



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**Commission for  
Social Policy, Education,  
Employment, Research and Culture**

**SEDEC**

# **The Challenges of the European Child Guarantee at Regional and Local Level**



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## List of acronyms

<b>CLLD</b>	Community-led Local Development
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>ECEC</b>	Early Child Education and Care
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICTs</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>LAG</b>	Local Action Group
<b>LRAs</b>	Local and Regional Authorities
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Government Organisations
<b>2021 ECC</b>	2021 European Child Guarantee

## Summary

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The evidence collected in this study confirms that cities and regions have a **primary role in identifying and assisting children in need in order to favour their social inclusion**. Responsibilities vary across countries but in almost all EU Member States both local and regional authorities (LRAs) are key in providing education, health, housing and social services (including healthy food) to homeless children; children with a migrant background, or minority ethnic origin; children experiencing severe deprivation, social exclusion, disabilities or mental health issues; children in alternative care; and children in precarious family situations which may endanger their safety. In addition, many cities and regions make provisions for their children in need to have access to leisure, sports and cultural activities. In some EU countries, local and regional authorities are not only involved in the delivery of these services but also in their planning and financing with their own or other public/private resources. Thus, the role of LRAs is not a secondary one when it comes to the implementation of the recently approved (June 2021) European Child Guarantee.

This study collects a sample of 20 initiatives by LRAs in support of children in need (**Part 1**). Six of these initiatives are developed into case studies in **Part 2**. Several of the identified interventions have a demonstrated positive impact on the target groups, others highlight the difficulties LRAs face in providing quality support to children. Some interventions are long-standing and traditional in their approach, others are experimental, demonstrating that while some consolidated practices are positive, there is also space for innovation and modernisation in guaranteeing children their rights and in breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion across generations.

According to the evidence collected, there are some main challenges and difficulties which LRAs usually face while addressing the policy areas targeted by the 2021 European Child Guarantee (2021 ECC) and the EU strategy on the rights of the child (**Part 3**). Member States, which are the main addressees of these two EU policy documents, should support LRAs in overcoming these challenges. In particular, this can be accomplished by giving LRAs a voice in the design and implementation of future actions, given the experience they have gained through their concrete interventions to mitigate child exclusion and poverty at the local level. Part 4 also builds on the initiatives and cases presented

in Parts 1 and 2 and outlines some recommendations for Member States. The main challenges identified and the corresponding recommendations are summarised in the following table.

<b>LRAs’ challenge</b>	<b>Suggested recommendations for Member States</b>
<p>Limited information/knowledge on the extent of child vulnerability and poverty phenomena in LRAs’ territories of competence.</p>	<p>Member States shall involve LRAs in the definition of a national framework for data collection monitoring and progress evaluation as required by the 2021 ECC.</p>
<p>LRAs may lack the capacity to reach out to every child in need. The adoption of local strategies may not be enough.</p>	<p>Member States shall systematically implement communication and visibility campaigns on the interventions carried out locally.</p>
<p>Unconducive national policies for children in need may affect the impact of LRAs’ initiatives.</p>	<p>Member States should encourage the preparation of municipal/territorial/regional strategies for tackling child poverty and exclusion which are aligned to the national action plans requested by the 2021 ECC.</p>
<p>Territorial disparities in terms of infrastructural endowment, private and public service providers and socio-economic conditions lead to diversified outcomes of the same policy across territories.</p>	<p>Member States should take action in structurally smoothing territorial disparities through national policy reforms.</p>
<p>Financial constraints prevent appropriate interventions.</p>	<p>Member States shall provide adequate financial resources to territories to support long-term and sustainable interventions.</p>
<p>Insufficient capacities for providing integrated services to children in need prevent the involvement of third parties which instead add value in gathering extra information on children’s needs, as well as in offering a wider variety of professional child-centred services.</p>	<p>Member States shall facilitate partnership at the local level including through the engagement of civil society to leverage multidisciplinary and professional competencies.</p>
<p>Increasing the capacity for target children in need to become independent through quality education &amp; related services.</p>	<p>In the education policy area, Member States should consider assessing the quality of education provided to disadvantaged children through the level of independence achieved by the supported children</p>
<p>Insufficient provision of access to adequate infrastructure for child healthcare, leisure &amp; culture either</p>	<p>In the healthcare policy area, Member States should invest in health resources to ensure a minimum endowment of child-specific infrastructures and</p>

<b>LRAs' challenge</b>	<b>Suggested recommendations for Member States</b>
determined by the lack of infrastructure or by the existence of financial barriers to access existing infrastructures.	health professionals across territories. In addition, they should encourage the use of structural funds to develop a market-based approach to child inclusion through leisure, sport and cultural activities.
Lack of housing opportunities to the advantage of families with children in need.	Member States should pursue the 'housing first' principle and under the guarantee should prioritise the co-funding of innovative partnerships for the provision of stable housing to homeless families with children.
Unexpected crisis situations which exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities of children in need.	Member States should support the preparation of local and/or regional contingency plans for prioritising, in case of emergency, the provision of essential services for disadvantaged groups, including for children in need.



## Part 1: Inventory of local and regional initiatives relevant for the European Child Guarantee and the EU strategy on the Rights of the Child

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The compiled inventory includes initiatives in which LRAs have an active role. All the initiatives are related to preventing and responding to social exclusion in order to guarantee access to essential services to **children in need**. Equal opportunities for children in need are achieved primarily by combating **child poverty**.

Coherently with the ‘Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee ([EU 2021/1004](#))’, this inventory includes initiatives: i) intended as support measures for ‘**children in need**’, understood as ‘*persons under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion*’; ii) addressed to **target groups with specific disadvantages** such as: ‘*(a) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (b) children with disabilities; c) children with mental health issues; (d) children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; (e) children in alternative, especially institutional, care; and (f) children in precarious family situations*’; iii) focused on the following **policy areas of the Child Guarantee**: 1. early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school-based activities, a healthy meal each school day (‘education & related services’); 2. healthcare; 3. healthy nutrition; 4. adequate housing; and iv) on the policy areas related to children’s rights: 5. to be protected against any possible form of violence as identified in the Communication on the EU strategy on the rights of the child ([COM\(2021\) 142 final](#))(‘fight against violence’), and 6. “*to relax, play, and enjoy cultural and artistic activities*” as identified in the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) (‘leisure & culture’).

The inventory includes **20 initiatives from 17 EU countries**. Out of these initiatives, **six are developed into case studies** in Part 2. The initiatives were identified on the basis of desk review of literature, documents, and web-based information. Attention was given to ensure a balanced coverage of the interventions across EU countries as well as across policy areas. Initiatives are listed below according to the alphabetical order of the countries’ acronym.

## 01BE – Children First in Ghent

Policy areas: **1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 5. fight against violence.** Target group: **economically disadvantaged and vulnerable children.** Implementer: local authority.

Children First is an initiative implemented by the Municipality of Ghent's Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW). It is aimed at supporting economically disadvantaged or vulnerable children and their families through the placement of social workers as student counsellors within schools. This one-to-one counselling service ensures an integrated approach in addressing these families' special needs. Amongst the aid offered to families is **improving living conditions** (e.g. free warm meals for children at school); **providing healthcare support** (e.g. psychological support for vulnerable children in cooperation with the centre for pupil counselling, Confidence Centre for Child Abuse, and Crisis Assistance); and **addressing difficult family situations** due to precarious circumstances. The initiative is funded by the PCSW and by the Federal State (City of Ghent, 2018).

## 02BE – The Caravelle project of the Brabant wallon Province

Policy areas: **1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 6. leisure & culture.** Target group: **children with disabilities.** Implementer: regional authority (province).

Caravelle is a project implemented by the Early Assistance Service of the Brabant wallon Province together with Triangle Wallonie (an early assistance and integration service for children with visual and hearing impairments), ONE (the Walloon Birth and Childhood Office) and AViQ (the Walloon Agency for Health, Social Protection, Disability and Families). With a team involving a coordinator, a psychologist, a psychomotor therapist and two nursery nurses, it offers individual inclusion and support services to special needs' children aged 0-12 who attend collective and family childcare facilities. Tailored support to each child includes, for example, a toolbox comprising objects enhancing their creativity, sensory enrichment and independence. Professionals working in such facilities receive initial and continuous training aimed at properly interacting and working with children (project [website](#)). With an ESF budget of approximately €130,000, the project has supported 79 children, provided extra help to 281 teachers and trained 779 teachers (ESF [project sheet](#)).

