

Analysis

European Child Guarantee

Overview of selected aspects of the National Action Plans submitted
by the end of 2022

December 2022

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	1
NATIONAL COORDINATORS.....	2
STATUS OF THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS	2
EMBEDDING IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS.....	3
OVERARCHING GOALS TO REDUCE CHILD POVERTY.....	3
TARGET GROUPS.....	5
FOCUS AREAS	6
EXISTING AND (NEWLY) PLANNED MEASURES.....	6
NEW INITIATIVES IN THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS?	7
EXEMPLARY CONTENT AREAS	7
INDICATORS, TARGETS AND MONITORING	8
SUMMARY.....	8

INTRODUCTION

To combat child poverty, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union decided in 2021 to establish a "European Child Guarantee".¹ It is a targeted initiative to support vulnerable children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU. The Child Guarantee aims to "prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children in need to a range of essential services, thereby also contributing to the protection of children's rights by tackling child poverty and promoting equality of opportunity."

The Child Guarantee requires that the individual EU Member States each develop a National Action Plan (NAP) with country-specific measures for implementation. However, the EU will support the member states in their activities, especially by EU funding. The NAPs cover the period until 2030 and take into account national conditions. They are supposed to include:

- target groups;
- quantitative and qualitative targets;
- planned or already taken measures, including financial resources and timetables; and
- a framework for monitoring.²

In view of the protracted process of submitting the Action Plans, it seems useful to present an interim overview of their status and how the member states approach them. The Action Plans follow very different approaches in terms of content and structure as well as style, which makes it difficult to compare them. In addition, owing to the scope of the NAPs and time constraints, this undoubtedly cannot be an in-depth analysis, but merely a snapshot of the current status of the Action Plans that have been submitted by the end of 2022.

¹ Parlementsresolution: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021IP0090>
 Kommissionsvorschlag: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0137&qid=1647980233530>
 Ratsempfehlung: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG>

² Art. 11 (c), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021H1004#PP2Contents>

