



## Call for a child-centred EU budget

### Joint reaction to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) Proposal

The next European Union (EU) long-term budget has the potential to invest in all children, everywhere – by tackling child poverty and upholding their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>1</sup> – ensuring these rights are protected, respected, and actively promoted. As organisations working on children’s rights, we call on the EU to invest in all children, everywhere. Therefore, we recommend the following:

1. **Adopt a rights-based and child-centred EU budget.**
2. **Track investment in children and introduce a “child investment lens” approach across all EU funding instruments, by creating a transparent “child marker”.**
3. **Ensure meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of children and organisations representing them.**
4. **Allocate sufficient funds to social objectives and invest in eradicating child and family poverty.**
5. **Continue to invest in preventing, responding to and combating violence against children.**
6. **Uphold child protection standards above security and migration management considerations.**
7. **Ensure that investment spending on EU external action prioritises the needs of children, particularly children living in crisis contexts.**

<sup>1</sup> All EU Member States have ratified the UNCRC.

## 1. Adopt a rights-based and child-centred EU budget.

The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) must fully align with the principles of the UNCRC, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and other major international conventions which impact child rights, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This requires a clear political and financial commitment to **prioritising and mainstreaming children's rights** and **including references to the UNCRC and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** across all funding instruments. The MFF Regulations should also include **horizontal and thematic enabling conditions and measures** to safeguard children's rights and prevent social exclusion and discrimination.

Particular attention should be given to **groups of children who are at greater risk of human rights violations** and who require specific support for their rights to be respected. These groups include, but are not limited to: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with mental health issues; third country national children, irrespective of their migration status, or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; stateless children; LGBTQI+ children; children in alternative, especially institutional, care; and children in precarious family situations, such as those living in lone-parent households.<sup>2</sup> This also means giving special attention to children affected by the transition from institutions to out-of-care or to family and community-based care, such as those living in **lone-parent households at risk of poverty or social exclusion**.

Funding should be allocated to support the **implementation of existing and upcoming strategies**, including the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, European Care Strategy, the European Child Guarantee, the Anti-Racism Strategy, the EU Pillar on Social Rights, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, the European Affordable Housing Plan, the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids, as well as the Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, the EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, the EU Victims' Rights Strategy and the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

- **Prioritise and mainstream children's rights across all funding instruments and include references to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.**
- **Include horizontal and thematic enabling conditions and measures to safeguard children's rights and prevent social exclusion and discrimination across the MFF Regulations.**
- **Give particular attention to groups of children who are at greater risk of human rights violations and who require specific support for their rights to be realised.**
- **Allocate funding to support the implementation of existing and upcoming strategies.**

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<sup>2</sup> See also: The target groups mentioned in the Council of the European Union, Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee.

## 2. Track investment in children and introduce a “child investment lens” approach across all EU funding instruments, by creating a transparent “child marker”.

Investing in children is something to be proud of, as it plays a significant role in strengthening societies and democracies. Systematically assessing how EU-funded activities impact children should be a foundational principle across all programmes. However, as of yet, the EU is unable to quantify its total investment in children and young people. A dedicated **child marker** should serve as an ex-post monitoring instrument to assess how much the EU and its Member States are investing in children, both within the EU and externally, with the goal of improving transparency and enabling data-driven impact assessments. By linking expenditure to measurable child outcomes, such as reduced poverty rates, improved educational well-being and meaningful participation, and better mental health, this tool would enhance accountability, inform decision-making, and support more effective implementation and strengthening of different policy frameworks.

Furthermore, EU spending should systematically apply a **child investment lens**, ensuring that children’s needs are considered at every stage of programming, budgeting, and implementation. This includes mainstreaming children’s rights across all relevant instruments and adopting mandatory earmarking for child-focused measures. Without ring-fenced funding, children risk being sidelined – particularly those in vulnerable situations. The **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme** has demonstrated its capacity to integrate gender equality into its calls for proposals and evaluation methodology, with significant results (every fourth euro spent from grants was found to contribute to gender equality). A similar model should be adopted to support mainstreaming a children’s rights perspective and contribute to the fulfilment of children’s rights throughout the EU budget, and specifically via the new **AgoraEU Programme**.

- **Assess how much the EU and its Member States are investing in children through a dedicated child marker.**
- **Systematically apply a child lens for EU spending, which includes mainstreaming children’s rights across all relevant instruments and adopting mandatory earmarking for child-focused measures.**

## 3. Ensure meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of children and organisations representing them.

The **meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of children and the organisations representing them** should be ensured in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU-funded programmes. The new framework should establish robust and transparent participation mechanisms from the outset. Children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect them. We therefore call for initiatives that encourage child participation to be explicitly referenced and adequately funded, building on the positive developments in current **CERV funding**. Furthermore,

children should be meaningfully involved in the decision-making processes regarding the EU budget. As organisations working on children’s rights, we believe that civil society organisations form part of the democratic infrastructure and, as such, should be meaningfully involved alongside children.