### 03BG – The municipal ECEC centres of Tundzha (CASE 1)

Policy areas: **1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 6. leisure & culture.** Target group: **Roma children and their families.** Implementer: local authority.

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*

### 04CZ – The Brno ‘Rapid re-housing’ project (CASE 2)

Policy area: **4. adequate housing.** Target group: **disadvantaged families with children including Roma.** Implementer: local authority.

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*

### 05DE – Duisburg integration and advice project

Policy areas: **1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 4. adequate housing; 6. leisure & culture.** Target group: **children of EU migrants.** Implementer: local authority.

In February 2012, the parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia passed an ‘Act to Promote Social Participation and Integration in North Rhine-Westphalia’. The Act supports the establishment of [municipal integration centres](#) in cities and urban districts experiencing integration issues. Accordingly, actions have been taken by a large number of the state’s municipalities. In 2016, the Municipality of Duisburg developed its ‘municipal integration concept’ and started implementing a number of initiatives accordingly (Municipality of Duisburg, 2016). In partnership with Duisburger Werkkiste gGmbH (a Catholic youth welfare institution in Duisburg) and GfB (a non-profit association in Duisburg that promotes employment), the city implemented a 3-year project (2016-2018) to integrate and provide advice to newly arrived disadvantaged EU migrants and their children. In particular, Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants are relatively important communities in Duisburg; in 2016, they were 17,000, out of which over 40% were children. The project had three objectives: 1. to reach out to the target group to inform about available assistance and related advisory services. 2. to provide advice and information about early education and social care services such as **standard and school-entrance medical examinations, leisure services for children, German language services for children, distribution centres for food, toys and children’s clothing, as well as local public health benefits, family advice centres, and volunteer doctors;** and 3. to reach out to **the homeless or people at risk of homelessness** and advise and inform them on available support. This was mainly achieved through trained **integration advisers** who acted as **reference people** for the families and

**contact points** with the city institutions which provide services for assistance, education, social care and housing. Leaflets in Bulgarian and Romanian supported the advisers' outreach work to migrant families in need. The project, funded with €93,384, was considered a best practice by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (EUNL2016, 2016).

## 06ES – Attention to educational diversity programmes of the Region of Extremadura

Policy area: **1. education & related services**. Target group: **disadvantaged children**. Implementer: regional authority.

Extremadura has three programmes that support disadvantaged children in the area of education. They are implemented over the period 2015-2021 and co-funded through the ESF Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020. The socio-educational support [Programme REMA](#) aims at improving the educational level and **school performance** of those students who are in a disadvantaged situation due to social, economic, ethnic or cultural reasons. The [COMUNICA Programme](#) is addressed to primary school students with **low communication capacities and learning difficulties**. The [IMPROVE in CAEPs Programme](#) aims at improving the performance and socio-educational inclusion of the students of the 'Preferential Educational Attention Centres'. These centres – currently 24 – are responsible for the education of children with socio-economic, cultural, or ethnic discrimination. Students in these centres usually have issues related to **absenteeism, low motivation, low collaborative and high conflictual attitude**.

## 07ES – Shelter homes for minors in Castilla y Leon

Policy area: **4. adequate housing**. Target groups: **orphans, unattended children or children separated from their families**. Implementer: regional authority.

The Region is responsible for taking care of children who are abandoned or temporarily separated from their families due to the existence of difficult situations. In 2020, there were over 1,300 of these children in Castilla y Leon. Some (60%) were residing in host families, the rest were living in **shelter homes** distributed over the provinces of León (123), Valladolid (109), Salamanca (66), Ávila (54), Burgos (43), Palencia (36), Segovia (34), Zamora (28) and Soria (20). The Region's role became even more important and the regional child protection system was strengthened as, during the pandemic, some children were left unattended when their caretakers (parents or relatives)

had to be hospitalised because of **COVID-19**. The system is managed by the regional social services, including their territorial administrative units, and benefits from the **collaboration with organisations of the third sector** such as Caritas and the Red Cross (LaRazon news dated [03/03/21](#) and [20/01/21](#)).

### **08FI – The Espoo Action Programme to reduce poverty of families with children**

Policy areas: **1. education & related services; 6. leisure & culture**. Target group: **families with children in poverty**. Implementer: local authority.

In 2017, in Espoo, the number of families with children receiving basic social assistance was 3,986 (11.6% of the families). In August 2019, the Espoo City Council approved the 2019-2021 Espoo action programme to reduce poverty among families with children. Proposed by a working group comprised of representatives of the Family and Social Services, the Social and Health Services, the Employment Services and the Education and Cultural Service of the municipality, the city council is in charge of following the programme's implementation on an annual basis and of assessing its effectiveness. The programme aims to support disadvantaged Espoo resident families through an integrated approach that addresses **the needs of all the family members**. Foreseen measures are implemented according to already existing city plans or are created ad-hoc for the programme. Measures address aspects related to **poverty risk factors** (e.g. single-parent families, a family member's disability), inclusion and **social mobility** (i.e. the extent to which children's social status is different from that of their parents), **support for low-income parents**, and **support for children's participation in cultural and civic activities, hobbies and sports**. The latter, for example, implies agreements with third party providers/organisations for free access to their sports services, or the provision of free passes to sport facilities (Espoo City Council, 2019).

### **09FR – Social children's homes in Seine-et-Marne**

Policy areas: **4. adequate housing; 5. fight against violence**. Target group: **children in need or at risk, including unaccompanied minors**. Implementer: local authority (department).

[Social Children's Homes](#) is an initiative implemented by the Departmental Council of Seine-et-Marne which provides more than 40 **housing arrangements (i.e. structures or foster families) to children in need or at risk**. Each child is offered personalised assistance and accompanied by a multidisciplinary team made of specialised educators, psychologists and

psychomotor therapists, amongst others, ensuring their basic needs (e.g. supporting their physical, emotional, educational and social development, as well as preserving their safety and security). Although children are separated from their families because they are in danger, supervised meetings with families are regularly planned with the aim of keeping in touch and facilitating, in the medium to long term, a potential reunion. Up to November 2019, 6,900 children benefitted from the initiative, out of which 900 were unaccompanied minors, 3,000 were placed in foster families and other accommodation facilities, and the other 3,000 were supported to avoid entering such centres. With a total budget of €177 million devoted to child protection in 2019, 40% was allocated to the reception of unaccompanied minors (Le Parisien [news](#) dated 19/11/19).

### 10HR – Baltazar 4 in Krapina-Zagorje County

Policy area: **1. education & related services**. Target group: **students with disabilities**. Implementer: local authority (county).

[Baltazar 4](#) is the latest in a series of four consecutive projects implemented by the Krapina-Zagorje County within the Operational Programme ‘Effective Human Resources 2014-2020’. With a budget of approximately €1.5 million, the project is 90% co-funded by the ESF, the contribution of the County being approximately €20,000. Over a 4-year period (2017-2021), the project hires 60 **teaching assistants and professional communication mediators** through a tender procedure to support 60 students with disabilities in primary and secondary educational institutions. Since 2014, it contributes to ensuring adequate and inclusive education to students with disabilities whilst enhancing their socialisation with classmates, as well as their independence and skills development in the learning process. The duration of the project is considered key to its success. Analysis of past implementations of Baltazar has demonstrated its impact in terms of the target students’ independence.

### 11HU – ‘Give kids a chance’ programme in Encs micro-region

Policy area: **1. education & related services**. Target group: **marginalised children and families**. Implementer: local authority (micro-region).

