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ETUCE Position on

Public Consultation on a European Child Guarantee Initiative

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On 19 August 2020 the European Commission launched a public consultation on “Basic services for children in need - European Child Guarantee” which is open until 07 October 2020 [via this link](#).

The aim of the European Commission’s public consultation is to prepare a *Council Recommendation for the Child Guarantee*. According to the European Commission’s [Roadmap](#) “the objective of the Child Guarantee initiative is to ensure access for children in need to the services they need, in particular early childhood education and care (ECEC), health care, education, nutrition, housing and participation in cultural and leisure activities.” More specifically, the Child Guarantee will focus on socio-economically disadvantaged children who face poverty, and “children with a migrant background, children in institutions and children with disabilities”. Moreover, as the European Commission announced, this initiative will be part of an upcoming comprehensive *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* to be adopted during the first quarter of 2021.

The following text is the response of ETUCE, which represents 11 million teachers in Europe, to the background document of the public consultation, the [European Commission’s Roadmap](#), based on consultation with its Member Organisations.

1. We remind that the COVID-19 crisis had a huge impact on the early childhood education (ECE) sector. The closing of schools and education institutions caused serious difficulties for parents and families, and in particular women, from whom many continued working from home while taking care of their children and supporting them in home learning at the same time. The **COVID-19 crisis** also exacerbated the condition of children and families that were already in need, increasing overall poverty and social exclusion, and creating additional gaps in education and learning. Therefore, it is timely to present an effective European initiative that can encourage the EU member states to set up **effective actions to tackle increased social exclusion** caused by the pandemic, reduce child poverty, and ensure equal access to ECE and other educational services for all children.
2. We welcome that the European Commission launched this initiative as child poverty and the consequential unequal access to early childhood education (ECE) seriously affect our society and education systems. According to [Eurostat](#), 23,4% of the children in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2018. ETUCE believes that this percentage has increased due to the social and economic crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon Europe. We are deeply concerned that social and

economic inequalities among children that lead to unequal access to quality early childhood education have a detrimental effect on **children's life and their future learning possibilities**. We remind the European Commission about the importance of ECE to rectify inequalities and enhance inclusion. Several research studies and the latest [OECD data](#) show that the first years of children have a profound impact on their future life chances, and equal access to ECE is essential to reduce child poverty and compensate inequalities in the long-term. We underline that all children should be guaranteed the **right to have equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE services** from birth until the starting of compulsory schooling and the Child Guarantee should answer to this demand.

3. We note that the European Commission emphasises that the European Child Guarantee initiative *"will contribute to implementing Principle 11 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** on childcare and support to children"*. In this respect, we remind the Commission that **education is a human right and a public good**. Therefore, the European Child Guarantee initiative must ensure also the implementation of the **Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights** which states that *"Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market"*. Every child should have the right to equal access to high-quality and inclusive early childhood education. We also underline the importance of **holistic education and play-based pedagogies**, and the crucial contribution that ECE makes in preparing children to fully participate in society.
4. In addition, we request that the Child Guarantee should reinforce the implementation of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN)**, namely the SDG1 which aims to reduce the number of children in poverty, and SDG 4 on quality education. We ask that the initiative should take into consideration the *European Commission's Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* to which ETUCE actively contributed. Nevertheless, we underline that the Member States need to take more concrete actions to achieve the implementation of these objectives. As it emerged from [the Sustainable Development Goals Report](#) (2020), the reduction of poverty has slowly lost pace during the last years, and the COVID-19 has sharpened existing inequalities, pushing millions of people into deprivation. The UN recommends that additional efforts are needed at national level and governments should adopt **effective strategies** as well as increase **public investment** for the SDG implementation. Therefore, the European Commission should urge the Member States to set **effective national action plans to implement the Principle 1 and Principle 11 of the European Social Pillar and SDG 1 and 4** to reduce poverty among children and ensure equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE. Furthermore, as it is stated in the [Article 3\(3\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), *"the European Union is engaged to combat social exclusion and discrimination and to **protect children's rights**"*. In this respect ETUCE demands that Member States find sustainable solutions to guarantee that all children have equal

access to quality and inclusive ECE and to ensure the continuation of early years' services during pandemics by providing the necessary resources and safety measures.

5. Ensuring high quality and inclusive ECE for all children starts must start at improving the quality of initial training for ECE teachers highlighting within it the role of play. We believe that ECE is not only a preparation for school, but a beneficial education for the **children's potential**, and being such, it should be seen from the perspective of its value for the children, and childhood in itself, rather than an economic viewpoint. Several studies show that overly academic ECE has a negative impact on children and play should have more of a role in the ECE activities. The ECE curriculum should be structured around a **play-based learning method** that allows children to healthy develop their emotional and cognitive abilities and their social identity. Moreover, teachers with pedagogical qualification and experience in early years' learning should be employed in all early years' settings.
6. We note that the European Commission *"will allow for adjusted and tailor-made solutions according to specific situations faced by children in need in each Member State. The precise actions and priority target sub-groups would be left to the Member States to define, based on their specificities, gaps, mode of service delivery to them and the financing require"*. In addition to European investment, it is necessary to have effective measures also at national, regional and local level to reduce poverty of children and their families and guarantee equal access to early childhood education (ECE). We remind the Member States and the European Commission that such national, regional and local actions on the Child Guarantee must be designed and implemented through effective and meaningful **social dialogue** and regular consultations with the education trade unions.
7. We remind the European Commission that in line with the **European Pillar of Social Rights** Principle 8 on **social dialogue and involvement of workers**, meaningful social dialogue and collective bargaining involving those working in the sector at all levels of education, can pave the way to developing effective policies for the benefit of all children. It is only through meaningful information, consultations, and negotiations, that successful joint policies are developed and implemented. In the wake of this initiative, we call the European Commission to provide support for increased capacity of social partners in education to promote social dialogue on early childhood education policies, according to national practices and aiming at a shared goal of upward European convergence. Alike, while the situation regarding quality access and provision of early childhood education might differ significantly across countries, there are many common challenges education personnel in the field might face across Europe. As the voice of teachers and other education personnel across Europe, and recognised European social partner in education, ETUCE deems of outmost importance to recall the role of the European social dialogue in this important field.