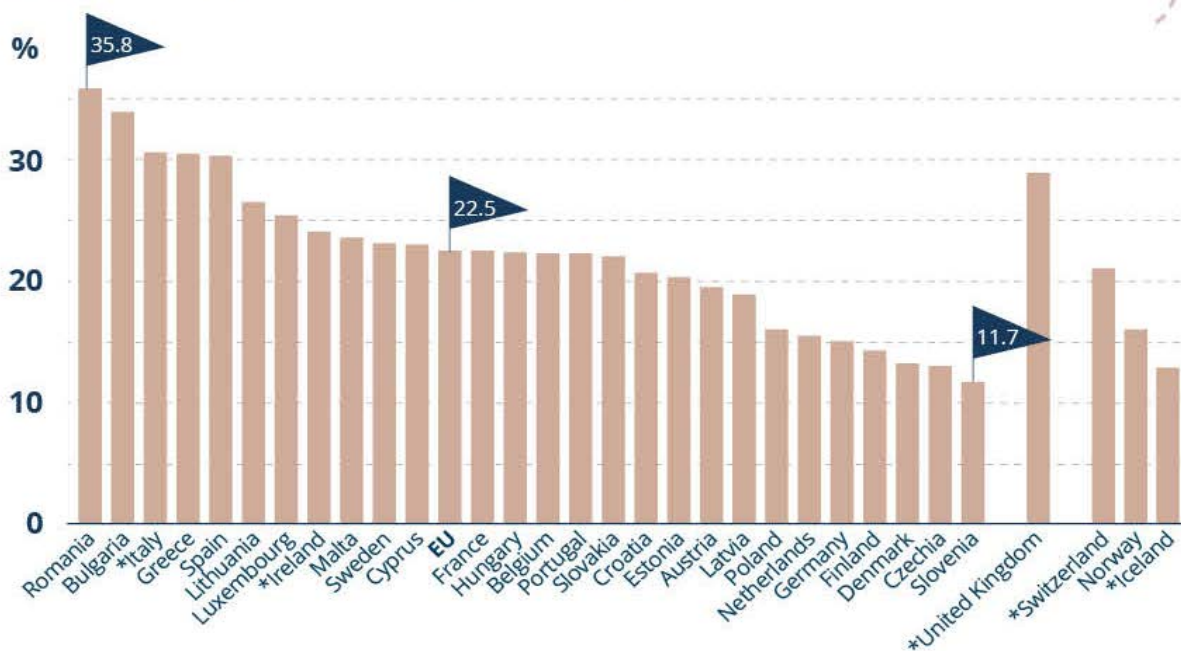
NATIONAL COORDINATORS

As the Child Guarantee foresees, all 27 EU Member States have appointed a national coordinator; 21 coordinators are women and six are men. The national coordinators include a minister (Romania), two deputy ministers, a state secretary (Germany), at least 12 directors/heads of department (including one director of a government-owned scientific institute), one deputy director and one person from a civil society organisation (Kinderliga, Austria). In a third of the cases, the coordinators were individuals from other groups or hierarchies.

STATUS OF THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS

By the scheduled deadline of mid-March 2022, no Member State had yet submitted its National Action Plan to the European Commission. However, by the end of 2022, 18 of the 27 Member States, i.e. two thirds of the number, had submitted their Action Plan. This includes nine of the 11 states that have more children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) than the EU average of 22.5% in 2019.³ These countries are expected to allocate at least 5% of their European Social Fund ESF+ funds to the fight against child poverty. The NAP can be helpful in negotiations with the EU Commission on funding for those countries.

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% of population aged less than 18 years, 2019)



*Data for 2018.
Belgium breaks in series; EU-27: estimate

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_peps01)

Graph: European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/european-child-guarantee/>

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/european-child-guarantee/>

EMBEDDING IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Five of the 18 National Action Plans submitted were decided by the Member State's cabinet (Bulgaria, Ireland, Poland, Sweden and Cyprus), two were endorsed or signed by the respective minister or deputy minister, three were prepared and submitted by the national coordinator, and at least five by a ministry (in cooperation with other ministries, as well as civil society). It is unclear who decided on three of the plans. Countries in which the Action Plan is highly embedded in political institutions often have above-average proportions of children at risk of poverty. The titles of eight Action Plans clearly state that they advocate for the implementation of the Child Guarantee, while most do not mention a clear orientation and one title is formulated in a rather distancing way.

INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY, CHILDREN AND SCIENCE

Thirteen of the submitted NAPs refer to the involvement of non-governmental organisations in the preparation of the plan, eight plans to the involvement of children and three to the involvement of scientific institutions. Civil society was involved in ways that ranged from a single conference to online consultations, a national network and exhaustive other processes. Belgium included as an annex in its Action Plan a detailed statement of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion as an annex. Children and young people were often involved in focus groups, as well as in online surveys or advisory boards. The President of Greece and the Deputy Minister for Labour listened to the concerns of children and young people in an event on the Child Guarantee. The Italian Action Plan quotes the recommendations of young people from the Youth Advisory Board in several places. Sweden addresses children's participation not only in the preparation of the Action Plan but also in the policy-making process in general. Some Action Plans also provide for the participation of NGOs and/or children in the implementation and monitoring of measures.