‘Give kids a chance’ is a programme originally shaped in the Hungarian National Strategy to Combat Child Poverty. Initiated in 2006 as a pilot, it has since been rolled out and renewed several times. In the current programming period, it is funded through the ESF and provides support to 31 districts, out of which 24 were already involved in its previous editions. Each district receives €1.5-2.0 million over a 5-year period. The programme combines support to

children and to their families, providing temporary relief to their marginalisation. It focuses on early child education and care services as well as **institutional cooperation among the education, healthcare and social sectors**. The local government of Encs, a disadvantaged territory located in the north of Hungary, is in charge of managing the programme's implementation in its micro-region. A recent assessment of the programme confirms that its support is valuable though temporary in a system which is characterised by scarce and bureaucratic child-welfare policies. Over time the programme lost its place-based character, and local governments became less capable of adapting it to meet local needs. Higher central bureaucracy, strong hierarchical dependencies among local actors and a general lack of involvement and interest of civil society do not support the adaptation of the programme to the needs of marginalised groups (Keller and Virág, 2019).

### 12IT – QuBì, the City of Milan's recipe against child poverty (CASE 3)

Policy areas: **1. education & related services. 2. healthcare. 3. healthy nutrition**. Target group: **children in poverty and their families**. Implementer: local authority.

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*

### 13LT – Improving healthcare infrastructure for children and youth in Kėdainiai and Anykščiai district municipalities

Policy area: **2. healthcare**. Target group: **children with behavioural and emotional disorders**. Implementers: local authorities.

This project is implemented by the public health bureaus of Kėdainiai District Municipality and Anykščiai District Municipality located in the north-eastern region of Aukštaitija. It is funded by the EEA and Norway Grants with €218,491. The two districts have **poor health infrastructure available for children and youth** and are unable to properly support the increasing number of children with behavioural and emotional disorders, most of which are caused by social difficulties. The project, currently ongoing, will provide renovated infrastructure and health promotion measures, in particular related to child mental health. Its overall scope is to reduce health inequality which is particularly evident between rural and urban areas (project fact sheet on EEA grants [website](#)).

#### 14LV – Better care in Kurzeme planning region (CASE 4)

Policy areas: **2. healthcare; 6. leisure & culture.** Target group: **children with functional disabilities and without parental care.** Implementer: local authorities (20 municipalities).

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*

#### 15LV – Riga Meal cards for schoolchildren

Policy area: **3. healthy nutrition.** Target group: **children in vulnerable families.** Implementer: local authority.

The Municipality of Riga provides free lunch to about 102,500 school children. Before the **COVID-19** lockdown, these lunches provided an opportunity for children in vulnerable families to get at least one appropriate meal daily. When the lockdown in Latvia began (April 2020) and pre-school services and primary education or general secondary education institutions were closed, the Municipality of Riga provided vulnerable families with a [Free Meal Card](#) (one for each child). The ‘MAXIMA Latvija’ card foresaw €1.42 for each child per day, was recharged on a monthly basis and was accepted in food retail stores throughout the country (Riga City Council [news](#) dated 16/04/20). Parents interested in receiving the Free Meal Card had to enroll in the Riga Municipality Family Support Register. In the end, it was issued for 16,000 children in vulnerable families. Up to December 2020, the budget allocated by the Department of Welfare of the Riga City Council was €1,077,717. Through this initiative, the municipality provided eligible families with an immediate and easy-to-use solution. At the same time, it obtained information on vulnerable families which is key to better design and implement future policies for children. This initiative was submitted as a good practice for the [Milan Pact Awards 2020](#) related to the response of the urban food system to COVID-19.

#### 16NL – Rotterdam’s policy framework for tackling poverty

Policy areas: **1. education & related services. 2. healthcare. 4. adequate housing.** Target group: **economically disadvantaged families (including single-parent families).** Implementer: local authority.

18.4% of the children living in Rotterdam suffer from poverty. Against this backdrop, the municipality has implemented a [policy framework for tackling poverty](#) over the period 2019-2022 which builds on a **cross-sector integrated approach to be used in three city districts** which have the worst poverty rates (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2019). A family support programme has therefore been put in place and is funded by the vice-mayor’s portfolio with the aim of either



preventing, detecting or addressing specific needs reported by families with children under the age of 18. The municipality acts as connecting point with citizens, companies, schools, social organisations and institutions which counsel parents and children on problems such as **healthcare, education, housing and parenting**. In 2019, 500 economically disadvantaged (single-parent) families received intensive stress-sensitive help thanks to this policy. A **two-year monitoring** is carried out through a **Poverty Index** developed by the municipality to assess the average rate of poverty registered in the city.

#### 17PL – Happy Frog Youth Clubs in Kujawsko-Pomorskie (CASE 5)

Policy area: **1. leisure & culture**. Target group: **children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including those with disabilities**. Implementer: local authorities.

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*

#### 18PT – The Educational Articulation Technical Team (ETAE) of Braga

Policy area: **1. education & related services**. Target group: **children with special educational needs and with a migrant background**. Implementer: local authority.

ETAE (*'Equipa técnica de articulação educativa'*) is one of the two educational initiatives implemented by the Municipality of Braga within the Cávado's Integrated and Innovative Plan to Combat School Failure (**PIICIE**). ETAE (2018-2020) aimed at providing an educational offer tailored to children and young people at potential educational risk in order to prevent their **drop-out from school**. A special focus was paid to **socially vulnerable children** such as those with special education needs and those with a migrant background. These children were monitored and offered actions covering the areas of recreation, entertainment, speech therapy, education and psychology, as well as activities enhancing the development of transversal and interdisciplinary skills in an integrated and articulated manner. The project was 85% funded by the ESF (approx. €576,000), with the remaining budget allocated by the local government. It targeted 2,040 students across 90% of the municipal schools.

#### 19RO – Come to School! Change your destiny!

Policy area: **1. education & related services**. Target groups: **children and young people at risk of early school leaving, children with special educational needs (including Roma)**. Implementer: local authorities (counties).

The County Schools Inspectorates of the three Romanian counties of Covasna, Harghita and Vrancea aim at developing and implementing services for the social inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. The aim is to increase school attendance and **prevent/reduce early school leaving** through psycho-pedagogical **counselling for pupils, counselling for parents and training for teachers**. School inspectorates benefit from collaborating with partners such as the University of Transylvania that provides support for teacher training with its Faculty of Psychology and Science; the county police and the inspectorate Covasna in charge of campaigns and anti-victims and anti-criminal counselling activities; NGOs specialised in parent education and health education; the County Resource and Educational Assistance Centres for psycho-pedagogical counselling for children with special educational needs; and the Oslo New School training institution that provides advice about similar experiences in Norway. The project budget is €1,462,032 funded through the EEA and Norway Grants. Over two years (November 2020-October 2022), the project targets 12 schools, 728 children and young people at risk of early school leaving (including Roma children), 120 children and young people with special educational needs, 500 parents, and 233 teachers (project fact sheet on EEA grants [website](#)).

#### 20SI – Ljubljana’s Special Education Centre Janez Levec (CASE 6)

Policy areas: **1. education & related services. 5. fight against violence. 6. leisure & culture.** Target group: **children and youth with special needs.** Implementer: local authority.

*This initiative is described as a case study in Part 2.*



## Part 2: Case studies

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### CASE 1\_ The municipal ECEC centres of Tundzha (Bulgaria)

Policy areas	1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 6. leisure & culture
Target group	Roma children and their families
Involved LRAs	Municipality of Tundzha (approx. 21,000 inhabitants)

#### Description

The [Municipality of Tundzha](#)'s early child education and care (ECEC) service centres are **community centres** providing children aged 0-7 and their families, as well as at-risk pregnant women, with **free essential social and early intervention services**. ECEC centres are thus a way to deliver further services in the social, health and recreational sectors, which contributes to strengthening the sense of community belonging and the integration of vulnerable groups of people. These centres are operational since 2009 and aim to ensure equal access to ECEC in rural areas. The focus is on Roma children as more than 70% of the children benefitting from such services **are of Roma origin** (Vandekerckhove *et al.*, 2019).

