



# EUROPEAN ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK (EAPN) IRELAND SETTING OF A NEW NATIONAL CHILD POVERTY TARGET Submission To the Department of Social Protection January 2024

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## Introduction

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the setting of a new National Child Poverty Target. EAPN Ireland is a network of 160 local, regional and national anti-poverty organisations and individuals. It is the Irish national network of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), which links groups fighting for the eradication of poverty across Europe. The Mission of EAPN Ireland is to put the eradication of poverty at the top of the Irish and European policy agenda and empower groups working to end poverty to understand and influence policy-making.

## Child Poverty

It is unacceptable that children should have to grow up in poverty, but in recent years children in Ireland have experienced poverty, social exclusion and homelessness in growing numbers. By age, children have the second highest at risk of poverty rate (15.2%) with over 185,000 children living below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> The at risk of poverty rate for households with one adult and one or more children was 23.8%, compared with 13.1% of persons living in two adult households with 1-3 children.<sup>2</sup> The enforced deprivation rate among children was 19.9%, meaning over 235,000 children experienced deprivation in 2022. Single-adult households with children experienced higher rates of deprivation at 43.5%.<sup>3</sup> Children are particularly vulnerable to consistent poverty. The consistent poverty rate rose from 5.2% to 7.5% or almost 90,000 children, compared to 5.3% in the general population.<sup>4</sup> Children in households headed by a lone parent are significantly more vulnerable to consistent poverty at a rate of 14.1% compared to 5.3% among two parent families.<sup>5</sup> In November 2023, the number of homeless children surpassed 4,000 for the first time.<sup>6</sup> The Department of Housing statistics showed that 4,105 children accessed emergency accommodation on the week of 20 to 26 November, 17% higher than during the same period in 2022.<sup>7</sup> There were 2,000 families accessing emergency accommodation, of which 57% were single parent families.<sup>8</sup>

Child poverty is above all about children growing up in families experiencing poverty. That is, without an income that is sufficient to live with dignity and take a full part in society. However, it is about more than not having enough money. EAPN and the Eurochild Task Force developed the following definition that captures the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty:

“Children are living in poverty if the income and resources available for their upbringing are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is considered acceptable in the society in which they live and which is sufficient to ensure their social, emotional and physical well-being and development. Because of growing up in poverty they and their families may experience multiple disadvantages through low income, poor housing and environment, inadequate health care and barriers to education. They are often excluded

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/poverty/>

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2024/01/05/number-of-people-in-emergency-accommodation-hits-new-high-of-13514/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>

<sup>8</sup> ibid

and marginalised from social, sporting, recreational and cultural activities that are the norm for other children. Their access to their fundamental rights may be restricted, they may experience discrimination and stigmatisation and their voices may not be heard.”<sup>9</sup>

However, formal definitions and descriptions do not adequately capture the harsh day-to-day realities for children and how much poverty affects their lives. They do not show the difficulties that families face when living in poverty and the constant struggle to provide a decent home and life for their children, often against enormous odds and in the face of continuous criticism and stigmatisation. The multi-dimensional nature of child poverty means that it can affect children in many different ways. To understand the reality better, we must therefore listen to the voices of children growing up in poverty and of their parents. The setting of targets, indicators, measures and timeframes must reflect this reality and be designed to effectively address the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty.

### **Does consistent poverty remain the most appropriate basis for a national child poverty target or are there other indicators that could be considered?**

EAPN Ireland believes that consistent poverty is an important and relevant measure, and that it remains the most appropriate basis for a national child poverty target. However, as noted in the consultation guidance document, the consistent poverty measure does not adequately reflect broader well-being or access to service issues. Thus, in order to effectively tackle child poverty, this measure should be supplemented by other indicators in order to address the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty, the depth and persistence of poverty and the increased risk of poverty faced by particular cohorts or groups of children.

Tackling child poverty and social exclusion should be set in the broader context of promoting child well-being. Achieving well-being is a much broader concept than tackling child poverty alone. It involves taking a “whole child perspective” which considers the multi-dimensional nature of children’s lives and the importance of their relationships. In other words, it encompasses health, education, family support, protection from harm, and children’s ability to fully participate in decisions affecting them. There are four main reasons that this approach should be used to inform the development of targets and indicators:

1. To achieve progress in the long-term it is important to focus on prevention as well as on alleviation of child poverty and social exclusion. This means putting in place the policies and programmes that will, as far as possible, promote the well-being of all children and prevent them and their families from falling into poverty and social exclusion in the first place. It thus also puts the focus on early intervention to prevent problems arising;
2. A focus on well-being puts children’s rights and needs at the centre of policy making. It recognises that children are rights’ holders in their own right and that protecting and ensuring children’s rights is the best way of ensuring children’s well-being and thus preventing child poverty. It also ensures that policies are developed whose first priority is to meet the needs of children here and now as well as ensuring their future well-being;
3. An emphasis on well-being ensures a holistic approach which recognises that preventing and tackling child poverty and social exclusion is much more than just a question of income but also must cover areas such as education, health, housing and environment, recreation, sport and culture. Targets and indicators must be set to reflect these areas;
4. A focus on well-being ensures that any strategy remains firmly child-centred and leads to a focus on the development of the child and thus to an emphasis on the participation and empowerment of children.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.eapn.eu/towards-children-s-well-being-in-europe-eapn-and-eurochild-s-explainer-on-child-poverty-in-the-eu-is-out-2/>

