Why recovery needs to have children at its centre [1]

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EXCERPTS

As we are phasing out of a lockdown into a crisis, recovery is on everyone's mind. Recovery, however, can mean different things. An employee with an office job can expect something different than someone out of a job from the hugely affected service sector. A large company's expectations will also differ from a small business owner's—as will those of a single parent, compared with a household of two earners. It is the responsibility of Europe's leaders to ensure that recovery reaches children too and offers them a helping hand.

The European recovery plan advanced by the European Commission on May 27th proposes to mobilise €1,100 billion under the 2021-27 Multiannual Financial Framework, and an additional €750 billion through a new instrument, Next Generation EU. The commission has urged national governments to approve it quickly, in view of the challenges ahead.

Indeed, to save one of the most prosperous regions of the world from collapse, billions of euro will be required to alleviate the burden on those who will suffer most under the looming economic downturn. In these efforts at stabilisation, there is not only a particular urgency but a rationality in investing in children. The announced Child Guarantee and earmarking of resources from the cohesion envelope to tackle child poverty are therefore symbolic and urgent.

Social stresses

In the realities we are all experiencing there is a child somewhere. Covid-19 is not just affecting adults and our mental health—we know it is affecting children just as much. If we are not under 18 ourselves then we might have a child whom we want to comfort, or have friends or families in lockdown with children. Social distancing places stresses on all humans as social beings, regardless of age.

There is growing evidence of the challenges children have been facing as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Because of how the pandemic exposes our collective vulnerability and humanity, it might be thought decision-makers would relate more readily to the difficulties endured by children, and be more likely to prioritise their needs—but that might be a naïve assumption.

Looking beyond our own households, we can notice all the services that have abruptly come to a halt under the lockdown and on which families normally rely. Daycare and schools having been shut, as well as targeted social services, such as psychological support, family counselling and home visits—yet with no support with childcare available from the accustomed network of family or friends.

Only people living within the same walls know what happens in homes where there is substance abuse, alcoholism, a mental-health issue, violence or neglect. Children and families in vulnerable situations are missing out on much-needed support. Years of progress made in these homes with the help of professionals can be undone and children may be severely affected by confinement—there is no way of knowing exactly. The United Nations has raised the alarm about the mental health of children, including adolescents, as they are at particular risk of abuse during the pandemic.

Growing inequality

As lockdowns ease and children trickle back to daycare and school, inequality will have grown between children of more and less well-off families. Governments will need to focus on the services designed to reduce these inequalities, be these universal or specialised. The EU's efforts to support investment and reform by member states should recognise that.

We cannot be assured merely by billions flying around at the macro-level. Resources are still scarce and decision-making is in a crisis mode of crude prioritisation. The criteria for such decisions are not new; neither are the basic assumptions. Work creates livelihoods, income creates purchasing power, creating demand, which meets and creates further supply. The economy picks up, businesses can borrow more, banks can lend more and we reach the bliss of balance in the bubble. But in the post-pandemic crisis such assumptions should be questioned.

We can see that the looming crisis will create more poverty and inequality—it is just impossible to tell its magnitude yet. The World Bank predicts that progress made in the last five years to reduce poverty globally will be erased and it estimates that 40-60 million more people will fall into extreme poverty (an income below $1.90 a day) in 2020.

Not just enterprises but entire sectors have crashed. Travel and tourism, catering and indeed most services have suffered their biggest setbacks this century. The International Labour Organization estimates that about half of the global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods. What if some parts of our economies cannot pick up again, or not to the level before? What if the people who worked in these areas need to receive welfare support to sustain themselves while they figure out how to fight the fire life has blown their way? What if their retraining is not yet in sight? What if they have to change lifestyle to such an extent that they have to rely on basic income and social housing? And what, in that context, will be the collateral damage to the children in their lives?

Different systems

If anything, the comprehensive impact of the crisis in Europe has brought to the surface the harsh differences in the buffer potential of our different welfare systems. We cannot go past this. We need to praise what they are doing for the victims of the breakdown now but also say what more could be done.

It is the responsibility of every government to take an honest look at how existing social safety nets are catching people, children included. Then, to reach those that fall through, there should be no shame to seek exemptions from deficit rules to enhance social investment. National reforms of child-protection systems and policies aimed at preventing poverty and additional inequality should meanwhile not come to a halt but should be accelerated with EU backing, to support those most in need.

The EU budget powering the recovery plan promises at least 5 per cent of total expenditure under the European Social Fund Plus to help lift children out of poverty. Its agreement by heads of state or government will be a milestone for investment in children. This is the EU's chance to spearhead the fight against growing inequality. It can remind decision-makers to make children's wellbeing central in structural reform—connecting welfare policies, leave, education and healthcare policies, social protection and support services through a strategy aimed at preventing and reducing child poverty.

Efforts should focus on preparing our systems now, to strengthen their ability to reach all children through universal provisions, coupled with support measures targeting the most disadvantaged. The EU can pass this message through the Child Guarantee—which it has committed to initiate as a matter of priority—and spend that 5 per cent in a strategic way.

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