By using an integrated approach, the municipality strictly cooperates with multi-disciplinary teams, training centres and other stakeholders (e.g. educational, health and labour mediators) with the aim of ensuring the best possible response to the needs of any child and their families. Amongst the services provided until 2019 are (Vandekerckhove *et al.*, 2019): **free transportation for 529 children aged 2-6** attending the local ECEC centres; **parenting classes**; **summer camps** for children who are about to start first grade; **children's book libraries**; **free speech therapy**; **Bulgarian language courses**; **family counselling** (including information on parents' legal rights and responsibilities); **mobile health and dental screening services**; **gynaecological visits**; and **home visits for children in institutional care and youth**. A team of more than 20 **mediators** – most of whom are of Roma origin – coordinates the services locally to gain the community's trust and facilitate interaction with the service providers.

The municipality's commitment to ensure a local child protection policy is reflected in its multi-annual strategic planning. For example, the recent 2021-2027 plan for the municipality's integrated development strongly reaffirms the

importance of securing social engagement, integrated policies, living standards and quality of life, with special reference to vulnerable children and their families. Amongst the measures included in the plan are family involvement and activities aimed at enhancing children’s personal development, forms of expression and talent development, as well as participation in the local government (Municipality of Tundzha, 2021). The municipality continuously seeks EU funds, international programmes and sources, and further external funding opportunities (e.g. fundraising campaigns) in order to implement new initiatives which fit local needs.

### Highlights from the case

- ECEC centres in small municipalities are stable and accessible reference points in rural areas. They serve as portals for engaging the community in the delivery of social, health and recreational services for vulnerable families who face issues related to young children.
- The collaborative and participatory approach adopted by the Municipality of Tundzha in working in close cooperation with multi-disciplinary teams, training centres and other stakeholders (e.g. Roma mediators) who operate in the ECEC centres has been key for success. A common vision and goals, as well as a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, together with an effective monitoring process and adequate funding and financing mechanisms, are pivotal to ensure coherence between services for children in need.

## CASE 2\_ The Brno ‘Rapid Re-Housing’ project (Czech Republic)

Policy area	4. adequate housing
Target group	Disadvantaged families with children, including Roma
Involved LRAs	Municipality of Brno (approx. 380,000 inhabitants)

### Description

In April 2016, a two-year pilot project named Rapid Re-Housing was launched in Brno with the support of the [Platform for Social Housing](#), an umbrella organisation for NGOs, professionals and other stakeholders interested in social housing and human rights across Czech Republic. The project aimed at **quickly providing a stable home solution to disadvantaged families with children**. The Rapid Re-Housing rationale is related to the concept of ‘housing first’ according to which housing availability is considered the first step in solving the social and economic issues faced by disadvantaged families. As part of the

project, **50 apartments were made available to host homeless families or those living in private hostels, shelters and other types of temporary housing.**

The project's budget was €372,290, co-funded with the ESF (€69,656) (project [presentation](#)). The budget served to support the costs of the three partners: the Municipality of Brno, the IQ Roma Servis (a local NGO) and the University of Ostrava. The Municipality of Brno, as the owner of apartments located in different city districts, made these apartments available at a reasonable rent. Support services were provided by IQ Roma Servis, which is used to working with Roma communities. Because Roma families make up two-thirds of all families experiencing long-term homelessness in Brno, such expertise was essential. The University of Ostrava was in charge of leading the assessment of the pilot project's impact, its innovation potential and its replicability.

The project began by **seeking families with children in the city of Brno who had housing needs.** In April 2016, a registration week was organised, and in June 2016, 421 families had provided their contacts and availability in order to be part of the pilot project. A random sample of 100 families was selected as a control group to analyse the effectiveness of the project, comparing their situation (with interviews after six months) with the situation of the 50 families selected for the housing and social services support. Families in the control group who gave their **consent to share Labor Office and school data** (in relation to their children) and actively participated in providing information were rewarded financially (University of Ostrava, 2018).

Services provided by IQ Roma Servis were based on mutual trust between the professional team and the family members. Support was foreseen in the form of **daily advice as well as in the form of aid for deep family crisis situations, including domestic violence.** IQ Roma Servis also acted as a local community service hub to facilitate support for families such as information about the **educational offering of schools and kindergartens; consultancy with physicians and specialists; liaison with staff in charge of child protection; and organisation of their apartment** (e.g. with the provision of furniture).

Within families that benefitted from the apartments from September 2016 to June 2017, the rate of housing retention one year later was 96% (i.e. out of the 50 apartments offered, 48 families remained in the apartment). Additionally, positive impacts on family wellbeing, children's behaviour, educational attainment, security and employment were proven. The aim of the project in the medium term was to have positive effects on family reunification, school attendance, physical and psychological health, family budgets, and overall

quality of life (EP, 2018). On average, children in the families that benefitted from apartments spent 33 fewer days in institutional or foster care than those in the control group. In addition, it was assessed that the project helped create public expenditure savings for a total of €61,002 in 12 months (ESF project [factsheet](#)).

The project won the FEANTSA Ending Homelessness Awards, the SozialMarie International Prize for Social Innovation in 2018, and in the same year, the ‘housing first’ approach was adopted in other Czech cities (Otrokovice, Liberec, and Prague)([Social Housing Platform](#)).

### Highlights from the case

- Adequate housing is a prerequisite to guarantee the stability of families. From that starting point, the project aimed to achieve a number of goals, including improving children’s school attendance in the short term and their school achievement in the medium term.
- Detailed knowledge of families in need is crucial for providing ad-hoc support. Incentives to be part of the project also became incentives to be part of the community. Trust-building processes and involvement of local social services providers also allow social exclusion phenomena to be reduced.
- The project’s design with a solid quantitative assessment of its innovativeness and effectiveness of the ‘housing first’ approach allows local decision-makers to adopt informed and efficient policies for guaranteeing adequate housing for disadvantaged families with children. The rationale behind this intervention is that the average support cost for one family benefitting from the housing project was lower than the average support cost provided institutionally for a family of the control group.

### CASE 3\_QuBì, the City of Milan’s recipe against child poverty (Italy)

Policy areas	1. education & related services; 2. healthcare; 3. healthy nutrition
Target group	Children in poverty and their families
Involved LRAs	Municipality of Milan (approx. 1,400,000 inhabitants)

### Description

QuBì is a programme promoted by the Cariplo Foundation in collaboration with the City of Milan. The programme is also supported by four other foundations mainly operating in the city, and Intesa San Paolo, one of the most important banks operating in Italy. Started in 2017, the QuBì programme aims to combat

the phenomenon of child poverty by promoting **collaboration between public institutions and the third sector** and by carrying out interventions addressing the general-purpose demand for services by children in poverty in the city as well as the specific needs of families living in more than 20 of the city districts.

At the beginning of the project the Municipality of Milan provided information on citizens who receive social contributions for their economically disadvantaged status. This was done in order to identify potential families to be targeted by QuBì (welforum.it [news](#) dated 29/05/21).

The programme is organised around four main axes of actions: 1. regular analysis of poverty in the city; 2. improving the economic conditions of low-income families; 3. promoting an integrated system for supporting beneficiaries; and 4. implementing innovative actions to combat food poverty.

QuBì operates **at the district level** through 23 networks (named after the districts in which they are working) involving more than 400 organisations, associations and cooperatives to address the needs of children in poverty and of their families (QuBì [website](#)). **Each district has its own ‘recipe’ against child poverty**, funded with €200,000 for the period 2019-2020. Eight full-time social workers of the Municipality of Milan coordinated the activities of the third sector organisations working in the various QuBì networks (welforum.it [news](#) dated 29/05/21).

For example, in 2019, QuBì launched the crowdfunding campaign ‘Let’s make all the children smile’ **to favour access to dental care and promote oral health** for the children in the city who live in poverty. Donations made it possible to offer free screening days for children which were carried out both in dental clinics and with targeted interventions in the city districts; to carry out awareness and prevention activities addressed to parents; and to support dental care of those children whose families could not afford it. Donors were rewarded by participating in the ‘Voices out of the choir’ concert organised in December 2019, featuring the San Vittore prison inmate choir in Milan (QuBì [website](#)).