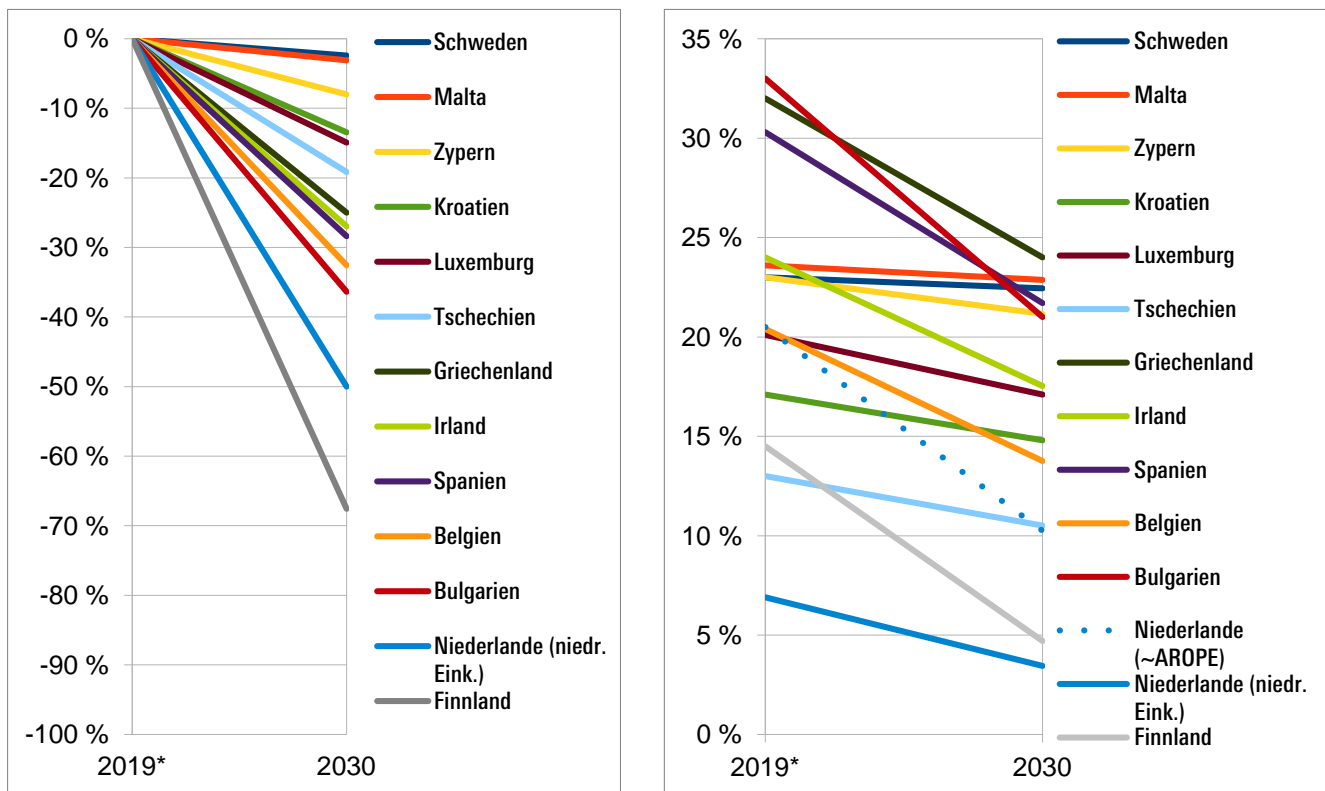
OVERARCHING GOALS TO REDUCE CHILD POVERTY

Thirteen of the 18 National Action Plans include a quantified and time-bound target for reducing the proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. One of these countries (Malta) sets a target for the reduction of poverty in the whole population, but children receive special attention. Two other countries set a target to reduce child poverty without quantifying the extent of the reduction. Four Member States do not specify a comprehensive child poverty reduction target at all. They include countries in which children face both high and low risks of poverty.

The quantified targets for 2030 range from a 2.4% reduction to 68% (25% on average). Ireland has set a target to move from 20th place in the EU to 5th place by 2030, which means that the achievement of the target also depends on developments in the other Member States. The government of the Netherlands wants to reach its target of halving poverty risks for children not just by 2030 but by the end of its term in 2025.

The very different levels of ambition of the Member States' targets do not seem to be clearly related to the level of risks of child poverty (see graph on the right). The four countries with the highest poverty risk do aim for significant reductions, but the next three countries are aiming for only the smallest reductions among the Member States. In the middle, there are clear and moderate reduction targets, and the two most ambitious targets are found in countries with below-average poverty risks (Finland and the Netherlands).

Figures: Reduction targets as percentage change and related to the AROPE share



* 2019 is used as the base year in most National Action Plans, but not all.

