



# Protect What Works

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The case for protecting the child poverty  
earmark in the next ESF



**Save the Children**



*A safeguard should not be dismantled because it has worked, especially when children need it most.*

The paper was authored by Enrico Tormen (Save the Children Europe) and Alina Makarevičienė (PPMI).

Information included in this report stems from the invaluable contributions of Save the Children colleagues: Linnéa Plöen Casterud (Save the Children Sweden); Aino Sarkia, Tiina-Maria Levamo (Save the Children Finland); Eric Großhaus (Save the Children Germany); Arianna Saulini, Patrizia Luongo, Elena Caneva (Save the Children Italy); Carmela del Moral (Save the Children Spain); Roxana Paraschiv (Save the Children Romania); Fabio Belafatti, Ieva Juskaite (Save the Children Lithuania); Blerina Celoaliaj (Save the Children in Albania); Festina Kabashi, Gagica Genta (Save the Children in Kosova/o); Tatjana Ristić, (Save the Children in North West Balkans).

The Report was revised by Olivia Mertens and Alissia Bourguignon (Save the Children Europe), and designed by Sangjukta Mumu (Red Balloon)

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Im Schatten einer riesigen Lilie  
wohnt im Herzwald 'ne Einhornfamilie.  
Der Herzwald liegt im Land der Träume.  
Dort sind die Blumen so groß wie Bäume!  
Alle Steine sind aus Plüsch und rosarot!  
Zum Essen gibts immer nur Kekse statt Brot.  
Und seit eine kleine Fee mal Hunger hatte,  
sind die tief fliegenden Wolken aus Zuckerwatte.  
Immer scheint dort die Sonne, alles ist mega,  
es gibt keine Sorgen und auch keine Jäger.

Jäger

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# Executive Summary

“As Europe confronts unprecedented threats to its security, economic prosperity and social system, we need to ask ourselves not just ‘how do we defend our countries?’, but also ‘what is worth defending’. The answer is that a meaningful, rich and fulfilling future for all our children, built on all the hard-fought achievements for equality and justice, is what makes our countries a special place worth defending.”

- Save the Children Lithuania

This reasoning lies at the heart of the choices the European Union (EU) now urgently faces. Recent years have brought **important progress** in the EU's commitment to children's rights and the fight against child poverty, including the adoption of the **European Child Guarantee (ECG) and renewed action through the European Anti-Poverty Strategy**. These developments demonstrate that both practical solutions and a political framework for action exist. However, **these will only be transformative if they are matched by sufficient and earmarked funding**. As defence and competitiveness increasingly dominate political and budgetary priorities, while national social budgets are under pressure or being reduced in several Member States, **there is a serious risk that existing commitments will lack the resources needed to deliver real change for children**.

**Child poverty remains a widespread, persistent and profoundly unacceptable reality**. Its persistence reflects not a lack of solutions, but a lack of sufficient political and financial prioritisation. When considering Europe's competitiveness agenda, we must return to the same question as above: what is the ultimate goal of greater competitiveness? **Competitiveness cannot be an end in itself. Its value lies in whether it delivers greater prosperity, security and opportunity for people**. An economy that grows stronger while leaving millions of children and families behind cannot be considered successful.

In 2025, **nearly 1 in 4 children in the EU, equivalent to 19.2 million children, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion**. Although this figure has declined slightly in recent years, it remains above the 2019 baseline for the EU's 2030 child poverty target. At the midpoint of the implementation period, the EU has made **no net progress towards its goal of lifting 5 million children out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030**. Meeting that target would now require **approximately 2,800 children to leave poverty or social exclusion every day** until the end of the decade<sup>1</sup>.

This paper draws on **evidence gathered directly from Save the Children's national experts in 7 EU Member States** (Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and Sweden) and 4 pre-accession countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia). The evidence was collected through a dedicated questionnaire, complemented by analysis and materials produced by Save the Children's national organisations. It was further supported by a review of **national biennial ECG progress reports and project-level monitoring data on European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) investments in all EU Member States<sup>2</sup>**.

**To build this case, the policy paper is structured as follows:**

- 1** | **Sets out the scale** and urgency of child poverty in Europe and the case for stronger investment.
- 2** | Presents the **European Child Guarantee** as the EU's key rights-based framework for addressing child poverty and ensuring access to essential services.
- 3** | Examines how **ESF+** currently supports the Child Guarantee and what could be lost under the proposed post-2027 funding architecture, drawing on national evidence to assess the role of dedicated earmarking.
- 4** | Assesses how **EU funding is translating into action** across the five service areas covered by the Child Guarantee, identifying both successful investments and persistent gaps
- 5** | Examines whether **funding is effectively reaching the most excluded children** and the structural barriers that can prevent this, including targeting, co-financing and monitoring.
- 6** | Considers how far the **Child Guarantee's rights-based approach** is reflected in practice, including through the experiences and perspectives of children themselves.
- 7** | The **conclusions** translate the evidence into recommendations for the EU institutions and Member States on how to strengthen, protect, and better track investment to tackle child poverty in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).
- 8** | The **country fiches** in Appendix 1 provide consolidated summaries of this evidence, which is used throughout the report to inform the cross-country findings, thematic analysis and country examples.



This paper shows that **when used effectively, ESF+ produces real and attributable improvements in children’s lives, and that these results occur most prominently where a mandatory, quantified child poverty earmark exists.** Across the EU, Member States have programmed approximately **EUR 9.6 billion (planned allocations, including national co-financing)** to address child poverty under the ESF+ funding category ST06, representing 6.88% of total ESF+ investment. Of the 24 Member States reporting investment under this theme, **19 allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty**, including all 11 subject to the mandatory threshold and 8 of the 13 Member States that are not legally bound by it and report ST06 allocations. **This suggests that the earmark and ECG framework have helped establish 5% as a broader investment benchmark for tackling child poverty.** Spain has gone beyond the mandatory 5% floor, programming 6.72% of its ESF+ resources (EUR 1.09 billion, including national co-financing) under ST06. Its own biennial report sets aside EUR 795 million of ESF+ (EUR 527 million EU support plus EUR 268 million national co-financing) for the National Child Guarantee Action Plan. ESF+ accounts for around 49% of the funding behind the ECG actions reported by the Autonomous Communities. While ESF+ is not the only driver of progress, dedicated funding plays an important role in supporting implementation.

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**The evidence shows that protected funding provides the visibility, traceability and predictability needed to make targeted investment more likely, sustained and central to national programming. This matters particularly when national governments are reducing domestic social expenditure.**

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In Finland, child poverty is rising as cuts to social security and housing allowances take effect, while youth homelessness increased by almost 40% in 2025. In Sweden, recent reforms risk increasing child poverty by restricting social protection for children in migrant families and those in families receiving social support.

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These cases demonstrate that ESF+ provides more than additional funding: it offers continuity when national budgets retreat and enables successful interventions to become embedded in national and local systems. Without a protected earmark, EU funding cannot reliably counter domestic retrenchment, and a strengthened ECG risks being given greater responsibilities without the resources needed to deliver on them.

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**TABLE 1.**

Selected examples of ESF+-supported investment in children mentioned in the paper

| Country                                                                                                 | Example                                               | ESF+ funding (allocated)                                                                                     | Connected with the Child Guarantee?                                | Relevance                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br><b>Italy</b>       | DesTEENazione and ComeTE                              | DesTEENazione: <b>EUR 200m ESF+</b> (+ EUR 25m ERDF for first 60 projects);<br><br>ComeTE: <b>EUR 121.9m</b> | <b>Yes</b> – dedicated ECG priority                                | 92 multifunctional youth spaces; ComeTE delivers around 9,000 socio-educational measures across 148 Territorial Social Areas and introduced formal co-design with third-sector organisations. |
| <br><b>Lithuania</b> | Family-based foster care services                     | EUR 11.9m ESF+ (EUR 20.05m total)                                                                            | <b>Yes</b> – within ESF+ investment in ECG objectives              | 66 centres strengthened; more than 5,000 children reached with integrated support to grow up in family rather than institutional care.                                                        |
| <br><b>Romania</b>   | Community-based family-separation prevention services | Not specified for the intervention                                                                           | <b>Yes</b> – aligned with ECG National Action Plan measure M2.1.13 | Targets 37,000 children by 2030; provides educational, psychosocial and material support, alongside support to parents.                                                                       |

| Country                                                                                      | Example                                        | ESF+ expenditure                                                                                                | Connected with the Child Guarantee?                                              | Relevance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Germany | JUST BEst                                      | Up to <b>EUR 70m (2022–2027)</b>                                                                                | <b>No known structural link</b> between ESF+ programming and the ECG Action Plan | Implemented in 70+ municipalities; 64% of participants improved their education/employment situation and 71% achieved more independent living.                                                                                                                                      |
| <br>Sweden  | Min Framtid (“My Future”)                      | <b>SEK 55m (2026–2028)</b>                                                                                      | <b>Indirect link</b> – provision is linked mainly to pre-existing <b>policy</b>  | Third consecutive ESF+ funding period; evolved into a long-term public–civil society partnership with Stockholm, supporting 15–21-year-olds towards education or employment.                                                                                                        |
| <br>Spain | Ring-fenced Child Guarantee priority (ESO4.12) | <b>EUR 795m ESF+ earmarked for the National ECG Plan (EUR 527m EU support + EUR 268m national co-financing)</b> | <b>Yes</b> – dedicated ECG priority                                              | ESF+ accounts for around 49% of the funding behind the ECG actions reported by the Autonomous Communities. ESF+ supports family-based care, foster families, social innovation and material assistance, including wallet cards for around 70,000 vulnerable families with children. |

The above examples are particularly significant in the current policy context, as the funding architecture that has made investment in children visible, traceable and reliable is now at risk. Under the European Commission's proposal for the 2028-2034 MFF, **the existing mandatory 5% child poverty earmark would disappear**. The proposal merely includes an **undifferentiated 14% social spending floor** covering skills, employment, rural development and other competing priorities, with **no dedicated allocation for children and no binding requirement to integrate the specific logic of the Child Guarantee into programme design**. This document shows that earmarking and its connection to the ECG have influenced investment beyond their formal legal scope. Replacing this protected target with a broad aggregate floor would make child poverty spending less visible, predictable and accountable at a crucial moment when national social budgets are under pressure.

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**The substantial level of ESF+ investment should therefore be recognised as evidence of the mechanism's success, not as a justification for removing it. A safeguard should not be dismantled because it has worked.**

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A child who participated in a Save the Children Italy consultation shared their hopes for the future:

*I hope my future will be better than what I'm living now, because it's hard to always have to worry every time, 'will we eat today?'<sup>3</sup>*

This is ultimately what is at stake in the EU's next long-term budget. The funding choices discussed in this paper are not merely abstract percentages or technical provisions. They determine whether millions of children can access the support and essential services they need to escape poverty and fully enjoy their rights. Safeguarding dedicated funding for tackling child poverty is therefore not simply a budgetary choice. It is the necessary condition for translating the EU's commitments to children into tangible and lasting improvements in their lives.

**That is why this paper's central request is to safeguard the mandatory 5% ESF+ child poverty earmark, extend it to every Member State and strengthen it where the need is greatest.** The European Parliament endorsed a closely aligned approach in its resolution of 12 February 2026 on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. It called for a dedicated EUR 20 billion Child Guarantee envelope in the next MFF and a 5% earmark in every Member State, rising to at least 10% where the rate of children at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROP) exceeds the EU average<sup>4</sup>. The European Committee of the Regions adopted a similar position the following month<sup>5</sup>. The evidence and recommendations presented in this paper reinforce institutional support for these commitments. The European Commission and the Council must now act to embed these priorities in the next MFF and provide the resources needed to implement them.



## Key ask

**A mandatory child poverty earmark for every Member State:**  
in line with the European Parliament's position, require every Member State to allocate **at least 5% of its ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty**, rising to at least 10% in Member States with child AROPE rates above the EU average. This would restore the successful mechanism currently applied to 11 Member States and extend it across the EU.

## Additional recommendations

### **A dedicated and adequately resourced ECG in the 2028–2034 MFF:**

safeguard ring-fenced funding for ECG implementation through a strengthened European Social Fund, with the European Parliament's call for an envelope of at least EUR 20 billion as a key benchmark.

### **A Child Marker and mandatory financial reporting:**

establish an EU-wide mechanism tracking actual, disaggregated expenditure on children. Require Member States to itemise planned ECG allocations in their National Action Plans and report the resulting expenditure and outcomes.

### **Binding partnership and participation requirements:**

ensure meaningful involvement of children's rights civil society organisations throughout programme design, implementation and monitoring, alongside formal mechanisms for child participation.

### **Equivalent safeguards for pre-accession funding:**

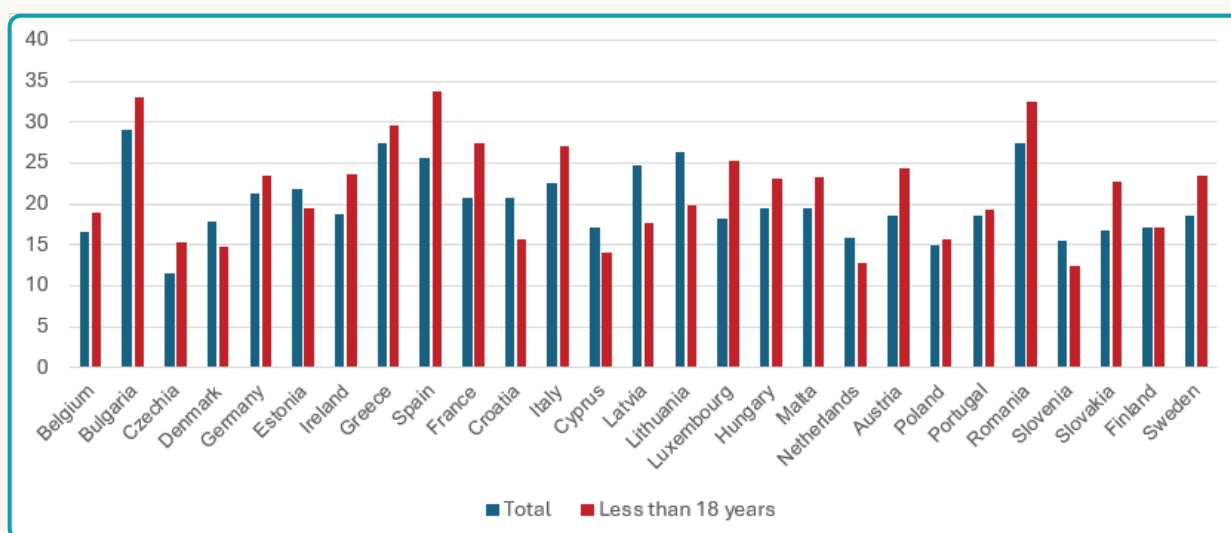
incorporate Child Guarantee-equivalent earmarking, tracking and accountability requirements into Global Europe programming under the next MFF for candidate and pre-accession countries.