During the **COVID-19** pandemic, the vulnerability of children in poverty increased and QuBì activated a number of initiatives to further support them. For example, the opening of 10 temporary food distribution hubs, contributed by the Municipality of Milan in line with its Food Policy, made food available to thousands of families; the crowdfunding campaign ‘Milan supports Milan: add a meal to the table’, made **more food products available to the hubs, which allowed for diversified meals and for the support of a higher number**



**of families in need** (QuBì [website](#)). In order to address the digital inequality among students, **638 digital packages**, including personal computers, tablets, connections, routers, and SIM cards, were provided to disadvantaged children to allow them to remotely follow educational activities. Beneficiaries were identified through the continuous mapping of families in poverty carried out by the QuBì networks (QuBì [website](#)). To further mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020 the QuBì activated the ‘By hand-QuBì’ project (promoted by ‘Save The Children’) aimed at supporting **160 women in situations of fragility during the period of pregnancy and after childbirth, since access to hospitals and clinics was limited.**

Since 2017, some 50,000 people in poverty, out of which almost 25,000 were children, have been supported by the 23 QuBì networks and 2,800 children have been targeted with services for education.

### Highlights from the case

- The city-wide approach and the district-oriented interventions of the QuBì programme make it possible to address all types of needs of children in poverty in the city by using large scale general-purpose projects and small-scale initiatives.
- As Milan is a large city, the networks at the district level are essential to collect information on families in need at the local level and to respond locally.
- Bottom-up participation, citizens’ engagement and volunteering are effective approaches to address the specific needs of children in poverty practically, and to increase social cohesion.
- The QuBì program adopts a tailored approach in its intervention, partnering with ad-hoc providers of social services and varying the source of funding from, for example, private foundations’ resources to crowdfunding. This approach was crucial to address the additional challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CASE 4\_Better care in Kurzeme planning region (Latvia)

Policy areas	2. healthcare; 6. leisure & culture
Target group	Children with functional disabilities and without parental care
Involved LRAs	20 municipalities in the Kurzeme Planning Region (approx. 240,000 inhabitants)

### Description

The '[Kurzeme for all](#)' (2015-2023) is a project implemented in the Kurzeme planning region, in the western part of the country. Its total cost is €8.3 million, out of which 85% is co-funded by the ESF and the remaining part by the state budget. All **20 municipalities** of the Kurzeme region are partners of the project together with **the State Social Care Centre 'Kurzeme' and its six branches, and other social centres for children without a family** (project [website](#)). Amongst the outcomes the project aims to achieve by 2023 are: providing 482 people with mental health and intellectual development disorders, 361 children with functional disorders and 128 children without parental care with an **individual needs assessment and support plan**; developing a **regional de-institutionalisation plan** to provide local community-based social services and re-organise five child care institutions for children without parental care and orphans; providing 350 children with disabilities with **social rehabilitation** (e.g. physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, etc.); increasing the number of foster families and adopters to **reduce the number of children living in institutional care**; **training specialists** at the level of community-based social services to further enhance their expertise in working with children without parental care; and **raising public awareness** about people with disabilities and their needs, including children without parental care.

Up to 2020, **14 out of 20 municipalities provided community-based social services to 142 children with functional disorders** (Kurzeme Planning Region, 2020). Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, from the second half of 2020 to March 2021, the Kurzeme Region continued to deliver these services and provided **159 children with functional disorders with individual support plans, 91 people with mental disorders with community-based services and 110 parents with children with functional disorders with social services** (project [updates](#) dated 07/06/21). In addition, leisure activities such as integrative summer camps open to children with functional disorders and disabilities and their families have been scheduled for 2021 in compliance with the local pandemic restrictions. The goal of these activities is to enhance children's physical, emotional and material personal well-being, interpersonal relationships and social inclusion, thus reducing their isolation and the risk of entering child social care centres.

### Highlights from the case

- Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, thanks to joint efforts and coordination, community-based social services and further initiatives supporting children with functional disorders and without parental care have continued.

- The cooperation of local governments with various NGOs and relevant stakeholders enhanced the number and variety of services offered, which are even more tailored to address the individual children’s needs. However, further efforts and funding need to be sought in order to have adequate infrastructure for delivering such services.
- The project supports the ongoing process of de-institutionalisation of services which is meant to lead to the provision of community social services by local governments. Still, notwithstanding several public information and awareness raising campaigns, more significant efforts aimed at enhancing public participation and a positive attitude towards disadvantaged categories of children need to be achieved at the local level.

### CASE 5\_Happy Frog Youth Clubs in Kujawsko-Pomorskie (Poland)

Policy area	6. leisure & culture
Target group	Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion
Involved LRAs	Local authorities involved in the LAG ‘ <a href="#">Partnership for Krajny and Pałuk</a> ’ (approx. 87,000 inhabitants)

#### Description

The [Happy Frog Youth Clubs](#) is a small project aimed at involving children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in extra-school activities. The project is implemented by a local company named ‘Happy Frog Michał Raczyński’ and is co-funded under the community-led local development strategy for the Nakło county implemented by the **Local Action Group** (LAG) Association ‘Partnership for Krajny and Pałuk’. The [LAG](#) is participated by the district authority of Nakielski, five municipalities, several public entities in the cultural and agricultural sectors, several associations in the social sector, and businesses. The area covered by the LAG is a former state farming area. It is characterised by high unemployment and several families are almost entirely dependent on welfare. Besides poverty, inhabitants have a low social activity and their children have **poor results at school and no availability of extra-curricular events and activities** (LAG [project description](#); ESF [project sheet](#)). The objective of the community-led local development strategy is to improve the social inclusion of 500 residents of the county over the period 2018-2023. It has been allocated €800,000 towards this scope, out of which €690,000 are contributed by the ESF. The objective is expected to be achieved by funding at least 48 small projects, each contributing to the overall social inclusion target. The Happy Frog Youth Clubs is one of these selected small projects which

focuses on the inclusion of children aged 7-18 years. Its total cost is €25,900, out of which €23,800 are from the ESF under Axis 11, Measure 11.1 ‘Social inclusion in the areas covered by the community-led local development strategy’ of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship Regional Operational Program 2014-2020.

The project targets children who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. **Children with disabilities are encouraged to participate and are prioritised** in the selection process. Clubs are established in three small municipalities (Mrocza, Witosław, and Rościmina) to organise extra-school activities for participants. Each club is active for a minimum of 14 weeks, twice a week during weekdays, and at weekends. Participants are helped with school homework, are involved in recreational activities that encourage integration (e.g. cinema, swimming pool, escape room, canoeing, cycling, survival, geocaching), and are provided with social and civic competencies through participation in workshops. The overall aim is to provide these children with some opportunities to break the ‘*vicious circle of poverty and dependency on social benefits*’ (ESF [project sheet](#)) by encouraging their **educational path, strengthening their self-esteem, gaining new skills, integrating fun and culture and developing interpersonal attitudes.**

Each club supported 10 children (LAG [news](#) dated 26/07/19). According to the application form, children were asked for their feedback after four weeks from the completion of the club, and again after three months, to inform the LAG on any change in their social inclusion.

### Highlights from the case

- Community-led local development is implemented by associations of local stakeholders and their strategies are focused on the needs of territories. They therefore represent an excellent channel for individually reaching children in need.
- Even small projects may have an impact if they are framed into a large initiative. The LAG decided to pursue its objective of supporting the social inclusion of 500 inhabitants by awarding several small support projects to local stakeholders, which preferably did not belong to the public sector (LAG [project description](#)).
- Leisure and cultural activities are essential for the personal development of children and for learning to establish relationships with others. There are financial barriers for those who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion to participate in these activities. This is worsened by the fact that in some municipalities schools may not have the necessary infrastructures to offer these activities.

## CASE 6\_ Ljubljana's Special Education Centre Janez Levec (Slovenia)

Policy areas	1. education & related services; 5. fight against violence; 6. leisure & culture
Target group	Children and youth with special needs
Involved LRAs	Municipality of Ljubljana (approx. 280,000 inhabitants)

### Description

The Special Education Centre Janez Levec (CJL) is a public institution established by the Municipality of Ljubljana and funded through municipal, national and private (sponsors and donors) sources. The centre is made up of a number of facilities: two elementary schools offering education programmes for children and adolescents with special needs; special education departments for mobile pedagogical services and extra-curricular activities; an educational centre (PIKA) for the training of teaching staff; a 'House' (OE Dom) for children with special needs; and labour and employment centres for adults with minor intellectual disabilities or inclusion problems in the labour market.