We furthermore recommend that **AgoraEU** strengthens funding in the area of children's rights both in the single strands, especially **MEDIA+** and **CERV+**, as well as in the **cross-cutting funding**. Children's rights as a topic has always been underfunded and covered by few calls for proposals. The new programme should therefore increase its support for children’s rights, with a specific focus on meaningful and inclusive child participation and engagement in decision-making.

As highlighted by the EU Civil Society Strategy, the EU budget should **simplify access to EU funding with safeguards** in order not to mean that “only big players can apply”, particularly for **grassroots and smaller organisations**, and promote **multi-annual and flexible mechanisms**. These measures echo the call from organisations for sustainable financing and simplified procedures, where Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP) was used to empower smaller organisations. The budget should also support the commitment of the European Commission to provide increased financial support, *‘including by exploring the possibility of further expanding the use of financial support to third parties’ schemes across relevant EU funding programmes.* In light of the increasing competition and awareness of the lifeline that such a funding instrument represents for civil society organisations in an increasingly hostile environment, part of **CERV+** should be dedicated exclusively to civil society and not-for-profit entities.

- **Ensure meaningful participation of children and organisations representing them in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU-funded programmes.**
- **Explicitly reference and adequately fund initiatives that encourage child participation, continuing the positive development in current CERV funding.**
- **Ensure that AgoraEU strengthens funding in the area of children's rights both in the single strands, especially MEDIA+ and CERV+, as well as in the cross-cutting funding.**
- **Simplify access to EU funding, particularly for grassroots and smaller organisations, and promote multi-annual and flexible mechanisms.**

#### **4. Allocate sufficient funds to social objectives and invest in eradicating child and family poverty.**

Child poverty and socio-economic disadvantage of children have a high cost for societies, amounting on average to **3.4% of annual gross domestic product (GDP)** in the OECD countries.<sup>3</sup> Social investment should be recognised as essential infrastructure for Europe's future. It is not only a matter of justice, but also a fiscal and strategic necessity. As the European Commission has stated, the MFF must “deliver on shared priorities” and “strengthen the EU’s long-term capacity to act”. Investing in children and their families’ access to social services and opportunities builds a stronger, more resilient

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, [What are the economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage?](#).

Europe. In this light, funding for children and social inclusion should be treated as core infrastructure and safeguarded accordingly.

We therefore call to earmark a specific budget of at least **EUR 20 billion** to tackle child poverty and to address the measures under the **European Child Guarantee**, as requested by the European Parliament in its INI Report on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>4</sup> The **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** should be maintained as an identifiable and separate fund within the **National and Regional Partnership (NRP) Plans**. Additionally, Member States should allocate at least **5% of the ESF+** to projects and structural investments combating child poverty, with at least **10%** earmarked in Member States where child poverty and social exclusion exceed the EU average.<sup>5</sup> This should be backed by **strong and specific indicators** on children, care and family support in the **tracking and performance framework** (e.g. availability, accessibility, quality, outcomes).

- **Earmark a specific budget of at least EUR 20 billion to tackle child poverty and to address the measures under the European Child Guarantee, corresponding to no less than 5% European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) allocation requirement, with an increased 10% for Member States with a higher child poverty rate.**
- **The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) should be maintained as an identifiable and separate fund within the National and Regional Partnership (NRP) Plans.**
- **Ensure strong and specific indicators on children, care and family support in the tracking and performance framework.**

## **5. Continue to invest in preventing, responding to and combating violence against children.**

As noted by the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, Dr Najat Maalla M'jid, failing to address violence against children leads to higher costs in healthcare, justice, and social welfare services, as well as increased enrollment in special education and grade repetition.<sup>6</sup> National-level estimates of the overall direct and indirect costs of violence are as high as **11% of the national GDP**.<sup>7</sup>

We welcome that the proposed **AgoraEU programme** maintains core priorities that are strongly relevant to children and grassroots organisations, including protecting and promoting the rights of

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament, Parliament's proposals to eradicate poverty in the EU by 2035 (2026), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20260205IPR33623/parliament-s-proposals-to-eradicate-poverty-in-the-eu-by-2035>.

<sup>5</sup> Alliance for Investing in Children, European Parliament backs real investment to end child poverty, now the EU must deliver (2026), <https://alliance4investinginchildren.eu/european-parliament-backs-real-investment-to-end-child-poverty-now-the-eu-must-deliver/>.