# 1. Introduction: The cost of falling behind on child poverty

Child poverty is one of the most persistent, costly and politically consequential social crises facing the European Union. In 2025, an estimated 19.2 million children across the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), and children remained markedly more exposed than the population as a whole: 24.3% of children were AROPE, compared with 20.9% of the EU population<sup>6</sup>. This gap is not new, and based on available evidence, it is not closing. This is not an

inevitable consequence of economic cycles or external pressures. It is the result of political choices, sustained underinvestment and gaps in social protection, services and targeted support. The EU and its Member States have the instruments, the evidence and the institutional framework to address child poverty. What is needed now is the political will to back these frameworks and instruments with sufficient, protected and accountable resources.

**Figure 1. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the eu in 2025 (% of age group)**



Source: Eurostat, ilc\_peps01n. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC\\_PEPS01N](https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS01N)

Under the 2021 European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the EU committed to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, compared with 2019. Of this overall reduction, at least 5 million should be children, equivalent to a 26.1% decrease from the 2019 baseline of 19.1 million children at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>7</sup>. Based on the latest available figures, the EU is not on track to meet this target. The number of children at risk fell from a recent peak of 19.8 million in 2022 to 19.2 million in 2025. Although this decline

should be welcomed, 5 years into the 10-year implementation period, the figure remains above the 2019 baseline.

**The EU has yet to achieve any net reduction relative to its own starting point. Meeting the 2030 target would now require lifting approximately 2,800 children out of poverty or social exclusion every day until the end of the decade<sup>8</sup>.**

National ambition is also insufficient: the combined child poverty reduction targets established by Member States amount to only 2.9 million children, and only Ireland, Cyprus and Sweden have met their national targets to date<sup>9</sup>.

**The consequences for children are real, harmful and cumulative.** Child poverty undermines physical and mental health, limits educational attainment, restricts access to adequate nutrition and housing, weakens family relationships and participation in social life, and forecloses future opportunities. Children experiencing poverty are 12.5 times more likely than their peers to lack a daily meal containing protein, 10 times more likely to miss school trips, almost 8 times more likely to lack access to leisure activities and more than 6 times more likely to be low academic achievers<sup>10</sup>.

These are not background statistics, but **daily conditions in which millions of children in EU Member States are growing up.** As one girl who took part in an online Save the Children's consultation on poverty and violence against children in Romania put it:

***"Poverty, to me, is those moments when your friends are making memories, and you are not. It is when you cannot wait to get home because you are hungry..."***<sup>11</sup>

Save the Children Sweden's own work with children captures a related, easily overlooked dimension of the same point:

***"We meet children who say, 'I don't really want to go', when their sports club is travelling to a tournament – not because they lack the desire to participate, but because they want to spare their parents the anxiety of knowing the family cannot afford the cost. It is in these everyday moments, often invisible to others, that children carry responsibilities they should never have to bear".***

Child poverty is not only a question of material deprivation: it is also measured in the choices, worries and responsibilities children take on to protect their families.

The cost of failing to close this gap is not

measured only by the detrimental loss of rights and potential for individual children. **Childhood socio-economic disadvantage costs OECD countries approximately 3.4% of GDP each year** through its long-run effects on employment and health outcomes<sup>12</sup>. Investment in the services within the scope of the ECG delivers substantial social and economic returns, outweighing the initial investment several times over. For example, the European Commission's own review cites a **threefold return on health-related programmes** for children and a **return of up to seven euros for every euro invested in education**, drawing on a forthcoming RAND Europe study on the effectiveness of child benefits in the EU<sup>13</sup>.

**These figures make investment in children a question of fiscal responsibility as well as social policy. Children whose needs are left unmet do not disappear from public budgets; those needs re-emerge later through higher expenditure on healthcare, remedial education, social protection and crisis response. Reducing preventive investment therefore defers costs rather than eliminating them.**

This is consistent with the Council's March 2026 conclusion that child investment is both a social obligation and a strategic investment in Europe's future competitiveness, stability and cohesion<sup>14</sup>.

Given the human and economic costs of child poverty and the substantial returns on investment, **the reduced ambition and weaker funding safeguards for tackling child poverty in the European Commission's proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF**<sup>15</sup> are particularly concerning. Published on 16 July 2025, the proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF is accompanied by the specific draft Council Regulation laying down the framework itself<sup>16</sup>, a draft Regulation establishing National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)<sup>17</sup> and a markedly shorter ESF Regulation, running to just nine articles<sup>18</sup>. The sections that follow examine what is at stake if the funding architecture supporting the European Child Guarantee is weakened, rather than strengthened, under the next MFF.

## 2. From rights to services: the role of the European Child Guarantee

The ECG was established by Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021<sup>19</sup>. **It is not a discretionary social programme but a rights-based commitment**, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights<sup>20</sup> of the Child, Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This rights-based framing **positions unmet access to services for children in vulnerable situations as a failure to uphold children's rights rather than merely a programming shortfall**. It therefore has accountability implications for both Member States and the EU institutions responsible for designing the funding architecture that supports its implementation.

The Recommendation targets '**children in need**', defined as persons under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with particular attention to specific groups of children in vulnerable situations<sup>21</sup>. It calls on Member States to guarantee free and effective access to early childhood education and care (ECEC); education, including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare. It also calls on Member States to guarantee adequate access to healthy nutrition and housing<sup>22</sup>. These five areas provide the analytical structure for the thematic analysis in Section 4 and are also reflected in the country fiches in Appendix 1.

**The ECG's political significance lies in its focus on children who are too often invisible in mainstream anti-poverty policies:** Roma children, children with a migrant background, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children in precarious family situations, children in single-parent households, children experiencing homelessness, and children in disadvantaged territories. General poverty reduction measures have a



poor track record of reaching these groups specifically. **The ECG's targeted architecture is the only EU-level instrument that specifically addresses this gap. In doing so, the ECG has put child poverty more firmly on national and EU agendas**, proposing that Member States develop dedicated action plans, identify the most disadvantaged children and improve coordination across sectors. **It has also helped trigger new investments and policy initiatives, strengthened cooperation with civil society, and created new opportunities for child participation and peer learning across countries**<sup>23</sup>.

The analysis of this paper draws on qualitative evidence from Save the Children's national members across eleven countries and territories, including seven EU Member States (Finland, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and Sweden) and four candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia), to examine how **ESF+ funding has turned the ECG rights-based commitment into tangible improvements for children, and what is at risk if the funding provisions supporting it are diluted in the next MFF**. This evidence is used throughout Sections 3–6, while Appendix 1 provides consolidated country fiches setting out the national context, funding arrangements, examples, bottlenecks and advocacy priorities.



### 3. The funding architecture at risk: from earmarking to flexibility

#### 3.1 ■ EU-level developments in the course of preparation to post-2027

Under the current ESF+ Regulation, **Article 7(3) requires all Member States to allocate an appropriate amount of their ESF+ resources under shared management to targeted actions and structural reforms to combat child poverty, including through implementation of the ECG. Member States whose child AROPE rate exceeded the EU average over 2017–2019 must allocate at least 5% of those resources specifically to this purpose<sup>24</sup>.** Eleven Member States are covered by the 5% obligation: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania and Spain<sup>25</sup>. **Article 7(4) of the same Regulation requires all Member States to direct at least 25% of ESF+ resources to social inclusion more broadly<sup>26</sup>.** Under this architecture, an estimated **EUR 9.6 billion** (of which EUR 6.7 billion is EU-funded and the remainder is national co-financing) has been programmed EU-wide under Secondary Theme 06, ‘addressing child poverty’, for the 2021–2027 period, equivalent to around 6.9% of total ESF+ investment<sup>27</sup>.

**The European Commission’s proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF removes this specific earmarking architecture:** it provides no dedicated funding guarantee for tackling child poverty, leaving investments for children without any ring-fenced protection in the next EU budget. In its place, the draft **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) Regulation reduces the 25% earmarking on social spending to a single 14% social spending target across the whole National and Regional Partnership Plan envelope**, covering skills, employment, poverty, social inclusion and rural

development together. Additionally, it contains neither a dedicated sub-floor for child poverty nor any obligation to preserve the specific logic of the ECG in programme design<sup>28</sup>. This is particularly concerning given that **the European Commission itself acknowledged**, in its May 2026 Communication on strengthening the ECG, that the **EU and national resources dedicated to its implementation remain insufficient<sup>29</sup>**. The next European Social Fund (ESF) would no longer have a separate, dedicated budget. Instead, social objectives would be split between the NRPPs and a new European Competitiveness Fund, which would cover education and training in strategic sectors<sup>30</sup>. The shift to nationally designed Partnership Plans, approved at the national level, further risks marginalising the sub-national, regional and civil society partners that have historically delivered much of this work<sup>31</sup>.



Notably, the **ECG is identified in Annex VI of the proposed NRPPs Regulation as one of four social policy areas Member States are expected to address in their national plans**, a point the European Commission's own review presents as a 'vital opportunity' for the next programming period<sup>32</sup>. This is a crucial and welcome feature of the new MFF architecture. Yet, without a specific earmarking requirement, decisions on the level of funding allocated, and therefore the likelihood of achieving tangible results, will remain at the **discretion of individual Member States**. Section 3 explains why Save the Children<sup>33</sup>, together with the wider EU Alliance for Investing in Children, considers it urgently necessary to retain and protect the existing 5% ESF earmarking for tackling child poverty.

**Flexibility and earmarking should not be treated as opposing principles.** A binding earmark establishes a minimum level of investment while still allowing Member States to design measures tailored to their national and regional contexts. Without such a safeguard, flexibility extends to whether child poverty is prioritised at all. **The earmark therefore acts as a floor for investment, not a constraint on flexibility.**

The risk that investment in children could lose priority has not gone unnoticed. **The European Parliament's resolution of 11 March 2025** on the European Social Fund Plus post-2027 already called for a standalone ESF+ with ring-fenced resources, a child poverty earmark of at least 5%, and genuine application of the partnership principle<sup>34</sup>. Less than a year later, the Parliament went further still: its **resolution of 12 February 2026 on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** calls for a dedicated EUR 20 billion ECG envelope within the 2028–2034 MFF, implemented through ESF+, alongside the same 5% floor for all Member States and 10% for those above the EU-average child AROPE

rate<sup>35</sup>. The **Committee of the Regions** adopted a closely aligned position the following month, calling for at least EUR 20 billion for the ECG in the next EU budget and a strong, visible ESF+ within cohesion policy<sup>36</sup>.





### 3.2 ■ National level evidence on the current state of play

The evidence from Save the Children's national members shows a clear difference between mandatory and discretionary frameworks. **Where the 5% earmark is mandatory, there are identifiable, clear and traceable programmes that Member States and civil society can refer to.** Where the earmark is discretionary, national members describe existing measures being relabelled as Child Guarantee contributions rather than the creation of new, purpose-built investments.

Evidence gathered by Save the Children Germany illustrates this clearly: resources earmarked for tackling child poverty are frequently implemented through broader measures directed towards labour market access or integration. Dedicated child-poverty interventions appear to play a comparatively smaller role within the overall programme architecture, which gives the impression that **programmes are being labelled under the 5% child-poverty earmark even when the primary goal of many programmes is broader**<sup>37</sup>. Table 2 sets out this contrast across seven countries with data collected by our national experts for which the earmarking status differs. The Swedish case adds a different but complementary perspective: its own discretionary regime has still sustained a genuinely long-running, co-financed intervention, but the national government attributes this to pre-existing policy rather than the ECG specifically<sup>38</sup>.