There are two main types of educational programmes offered: the first type is for children aged 6-15 with mild learning difficulties for which **educational standards are adapted** and smaller classes arranged in order to facilitate learning. The second type is for children aged 6-18 with more severe intellectual disabilities. In this case, each pupil has a **personalised goal** to be achieved and emphasis is put on increasing the individual's **potential to adapt and access the labour market**.

Support for schooling and education activities of children with special needs is grounded in the **professional training of pedagogues** and in the organisation of seminars, lectures, teaching and counselling activities for educators, teachers and families. Since 2013, teachers and professionals are trained at the PIKA institute, which is considered a good example of addressing quality in the delivery of special education. Counselling activities for parents are also featured through the Centre Janez Levec 'For parents' [webpage](#) and touch upon a variety of topics such as epilepsy, physiological support, abuse and violence against children with special needs.

The special educational departments are in charge of two types of activities. The first type relates to the offering of **mobile pedagogic services** to allow for the mainstreaming of children in need in general classrooms. In 2017, there were 40 mobile teachers. The second type aims at **organising sport and leisure integration activities** such as the 'Play with me' Festival, the 'School for life'

camp, summer holidays, Special Olympics, and participation in EU initiatives (CJL [website](#)).

Finally, 'Home', or 'OE Dom', (2021 [brochure](#)) is a residence for those children who cannot live with their families. Because of the restrictions caused by the **COVID-19** pandemic, in 2021, OE Dom is remaining open only for students attending a customised and special programme. OE Dom implies much more than education for its children. It provides for social skills and knowledge development for independent living (such as going to the post office, or taking care of one's own personal hygiene) as well as for sport (football tournament, sailing, yoga) and leisure (gardening, art circle, movie nights, or use of ICT).

In 2017, the Centre Janez Levec schools and the OE Dom followed 448 pupils, and 915 pupils were supported through the mobile pedagogical service. In the same year, it had 241 employees (educational staff and other categories) (CJL [website](#)).

### Highlights from the case

- According to the national Placement of Children with Special Needs Act of 2000, learners have the right to mainstream education in schools, to have personalised education plans developed and to receive additional professional support. Ljubljana has good resources that can be networked for supporting children with special needs (it is the founder of 23 kindergartens and 50 elementary schools), but this is not the case for many smaller municipalities (FPIES Project, 2018).
- The quality level of special education activities is as important as the activities themselves. This case is a good example of the effort made by the municipality to provide quality services and thus increase the opportunities for children in need to enhance their inclusion, including in the labour market.



## Part 3: Main challenges faced by local and regional authorities

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The main challenges faced by LRAs in providing services and assistance to children in need may be distinguished into ‘horizontal challenges’, which in general affect the intervention of LRAs, and area-specific challenges, which are related to one or more specific intervention policy areas.

### 3.1 Horizontal challenges

*Challenge 1. Limited information/knowledge on the extent of child vulnerability and poverty phenomena at the territorial level.*

**Vulnerability and child poverty** are often **hidden phenomena** until they are revealed by the occurrence of abuses and/or social exclusion behaviours. Information/knowledge about children in need is a necessary condition to properly design and then implement effective and tailored policies and actions at any administrative level.

The ‘Rapid Re-Housing’ project in the Czech Republic (CASE\_2) became aware of the severity of housing needs amongst Brno’s families with children further to the carrying out of a registration week at the beginning of the project. Against an estimate of 250-300 families in need, 421 families registered to get support through the project, out of which only 50 could be accommodated through the pilot intervention. In the case of Riga (15LV), the municipality could not identify a priori the vulnerable families with children that would have benefited from a meal card guaranteeing food provision at the time of school closure during the COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, the municipality carried out a digitalised enrolment process in the municipal Family Support Register which was used not only to define eligible beneficiaries of the meal cards, but was generally treated as a database of vulnerable families. In a more structured approach, the Municipality of Ghent (01BE) has developed a deprivation index composed by indicators on poverty in order to build its anti-poverty policy, where children in need are highly prioritised. Similarly, in Rotterdam (16NL) delivery of tailored services is made according to a poverty index which maps children in need.



### *Challenge 2. Difficult outreach to every child in need.*

In addition to the lack of information/knowledge about the extent of the problem, a further barrier relates to the **lack of capacity of the local or regional authority to reach every child in need.**

Even territorial cooperation instruments such as community-led local development strategies by Local Action Groups, which are by definition grounded in the territory and close to the needs of its inhabitants, may have problems in reaching out to the children in need of all the municipalities cooperating in the Local Action Group (LAG). In the case of the Happy Frog Club in Poland (CASE\_5), the LAG overcame the problem by awarding several small projects, each contributing to the LAG's overall targets, to differentiate the reach out capacity as much as possible. In big cities such as Milan, Italy, it was essential for the QuBi programme (CASE\_3) to get closer to the children in need in order to become visible to beneficiaries. This was achieved by establishing a number of networks, each covering one of the city's most deprived districts. In Duisburg (05DE) ad-hoc trained integration advisers are providing families in need a door-to-door service and are supported in their reach out activity by the distribution of leaflets in Bulgarian and Romanian. Visibility is also fostered by the Kurzeme planning region (CASE\_4), which published on its website a map of planned and created infrastructure for people with mental disorders, showing the services provided.

### *Challenge 3. Unconducive national policies for children in need.*

The **lack of consensus between the national and the subnational level with respect to child policies** affects the impact of the initiatives undertaken by LRAs. This is one of the shortcomings highlighted by the 2017 review of the 2013 Recommendation on 'Investing in children' (Box 1).

#### **Box 1. What are the experiences learnt from the implementation of the Investing in Children Recommendation at the regional and local level?**

The 2013 Recommendation on 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' has driven some action at the country level but its progress in implementation is reported to be slow and diverse across countries. In 2017, from the governance point of view, the following shortcomings, which appear

to be relevant also for the local and regional level, were found in some Member States: 1) lack of coordination between the national and the regional level with respect to child policies; 2) lack of alignment between regional/national plans and EU programmes; 3) lack of a strategic national/regional approach that makes interventions sustainable over time and not a one-off/short-term intervention; 4) insufficient monitoring of the use of resources and insufficient impact assessment; 5) insufficient integration and coordination of provided services (notably, an integrated approach for tackling child poverty and social exclusion was the novelty introduced by the 2013 Recommendation); 6) insufficient mainstreaming of children's rights across all policy areas; 7) insufficient collaboration with civil society organisations; and 8) limited public awareness raising.

Source: EC-DG EMPLOYMENT, 2017.

The case of the Hungarian 'Give kids a chance' programme (11HU) provides an example of increasingly centralised control of an intervention that was originally intended to be driven by the needs of the micro-regions in which it is implemented. This negatively impacts on the effectiveness of the programme. Another example of conflicting policies is found in Spain where the education system is characterised by important attention to diversity (06ES). Still, the Spanish situation was considered controversial as the 2013 Act on the Improvement of the Quality of Education introduced some provisions that were extensively criticised, even by Autonomous Communities, and this situation led to the non-application of several of the main measures proposed in the law. One of the most controversial aspects is related to language. The 2013 Act (additional provision No.38) sets Castilian as the primary language for education but this was not accepted by some Autonomous Communities. A new Spanish law on education was issued at the end of 2020 (Eurydice [website](#)) serving, among other scopes, to overcome the difficulties encountered with the 2013 Act. Among the amendments introduced by the law is the possibility for Autonomous Communities to use co-official languages together with Castilian as a children's right for freely accessing public education services.

Instead, initiatives such as those implemented by the Municipality of Tundzha (CASE\_1), the Departmental Council of Seine-et-Marne (09FR), the Krapina-Zagorje County (10HR) and the Municipality of Rotterdam (16NL) became part of medium-term policy frameworks underpinning EU and national strategies.