It is also crucial that Ireland measures child poverty in a manner that is consistent with the poverty targets, measures and indicators developed and used at EU level. Therefore, any poverty indicators used in the target need to capture the multi-dimensionality of poverty. In addition to consistent poverty, this should also include relative as well as persistent poverty. With regard to the latter, it is crucial that work is done to produce longitudinal information on the situation of children (i.e. a survey following children over time) to capture the dynamics of child poverty and well-being over a sustained period of time. This could involve building upon and scaling up the Growing Up in Ireland study and other national longitudinal studies.<sup>10</sup>

### **Should the target be set on an absolute (number of children) or rate (per cent) basis, or both?**

We advise that the target be formulated based on an agreed percentage rather than a set number of children. This is because a percentage makes it easier to interpret and to track progress over time. It is also not affected by changes in the population size. In addition, the CSO uses percentages in its statistics and reporting on poverty and deprivation, including for children. The national child poverty target outlined in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*, an ambition reiterated in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, was to lift 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020, which would require a reduction of at least two-thirds on the 2011 level (107,000 children).<sup>11</sup> This target would correspond to reducing the number of children in consistent poverty to approximately 3.2%.<sup>12</sup>

The failure to achieve the 2020 target should encourage greater ambition. As an interim target, the existing child poverty target should be reduced from 3.2% to 2% or less. This would bring the child poverty target in line with the national consistent poverty target – it is not and should not be acceptable to have a higher rate of consistent poverty for children than for the general population. Progress towards this target should be monitored and reported on yearly, with a mid-term review to readjust if necessary. The longer-term goal should remain the eradication of consistent poverty in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

While the target should be set on a rate (per cent) basis, it remains important that the absolute (number of children) figure continues to be monitored and reported, disaggregated by age group and other demographic factors where relevant.

### **What is the most appropriate timeframe for the target?**

The timeframe for achieving the target should be similarly ambitious and set in line with existing policy frameworks, as well as national and international commitments, including:

- The Government's Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit Programme Plan, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme for Child Poverty and Wellbeing*, which commits the Programme Office to work with the Department of Social Protection and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to develop and monitor a new national child poverty target to the end of 2025.<sup>13</sup>
- *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*.

The timeframes of these commitments provide the opportunity for interim reviews of the 2% target recommended above, in the context of the longer-term goal of ending child poverty in Ireland. The timeframe for this longer-term goal should be by 2030 in line with commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.growingup.gov.ie/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/775847-better-outcomes-brighter-futures/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BKMNEXT431.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/573a7-the-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office-programme-plan/>

## **Is it feasible to set sub-targets within the child population (e.g. for specific cohorts or groups), which can then be monitored?**

In the context of ending child poverty, the two underlying principles of the UN Sustainable Development Goals should underpin the setting of targets, sub-targets and indicators: to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first.

The overall child poverty figures only give part of the picture as there are often additional factors that make some children even more at risk. The indicators for measuring poverty and social exclusion can be broken down to show the overall number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. However, while this is a useful way of giving an overall indication of the scale of the child poverty and social exclusion, it is not sufficient to capture all the dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion and of child well-being. Additionally, there are particular groups of “hidden” children who experience particularly severe poverty and social exclusion and who are invisible. Tackling and preventing child poverty, and promoting child well-being requires suitable targets, indicators and measures that can be used to monitor child poverty and well-being across society, with a particular focus on those children who are most at risk of poverty and social exclusion – so that policy measures reach the furthest behind first.

The SILC provides useful information in this regard by highlighting some of the groups in society most impacted, such as families headed by a lone parent, and families headed by a person who is unemployed. However, many groups disproportionately affected by poverty and social exclusion are not included in these statistics due to the size of the samples used.

This includes disabled people, Travellers, Roma, migrants and other ethnic minorities, people experiencing homelessness, international protection seekers, children in emergency accommodation, and children living in communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Clear and time bound targets specific to poverty reduction among such groups are needed in both targeted policy measures and mainstream policy measures. Agreeing on appropriate indicators and ensuring that suitable data are collected regularly is vital to understanding which children are affected by poverty and how many of them there are.

Improving the overall collection of data on child poverty and social exclusion and children’s well-being is important but, on its own, is not sufficient. It will not capture the situation of some groups of children who are experiencing severe poverty and social exclusion but who are largely “hidden” or invisible in data collection. Specific additional studies are urgently needed to capture and monitor the situations of these children. Making better use of administrative data can be helpful in this regard. Both quantitative and qualitative data are important to develop a comprehensive picture.

It is crucial that measuring the extent and depth of child poverty and well-being moves beyond a focus mainly on income measures. To capture the multi-dimensional and complex nature of child poverty and child well-being, it is vital to develop a broad range of indicators. A wider range of indicators is necessary, reflecting the different aspects of child well-being and including a focus on children’s healthy development and learning, as well as breakdowns by age of children, household status, and other demographic factors as relevant. It is also important to capture the depth and intensity of poverty, changes over time and the extent to which children are long-term or persistently poor.