TABLE 2

## Earmarking regime and attributable investment, selected Member States

## Colour Key

**red** indicates Member States without a mandatory ESF+ child-poverty earmark;  
**green** indicates those subject to the mandatory minimum allocation of 5%.

| Country                                                                                               | Earmark regime       | Evidence of attributable investment in 2021-2027 and post-2027 exposure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br><b>Finland</b>   | <b>Discretionary</b> | <p>Services for children, young people and families (EUR 23 million) and safety nets for young people (EUR 30 million) affect children indirectly rather than through a child-rights-specific design. Finland is a strong case for why greater ESF+ investment is needed: child poverty is rising precisely as national social-security cuts bite. Co-financing pressure compounded by national STEA cuts (EUR 384 million to a projected EUR 190 million, 2024–2027). Save the Children Finland has publicly opposed these national cuts<sup>39</sup>, warning they risk pushing more children into poverty precisely as EU-level earmarking may be erased.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <br><b>Germany</b> | <b>Discretionary</b> | <p>The German federal ESF+ programme “JUGEND STÄRKEN: Brücken in die Eigenständigkeit (JUST BEst)” is implemented in over 70 municipalities and supports vulnerable 14–26-year-olds including care leavers through outreach, case management and access to housing, education and training. EhAP Plus projects target inter alia homeless people including their children, through low-threshold outreach, counselling and accompaniment to social services<sup>40</sup> and is aligned with the ECG priorities.</p> <p>“Starke Kinder ESF Plus – Maßnahmen gegen Jugendarmut” aims to combat child and youth poverty by enhancing participation, education, and support opportunities for vulnerable young people while strengthening sustainable local prevention structures. Dedicated child-poverty interventions appear to play a comparatively smaller role within the overall programme architecture which gives the impression of labelling programs under the 5% child poverty earmark even if the primary goal of many programs is something different.</p> |

| Country                                                                                      | Earmark regime          | Evidence of attributable investment in 2021-2027 and post-2027 exposure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Sweden  | <b>Discretionary</b>    | <p>Save the Children Sweden and the City of Stockholm are implementing Min Framtid, a SEK 55 million project running from 2026 to 2028. The project is now in its third consecutive ESF+ funding period, showing that ESF+ has supported a sustained intervention over several programming cycles. It is also reinforced by a long-term public-civil society partnership (IOP).</p> <p>However, the Swedish Government does not present this type of provision as a new measure created in response to the ECG. Instead, it sees it as part of Sweden's pre-existing social policy framework. The Swedish experience also highlights a funding risk: under a broader 14% social spending floor without dedicated child-poverty earmarking, smaller civil society organisations may struggle to compete for funding against larger actors and other social priorities.</p>                                                                                         |
| <br>Italy | <b>Mandatory<br/>5%</b> | <p>Three flagship calls illustrate the scale of attributed investments: DesTEENazione, building 92 multifunctional youth spaces (EUR 200 million ESF+ plus EUR 25 million ERDF for the first 60 projects, with a further EUR 102.7 million for 32 additional projects); ComeTE, a national pilot delivering around 9,000 socio-educational measures through 148 Territorial Social Areas, co-designed with Save the Children Italy (EUR 121.9 million); and Primi Passi, a co-design programme for families with children under three (EUR 80 million).</p> <p>The clear traceability of actions linked to the ECG allows for implementation monitoring. Furthermore, co-design with third-sector organisations has been piloted for the first time. This shows the impact of the important provision requiring EU Member States with child poverty rates exceeding the EU average to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty.</p> |

| Country                                                                                        | Earmark regime         | Evidence of attributable investment in 2021-2027 and post-2027 exposure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Lithuania | <b>Mandatory</b><br>5% | <p>“Development of services promoting and effectively supporting foster care in a family environment”, an ESF+-supported project (EUR 11.9 million of an overall EUR 20.05 million project value), has strengthened foster care services through 66 centres, reaching more than 5,000 children with integrated support to help them grow up in a family rather than an institutional environment. However, recent political instability and changes in governing coalitions make the national policy trajectory uncertain.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <br>Romania   | <b>Mandatory</b><br>5% | <p>There are strong links between the ESF+- funded interventions and the National Action Plan for the CG, mainly because the NAP was developed when the programming process (and therefore negotiations with relevant stakeholders) was very advanced. Thus, the results of the operational programming were reflected in the NAP. Community-based family-separation prevention services aim to target 37 000 children by 2030 and are among the illustrative examples. Both implementation and contracting are ongoing, and both local authorities and CSOs have been eligible under most of the calls for proposals open under this priority. Save the Children Romania has been implementing five local projects awarded under this priority. The day centres are operated in partnership with the local child protection authorities, and they provide children with the necessary space to do their homework, receive emotional support, and socialise. However, these services are flagged as being at greatest risk, since response measures are traditionally prioritised under budget pressure.</p> |
| <br>Spain   | <b>Mandatory</b><br>5% | <p>The state-level ESF+ Programme for Social Inclusion, the Child Guarantee and the Fight against Poverty, which includes a ring-fenced ‘Child Guarantee’ priority (ESO4.12), has roughly EUR 2.06 billion, with about 32% of ESF+ devoted to social inclusion, above the 25% minimum. ESF+ directly funds deinstitutionalisation and family-based care, support for foster families, social-innovation pilots, integrated pathways for vulnerable groups, and the Basic Material Assistance Programme, providing food-and-essentials wallet cards to roughly 70,000 vulnerable families with children. The managing authority is UAFSE (Ministry of Labour and Social Economy); state-strand operations are selected by the State Secretariat for Social Rights. Civil society organisations take part as beneficiaries through competitive calls and are meaningful delivery partners, but largely as grant recipients rather than co-designers.</p>                                                                                                                                                       |

The evidence points to more specific scenarios than just ‘discretionary funding is at risk’. **Spain** and **Italy** face a conversion risk: turning proven pilots into permanent, predictably funded services once time-limited pilot or recovery-fund financing (NRRP, in Italy’s case) runs out. In **Lithuania**, the main risk is political uncertainty, given the short-lived coalition governments since 2024. **Romania’s** risk is structural, since prevention-oriented services, the ones most exposed here, are traditionally deprioritised against response measures under budget pressure. **Germany** and **Finland** illustrate a different, arguably more fundamental, risk: without a child-specific earmark, a 14% general social-spending floor would maintain

existing spending patterns, rather than drive dedicated investment to tackle child poverty. **Finland’s** exposure is heightened by recent **national social-security cuts** that Save the Children Finland has itself publicly opposed. This is **precisely the context in which EU-level earmarking should help compensate for domestic spending cuts, not simply supplement existing provision**. Furthermore, Save the Children **Sweden’s** recent review of reforms adopted during the current parliamentary term finds that, while some measures strengthen children’s living conditions, **the overall direction of reform risks increasing child poverty**, particularly through **reduced access to social protection for children in migrant families and those in families receiving social support**.

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**The next funding framework should therefore retain a dedicated child poverty earmark, require National Action Plans to include measurable financial commitments and regular reporting, and ensure monitoring captures whether national reforms are strengthening or weakening children’s access to their rights, with children and civil society involved throughout the policy cycle, not only consulted at the margins.**

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This pattern should be interpreted in light of the ESF+ earmarking on child poverty. Across the EU, Member States have programmed approximately **EUR € 9.6 billion** (planned allocations, including national co-financing) under ESF+ Secondary Theme 06 (ST06), “Addressing child poverty”, equivalent to 6.88% of total ESF+ investment. **11 Member States** with child poverty rates above the EU average in 2017–2019 are **legally required to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty**, while the remaining Member States must allocate an “**appropriate amount**”. All 11 Member States subject to the mandatory threshold currently programme more than 5% of their ESF+ resources under ST06. The **influence of the earmarking requirement and the Child Guarantee framework appears to extend beyond these 11 Member States**: 8 of the 13 Member States not bound by the 5% threshold also allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources under ST06. Overall, of the 24 Member States reporting investment under ST06, 19 allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to this theme<sup>41</sup>. **Together, these provisions have helped establish 5% as a broader investment benchmark across the Union. Current investment levels cannot be assumed to persist in the absence of this framework.**

TABLE 3

**ESF+ allocations for child poverty across Member States, 2021-2027  
programming period**

| Member State                                                                                   | Earmark regime     | ESF+ and national co-funding under ESF+ Secondary Theme 06 "Addressing child poverty" | Share of ESF+ investments under ST06 "Addressing child poverty" over total ESF+ investments in Member States |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Austria   | Appropriate amount | € 199,154,827                                                                         | 20.62%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Belgium   | Appropriate amount | € 100,316,661                                                                         | 3.46%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Bulgaria | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 165,144,004                                                                         | 5.28%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Croatia | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 249,700,000                                                                         | 11.01%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Cyprus  | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 39,166,667                                                                          | 11.04%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Czechia | Appropriate amount | € 84,111,350                                                                          | 2.66%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Denmark | Appropriate amount | -                                                                                     | -                                                                                                            |
| <br>Estonia | Appropriate amount | € 31,418,502                                                                          | 5.10%                                                                                                        |

| Member State                                                                                      | Earmark regime     | ESF+ and national co-funding under ESF+ Secondary Theme 06 "Addressing child poverty" | Share of ESF+ investments under ST06 "Addressing child poverty" over total ESF+ investments in Member States |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Finland      | Appropriate amount | € 63,493,418                                                                          | 7.00%                                                                                                        |
| <br>France       | Appropriate amount | € 39,522,251                                                                          | 0.37%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Germany      | Appropriate amount | € 737,544,440                                                                         | 5.59%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Greece      | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 896,623,666                                                                         | 12.79%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Hungary    | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 380,949,694                                                                         | 6.11%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Ireland    | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 132,214,743                                                                         | 12.23%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Italy      | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 2,298,374,914                                                                       | 8.15%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Latvia     | Appropriate amount | € 59,279,659                                                                          | 7.11%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Lithuania  | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 111,025,207                                                                         | 9.30%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Luxembourg | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 2,479,543                                                                           | 7.02%                                                                                                        |

| Member State                                                                                     | Earmark regime     | ESF+ and national co-funding under ESF+ Secondary Theme 06 "Addressing child poverty" | Share of ESF+ investments under ST06 "Addressing child poverty" over total ESF+ investments in Member States |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>Malta       | Appropriate amount | € 9,151,000                                                                           | 4.47%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Netherlands | Appropriate amount | -                                                                                     | -                                                                                                            |
| <br>Poland      | Appropriate amount | € 1,445,368,039                                                                       | 9.52%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Portugal    | Appropriate amount | € 561,264,531                                                                         | 5.99%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Romania   | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 564,831,706                                                                         | 6.63%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Slovakia  | Appropriate amount | € 298,538,188                                                                         | 10.34%                                                                                                       |
| <br>Slovenia  | Appropriate amount | -                                                                                     | -                                                                                                            |
| <br>Spain     | Mandatory ≥5%      | € 1,091,853,155                                                                       | 6.72%                                                                                                        |
| <br>Sweden    | Appropriate amount | € 11,325,299                                                                          | 0.70%                                                                                                        |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                                     | -                  | <b>€ 9,572,851,462</b>                                                                | <b>6.88%</b>                                                                                                 |

Source: European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2026) 772 final, Reviewing progress made in the implementation of the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, 6 May 2026.

Note: programmed allocations (EU contribution and national co-financing) coded to Secondary Theme 06, not expenditure. Denmark, the Netherlands and Slovenia report no ST06 allocation. The total share (6.88%) is calculated over total ESF+ investment in all 27 Member States."

The case for stronger earmarking is also supported by evidence beyond this paper's seven-country sample. The **EU Alliance for Investing in Children**, a coalition co-led by Save the Children and Eurochild, reached the same conclusion, calling in April 2025 for the same 5% and 10% earmarking structure recommended in this paper and by the European Parliament<sup>42</sup>. Country-level evidence points in the same direction. **Spain** has gone beyond the mandatory 5% earmarking, programming **6.72% of its ESF+ resources under ST06, and its own biennial report sets aside EUR 795 million of ESF+ (EUR 527 million EU support plus EUR 268 million national co-financing) for the National Child Guarantee Action Plan**. ESF+ accounts for around 49% of the funding behind the ECG actions reported by the Autonomous Communities. This suggests that a higher earmark can move beyond the margins of national programming and can become a central component. A similar pattern is

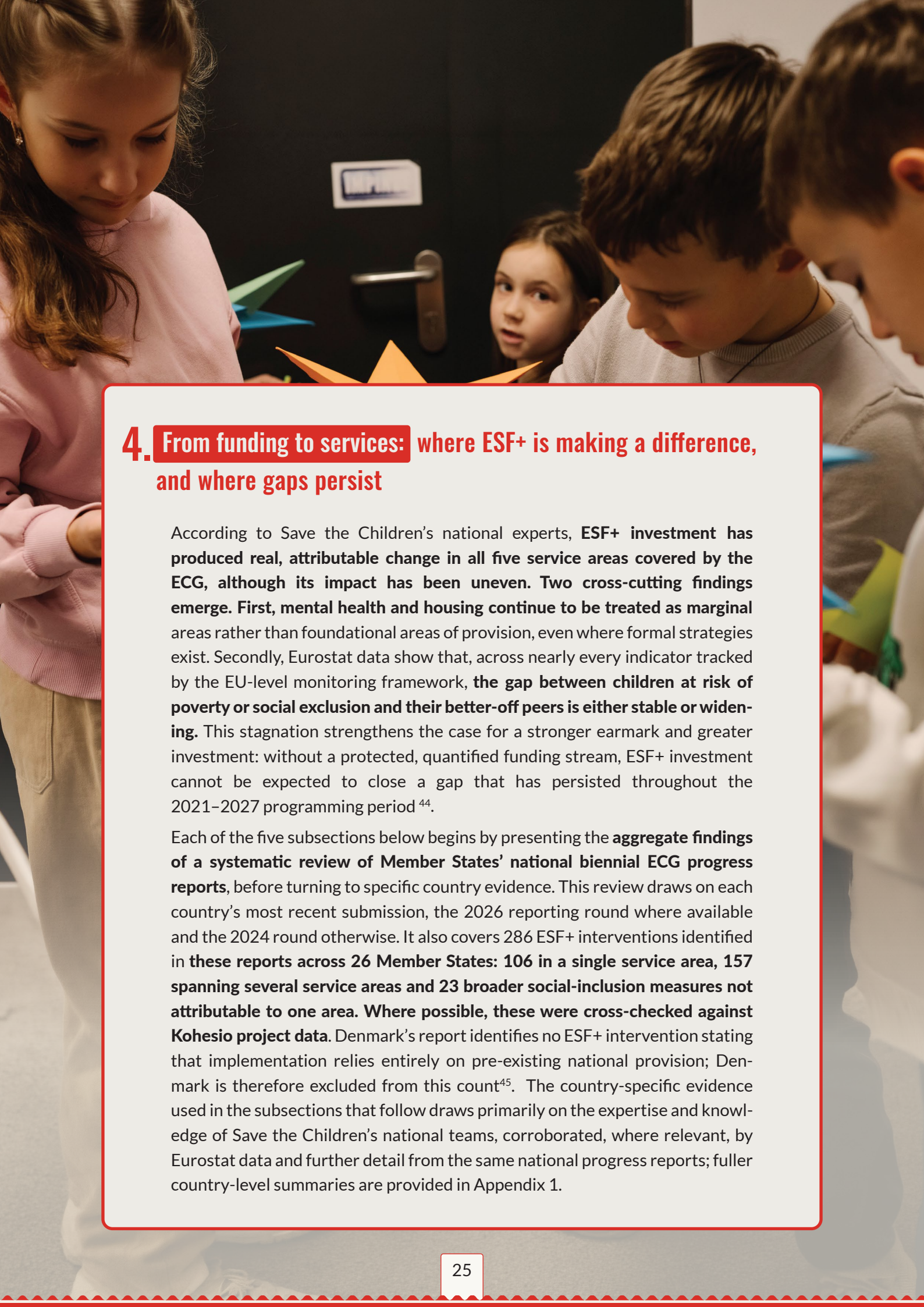
observed in **Italy**, where EUR 734 million has been allocated to a dedicated funding priority for implementing the European Child Guarantee within its national ESF+ programme for social inclusion and poverty reduction, "PON Inclusion", demonstrating the same pattern operating at scale under a mandatory 5% regime.