*Challenge 4. Territorial disparities as a hampering factor of balanced service provision.*

Differences among territories in terms of infrastructural endowment, private and public service providers and socio-economic conditions lead to diversified outcomes of the same policy across territories (Box 2).

**Box 2. Do territorial disparities affect services to children in need?**

A recent study highlights the relevance of disparities across Finnish municipalities. Within the four types of areas identified in the study according to socio-economic differences, the ‘lagging areas’ type shows much higher values of the ‘at-risk of poverty rate for children’ indicator than the other three types. Currently, these disparities are mainly addressed by differentiating financial transfers by the central government to municipalities according to their level of tax revenues, and through the use of EU structural funds. The study argues that this municipality-centred approach does not achieve a balanced service provision across the country. It suggests that rather than focusing on the redistribution of resources to single administrations, investments and policies should focus on redistributing services to people independently from where they live. A reform of healthcare and social services is currently underway in the country. The reform is expected to move the responsibility of the delivery of these services from municipalities to regions by 2023 (FES-KSF-FEPS-ILS, 2021). Another research highlights differences in the provision of early childhood education and care services across German federal states as well as counties (Schober, 2020).

Sources: FES-KSF-FEPS-ILS, 2021; Schober, 2020.

Among the initiatives and cases included in this study, the Slovenian case (CASE\_6) highlights differences between small and large municipalities in providing services for children with special needs. In particular, a country review reports on a gap between the principles of inclusive education, which in Slovenia are clearly set in the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act of 2000, and the implementation of these principles. This occurs especially in smaller municipalities due to lack of resources on which to leverage (FPIES Project, 2018).

*Challenge 5. Financial constraints prevent appropriate interventions.*

Initiatives implemented to tackle child poverty and exclusion at the territorial level need **funding sustainability**. In general, one-off interventions in supporting disadvantaged children are not considered adequate.

Local/regional funding capacity varies over time and is influenced by the social priorities in the public agendas, which, in turn, are influenced by political decisions and emergency situations (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). Initiatives and cases included in this study demonstrate that EU structural funds and the ESF in particular represent a primary source for supporting children in need at the territorial level. Still, it is also noted that some initiatives look for alternative sources to complement their interventions or to ensure their sustainability. The Municipality of Ghent (01BE), for example, has set up offices aiming at monitoring EU funds which are suitable for tackling people at risk of poverty – with special reference to children. Given the positive results achieved so far by these offices, the municipal government has decided to regularly allocate a budget to this activity. The early child education and care centres in Tundzha (CASE\_1) are financially supported thanks to different external funding opportunities, including fundraising campaigns. A regular search for donors willing to support investment in early childhood is thus performed with the aim of either leveraging existing services and infrastructure, or setting up new ones. Within the QuBi programme (CASE\_3), the crowdfunding campaign ‘Let’s make all the children smile’ was launched in 2019 to favour access to dental care and promote oral health for the children of the city of Milan who live in poverty.

*Challenge 6. Insufficient capacities for providing integrated services to children in need.*

When implementing initiatives at the community level, participation of non-governmental organisations, volunteers’ associations, training centres, professionals and other stakeholders involved in providing children in need with services is essential for LRAs. Third-party involvement adds value in gathering extra information on children’s needs, as well as in offering a wider variety of professional child-centred services.

There are many examples across the initiatives and cases included in this study of LRAs which rely on the cooperation with third parties to provide services to children in need, such as the integrated initiative of Children First in Ghent (01BE), the teamwork of the Caravelle project (02BE), the Roma mediators in the ECEC centres of the Municipality of Tundzha (CASE\_1), and the multidisciplinary teams in the social children's homes of the Departmental Council of Seine-et-Marne (09FR). Primarily, these initiative and cases demonstrate that LRAs need to be aware of the resources, services and capacities available for addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children before being able to engage them.

### **3.2 Challenges specific to some policy areas**

*Challenge 7. Increasing the capacity for target children in need to become independent through quality education & related services.*

Teachers and professionals are key in determining the impact of interventions.

In the Ljubljana case (CASE\_06), great attention is paid to the quality of special education, with teachers and professionals being trained at a specialised city institute. In the Caravelle project (02BE), professionals taking care of children with special educational needs receive continuous training in order to improve the quality of the support they provide to facilitate children's independent living. In the Baltazar 4 project (10HR), professionals who support children with disabilities are hired using a competitive procedure and the project has demonstrated its impact in terms of the independence achieved by the supported children.

*Challenge 8. Insufficient provision of access to adequate infrastructure for child healthcare, leisure & culture.*

Insufficient access is either related to the lack of appropriate infrastructure or to the financial barriers disadvantaged children have in accessing existing infrastructures.

Health, in particular, is a policy domain in which the provision of services requires ad-hoc infrastructures and professional human resources. One-off interventions such as the one aimed at expanding the availability of health offices to support children suffering from behavioural and emotional disorders in two district municipalities of Lithuania (13LT) are appropriate to increase the limited health infrastructural endowment of a territory. With regard to leisure and cultural activities, the first evidence is that in some areas schools may not be equipped enough to provide children with these activities. In the Happy Frog Club in Poland, structural funds are used to call for child inclusion projects from market providers (CASE\_5). In this way, sport and leisure infrastructures are accessed by using the involvement of third parties. In Espoo (08FI), where financial barriers prevent children who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion from participating in leisure and cultural activities in an extra-school setting, the city's action programme to reduce poverty amongst families with children includes specific support measures for participation in these activities, as well as for taking part in hobbies. Amongst the measures are agreements with third party providers/organisations for the free access to their sports services, or the provision of free passes to sport facilities.

*Challenge 9. Lack of housing opportunities to the advantage of families with children in need.*

Living in a house guarantees minimum stable conditions to disadvantaged children and to their families. This allows setting medium-term goals in other areas such as school attendance and achievement. In addition, the longer the period is in which families with children in need remain homeless, the higher the risk is of a permanent social exclusion.

In the 'Rapid Re-Housing' project (CASE\_2), apartments owned by the Municipality of Brno were made available at an affordable rent to host homeless families or those living in private hostels, shelters and other types of temporary housing. This intervention had a positive impact in terms of social inclusion of the involved children and the project idea was rolled out to other Czech cities. The project also demonstrated a positive return of its social investment in the medium term.

*Challenge 10. Unexpected crisis situations which exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities of children in need.*

Local and regional authorities who provide support to disadvantaged children cannot simply interrupt their function if an emergency occurs. Public services for children in need are essential and as such their provision cannot be discontinued. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that some vulnerabilities became more acute with the change of the contextual conditions.

Amongst the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic are ensuring healthy food to disadvantaged school children who lost the opportunity of having at least one decent meal a day as schools closed during the lockdown; guaranteeing continuity of education to children lacking digital devices (e.g. laptops, tablets) in order to learn remotely; combatting the increased crime and violence on youth (Box 3); and accommodating an increasing number of unattended children.

**Box 3. Crime and violence on youth in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

On 6 April 2021, within the framework of the 10th Economic and Social Council Youth Forum, the side event ‘Protecting Vulnerable Youths from Crime and Violence in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic’ has focused attention on the fact that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities of certain groups. *‘For instance, UN-Women reported an unprecedented increase in gender-based violence, including against young girls since the beginning of the pandemic. INTERPOL has found that, with both victims and perpetrators confined to their homes and connected to the internet for extended periods, there has been a worrying rise in child sexual exploitation and abuse globally. Strains brought on families during the pandemic have also weakened the integrity of the family unit, which plays an integral role in tackling substance abuse and addiction in youths’.*

Source: UNICRI [website](#).

The initiative of Riga (15LV) provided children in need and their families with a card recharged with the equivalent amount of one meal per day to be used in food retail stores. During the pandemic, the city of Milan (CASE\_3) supported women

in situations of fragility during the period of pregnancy and after childbirth, as a consequence of the limited access to hospitals and clinics. In the Kurzeme planning region (CASE\_4), community-based social services for children with functional disorders and children without parental care continued. In Castilla y Leon (07ES), the regional child protection system was strengthened during the pandemic to prevent children from being left unattended when their caretakers (parents or relatives) had to be hospitalised because of COVID-19.