<sup>6</sup> UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2025) Building the investment case for ending violence against children: Toolkit, <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/en/media/348>.

<sup>7</sup> UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2025) Building the investment case for ending violence against children: Toolkit, <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/en/media/348>.

the child, preventing, responding to and fighting violence against children, and we support the proposed general budget increase. To further strengthen its objectives, we call to ensure funding for **specialised child victim support services** in every Member State, including **multidisciplinary child protection centres and helplines**, as well as to promote **coordinated national frameworks** for all child victims, aligned with the revised Victims' Rights Directive, the Revised Anti-Trafficking Directive, as well as the proposed legislation to protect children from child sexual abuse, both online and offline. Adequate and dedicated funding should also be allocated to uphold children's rights in the **digital environment**, including by promoting **digital education** and allocating adequate funding to **safer internet centres**.

In addition, EU funds should be invested in **child-friendly justice systems**, in line with the UNCRC, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the Directive on Procedural Safeguards, as a preventive and cost-effective approach. Priority should be put on prevention, diversion and alternatives to detention for all children in contact with the law, and on meeting the support needs of children affected by a parent's imprisonment, to reduce long-term social and economic costs, while adequate funding should ensure access to legal assistance, multidisciplinary support services, trained professionals, and reintegration.

Furthermore, **family support and the prevention of child-family separation** are key to implementing the 2024 Commission's Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems, and sufficient funding should be allocated to these areas.

- **Keep the AgoraEU programme proposed general budget increase and its core priorities that are strongly relevant to children and grassroots organisations, including protecting and promoting the rights of the child, preventing, responding to and fighting violence against children.**
- **Ensure funding for specialised child victim support services in every Member State, including multidisciplinary child protection centres and helplines, as well as to promote coordinated national frameworks for all child victims.**
- **Allocate adequate funding to uphold children's rights in the digital environment, including by promoting digital education and allocating sufficient funding to safer internet centres.**
- **Ensure EU funding supports child-friendly justice for children in contact with the law, prioritising prevention, diversion, and alternatives to detention, and ensuring access to legal assistance, multidisciplinary support and reintegration.**
- **Allocate sufficient funding to family support and the prevention of child-family separation.**

## 6. Uphold child protection standards above security and migration management considerations.

Millions of children across the EU are affected by migration policies - ranging from children living on labour mobility permits (joining parents) to children arriving irregularly, detention and forced return policies. The most harmful aspects of these policies for children in migration are elements of the so-called migration enforcement policies of the EU. EU funding should be used to invest in **integrated child protection systems** that encompass migration enforcement and border management spaces in order to better protect children in migration and border spaces. The implementation of the child protective policies, especially the 2024 Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems and the 2019 Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration, should be prioritised.

The **Union Support for Asylum, Migration and Integration** should be used to fund **community-based and family-centered** reception facilities that allow children to participate in the local community and schools, as well as case management systems that identify durable solutions (as well as pre-return reassessments) for the children concerned. The strengthening of **guardianship systems and holistic age assessment** should be seen as a key funding priority for unaccompanied and separated children. In addition, services and projects facilitating access to quality education, healthcare, psychological support, counselling, vocational and non-formal education should be prioritized in all EU funds irrespective of the child's migration status, including linked to children's transition into adulthood. Adequate and accessible funding should be secured to support both **early and long-term integration and inclusion efforts**. These actions should be driven by national, regional, and local authorities, in close collaboration with grassroots organisations. Additionally, migration chapters under **NRP Plans** should be fully compliant with the above priorities and subject to robust monitoring and stakeholder consultation, including with migrant-led organisations and child rights actors.

EU funding must not be used to support the detention of children for migration-related purposes within or outside of the EU. If funding for border management (Union support for the Schengen area, for European integrated border management and for the common visa policy) continues to be prioritised, the Fund's Regulation should include measures actively promoting access to rights, the protection of children and the provision of legal assistance at borders – all legal obligations stemming from EU and international legislation. To ensure children are only returned when it is in their best interest, EU funds should be used to strengthen best interest assessments and pre-return reassessments.