Taken together, this evidence supports preserving and strengthening the child poverty earmark: to **at least 5% of ESF+ resources in every Member State, rising to at least 10% in Member States with a child AROPE rate above the EU average**. The 11 Member States currently subject to the mandatory earmarking already programme, on average, **8.75% of their ESF+ resources under ST06 (8.0% of their combined ESF+ resources)**<sup>43</sup>, indicating that raising the threshold to 10% would be a realistic and impactful step towards breaking the cycle of poverty. These earmarks should be paired with a Child Marker ensuring that formal commitments translate into investment in practice.

### Beyond the EU: Additional Evidence from Pre-Accession Countries

An illustration of what a wholly non-earmarked architecture produces in practice, and the role that the ESF could have in these countries after their accession to the Union, comes from outside the EU. Save the Children Albania and Save the Children Kosovo, reporting on their experience with IPA III, describe a funding environment in which no ESF+-equivalent earmarking mechanism exists. ECEC investment in Albania stands at just 0.29% of GDP, with participation reaching only 26.5% of Roma children against 51% of children overall, and Kosovo has no integrated national framework for monitoring child poverty or ECG-equivalent spending. Save the Children experts from both countries are asking the EU to **introduce within the Global Europe programming a similar mandatory minimum earmark and Child Marker tracking mechanism** this paper argues should be preserved and strengthened for the ESF itself.

Detailed country fiches for the seven EU Member States and four pre-accession countries covered by the research are provided in Appendix 1. The evidence they contain informs the comparisons and country examples presented in this section and throughout Sections 4–6.

A background image showing several children in a classroom setting, focused on working with colorful geometric shapes like triangles and stars. One girl in a pink shirt is in the foreground on the left, looking down at her work. Other children are visible behind her, also engaged in the activity.

## 4. From funding to services: where ESF+ is making a difference, and where gaps persist

According to Save the Children's national experts, **ESF+ investment has produced real, attributable change in all five service areas covered by the ECG, although its impact has been uneven. Two cross-cutting findings emerge. First, mental health and housing continue to be treated as marginal areas rather than foundational areas of provision, even where formal strategies exist. Secondly, Eurostat data show that, across nearly every indicator tracked by the EU-level monitoring framework, the gap between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and their better-off peers is either stable or widening.** This stagnation strengthens the case for a stronger earmark and greater investment: without a protected, quantified funding stream, ESF+ investment cannot be expected to close a gap that has persisted throughout the 2021–2027 programming period <sup>44</sup>.

Each of the five subsections below begins by presenting the **aggregate findings of a systematic review of Member States' national biennial ECG progress reports**, before turning to specific country evidence. This review draws on each country's most recent submission, the 2026 reporting round where available and the 2024 round otherwise. It also covers 286 ESF+ interventions identified in **these reports across 26 Member States: 106 in a single service area, 157 spanning several service areas and 23 broader social-inclusion measures not attributable to one area. Where possible, these were cross-checked against Kohesio project data.** Denmark's report identifies no ESF+ intervention stating that implementation relies entirely on pre-existing national provision; Denmark is therefore excluded from this count<sup>45</sup>. The country-specific evidence used in the subsections that follow draws primarily on the expertise and knowledge of Save the Children's national teams, corroborated, where relevant, by Eurostat data and further detail from the same national progress reports; fuller country-level summaries are provided in Appendix 1.



#### 4.1 ■ Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

A cross-country review of Member States' national biennial ECG reports identifies ECEC as a distinct ESF+ intervention area in seven of the 26 countries examined: Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Hungary and Italy. Together, these countries account for 32 of the 286 ESF+-funded interventions identified in the national reports<sup>46</sup>. In most of the remaining countries, investment relevant to ECEC is reported as being financed through the Recovery and Resilience Facility or national budgets, rather than through a dedicated ESF+ line. Alternatively, it is incorporated into broader measures that the reports describe as spanning several service areas.

**ECEC is the area in which the EU-level outcome data and country evidence provide the most consistent picture of progress.** Across the EU, the proportion of children under three, at risk of poverty or social exclusion who attended formal childcare for at least one hour per week **rose from 22.7% in 2022 to 24.4% in 2024**. The rate among their non-AROE peers also increased, **from 41.3%**

**to 42.4%**. Consequently, the access **gap between the two groups has remained broadly stable at around 18 percentage points**, rather than narrowing significantly<sup>47</sup>.

**Italy** illustrates both sides of this pattern within a single country. Nationally, ECEC provision has reached 31.6 places per 100 children aged 0 to 2. The Recovery and Resilience Facility has committed EUR 4.6 billion to expanding nursery and pre-school provision, including EUR 2.4 billion for the 0 to 2 age group and EUR 600 million for children aged 3 to 5, while ESF+ funding supports the training of staff who will deliver these services<sup>48</sup>. Yet coverage remains below 20% in the South and Islands, compared with more than 40% in Central Italy. Moreover, only 25.2% of children at risk of poverty attend ECEC, compared with 41% of their peers<sup>49</sup>. **Albania**, a pre-accession country outside the ESF+ framework, presents a starker version of the same underlying problem: ECEC investment stands at just 0.29% of GDP, while participation among Roma children reaches only 26.5%, compared with 51% among children overall.<sup>50</sup>

Through its work in **Lithuania**, Save the Children has identified a distinctive coverage gap that is not reflected in official statistics: families living on the margins of poverty, too well-off to qualify for compulsory placement support, but too poor to afford private provision<sup>51</sup>. **Romania** demonstrates what sustained investment can achieve over time. The number of crèche places more than doubled between 2020 and 2024, from 17,400 to 35,318, while participation among children under three rose from 6.8% to 11.1% by 2025. This expansion was funded mainly through Recovery and Resilience Plan investments in infrastructure, complemented by ESF+-funded staff training<sup>53</sup>. However, the expansion has been sharply uneven in absolute terms: rural capacity reached only 3,405 places by 2024, compared with 31,913 places in urban areas, although the number of rural places grew fastest in percentage terms from a very low base of 429.



## 4.2 ■ Education and school-based activities

**Education is the service area most frequently identified as a distinct ESF+ priority in Member States' reporting.** 12 of the 26 national biennial reports reviewed (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovenia) specifically identify education, while 48 of the ESF+-funded interventions identified in the reports are classified under this area. This relative prominence should not be interpreted as evidence that education receives sufficient support in absolute terms. It more likely reflects the fact that **education expenditure is administratively easier to isolate than investment in areas such as nutrition or housing**, where ESF+ contributions are more often incorporated into broader family support or social inclusion budget lines.

**Italy's** PON Inclusion (National Operational

Programme "Inclusion" - managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies) Priority 2 ("Child Guarantee") has enabled two flagship calls. The **DesTEENazione** programme is establishing 92 multifunctional youth spaces, with EUR 200 million from ESF+ and EUR 25 million from ERDF supporting the first 60 projects, followed by a further EUR 102.7 million for 32 additional projects. The ComeTE programme is a national pilot delivering around 9,000 socio-educational measures to children aged 6 to 17 across 148 Territorial Social Areas. **Co-designed with Save the Children Italy**, it has a budget of EUR 121.9 million. These initiatives represent a major achievement for Italy: the technical framework provided by the ECG, combined with funding channelled through ESF+, made them possible. **They demonstrate how the ECG and ESF+ can work together to support large-scale national measures**<sup>54</sup>.

In **Romania**, community-based day-centre services funded under the Inclusion and Social Dignity Programme and aligned with National Action Plan measure M2.1.13 aim to reach 37,000 children by 2030. Five of these services are delivered by Save the Children Romania. They provide homework support, psychosocial counselling, school supplies and a warm meal<sup>55</sup>.

**Germany's** Jugend Stärken: Brücken in die Eigenständigkeit programme, worth up to EUR 70 million over the 2022-2027 period and implemented in more than 70 municipalities, supports vulnerable young people aged 14 to 26, including care leavers, through outreach and case management<sup>56</sup>. Monitoring data show that 64% of participants improved their educational or employment situation and 71% made progress towards independent living, making this one of the more rigorously monitored interventions among the countries surveyed<sup>57</sup>.

**Sweden's** Min Framtid ("My Future") programme is an ESF+-funded partnership between Save the Children Sweden and the City of Stockholm. Now in its third consecutive funding period, with SEK 55 million allocated for 2026-2028, it supports young people aged 15 to 21 who are unemployed or at risk of leaving school without qualifications. The programme provides individual coaching, psychosocial support and guidance towards education or employment. **Its transition into a long-term public-civil society agreement with the city illustrates how ESF+ investment can catalyse durable municipal co-financing beyond the original project's lifetime.** This kind of transition from a time-limited to a permanent project should be actively planned for across all Member States, rather than left to chance<sup>58</sup>.

### 4.3 ■ Healthcare, including mental health

Healthcare presents a more challenging picture in the national reports than the Eurostat outcome data alone suggest. At EU level, the quantitative evidence is mixed rather than uniformly negative. Between 2021 and 2024, the gap in unmet medical needs between children at risk of poverty and their peers narrowed slightly, from 3 to 2 percentage points. However, the proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion reporting very good health fell more sharply than among their better-off peers, from 62.3% to 57.4%, compared with a decline from 70.3% to 67.0%. This widened the gap from around 8 to nearly 10 percentage points. **Mental health appears to account for much of this divergence. Between 2018 and 2022, the proportion of 13-year-olds from low-affluence households who reported feeling low more than once a week rose from 21% to 29%.** Across the EU, suicide is the reported cause of around one

in six deaths among 15- to 19-year-olds<sup>59</sup>.

Five of the 26 Member States reviewed (Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovenia) identify healthcare-specific ESF+ interventions in their most recent biennial reports. These reports identify 14 healthcare interventions, the third-highest total among the five service areas; only nutrition and housing record fewer<sup>60</sup>. **Mental health support is particularly unlikely to be identified as a standalone ESF+ funding line.** Where it appears, it is typically one component of a broader youth services or family support measure.

**Healthcare is the most extensively documented cross-country theme in the evidence submitted by Save the Children's national experts.** Seven countries provided relevant material: Albania, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Spain and Sweden. This evidence also reveals a persistent gap between policy commitments



and the healthcare services delivered in practice.

**Finland's** therapy guarantee, in force since May 2025, is the most prominent national reform identified among the countries surveyed. It provides access to short-term psychotherapy and structured psychosocial support in primary care<sup>61</sup>. Yet Finland's 2026 ECG progress report continues to identify mental health and substance-use services for children as being at risk. This illustrates a recurring pattern in which formal policy commitments outpace service delivery. **Germany's** EhAP Plus programme, worth approximately EUR 226 million for the 2021–2027 period, supports outreach to marginalised EU migrants, including Roma communities and homeless people with children. However, no full impact evaluation is yet available<sup>62</sup>. **Romania's** Recovery and Resilience Plan has committed EUR 180.5 million to 3,000 primary healthcare practices and EUR 40.2 million to 200 integrated community health centres. This represents a substantial infrastructure investment, although its specific effects on child poverty have not yet been evaluated separately.<sup>63</sup>

Evidence from Sweden closely corroborates this pattern. Despite increased national investment, 'long waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services and significant regional disparities continue to limit access to timely support'. According to Save the Children Sweden, mental health is also 'still too often treated as a specialised healthcare issue rather than as a foundation for children's learning, participation and **long-term wellbeing**'. Save the Children **Sweden** is, with several other stakeholders, part of a campaign called Psykisk hälsa på schemat ('Mental health on the timetable'), which seeks to address this gap in schools<sup>64</sup>.

**Albania's** National Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) has been adopted, yet evidence from Save the Children Albania indicates that services remain 'limited, unevenly distributed and weakly integrated'<sup>65</sup>. In Kosovo, Save the Children's assessment is even more critical: mental health is described as a marginal add-on rather than a foundational service<sup>66</sup>.

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The consistent finding across the countries that provided evidence is that mental health is treated as secondary and complementary, rather than as a foundational component of service provision. It should be read alongside the evidence on housing below: in both areas, formal strategies and policy attention are more common than adequately funded and consistently delivered services.

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#### 4.4 ■ Healthy nutrition

8 of the 26 national reports reviewed identify nutrition as a distinct ESF+ intervention area (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, France, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain). Together, these countries account for 10 of the interventions identified in the reports<sup>67</sup>. Where ESF+ funding supports nutrition, it usually does so as a minor component of a food aid or material deprivation programme, rather than through a dedicated nutrition intervention.