## Part 4: Recommendations

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The following recommendations are drawn coherently to the LRAs' challenges identified in Part 3. They are grounded on the assumption that Member States acknowledge and support the role of LRAs in contributing daily to breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion of children in need.

*Recommendation 1. Member States shall involve local and regional authorities in the definition of a national framework for data collection monitoring and progress evaluation as required by the 2021 European Child Guarantee.*

Information, data, statistics and tools for situational awareness, quantification and monitoring of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion are crucial to design interventions and allocate adequate resources. Among the solutions implemented at the territorial level are ad-hoc information collection exercises which allow the development of databases of vulnerable children and families, and more structured approaches based on the development of indexes which are then used to tailor interventions. **These and other similar unstructured and structured approaches that succeeded in their scope of assessing and monitoring children in need at the territorial level should be considered when developing the upcoming national frameworks for data collection monitoring and progress evaluation.** Member States should thus invite subnational authorities to share their experiences and instruments in order to assess their country-wide replicability for potential inclusion in the national framework. A joint effort at the Member States level in coordinating LRAs data collection could also provide the opportunity to develop a scoreboard of indicators measuring achievements in terms of children's rights in general ([Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Local and regional cooperation to protect the rights of the child in the European Union'](#) (2010/C 267/10)) and children in need in particular.

*Recommendation 2. Member States should support the reach out capacity of subnational authorities to every child in need by implementing ad-hoc communication and visibility campaigns.*

Local and regional authorities may implement appropriate territorial development instruments to increase their capacity to reach out to children in need across their territories, but nationally coordinated **communication and visibility campaigns** specifically addressed to the target beneficiaries and their families should support

the LRAs reach out activities. Coherent messages coming from the national and the territorial level would strengthen the visibility of locally implemented initiatives for tackling child poverty or exclusion among target communities.

*Recommendation 3. Member States should encourage the preparation of municipal/territorial/regional strategies for tackling child poverty and exclusion which are aligned to the national action plans requested by the 2021 European Child Guarantee and delegate responsibilities for their implementation at the territorial level in order to deliver services which respond to needs.*

On one side, the **centralisation of interventions to address local needs** risks offering ‘general purpose’ services which do not respond to the specific demand of a territory’s children in need. On the other side, the **absence of policy frameworks at the national level** may lead to local spontaneous interventions which lack sustainability in the medium term. Whereas national authorities have a strategic role in defining policies, instruments and resources, LRAs are in the position to properly tailor actions locally, in line with the needs of the children of their cities and regions. Municipal/territorial/regional strategies **specifically** addressing child poverty are the formal instruments that can support cities and other LRAs in structuring their role, allocating resources, and reinforcing the credibility of their actions in front of national authorities (Eurocities, 2020).

*Recommendation 4. Member States should take action in structurally smoothing territorial disparities through national policy reforms.*

When tackling child poverty issues, differences in infrastructural endowment, in the presence/absence of private and public service providers, and in the general socio-economic conditions of a territory may determine the success or failure of locally undertaken interventions. Mechanisms to balance these disparities should be considered. A recent review of the Slovenian financing policies for inclusive education suggests that a common vision developed at the national level for inclusive education can help smooth territorial disparities if it is accompanied by the establishment of funding mechanisms for its implementation at the local level. In particular, rather than offering a central support to individual learners in need through local schools, schools should be given higher spending capability and flexibility so as to develop inclusive environments able to respond to the local needs of both learners and teachers (FPIES Project, 2018).

Still, it needs to be noted that national policy reforms are not always enough to smooth disparities. In Germany, notwithstanding the existence of national laws and minimum standards for early child education and care, regional variation in service provision and take-up is reported to be high (Schober, 2020). In addition, in Spain, a national law on the quality of education caused controversial situations across regions and lack of uptake of measures by them, implying that national frameworks are **necessary but not sufficient to avoid territorial disparities** in the provision of services to disadvantaged children.

*Recommendation 5. Member States shall provide adequate financial resources to territories to support long-term and sustainable interventions.*

Availability of financial resources is one of the main obstacles to long-term actions supportive of children in need at the local and regional level. The European Social Fund+ has set specific objectives and rules to fight child poverty. Member States with the average child poverty higher than the 2017-2019 EU average (i.e. 23.4%) will have to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ financial envelope to this priority. These funds will have to **target the most deprived and remote areas in regions and neighbourhoods in cities, ideally following the indications on priorities received by local and regional authorities**. Allocation of ESF+ and EU Recovery and Resilience Facility funds is an opportunity for Member States to smooth territorial disparities along with policy reforms. Adequate funding will allow LRAs to reduce one-off interventions in favour of more structural and effective actions over time to address issues of children in need in their territories.

*Recommendation 6. Member States shall facilitate partnership at the local level including through the engagement of civil society to leverage multidisciplinary and professional competencies.*

An integrated holistic **multidisciplinary and person-centred approach through multi-stakeholder collaboration** (e.g. non-governmental organisations, training centres, parents of children in need, education, health and labour mediators, etc.) should ideally be pursued in the design, delivery and monitoring of tailored and integrated services for disadvantaged children. Citizens themselves are essential actors to be involved in actions supporting children in need. Formal and informal partnerships at the territorial level, or solidarity networks, should be facilitated through national endorsement.

*Recommendation 7. In the education policy area, Member States should consider assessing the quality of the education provided to disadvantaged children through the level of independence achieved by supported children.*

Quality education should not be an end in itself but should be **pursued to guarantee the independence of beneficiaries**, including children with disabilities, with behavioural problems, with learning difficulties or similar.

Quality education requires adequate competencies of trainers, children/families who are fully aware of their rights, and exploitation of the innovation technologies that may facilitate the inclusion of children in both the society and the labour market. The future economic independence of children in need must be prioritised and measured as an indicator of impact of undertaken initiatives.

*Recommendation 8. In the healthcare policy area, Member States should invest in health resources to ensure a minimum endowment of child-specific infrastructures and health professionals across territories*

Investment in prevention and early intervention is crucial to ensure the wellbeing and healthy development of children from early childhood, thus preventing escalating needs from arising at a later stage in life. Access to healthcare implies the existence of adequate health infrastructures at the local level. LRAs should be **supported in ensuring a minimum territorial endowment of facilities and staff which are qualified in child healthcare**. This type of infrastructural/human resources provision may be intended as dedicated spaces and people in existing facilities to minimise investment and capital costs. Investments should be made using not only the ESF but also the ERDF and the EAFRD for rural areas.

*Recommendation 9. Member States should encourage the use of structural funds to develop a market-based approach to child inclusion through leisure, sport and cultural activities.*

Providing access to activities not necessarily organised by schools and therefore not easily accessible to disadvantaged children may be achieved by encouraging a market-based approach to child inclusion rather than welfare-based interventions. Projects co-funded by structural funds and awarded on a competitive basis to economic providers, besides increasing quality and

motivation of the intervention, could **develop a market for service provision in these fields, thus also benefiting the local economies.**

*Recommendation 10. Member States should pursue the ‘housing first’ principle and under the 2021 European Child Guarantee should prioritise the co-funding of innovative partnerships for the provision of stable housing to homeless families with children.*

The ‘housing first’ principle states that availability of housing is the first step in solving the social and economic problems faced by disadvantaged families with children. Public authorities at all levels are in the position to make use of the houses and apartments they own for the public good. Still, **innovative partnerships** involving private homeowners and bringing evident benefits to all parties involved could be envisaged. National authorities are in the best position to investigate experiences already made by LRAs in this policy area and to identify approaches for innovative partnerships which adapt to national conditions.

*Recommendation 11. Member States should support the preparation of local and/or regional contingency plans for prioritising, in case of emergency, the provision of essential services for disadvantaged groups, including for children in need.*

Food, shelters, and protection against violence are essential in any circumstance but may become vital in emergency situations such as public health threats or earthquakes. Because of the important role played by LRAs in the provision of services to disadvantaged children and children in need at the territorial level, these authorities need to have a **contingency plan** in place to know **how to keep on delivering their services and how to prevent the occurrence of exacerbations of vulnerabilities in case of emergencies.**

## Annex I – References

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