- **Prioritise the implementation of the child protective policies, especially the 2024 Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems and the 2019 Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration, amongst others by strengthening child protection systems that protect children in migration and border spaces.**
- **The Union Support for Asylum, Migration and Integration should prioritise the funding of community-based and family-centered reception facilities, best interests assessments to identify durable solutions (as well as pre-return reassessments) and, for unaccompanied children, implementing holistic age assessments and strengthening guardianship systems.**
- **Ensure that the migration chapters under the NRP Plans are fully compliant with the above priorities and subject to robust monitoring and stakeholder consultation, including with migrant-led organisations and child rights actors.**
- **Ensure that the Union support for the Schengen area, for European integrated border management and for the common visa policy includes measures actively promoting the protection of children, legal assistance at borders as well as integrated child protection systems encompassing border spaces.**

## **7. Ensure that investment spending on EU external action prioritises the needs of children, particularly children living in crisis contexts.**

Every child has a right to survive, thrive and shape the world around them. However, globally inequalities are sharply increasing and children face a convergence of crises – rising conflicts, climate shocks, and funding shortfalls – that are destroying livelihoods, childhoods and futures. In this context, the next EU long-term budget has the opportunity to change the lives of millions of children. Investing in children is not only a moral imperative, but also fundamental to achieving the EU’s long-term objectives, both in eradicating poverty and in terms of competitiveness, security, and stability. Healthy, educated and happy children today help build resilient societies tomorrow.

We welcome the European Commission’s proposal for a **EUR 200.3 billion**<sup>8</sup> funded **Global Europe Instrument**. However, advancing children’s rights and strengthening child protection systems should have a strong and central place in the Instrument. The EU’s external action must maintain a human rights-based approach, focused on eradicating poverty and strengthening human development. Accordingly, the **20% Official Development Assistance (ODA) earmarked for human development should be reinstated, with a clear child rights dimension**.<sup>9</sup> The benchmark could indeed ensure that part of the investment remains focused on education, health and social protection, which are key

<sup>8</sup> CONCORD, “Analysis of the European Commission’s proposal for the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework and the Global Europe Instrument” (December 2025), <https://concordeurope.org/resource/analysis-of-the-european-commissions-proposal-for-the-eus-next-multiannual-financial-framework-and-the-global-europe-instrument/>.

<sup>9</sup> CONCORD, EPLO, Voice, “Joint Call: Ensuring that the Global Europe Regulation strengthens the EU’s ability to address fragility” (March 2026), <https://presidency.concordeurope.org/joint-call-ensuring-that-the-global-europe-regulation-strengthens-the-eus-ability-to-address-fragility/>.

for the well-being of children. We recommend that **80% of the Global Europe Instrument's geographic pillars be allocated to programmable funding**.<sup>10</sup> This would ensure that the majority of resources support long-term, predictable, and partnership-based cooperation. The remaining **20%**<sup>11</sup> **would cover resilience, crisis response, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid**, and would be complemented by access to the cushion for unforeseen challenges. Additionally, the **possibility to suspend development funding or programme implementation based on migration control, readmission cooperation, or return-related conditions should be removed**.

Humanitarian action must remain needs-based, neutral, and principled. The **EUR 25 billion humanitarian budget line**<sup>12</sup> should be protected within **Global Europe**, by including it in the text of the Regulation. Additionally, **a minimum 10% of humanitarian aid**<sup>13</sup> should continue to be dedicated to **Education in Emergencies**, protecting children's right to learn and thrive even in crisis situations.

Specific funding should be allocated to support reforms linked to **children's rights in the enlargement countries**, including the transition from institutional to family and community-based care, to ensure they align with the EU Acquis, in line with the recommendations of the yearly enlargement report. This should include support for partner countries to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion through a Child Guarantee approach, ensuring effective access for children in vulnerable situations to essential services.

- **Reinstate the 20% Official Development Assistance (ODA) earmark for human development, with a clear child rights dimension and ensure that the non-programmable funding does not exceed 20% of the overall budget.**
- **Ringfence the EUR 25 billion humanitarian budget line within Global Europe, by including it in the text of the regulation.**
- **Dedicate a minimum 10% of humanitarian aid to Education in Emergencies, protecting children's right to learn and thrive even in crisis.**
- **Allocate specific funding to support reforms linked to children's rights in the enlargement countries.**

#### **List of signatories in alphabetical order:**

1. Child Friendly Justice European Network (CFJ-EN)
2. ChildFund Alliance
3. Children of Prisoners Europe

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Commission Communication on "A dynamic EU budget for the priorities of the future – The Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034" (August 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Joining Forces Position Paper "Investing in Children Now" (September 2025), <https://joining-forces.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Investing-in-Children-Now-Position-Paper-Sept-2025.pdf>.

4. COFACE Families Europe
5. Eurochild
6. European Network on Statelessness
7. Hope and Homes for Children
8. Make Mothers Matter
9. Missing Children Europe
10. PICUM
11. Plan International
12. Quest
13. Save the Children
14. SOS Children's Villages
15. Victim Support Europe