In **Italy**, the National Fund to Combat Food Poverty at School was established by the 2025 Budget Law following advocacy by Save the Children Italy<sup>68</sup>. The fund is restricted to a specific group of beneficiaries, namely families experiencing poverty who are unable to pay school meal fees for children enrolled in primary education<sup>69</sup>. However, its allocated resources remain limited, and evidence on implementation is not yet publicly available. EU-level data illustrate why this matters. The proportion of 13-year-olds from low-affluence households who were overweight or obese rose to 29.1% in 2022, compared with 18.3% among their better-off peers. The gap between the two groups widened from 8.7 to 10.8 percentage points between 2018 and 2022<sup>70</sup>. Desk research provides further examples of the scale of nutrition-related support for children across Europe. The **Netherlands** allocates more than the mandatory 3% of its ESF+ budget, amounting to EUR 15.8 million, to a scheme explicitly targeting children at risk of poverty through the country's food banks<sup>71</sup>. **Spain's** EU School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme reached 1.98 million children during the 2022-2023 school year, supported by EUR 14.4 million in EU funding. **Romania's** National Healthy Meal Programme served 458,833 students across 1,223 schools in 2024<sup>72</sup>. These measures demonstrate the scale of nutrition support that can be achieved when governments prioritise investment in this area.

## 4.5 ■ Adequate housing

**Housing is the most underrepresented of the five service areas in Member States' reporting.** Of the 286 ESF+-funded interventions identified across the 26 most recent national biennial reports, only 2, one in Greece and one in Slovenia, are specifically classified under housing.<sup>73</sup> This does not mean that housing investment is absent from the wider EU funding landscape. Substantial housing-related expenditure exists, but it is channelled overwhelmingly through the European Regional Development Fund, the Recovery and Resilience Facility or national housing budgets, rather than through ESF+ itself.

The EU-level outcome data corroborate this finding: housing presents the widest and most persistent gap of any service area monitored at EU level. **In 2024, 21.1% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion lived in households experiencing housing cost overburden, compared with only 2.4% of children not at risk.** The rate among children at risk was therefore more than eight times as high, and the gap has widened slightly rather than narrowed since 2021<sup>74</sup>.

**Finland** illustrates how quickly a comparatively strong position can deteriorate. **Youth homelessness increased by almost 40% in 2025.** In a footnote to Finland's 2024 progress report, the European Commission confirms that this trend emerged only after the report was submitted and **links it to cuts to national housing allowances introduced through the Government's 2025 budget proposal.** **Romania's** biennial progress report identifies adequate housing as the service area with the most persistent gaps, even though its Recovery and Resilience Plan allocates funding for around 4,000 housing units for marginalised communities through a separate local fund component<sup>76</sup>.



Among the most highly resourced examples, **Italy's** Recovery and Resilience Facility has committed EUR 2.82 billion to affordable housing through PINQuA and a further EUR 2.36 billion to 1,430 'Community Houses'<sup>77</sup>. The scale of these allocations makes the persistence of the EU-level gap more striking. Substantial funding is being spent on housing, but not predominantly through the specific, targeted interventions needed to close the AROPE gap.

Consultations with children conducted by **Save the Children Albania** also corroborate adult-reported concerns about the opaque allocation of housing grants. As one child stated, 'the criteria and process for distributing housing grants are unclear'. This supports the extension of Child Guarantee-equivalent accountability and earmarking standards to the future Global Europe financing, rather than applying them only to ESF+. The underlying transparency problem is precisely the kind that a mandatory earmark and Child Marker could help address<sup>78</sup>.



## 5. Reaching the most excluded: targeting, barriers and the limits of ‘vulnerable in general’

Prioritising investment in children is essential, but it is not sufficient on its own. **Funding must also be designed and implemented to reach children facing the greatest barriers to accessing essential services.** This is particularly important when ESF+ resources support the implementation of the ECG, whose central purpose is to guarantee effective access to key services for children in vulnerable situations. Yet, ESF+ funding appears to struggle to reach the most excluded children within the broader population of children experiencing poverty. The gathered evidence points to structural rather than incidental barriers. **A properly designed earmark, paired with a Child Marker, could help overcome these barriers by requiring targeted and tracked spending according to the children and groups reached, rather than only at the programme level.**

The clearest structural finding is what this paper calls the **targeting paradox**: eligibility criteria fail in 2 opposite directions. Getting them right is more complex than the simple choice between ‘broadening eligibility’ and ‘narrowing eligibility’ suggests.

Save the Children **Lithuania** describes a recent call for proposals that received no applications because potential beneficiaries were required to experience too many simultaneous vulnerabilities and meet specific geographical conditions<sup>79</sup>. Evidence from **Serbia**, outside the EU funding framework, illustrates the same paradox in an algorithmic form rather than through programme design. The Social Card Registry, introduced to improve the targeting of financial social assistance, has reportedly resulted in more than 60,000 beneficiaries losing access altogether, with Roma and other vulnerable groups disproportionately affected<sup>80</sup>. **Whether exclusion results from an excessively narrow call for proposals or an automated eligibility system, the underlying failure is the same: a tool intended to improve targeting instead excludes some of the children it was designed to reach.**

At the same time, Save the Children's national experts also highlight that funding reaches children considered vulnerable in broad terms, but lacks an intersectional approach that prioritises those facing the greatest exclusion within that population. Evidence from Albania demonstrates how wide this gap can become in practice, even where a service framework exists on paper. Only 19% of identified protection needs among children with disabilities are currently met, while many municipalities meet only 0% to 10% of the overall service needs identified for children<sup>81</sup>. **Germany's** ESF+-funded programmes illustrate the same paradox. Resources intended to tackle child poverty are frequently channelled through broader measures focused on labour-market access and integration, rather than directly towards addressing child poverty<sup>82</sup>. This represents the funding-side counterpart of the targeting paradox: **without a binding earmark accompanied by clear targeting requirements, funding may reach children in general, but interventions are not required to prioritise the most excluded.** The Swedish context illustrates the same paradox.

When tackling child poverty is framed primarily in terms of access to education and the labour market, rather than the fulfilment of enforceable rights, it becomes harder to reach those facing the greatest exclusion. This is particularly the case when policy priorities place greater emphasis on employment than on social assistance. Taken together, Save the Children's national evidence supports a practical requirement for the next MFF: **a Child Marker sufficiently detailed to show not only whether funding reached children, but which children it reached and through which eligibility route.**

**Co-financing requirements are consistently identified as a barrier** across very different national contexts. Finland's 25% co-financing requirement is compounded by cuts to STEA, the national funding body for social welfare and health organisations, from EUR 384 million in 2024 to a projected EUR 190 million by 2027<sup>83</sup>. In **Kosovo**, co-financing requirements were reported to be sufficiently prohibitive to disqualify grassroots organisations from participation altogether<sup>84</sup>. In **Lithuania**, reporting and administrative requirements remain excessively demanding for organisations of all sizes and are becoming more burdensome, even as the EU moves towards simplified funding mechanisms such as lump sums. In each context, the organisations best placed to reach the most excluded children are often those least able to meet the financial and administrative thresholds for participation. This is particularly true of smaller, specialised organisations rooted in local communities. A future ESF+ Regulation could address this design problem directly through **lower co-financing rates or simplified cost options tailored specifically to child-focused delivery by civil society.**

Evidence from **Sweden** provides a positive example of how the sustainability challenge can begin to be addressed. Min Framtid, now in its third consecutive ESF+ funding period, has been reinforced by a durable partnership between public authorities and civil society,

through an idéburet offentligt partnerskap (IOP) with the City of Stockholm that adds long-term municipal co-financing. While the project remains ESF+-funded and financing beyond 2028 has not yet been confirmed, it shows how an **ESF+ funded time-limited project can catalyse longer-term public investment and build the partnerships needed for a sustainable service model<sup>86</sup>**. This example also demonstrates the distinctive value of ESF+: it can provide additional resources to address urgent needs and launch programmes that, if successful, can subsequently be sustained through national funding.

Kosovo provides a different model outside the EU funding framework. Its shift towards licensing NGOs and contracting them directly as **long-term public service providers**, rather than treating them as time-limited project implementers, has helped address the chronic underfunding of specialised social services and strengthen the monitoring of services delivered to children<sup>87</sup>. The experiences of Sweden and Kosovo suggest that durable partnerships between public authorities and civil society, adapted to different institutional contexts, are among the most transferable solutions to the challenges of monitoring and sustainability. The European Commission and Member States could actively encourage such



partnerships through **design guidance for the future National and Regional Partnership Plans**, rather than leaving them to emerge only as exceptions.

**Gaps in monitoring and financial tracking** compound both challenges. **Belgium's** 2026 progress report states that information on budgets allocated by its federated entities to ESF+ programmes 'was not collected due to lack of time and resources', even though the underlying reports exist<sup>88</sup>. **Portugal's** 2026 progress report illustrates the same pattern from a different angle. It states that it was 'not possible to assess specific allocations' for the ECG National Action Plan measures at the time of reporting, even though EUR 445.7 million was provisionally identified for them<sup>89</sup>. Evidence from Belgium and Portugal indicates a recurring administrative pattern. **This strengthens the case for a Child Marker: voluntary tracking of child-specific expenditure has already been attempted at Member State discretion but has not produced comparable and reliable data, even where the underlying information exists.** Formal compliance is not sufficient: a budget can satisfy general reporting requirements and still fail the children it was intended to reach. **A Child Marker should therefore be understood not merely as an additional reporting tool, but as a delivery safeguard.**

This evidence does not suggest that ESF+ is failing to invest in children. Instead, it points to an **instrument that functions broadly as designed but lacks the 2 features required to systematically reach children in the most vulnerable situations: binding targeting requirements and mandatory, disaggregated tracking.** A mandatory earmark alone would not resolve the targeting paradox or the monitoring gap identified here. This is why the paper's recommendations combine the earmark with a **Child Marker and partnership and reporting requirements**, rather than treating the level of funding as the only available lever.

## 6. The rights-based case and children's voices



The ECG's normative premise is that access to its 5 service areas constitutes an enforceable entitlement, grounded in **Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, rather than a discretionary social policy choice<sup>90</sup>. Yet this entitlement is often recognised in principle, but not yet fully guaranteed in practice.

For example, **Spain's** debate over free school meals continues at the national level, but in practice provision remains limited to the Basque Country<sup>91</sup>. **Italy's** National Fund to Combat Food Poverty at School exists in law but has limited allocated resources and little publicly available evidence regarding its implementation<sup>92</sup>.

**Finland** presents a different approach, illustrates how **universal access to public services** can be combined with targeted support for children facing additional barriers or disadvantages. The Finnish model therefore shows that universalism and targeted measures are not competing approaches. Universal services provide a common foundation, while additional support is required to ensure that children most at risk can access and benefit from them in practice<sup>93</sup>.

**Sweden** presents a distinct pattern. Its ECG reporting is formally grounded in a children's rights framework. The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** has domestic legal force in Sweden, while the country's new **Social Services Act** is explicitly framed around the **best interests of the child and children's rights to participation and information**. Yet within ESF+ programming, Save the Children Sweden reports that **child poverty is framed 'more as social inclusion, education and labour market participation than as the fulfilment of enforceable rights'**. Rights-based language is also 'less visible in financial allocations, eligibility criteria and monitoring of ESF+ projects' than in general social policy<sup>94</sup>.

More strikingly, **Sweden's** evidence highlights an additional risk: **national policy reforms can**

**move in the opposite direction from the rights promoted by the ECG while EU-level investment continues.** Save the Children Sweden's review of reforms adopted during the current parliamentary term found that, while some measures strengthen children's living conditions, the overall reform trajectory risks increasing child poverty, particularly by reducing access to social protection for children in migrant families and those in families receiving social support<sup>95</sup>. Therefore, **EU investment should help Member States expand children's rights, not merely compensate for national reforms that weaken them.** Sweden illustrates why this paper's central recommendation focuses on a protected earmark rather than funding levels alone: **a dedicated, ring-fenced allocation is among the few EU-level tools capable of safeguarding investment in children when domestic policy moves in the opposite direction**<sup>96</sup>.



**Children's testimony**, gathered through national consultations conducted by the Child Poverty Reference Group, directly corroborates the gaps

identified by adults. The quotations from **Albania** are particularly illustrative. Regarding hidden costs, a child observed that 'some services that are supposed to be free actually create extra costs for families'<sup>97</sup>. This directly supports the evidence on barriers to healthcare and nutrition. Regarding housing, another child stated that 'the criteria and process for distributing housing grants are unclear'<sup>98</sup>.

**Kosovo's Young Voices survey** found that 83% of children wanted greater influence over decisions affecting them, but only 9% had participated in a public consultation during the previous two years. Discussions with children from the ROR Group, Hëna Group and Um za Decu further revealed why children may be excluded from these processes: **"Public consultations are not child-friendly or engaging,"** as one 16-year-old girl explained. Children described consultations as overly formal, difficult to understand and poorly adapted to school schedules.