8. We welcome that the European Commission acknowledged the lack of improvement in the EU countries in stepping up efforts to reduce child poverty. In this respect, we underline that **public investment** in ECE institutions needs to be increased. The OECD Report “Education at a Glance 2020” recently revealed that European national governments invest in ECE only an average of 0,6% of their GDP. We welcome that the Roadmap suggests that Member States need to put in place “*necessary policy and funding investments*” to ensure that all children have equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE institutions. However, it is also necessary that the European Commission requires national measures to be concrete, appropriate and sustainable to improve the quality and equality of national education systems. Therefore, education trade unions request to include in the Country Specific Recommendations of the **European Semester** process that each country must ensure **sustainable public investment in ECE and make quality and inclusive ECE free for all children from birth until the starting of compulsory schooling**.
9. Moreover, the Roadmap also mentions the role of private institutions to tackle the problem of child poverty. We are deeply concerned about this policy of the European Commission as we believe that private institutions are not adequate to guarantee the right of children to have equal access to quality education as it is intended in the European Pillar of Social Rights. Access fees to ECE institutions and the increasing **privatisation** of early childhood education schools and systems contribute to exacerbating child poverty and increase the unequal access to ECE. We remind that the Child guarantee can be a successful initiative if it demands EU Member States to **increase public investment to ECE and stop further privatisation measures** to include early childhood education as part of the public education provision.
10. We also remark that the **unattractive salaries and working conditions** of the ECE staff sorely undermine the possibility to attract highly skilled personnel and the quality of ECE institutions. As shown by the latest [OECD data](#), salary of ECE teachers in the European Union is way below the level of teachers in other education sectors with ECE teachers earning in average 10% less than primary teachers and 17% less than higher education colleagues. Lack of sustainable public investment in ECE has a negative impact on the teaching profession with the ECE teachers receiving the **lowest salaries** in comparison to teachers in all other levels of education (OECD, 2020). This undermines the attractiveness of the teaching profession, making it more difficult to attract highly skilled professionals and to guarantee high-quality early childhood education (ECE). In order to make the ECE teaching profession more attractive, the status of ECE teachers needs to be enhanced by increasing education personnel’s salaries and improving their working conditions. We believe that the Child Guarantee initiative should also respond to the demands of education trade unions to ensure **decent salary and fair working conditions** for ECE staff as high-quality services for children require highly qualified and well-remunerated professional staff. Moreover, it must emphasize and enrich the skills content of the teaching profession in this sector by providing better access to continuous professional development for ECE staff.

11. We note that the European Commission addressed this initiative to the children in need identifying the children “*from precarious households, [...] with a migrant background, children in institutions and children with disabilities*” as the most affected categories from child poverty and social exclusion. We note that the difficulties and the conditions of disadvantage are sometime hidden elements. Therefore, we believe that equal access to high-quality and inclusive education should be provided to all children without distinction, while effective targeted support must be provided to the socio-economically disadvantaged children including refugees, migrants, Roma and traveler-children. The Child Guarantee should also answer to problems, eg supporting young children who sometimes go with their mother in jail. Secondly, as child poverty is a direct consequence of the deprivation affecting entire families, supporting the children in need must start from supporting their **families**. Indeed, the lack of means and possibilities of families prevent them from accessing basic services which are strongly related to child participation in ECE, e.g. buying clothes and paying transport tickets. In order to guarantee that children have equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE, Member States should provide efficient and sustainable **public investment to social services and family support** in addition to the investment in early childhood education (ECE).

12. Finally, ETUCE welcomes that the Roadmap proposes that Member States set up **national action plans** on fighting against child poverty within which they “*would also explain how to ensure free or affordable access to the core/basic elements of the services, where the main focus would be on existing gaps in the provision of services for children in need.*” However, we remind the European Commission and the Member States that the [Council recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems](#) has to be implemented. As it is stated in the Council Recommendation “Investing in early childhood education and care is a good investment only if the services are of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive”. Therefore, in order to ensure social inclusion of children, the guaranteed services should not be core/basic, but of high-quality. We are concerned that providing only *core/basic elements of the services* would lead to deepening social exclusion by creating a system of exclusive high-quality education only accessible to children of families who can afford it, while poor children would benefit only of basic low-quality education. Ensuring that all children have **access to the same quality services** is the only way to guarantee the right to equal access to high-quality and inclusive education to all children. Moreover, we do not agree with the Roadmap which says that the Member States have to “*ensure affordability, accessibility and availability*” of services. We believe that such a discrepancy in the policy objective on fighting against child poverty would deepen even more the exclusion of children as poor families cannot afford to pay the access fee of ECE institutions and the basic needs related to children’s participation in it if ECE is not free but only “affordable”.