Finally, as it is important to make sure that the indicators are really capturing the key issues, families and children experiencing poverty must be part of the process. This means developing more participative methodologies which engage with children as well as parents on what factors should be considered when developing indicators, as well as reviewing together the effectiveness of the indicators and data in capturing their reality. One area that needs to be

further developed is capturing the views of children experiencing poverty and not just to depend on the views of parents.

### **Are there specific actions required related to meeting the target?**

While this consultation is specifically related to the setting of a new child poverty target under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection, such a task cannot happen in isolation. Effectively tackling child poverty will require ambitious targets and indicators as part of a concrete integrated strategy, and a coordinated, sustainable, whole of Government approach. This must involve strong political commitment to addressing the underlying and structural causes of poverty and social exclusion, to promoting the well-being of all children, and to fostering children's rights. The annual Budget, and all relevant policy decisions, should contribute toward Ireland meeting these commitments, in line with its international anti-poverty commitments. EAPN Ireland recommends the following specific actions:

#### ***Policies and Measures:***

- Developing the right policies and programmes is one thing, effectively resourcing, implementing and delivering them on the ground is another. The gap between policies and delivery is often too big, and must be addressed;
- Ensure that child poverty and well-being is mainstreamed and made a central issue at the heart of the policy-making process, including all relevant policy development, implementation and monitoring, as well as in the annual Budget process.
- A commitment to prevention of child poverty and the provision of adequate universal services available to all children and their families is important to ensure all children's well-being from the outset and thus reduce the chances of falling into poverty;
- Effective policies must be put in place to support families, but family support alone will not be enough to prevent and tackle child poverty and promote and ensure child well-being. Children are independent rights bearers. It is the duty of the State to ensure that they are able to access their rights whatever their family or individual situation;
- Policies to tackle child poverty need to be set in the broader context of policies to promote child well-being. There is a need to combine both universal policies and actions aimed at promoting the well-being of all children and preventing poverty with targeted policies aimed at alleviating poverty and social exclusion;
- A commitment to ensuring a fair distribution of income and resources and low levels of inequality through a progressive taxation system is important to prevent poverty and social exclusion arising and promote well-being across society;
- Ensure that on-going efforts to counter discrimination and racism and to promote greater gender equality give particular attention to the situation of children and their families;

#### ***Targets/Objectives:***

- Setting clear objectives for the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion and monitoring and reporting regularly on progress towards these objectives;
- Agree overall quantified sub-target(s) for the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion and ensure that these targets are ambitious and sufficient to achieve agreed targets;
- Targets, indicators and measures must be developed and established for preventing and tackling child poverty and social exclusion which address all aspects of child well-being in a holistic and coordinated manner across the full range of relevant policy areas;

#### ***Data:***

- The development of policies should be evidence based; thus, arrangements need to be in place to ensure the availability of good data and analysis, and regular monitoring and reporting on the impact of policies;

- Collect detailed disaggregated data to enable the recognition of systemic barriers, and to ensure an intersectional approach is taken in policy-making, including through the use of well-being indicators;
- Increase the resources available to support efforts to tackle child poverty and promote child well-being, including providing resources and support for improved and more timely data collection and analysis, development of agreed indicators so as to ensure consistent approach to measurement and help to build statistical capacity;

### ***Participation:***

- A whole-sector or partnership approach should be fostered which combines the efforts of Government with those of parents and children, local communities, and civil society;
- Ensure effective stakeholder participation in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes to achieve Ireland's poverty and social exclusion targets, particularly through ensuring the meaningful engagement and involvement of children, their parents and the organisations that work with them;
- Arrangements should be in place for involving and listening to all children in a non-stigmatising way, including those experiencing poverty and their parents, in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and services that affect them;
- Facilitate enhanced exchange of learning and good practice on child poverty and well-being and, in doing so, ensure the participation of children and their families;
- Develop a coordinated and integrated approach which bring together actors across a range of sectors and combine the efforts of Government services with those of NGOs and the for-profit sector in a coordinated way. This helps in better identifying problems, ensuring early intervention and developing holistic responses;
- The key role played by children's organisations in supporting children at risk and in safeguarding their rights, as well as their crucial advocacy role, needs to be recognised, supported and adequately resourced;

### ***Reporting and Monitoring:***

- Progress on child poverty and well-being should be monitored and reported on a yearly basis, with a mid-term review to readjust if necessary. This should involve putting in place a rigorous monitoring and reporting system with robust oversight and accountability measures in place for meeting the needs and protecting the rights of all children;
- Ensure that ex-ante social impact assessments are used when developing and implementing relevant policies (including economic policies) so that children are protected;
- Suitable arrangements need to be put in place to ensure the effective and coordinated delivery of services and the early identification of and support for children and families facing particular difficulties.
- Ensure flexible and tailored responses: services need to be delivered in ways that respond to the needs of each child and their family. Thus, they need to be effectively monitored to be flexible and delivered in a way that is tailored to meet particular needs.