Moreover, they often felt that their participation had little meaningful influence on decision-making:

**"Even if we participate, expressing our opinion has no impact on decision-makers,"** said a

17-year-old girl. These findings suggest that the challenge extends beyond access to consultations to ensuring that children's participation in public decision-making is meaningful<sup>99</sup>. A girl who participated in an online consultation on poverty and violence against children in **Romania** described poverty in terms that cannot be captured by statistics alone:

**"Poverty, to me, is those moments when your friends are making memories, and you are not."**

A consultation conducted by Save the Children **Italy** captured a similar anxiety about the future. As a child explained, 'I hope my future will be better than what I'm living now, because it's hard to always have to worry every time, **"will we eat today?"**'<sup>100</sup>



This qualitative evidence is corroborated on a much larger scale by the European Commission's EU-wide consultation with children on the ECG

review, conducted between October and December 2025 through the **EU Children's Participation Platform** - a key framework currently supported by Save the Children and SOS Children's Villages<sup>101</sup>. More than 41,700 children across all 27 Member States participated<sup>102</sup>. Their findings closely echo the evidence gathered by Save the Children. Children linked inclusion to whether their families could **afford associated costs**, whether support was **available** when needed, and whether **adults listened and took action**, rather than simply to whether a service existed on paper. **Mental health support** was described as 'unevenly available and slow to access, including within schools'. The leading recommendation was to **make access affordable in practice, followed by improving the speed and consistency of service delivery.**<sup>103</sup>

## 7. Recommendations for EU institutions and Member States



The evidence gathered in this paper supports a central argument:

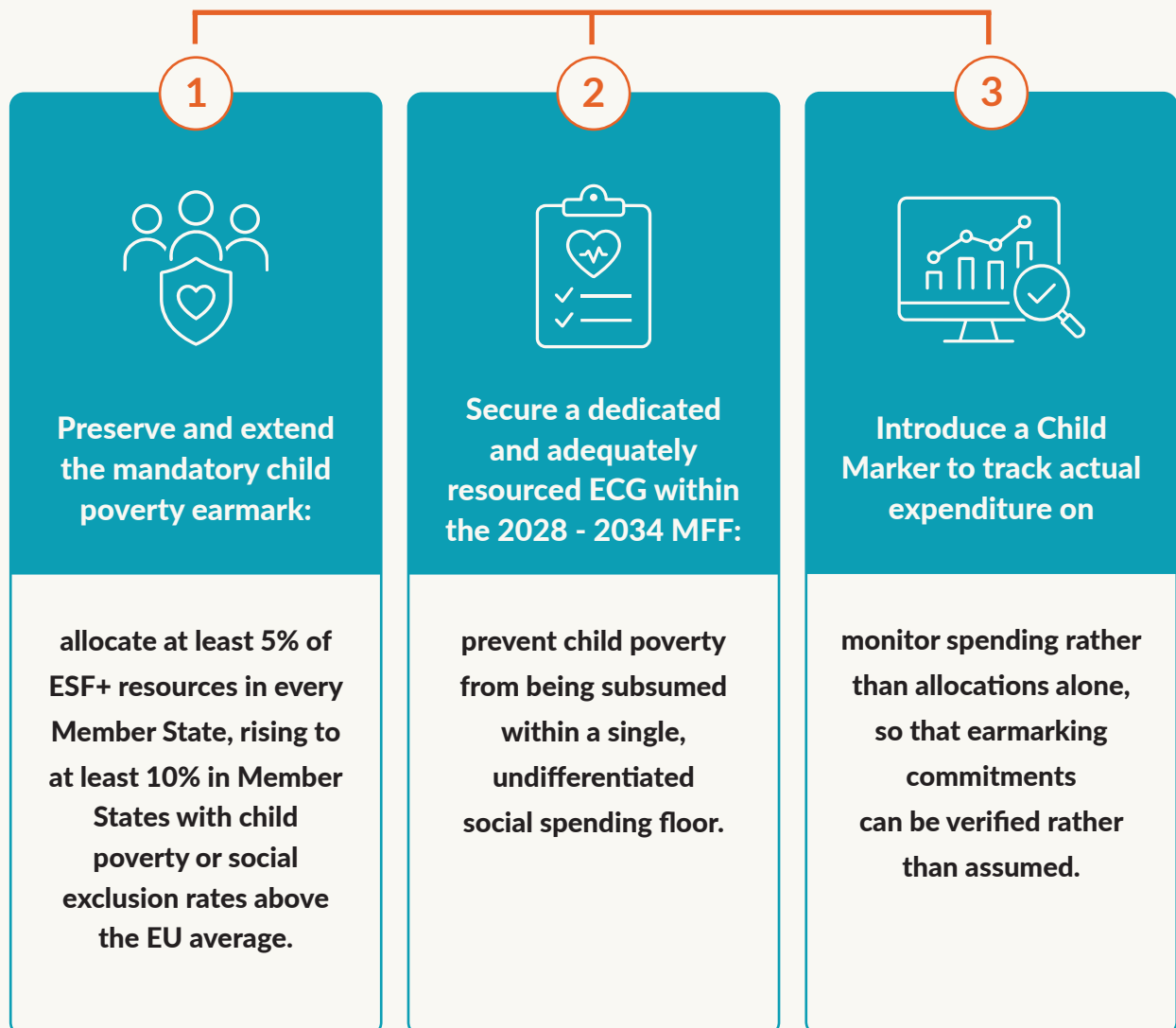
the funding architecture, not funding levels alone, determines whether the ECG's rights-based commitment becomes operational rather than rhetorical and, ultimately, how effectively the EU can tackle child poverty.

This analysis demonstrates why ESF+ remains fundamental to Europe's capacity to tackle child poverty. **Its role is not to replace national social expenditure, but to provide additional capacity to address needs that national systems do not always meet, sustain targeted investment in children over time, and enable effective approaches to develop into more permanent forms of provision.** Sweden's Min Framtid illustrates this added value particularly clearly. What began as an ESF+-funded intervention is now in its third consecutive funding period and has developed into a long-term partnership between Save the Children Sweden and the City of Stockholm.

**ESF+ can therefore act not merely as temporary project funding, but as a catalyst through which new forms of support are developed, proven and progressively embedded in national and local systems.**

This European layer of investment is particularly important because national social investment varies and cannot be guaranteed over time. Finland and Sweden demonstrate how quickly domestic policy can move in the opposite direction from commitments to reducing child poverty. In this context, the added value of ESF+ also lies in continuity: it provides a European investment capacity that can continue supporting children when national budgets are under pressure or domestic policy priorities change. Without a sufficiently strong and child-focused ESF+, investment in essential services for children would depend much more heavily on changing national fiscal and political choices, precisely when children experiencing poverty need sustained support the most

The analysis supports three overarching asks to policymakers:



The detailed recommendations below translate these overarching requests into the specific mechanisms available to each institution.



## European Parliament

The European Parliament plays a key role in influencing the positions of the European Commission and the Council and in shaping the final legislative framework. The central ask is for Parliament to continue calling for the protection and strengthening of the European Social Fund, including ring-fenced resources for children. Parliament's resolutions of 11 March 2025 and 12 February 2026 already call for a standalone fund, ring-fenced resources, minimum earmarks of 5% and 10%, and a dedicated EUR 20 billion ECG envelope<sup>104</sup>.

### Recommendations

- 1 | Restore a dedicated child poverty earmark:**  
allocate at least 5% of European Social Fund resources in every Member State and at least 10% in Member States with child AROPE rates above the EU average.
- 2 | Restore a mandatory allocation for social inclusion:**  
ring-fence at least 25% of ESF social spending resources for social inclusion, matching the current obligation under Article 7(4) of the ESF+ Regulation. Establish a standalone European Social Fund budgetary nomenclature within the NRPP to enable democratic scrutiny, financial tracking and accountability.
- 3 | Require financial allocations for ECG implementation:**  
require ECG National Action Plans to include mandatory financial allocations and ensure that these allocations are reported in NRPPs design documents.
- 4 | Establish binding partnership requirements:**  
ensure meaningful and consequential involvement of children's rights civil society organisations in NRPPs design and monitoring and establish formal mechanisms for child participation.
- 5 | Introduce a Child Marker:**  
establish a Child Marker or equivalent child-focused tracking mechanism across ESF+ and the NRPPs as a condition for NRPPs approval.



## European Commission

The European Commission must ensure that the next MFF provides the resources needed to deliver the EU's political priorities. This includes meeting the 2030 target of lifting at least 5 million children out of poverty or social exclusion and supporting the longer-term objective of **ending poverty in Europe by 2050**. Its 2026 Communication on strengthening the ECG sets out an ambitious and potentially transformative agenda. However, the Communication also acknowledges that **insufficient funding for and investment in the ECG are already limiting the impact of existing measures**, and stresses the need for sustained, long-term financing rather than short-term and fragmented projects.

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Without adequate and dedicated resources in the next MFF, a strengthened ECG risks being given greater responsibilities and higher expectations without the financial means to deliver them. Without that investment, the EU's 2030 and 2050 objectives risk remaining political ambitions rather than achievable policy outcomes.

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**The core ask has 3 elements: enforce enabling conditions requiring transparent, itemised financial allocations for ECG measures within National Action Plans; introduce a **Child Marker** to track actual expenditure rather than allocations alone; and take a **more assertive position with Member States on the rights-based framing of the Guarantee**.** Spain's experience illustrates the need for financial transparency: ESF+ accounts for around 49% of the funding behind the ECG actions reported by the Autonomous Communities. The proposed tracking mechanism responds to monitoring gaps identified in the biennial reports of Belgium and Portugal in Section 5 and in the country fiches for Spain, Romania and Sweden in Appendix 1, while the evidence from Spain, Italy and Sweden in Section 6 shows that the rights-based framing remains contested rather than firmly established.

## Recommendations

- 1 | Support a mandatory child poverty earmark during the forthcoming ESF negotiations:**  
endorse the requests made by the European Parliament and civil society for at least 5% of ESF resources in every Member State, rising to at least 10% in Member States with child AROPE rates above the EU average.
- 2 | Make ECG integration mandatory within NRPPs design:**  
replace optional guidance in an annex with binding requirements covering investment benchmarks, monitoring indicators disaggregated by groups of children in vulnerable situations, and review mechanisms.
- 3 | Strengthen scrutiny of national plans:**  
issue robust guidance on designing child-focused ESF investment within the NRPPs architecture and apply a rigorous approach when approving NRPPs that fail to demonstrate adequate provision for tackling child poverty.
- 4 | Use the European Semester systematically:**  
adopt Country-Specific Recommendations addressing gaps in ESF+ and national investment in tackling child poverty, including cases in which earmarking requirements have been formally satisfied but undermined in substance.



## Council and Member States

Member States are placing increasing emphasis on security and competitiveness. These priorities must ultimately serve a broader purpose: building prosperous and resilient societies that provide people with security and opportunity.

A Europe that becomes safer and more competitive while millions of children and families continue to experience poverty, and many more remain at risk, would fall short of that objective. Tackling child poverty is therefore integral to Europe's wider ambitions and to making them meaningful and sustainable. This connection is particularly important as national social spending comes under pressure, while the evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that EU funding can help maintain investment in children when domestic priorities shift.

**The Council must therefore ensure that tackling child poverty remains a visible and protected priority within the next EU budget.** It should respond to the calls from the European Parliament and civil society by introducing a mandatory ESF+ child poverty earmark of at least 5% of national resources in every Member State, rising to at least 10% in those with child AROPE rates above the EU average.

**This EU-level requirement must be matched by adequate national financing, rather than allowing European resources to substitute for domestic investment.** Spain provides the clearest illustration: despite earmarking EUR 795 million of ESF+ (including EUR 527 million in EU support) for the ECG, it has no dedicated national budget line for its National Action Plan. National authorities should also guarantee **meaningful participation by civil society and children** in planning and monitoring, recognising that formal representation alone does not ensure consequential influence. Equivalent Child Guarantee earmarking principles should also be incorporated into **Global Europe programming** under the next MFF for candidate and pre-accession countries.

## Recommendations

- 1 Embed the child poverty earmark in the next MFF architecture:**

ensure that the next MFF includes a binding requirement for every Member State to allocate at least 5% of ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty, rising to at least 10% in Member States with child AROPE rates above the EU average. Integrate ECG National Action Plans into NRPPs investment design from the outset, rather than through consultation after plans have been developed.
- 2 Complement ESF resources with national funding:**

secure long-term national co-financing for ESF+-enabled services for children, including maintenance costs and continued provision beyond individual project periods.
- 3 Protect social investment:**

resist fiscal pressure to reduce child-related social budgets and ensure that National and Regional Partnership Plans contain visible and protected measures for tackling child poverty
- 4 Improve access for the most excluded children:**

establish national child poverty sub-targets disaggregated by groups of children in vulnerable situations. Develop targeted outreach strategies for Roma children, children with disabilities, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness and children in alternative care.
- 5 Ensure meaningful participation:**

involve subnational and local authorities, including municipalities, and civil society organisations with direct service-delivery experience in policy design and monitoring. Establish formal mechanisms through which children can influence decisions.
- 6 Extend equivalent earmarking principles to pre-accession funding:**

incorporate Child Guarantee-equivalent earmarking and accountability requirements into Global Europe programming under the next MFF for candidate and pre-accession countries.

# Appendix 1- Country Fiches

The country fiches in this appendix summarise evidence collected from Save the Children's national experts in seven EU Member States - **Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and Sweden** - and four pre-accession countries - **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia**. The evidence was gathered through the 2026 Save the Children's Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire and complemented by materials produced by Save the Children's national organisations, national biennial European Child Guarantee progress reports, and relevant EU and national data. It has been used to inform the comparisons, thematic findings and country examples presented throughout Sections 3–6.

Each fiche presents a child poverty snapshot, the national context, relevant EU funding and European Child Guarantee implementation, a positive example where available, a key bottleneck, the national advocacy ask, and quotations from children or Save the Children representatives. For pre-accession countries, the fiches reflect experience with IPA III and emerging Child Guarantee-style processes rather than ESF+ itself.



## Finland

**“Finland's direction is concerning – we cannot afford to push even more children into poverty. It is essential to invest in children to break the cycle of disadvantage and to ensure equal opportunities for all.”**

**– Save the Children Finland.**

### Child poverty snapshot:

17.2% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2025, up from 14.5% in 2019. Material deprivation has nearly tripled, from 3.7% in 2021 to 10% in 2024, and child poverty is projected to rise to over 150,000 children.

### National context:

Cuts to social security, rising living and housing costs and increased healthcare customer fees, are the principal drivers of child poverty, compounded by one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. Children in single-adult households face a 28% poverty risk against 9% for those in two-adult households; families with a foreign-language background are also disproportionately affected.

