

Towards a child union! Reducing inequalities in the EU through investment in children's early years the foundation for European progressive studies ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

Europe is experiencing one of the worst health crises since the second world war. The covid-19 pandemic has so far infected more than 1,400,000 people and killed over 165,000.3 The lockdown, and the stop to economic activities decided upon by many governments of the EU, in contrast with the expansion of the pandemic, is causing a devastating recession, and is particularly hitting households which are economically and socially disadvantaged.

The crisis has highlighted the fragility and unsustainable nature of our current global economic and social model.

Indeed, within the EU, our current model has exacerbated inequalities between those who are benefitting from globalised markets and innovations, and other groups or communities who are losing opportunities and safety nets. The divide, largely due to deregulated markets and the minimisation of the welfare state, has undermined collective resilience not only to economic crises, but also to environmental and, as we have seen, health, crises.

Complexity is the new reality that progressives must embrace in order to create a sustainable development paradigm in which, together with democratic institutions, economic, social and environmental policies are part of the same, real, New Deal for Europe – a New Deal which will make the changes work for all.

At the heart of the new paradigm there should be a re-vamped welfare state system that enables the inequalities in today's complex, mutating and fragile economies and societies to be tackled. This revamped welfare state system should protect the most disadvantaged, and at the same time equip them. A renewed sense of solidarity is needed as the basis for reconstructing collective resilience if recurrent downturns are to be confronted adequately.

Children are at the heart of this change. While the abilities and skills necessary for individuals to grow up, live and be emancipated in the globalised world are developed right from the early years of life, so are inequalities. Policies to tackle inequalities in childhood are therefore an essential element in building the new progressive welfare – and societal – paradigm.

Over the last two decades, there has been increasing interest in the role that early childhood education and care (ECEC) can play in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A growing body of evidence shows that participation in quality ECEC programmes leads to positive gains, particularly for the most disadvantaged children, in the acquisition of abilities and skills whose benefits can be seen beyond childhood into later educational and life achievements.

However, the picture of ECEC in Europe today is rather gloomy from an equality standpoint. A number of factors related to access to quality ECEC services currently hinder the equalising potential of ECEC, and may even contribute to widening the gap. Access to services in most EU countries tends to penalise children from disadvantaged families, lower income households or those living in rural and remote areas. Moreover, the unequal enrolment of children in ECEC services is very often aggravated by disadvantaged households having access to lower quality settings. Quality refers to inclusion, or the capacity of ECEC programmes to emancipate every child and build collective resilience.

In addition, in most European countries early learning programmes are not conceived as part of a broader welfare approach that aims at fighting the inequalities in changed and fragile economies and societies. Early learning programmes therefore interact poorly with other labour and social protection policies. This increases the risk factors for children's development, and alongside this, it increases the exclusion and marginalisation of groups and territories. A Child Union is the progressive response to overcoming inequalities among children – and throughout the generations. It is an essential element of a New European Deal that makes the economy and society work for all. Furthermore, it should emancipate the most disadvantaged children and families by increasing their life chances and their ability to be the agents of collective resilience.

A Child Union is a set of principles aiming at equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC, and at addressing structural inequalities through labour policies and social safety nets. Today a Child Union is needed more than ever, when Europe is not only having to confront a terrible health crisis but also an economic recession that might crumble the foundations of communities' social cohesion and of the European project itself.

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