## ■ ESF+ / Child Guarantee use

Finland is not subject to the mandatory earmark and Save the Children Finland confirms that no ESF+ call has directly targeted child poverty. Investment instead works through systemic measures – services for children, young people and families (EUR 23 million) and safety nets for young people (EUR 30 million) that affect children indirectly rather than through a child-rights-specific design. Finland clearly illustrates why greater ESF+ investment is needed: child poverty is rising just as cuts to national social security are taking effect, yet, in the absence of an earmark, it is impossible to demonstrate that EU funding is being used in a targeted way to offset this domestic retrenchment.

## ■ Positive example

Finland's therapy guarantee, in force since May 2025, provides access to short-term psychotherapy or structured psychosocial support in primary healthcare and social services – an important national reform, even though Finland's own 2026 ECG progress report still flags mental health and substance-use services for children as being at risk.

In 2021, the Act on Compulsory Education raised the minimum school-leaving age to 18, ensuring that everyone could pursue a qualification free of charge and promoting more equal access to working life. Previously, around 15% of each age group dropped out of school.

## ■ Key bottleneck

A 25% co-financing requirement is particularly difficult for smaller NGOs to meet, and recent cuts to STEA (the national Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations), from EUR 384 million in 2024 to a projected EUR 190 million in 2027, are compounding this by weakening the ability of NGOs to access ESF+-adjacent funding at all. Youth homelessness rose by almost 40% in 2025, linked to cuts in housing allowance.

## ■ National advocacy ask

**Support a 5% earmark as a concrete commitment.** Civil society involvement should extend beyond consultation to early-stage priority-setting, and children and young people should be systematically heard throughout.



**“As our society grows older, children are becoming an even smaller minority – one whose rights and interests are too easily overlooked. Investing in children must therefore be a priority. We owe it to them and simply cannot afford not to give every child the best possible start in life.”**

**– Eric Großhaus, Save the Children Germany.**

### **Child poverty snapshot:**

23.5% of children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2025, with the rate fluctuating between 22% and 24% since 2019, essentially stagnant, with no major reform of child and family benefits delivered in this period.

### **National context:**

The cost-of-living crisis has been a central driver: real wages fell in 2020 and 2022 and only began recovering significantly in 2024. Single-parent households, large families and children with a migrant background are most exposed; around half of children at risk of poverty have at least one parent born outside the EU.

## ■ **ESF+ / Child Guarantee use**

Germany is not subject to the mandatory 5% child poverty earmark, since its AROPE rate was below the EU average when the ESF+ reform was agreed; instead, it follows the softer obligation to allocate an “appropriate amount”, with significant discretion left at the federal and Länder levels. ESF+ investment concentrates on early childhood education and care, school social work, and “whole household” approaches that combine child services with parental labour-market integration, managed jointly by federal ministries and the sixteen Länder.

## ■ **Positive example**

The German federal ESF+ programme “Jugend Stärken: Brücken in die Eigenständigkeit (JUST BEst)” is implemented in over 70 municipalities and supports vulnerable 14–26-year-olds, including care leavers through outreach, case management and access to housing, education and training. Monitoring data show that 64% of participants improved their education or employment situation, and 71% achieved greater independence in living.

## ■ Key bottleneck

Germany follows the discretionary “appropriate amount” obligation rather than a binding earmark. Resources earmarked for tackling child poverty are frequently implemented through broader measures that are directed towards labour market access/integration. Dedicated child-poverty interventions appear to play a comparatively smaller role within the overall programme architecture, which gives the impression that programmes are being labelled under the 5% child poverty earmark even when the primary goal of many programmes is something different. The ECG Action Plan and ESF+ programming were developed without any known structural link between them.

## ■ National advocacy ask

**Introduce in the ESF the 5% binding earmark:** this would send a strong signal to prioritise child poverty within ESF+ programming rather than treating it as secondary to labour-market objectives and should be paired with a more accessible tracking tool given Germany's fragmented federal competences, and with mandatory ECG budget allocations in National Action Plans, which currently do not exist.



“I hope my future will be better than what I'm living now, because it's hard to always have to worry every time, ‘will we eat today?’”<sup>105</sup>

– Child participant, Save the Children Italy consultation.

### Child poverty snapshot:

27.1% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (2023–2025), essentially back at the 2019 level after peaking near 30% in 2020–2022. Absolute child poverty stands at 13.8%, with marked territorial disparity: the absolute poverty rate among families with minor children ranges from around 12% in Central and Northern Italy to 16.4% in the South and Islands, and the AROPE rate for children under 16 reaches 43.6% for those with a foreign background, against 23.5% for children with Italian citizenship.

### National context:

Child poverty is driven by parental employment and education levels, family structure (large and single-parent households are most exposed) and entrenched North–South disparities. While representing a significant expansion of income support for families with children, the Assegno Unico Universale, a universal child allowance introduced in 2022 at a cost of around EUR 20 billion a year, has not in fact reduced child poverty, underscoring that a national cash transfer is not a substitute for targeted service investments.

## ■ ESF+ / Child Guarantee use

ESF+ and national resources jointly fund a dedicated ECG priority within the National Inclusion and Combating Poverty Programme (PON Inclusion), managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and implemented in line with Italy's National Action Plan for the ECG. Three flagship calls illustrate the scale: **DesTEENazione**, building 92 multifunctional youth spaces (EUR 200 million ESF+ plus EUR 25 million ERDF for the first 60 projects, with a further EUR 102.7 million for 32 additional projects); **ComeTE**, a national pilot delivering around 9,000 socio-educational measures through 148 Territorial Social Areas, co-designed with the Save the Children Italy (EUR 121.9 million) through a public co-design process open to third-sector organizations; and **Primi Passi**, a co-design programme for families with children under three (EUR 80 million)<sup>106</sup>.

**All of these are innovative initiatives made possible by the ECG-dedicated program, which has involved a significant financial investment.** The clear traceability of actions linked to the ECG allows for implementation monitoring. Furthermore, co-design with third-sector organisations has been piloted for the first time. This shows the impact of the important provision requiring EU Member States with child poverty rates exceeding the EU average to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty. Also, a new programme to include and integrate Roma children and adolescents has been developed. There are 31 ATSS receiving funding, which are launching the activities outlined in the project for a total of over 3,000 participants and more than 500 school complexes. The funding amounts to EUR 40 million.

## ■ Positive example

**ComeTE** is notable both for its scale and for being developed through the **first formal co-design process** between the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policies** and civil society organisations, a governance innovation as significant as the service delivery itself. Early implementation evidence is operational rather than outcome-based, since the four-year pilot has only recently begun.

## ■ Key bottleneck

Early Childhood Education and Care shows the clearest gap between national investment and equitable outcomes: national coverage stands at 31.6 places per 100 children aged 0–2 but falls below 20% in Southern regions against over 40% in Central Italy, and only 25.2% of children at risk of poverty attend ECEC compared with 41% of their peers. Civil society access to ECG monitoring data is also limited. The national coordinator's role and opportunities for systematic CSO involvement in monitoring could both be strengthened.

## ■ National advocacy ask

Treat the current 5% earmark as a floor, not a sufficient target: given the scale and persistence of child poverty, a **10% threshold for countries above the EU average would better support the transition from successful pilots to permanent, predictably funded structural services**, particularly for ECEC staffing once current infrastructure funding (NRRP) ends.



As Europe confronts unprecedented threats to its security, economic prosperity and social system, we need to ask ourselves not just “how do we defend our countries?”, but also “what is worth defending”. The answer is that a meaningful, rich and fulfilling future for all our children, built on all the hard-fought achievements for equality and justice, is what makes our countries a special place worth defending.

– Save the Children Lithuania.

## Child poverty snapshot:

16.9% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (2025); the national AROPE rate (19.9%, provisional) has fallen substantially since 2016 (33.2%) but has fluctuated year to year since 2021, suggesting an inconsistent effect of recent poverty-reduction policy.

## National context:

Social protection spending stood at only 16.95% of GDP in 2023, against an EU average of 27.83%. Chronic income inequality, the absence of progressive income taxation, and the fact that households with children are relatively less affected by poverty than the national average all shape a distinctive national picture.

## ■ ESF+/Child Guarantee

Lithuania allocates approximately 10% of its ESF+ allocation to ECG objectives, primarily addressing extreme vulnerability - children in foster care or institutional care, children with disabilities, and children from AROPE families - rather than poverty status as a stand-alone targeting criterion. ESF+ funding is frequently reported in aggregate alongside Regional Development, Cohesion, and other EU funds, making it difficult to isolate the specific contribution of ESF+.

## ■ National advocacy ask

“Development of services promoting and effectively supporting foster care in a family environment”, an ESF+-supported project (EUR 11.9 million of an overall EUR 20.05 million project value), has strengthened foster care services through 66 centres, reaching more than 5,000 children with integrated support to help them grow up in a family rather than an institutional environment.

## ■ Key bottleneck

Reporting and administrative requirements imposed by national authorities are described by civil society organisations as excessively demanding, even as the EU moves toward simplified funding mechanisms such as lump sums. Moreover, some calls have proved too narrowly intersectional to be practically deliverable; one recent call for proposals went unfilled because the eligibility criteria required beneficiaries to hold too many simultaneous vulnerabilities alongside specific geographic conditions, making it infeasible to reach a meaningful number of children.

## ■ National advocacy ask

A higher earmark is needed, ideally with a clear sub-earmark or a disaggregation mechanism that allows poverty reduction to be tracked separately from vulnerability in general – since AROPE status is currently treated as one vulnerability factor among several rather than a stand-alone prioritisation criterion.



## Romania

**“To me, child poverty is not only about the lack of money. It is about the lack of opportunities – the absence of things that should be normal for every child.”**

**– boy participant, online consultation on poverty and violence against children.**

### Child poverty snapshot:

32.4% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2025 – the lowest level in the past decade, down from a pandemic-era peak of 41.5% (2021–2022) and from 39.1% in 2019.

### National context:

Romania records one of the largest performance gaps linked to socio-economic status in the OECD's PISA assessment (24.1% versus an OECD average of 12%). Drivers include low parental education, the rising cost of living, and weak coverage, quality and hidden costs in health, education (particularly ECEC) and leisure services. Roma children, children with disabilities or special educational needs, children in large or rural families and children in alternative care are most affected<sup>107</sup>.

## ■ ESF+ / Child Guarantee use

**Three ESF+-funded operational programmes are relevant to children:** Inclusion and Social Dignity, Education and Employment, and Health. The National Action Plan for the ECG was developed after the programming of EU funds was already well advanced, resulting in strong formal alignment between the two. However, many highly relevant calls remain closed to civil society organisations, which are not eligible to apply.

## ■ Positive example

Community-based services designed to prevent family separation and support reintegration, funded under the Inclusion and Social Dignity Programme and aligned with National Action Plan measure M2.1.13, aim to reach 37,000 children by 2030. Under this priority, Save the Children Romania delivers five local day-centre projects, providing children with homework support, psychosocial counselling, creative workshops, school supplies and a warm meal, as well as counselling and financial guidance for parents.

## ■ Key bottleneck

Prevention-oriented services, and the organisations that deliver them, are identified as being at the highest risk under a weakened post-2027 architecture. Authorities have historically prioritised response measures – special protection, educational reintegration – over prevention, even though prevention is both more efficient and less costly. Required digital monitoring tools (an early-warning mechanism in education, a school segregation module, and a child observatory platform) are not yet fully implemented, creating a structural barrier where funding eligibility depends on data infrastructure that does not yet exist.

## ■ National advocacy ask

Support earmarking at 10% or higher to preserve the recent declining trend in child AROPE, paired with a mechanism that tracks actual spending rather than only allocation, to prevent situations where child-targeted funds go unspent and are then redirected to non-child purposes, and a mid-term corrective mechanism if investment falls below committed levels.



**“In one of the most prosperous moments in Spain's history, poverty cannot determine the development, rights and future of the children that suffer from it. It is not their failure – it is a political choice, and it is one we can reverse if we choose to invest.”**

**- Save the Children Spain.**

## **Child poverty snapshot:**

According to Eurostat, 33.8% of children under the age of 18 in Spain were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2025, the highest child AROPE rate in the EU and 9.5 percentage points above the EU average of 24.3%. The rate has remained structurally high for more than a decade.

## **National context:**

Key drivers include the cost of raising children, housing costs, weak family support policies, labour market precarity, and gender inequality. Children living in single-parent households, which are predominantly headed by mothers, face a poverty rate of 45.8%. Migrant and Roma children, as well as those living in disadvantaged areas, are often not reached by mainstream policies.

## ■ **ESF+ / Child Guarantee use**

Spain channels child-focused investment through a dedicated state ESF+ programme for Social Inclusion, the ECG and the Fight against Poverty, which includes a ring-fenced “Child Guarantee” priority (ESO4.12). Spain has exceeded the mandatory 5% earmark, programming **6.72% of its ESF+ resources (EUR 1.09 billion, including national co-financing) under ST06. Its own biennial report sets aside EUR 795 million of ESF+ for the ECG National Action Plan (around EUR 527 million in EU support plus EUR 268 million in national co-financing).** ESF+ accounts for an estimated 49% of the funding supporting the ECG actions reported by the Autonomous Communities. **However, no dedicated national budget line exists to complement this investment.**

## ■ **Positive example**

An integrated inclusion pilot aligned with the Child Guarantee, financed through the Recovery and Resilience Facility and implemented with the Ministry of Inclusion, reached 1,741 children and adolescents. A randomised controlled trial found that the pilot reduced reported material and social deprivation by 12.6% in the treatment group, providing rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of an approach that could be scaled up through ESF+ social innovation funding.

## ■ Key bottleneck

Under Spain's decentralised system of governance, roughly half of ECG delivery falls under the responsibility of the Autonomous Communities. This results in wide disparities between regions, with no comparable cross-regional monitoring. There is no transparent, real-time financial tracking of how much is spent, on whom and with what results. Spain also still lacks a universal or quasi-universal child benefit, while the existing means-tested supplement has a non-take-up rate of up to 72%.

## ■ National advocacy ask

Retain the 5% earmarking floor for all Member States and set a minimum earmark of 10% for those with a child AROPE rate above the EU average. This would safeguard the level of investment Spain has already reached, rather than leaving it to discretion under a single, undifferentiated social spending target. Pair this approach with a Child Marker, mandatory ECG allocations in National Action Plans, and an EU push for adequate family benefits with automatic enrolment.



**Sweden**

**“We meet children who say, ‘I don’t really want to go’, when their sports club is travelling to a tournament – not because they lack the desire to participate, but because they want to spare their parents the anxiety of knowing the family cannot afford the cost. It is in these everyday moments, often invisible to others, that children carry responsibilities they should never have to bear.”**

**- Save the Children Sweden**

### **Child poverty snapshot:**

In 2025, 23.4% of children in Sweden were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), up from 20.9% in 2024. Save the Children Sweden’s revised measure estimates that approximately 276,000 children experience economic vulnerability, almost 1 in 8 children and around 100,000 more than previously estimated.

### **National context:**

Key drivers include rising living costs, high housing and food prices, weak income growth, unemployment, and levels of social assistance that have not kept pace with costs. An interactive child poverty map recently published by Save the Children Sweden shows that inequalities in children’s economic circumstances are often greater within individual municipalities than between municipalities, highlighting the need for targeted action at both local and national levels<sup>108</sup>.

## ■ ESF+ / Child Guarantee use

Sweden is not subject to the mandatory 5% ESF+ child poverty earmark. Instead, it must allocate an “appropriate amount”. The national programme allocates 3% of the fund to support for the most deprived (Programme Area C), as required by the ESF+ Regulation; about half of this is coded to child poverty, equivalent to 0.70% of total ESF+ resources. The Government presents current provision as being delivered mainly through existing policy instruments, rather than through new measures introduced specifically in response to the ECG. Consequently, the strategic link between ESF+ programming and the national ECG Action Plan remains relatively weak.

## ■ Positive example

**Min Framtid (“My Future”)**, an ESF+-funded partnership between Save the Children Sweden and the City of Stockholm, supports young people aged 15–21 who are unemployed or at risk of leaving school without qualifications. It provides individual coaching, psychosocial support and guidance towards education or employment. Now in its third consecutive ESF+ funding period, with SEK 55 million allocated for 2026–2028, the initiative has been reinforced through an idéburet offentligt partnerskap (IOP); a long-term public–civil society partnership with the City of Stockholm. **It illustrates how ESF+ investment can catalyse durable municipal co-financing beyond the lifetime of an individual project.**

## ■ Key bottleneck

Public reporting rarely provides sufficiently detailed and disaggregated data to establish whether ESF+-funded projects reach children facing the greatest disadvantage, including children with disabilities, undocumented children and those in alternative care. This weak evidence base also makes it harder to embed successful approaches in mainstream provision. Many promising initiatives therefore remain project-based, with their continuation dependent on municipalities or other public authorities choosing to adopt and finance proven models once ESF+ funding ends.

## ■ National advocacy ask

Save the Children Sweden’s recent review of reforms adopted during the current parliamentary term finds that, while some measures strengthen children’s living conditions, **the overall reform agenda risks increasing child poverty, particularly by reducing access to social protection for children in migrant families. The next funding framework should therefore retain a dedicated child poverty earmark, require ECG National Action Plans to set out measurable financial commitments and provide for regular reporting, and ensure that monitoring captures whether national reforms are strengthening or weakening children’s access to their rights. Children and civil society should be involved throughout the policy cycle, not merely consulted at its margins. A dedicated, protected earmark is particularly valuable in precisely this context: when domestic reforms risk reversing progress, a ring-fenced EU funding stream is one of the few levers capable of safeguarding investment in children.**

## Albania and Kosovo- The External Dimension

“There is a need for structured awareness campaigns so that families clearly understand the number, type and eligibility criteria of services.”

- Children and Youth Advisory Group, Albania

“A child's right to health, education, and nutrition should never depend on their family's income or the local political climate. Implementing the Child Guarantee in Kosovo is not merely a policy goal, it is a moral imperative that defines what kind of society we are building for tomorrow.”

- Save the Children in Kosovo

ESF+ does not apply outside the EU. Both respondents based their answers on their experience with IPA III, the EU's pre-accession instrument, and with national Child Guarantee-style planning processes that are still taking shape. They are presented together because they illustrate, at different stages of institutional development, how the absence of an ESF+-equivalent earmarking mechanism manifests itself in practice



### Albania - child poverty snapshot and context

According to EU-SILC 2023, 26.5% of children are at risk of poverty, down from 28.5% in 2021 but still well above the EU average. Key drivers include low household incomes and parental employment rates, inadequate and poorly targeted social benefits, high food costs, and weak access to services in rural areas. Roma and Egyptian children, children with disabilities, rural children and children in alternative care are the most affected.

#### ■ Albania - IPA III use and positive example

Albania has reduced institutional care by an estimated 30% through a shift towards Child and Family Support Centres and community-based hubs. This has been accompanied by reform of the main national anti-poverty programme, Ndihma Ekonomike, to better target children, as well as the ongoing development of a regular child benefit. These are national reforms aligned with ECG objectives, rather than measures financed through a dedicated ECG funding stream.

## ■ Albania - key bottleneck

ECEC investment stands at only 0.29% of GDP, well below EU levels. Overall participation is around 51%, compared with only 26.5% among Roma children. Social services meet just 28% of identified protection needs overall and 19% of those of children with disabilities, while many municipalities meet only 0–10% of service needs. This gap is also reflected directly in consultations with children: “Some services that are supposed to be free actually create extra costs for families.”<sup>109</sup>



## Kosovo - child poverty snapshot and context

An estimated 23% of children live in poverty and 7% in extreme poverty; no EU-standard AROPE tracking system exists. High levels of labour-market informality undermine effective social insurance coverage, while the Social Assistance Scheme does not adequately reach families living just above the poverty line.

## ■ Kosovo - IPA III use and positive example

Mobile Outreach Teams provide integrated emotional, educational and psychological support directly in communities, helping vulnerable and excluded children, including Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children. In doing so, they overcome barriers, including documentation requirements and stigma, that prevent the most excluded children from accessing static municipal services. A parallel shift towards licensing NGOs and contracting them directly as long-term public service providers, rather than treating them as deliverers of time-limited projects, addresses the chronic underfunding of specialised social services.

## ■ Kosovo - key bottleneck

Kosovo does not yet have an integrated national framework for monitoring child poverty or ECG-equivalent expenditure; tracking remains tied to individual donor reporting cycles. Mental health provision remains a marginal add-on rather than a foundational service. Meanwhile, rigid, procurement-style administrative requirements continue to create significant barriers for smaller, specialised civil society organisations from accessing funding, despite their frontline expertise.

## Albania and Kosovo – national advocacy asks

Save the Children’s experts from both countries call for a mandatory minimum earmark within Global Europe programming under the next MFF, modelled directly on the ESF+ 5% mechanism. Kosovo specifically proposes making EU funding conditional on the delivery of its 2026–2031 National Strategy for Children and ECG Action Plan, while Albania calls for EU funding to be made directly available to civil society organisations supporting the implementation of national plans. Both countries also call for a Child Marker or equivalent tracking mechanism. Kosovo specifies that this mechanism must track not only financial inputs but also outcomes for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children, as well as children with disabilities.



## Serbia- The External Dimension

### Child poverty snapshot:

In 2025, 19.6% of children aged 0–17 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), according to the Statistical Office of Serbia.

### National context:

Inflation and rising living costs are compounding pre-existing drivers of poverty. Social protection has been weakened by the Social Card Registry, introduced in 2021 and operational since March 2022. The system has reportedly resulted in more than 60,000 beneficiaries losing access to financial social assistance, with Roma and other vulnerable groups disproportionately affected. Although amended in 2024, the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children continues to make parental allowance conditional on children's school attendance and immunisation status, structurally excluding many Roma families.

### ■ Key gaps

Access to ECEC is markedly unequal: 80% of children from the wealthiest income quintile are enrolled, compared with only 11% from the poorest quintile, 7% of Roma children, and 25% of children aged 3–5 in rural areas. These figures, drawn from the World Bank's Early Childhood Education and Care in the Western Balkans report (2026), reveal an income-driven structural gap in access that is among the widest in the region. The exclusionary effect of the Social Card Registry on eligibility for social assistance constitutes a second structural gap, with direct consequences for child poverty. Comprehensive, regularly updated and disaggregated data on children from vulnerable groups remain limited, constraining both effective policy targeting and advocacy.



## Bosnia And Herzegovina-The External Dimension

### Child poverty snapshot:

13.3% of households and 13.5% of individuals live below the national poverty line (Household Budget Survey 2022). The threshold is set at 60% of median monthly household expenditure, equivalent to approximately EUR 270 per month.<sup>110</sup>

### National context:

According to the Children's Rights Forum (December 2025), children's rights are "not consistently protected across the country". The Law on Social Services remains pending adoption despite sustained advocacy efforts, while the implementation of existing social protection legislation is fragmented across entities. Disaggregated data on vulnerable groups remain limited, and inflation and regional disparities in service provision compound underlying drivers of poverty.<sup>111</sup>

### ■ Key gaps

ECEC enrolment among children aged 3-6 stands at 37.3%, well below EU averages. Only 13% of children under three use ECEC services for at least one hour per week. Children with disabilities accounted for just 1.3% of enrolments in 2025/26, indicating a severe inclusion deficit within the already limited provision. The World Bank's 2026 report on ECEC, cited in the questionnaire, identifies limited institutional capacity, uneven infrastructure and affordability barriers as key constraints<sup>112</sup>. The forum of children convened by Save the Children and its partners in December 2025 provided independent confirmation that children in vulnerable situations - including Roma children, children with disabilities, children working on the streets, rural children, and migrant and refugee children - face particularly acute exclusion from services.<sup>113</sup>

## Appendix 2 – Sources

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- <sup>85</sup> Save the Children Sweden, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q6.
- <sup>86</sup> Save the Children, Kosovo.
- <sup>87</sup> Belgium's national ECG biennial progress report, 2026 round.
- <sup>88</sup> Portugal's national ECG biennial progress report, 2026 round.
- <sup>89</sup> Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004, recitals 4–6.
- <sup>90</sup> Save the Children Spain, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12.
- <sup>91</sup> Save the Children Italy, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12.
- <sup>92</sup> Save the Children Finland, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12.
- <sup>93</sup> Save the Children Sweden, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12.
- <sup>94</sup> Save the Children Sweden, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12 and Q14.
- <sup>95</sup> Save the Children Sweden, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q14.
- <sup>96</sup> Save the Children Albania, children's consultation, Q13.
- <sup>97</sup> Save the Children Albania, children's consultation, Q13.
- <sup>98</sup> Save the Children Kosova/o, Young Voices Report, 2024.
- <sup>99</sup> Save the Children Italy, [DOMANI \(IM\)POSSIBILI](#), 2024.
- <sup>100</sup> European Commission, [European Children's Participation Platform](#).
- <sup>101</sup> SWD(2026) 772, pp. 86–88.
- <sup>102</sup> SWD(2026) 772, pp. 87–88.
- <sup>103</sup> European Parliament, [2024/2077\(INI\)](#), 11 March 2025; European Parliament, [2025/2095\(INI\)](#), 12 February 2026.
- <sup>104</sup> Save the Children Italy, [DOMANI \(IM\)POSSIBILI](#), 2024.
- <sup>105</sup> Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, [Priority 2 – Child Guarantee, DesTEENazione – Desideri](#) in azione, ComeTE – Sostenere passioni, competenze e desideri, and [Co-design programme for the first thousand days of life](#), accessed 25 August 2026.
- <sup>106</sup> OECD, [PISA 2025 Results](#), Table I.B1.2b.4, 2026.

- <sup>107</sup> OECD, [PISA 2025 Results](#), Table I.B1.2b.4, 2026.
- <sup>108</sup> Save the Children Sweden (Rädda Barnen), [Interaktiv karta visar: Så ser barnfattigdomen ut i Sverige](#), 30 June 2026.
- <sup>109</sup> Save the Children in Albania, Child Poverty Reference Group questionnaire response, 2026, Q12.
- <sup>110</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina does not use EU-SILC, making direct AROPE comparisons with EU Member States methodologically inappropriate without a conversion note.
- <sup>111</sup> UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina, [Situation Analysis on the Position of Children and Adolescents in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (November 2025); Marc Lucet, [“The Three Promises We Must Keep to Every Child in Bosnia and Herzegovina”](#), UNICEF (21 November 2025); UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina, [“Foster Care Conference”](#) (24 June 2025); European Commission, [Commission Staff Working Document – Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (4 December 2025); World Bank, [Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 28: Towards Better Jobs](#) (October 2025).
- <sup>112</sup> Sofia Gomez Tamayo, Tigran Shmis and Indhira Vanessa Santos, [Early Childhood Education and Care in the Western Balkans: Investing for Children, Families and Jobs](#), World Bank, April 2026.
- <sup>113</sup> Save the Children North West Balkans, SOS Children’s Villages BiH, World Vision BiH and the Stronger Voice for Children Network, Forum on Children’s Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Children at the Heart of EU Integration, Sarajevo, 16 December 2025; see the [post-event account reproducing Save the Children’s statement and the official Ministry of Civil Affairs advance announcement](#).



**Save the  
Children**

**Save the Children Europe**

Rue Marie-Thérèse 21, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Phone: +32 (0)2 512 78 51

Email: [brussels.info@savethechildren.org](mailto:brussels.info@savethechildren.org)

Website: [Save the Children Europe](http://Save the Children Europe)