Sources: National Action Plans, own calculations. The target for Malta also applies to the total population. The target for the Netherlands is not for 2030 but for the end of the government’s term (2025). Target value for Ireland according to AROPE data for 2021 (5th place as target, AROPE: at risk of poverty or social exclusion, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N_custom_3366449/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=06fb2adc-c347-4be1-b476-84ff599b5313).

DIFFERENT STARTING CONDITIONS

Thirteen Member States point out in their action plans that they already have several child, family and social policies and plans in place to tackle child poverty (including Bulgaria, Estonia and the Czech Republic). Finland notes that its Action Plan sits within the framework of the 2021 National Strategy for Children and plans for its implementation. Poland emphasises that "The actions presented in the National Action Programme are part of numerous strategies and programmes implementing public policies related to combating poverty or the social exclusion of children and breaking the intergenerational cycle of marginalisation and unequal opportunities" (p. 41). The French government states more generally that its national strategies anticipate the European Child Guarantee. Nevertheless, it argues that there is a need to expand the implementation of existing strategies. Other Member States seem to implicitly share a similar view.

Italy, however, admits that it seemed to be lagging behind, but has embarked on a reform era in the last two years that also extends children’s rights (the Action Plan was presented before the change of government in 2022). Spain acknowledges that its social protection system has been "inadequate and ineffective" in ensuring the protection of all children and adolescents and in alleviating or preventing poverty or social exclusion. "For years, the child poverty rate has been unworthy of a country with the level of development of Spain."⁴

⁴ NAP Spain, p. 5 (own translation).

Other countries are developing concrete objectives and interventions in their NAPs without referring to already existing strategies and plans for poverty reduction (e.g. Belgium, Croatia and Cyprus). Greece's National Action Plan states: "The preparation of the N.A.P. in the context of the European Child Guarantee is a great opportunity to elaborate a respective National Strategy to improve substantively the current situation in the field of child protection with a horizon by 2030. (...) The National Action Plan (NAP) for the Child Guarantee is the first comprehensive and consistent effort at national level to combat child poverty and social exclusion, focusing on children."⁵

TARGET GROUPS

There are 6 target groups in the European Child Guarantee:

- 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;
- f) children in precarious family situations.⁶

All action plans report in detail on the situation of children in their country. However, it is usually not clear from the situation analysis whether the target groups proposed by the EU are also suitable for the respective country. Nevertheless, nine of the 18 countries adopt all six target groups, three countries adopt five target groups, and each one country adopts four, two or only one of the target groups. Eleven Member States use these target groups for their situation analysis. Croatia only refers to them in the "key services" (see below). The vast majority of Action Plans do not differentiate measures separately by target group. The Netherlands uses its own target groups (within the fields of action). In Belgium, "In general, the federal government and federated entities have chosen not to take specific measures for particularly vulnerable groups of children. In general, measures are taken for all children in poverty, because the needs are great and apply to all" (ch. 4). Target groups do not appear specifically in the French Action Plan either.

The target groups of children with disabilities and those with mental health problems are often combined. In the Czech Action Plan, seriously ill children and children in palliative care are explicitly included in this group. Similarly, the target group of children in precarious family circumstances explicitly includes those living in a family in debt or affected by foreclosure/insolvency (which is comparatively common in the Czech Republic).

Eight Member States add further target groups: pre-adolescents and adolescents, adopted minors (Italy), LGBTIQ, victims of violence, drug addicts, Sami (Finland), national minorities and LGBTIQI children (Sweden), children with parents in a situation of "administrative irregularity" or in conflict with the law, victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation (Spain, p. 16, Tab. 1), vulnerable children and pupils in daycare centres and primary schools, vulnerable children and young people receiving benefits under the Service Act (Denmark), children receiving monetary child benefits, children in underdeveloped areas, children of imprisoned parents (Croatia) and underage prisoners (Greece). The Czech Republic has subdivided, expanded and supplemented the six target groups to make 18 target groups. The supplementary target groups include children living in socially excluded residential areas; children living with a parent with disabilities; children who engage in "risky behaviour" ("e.g. aggressive behaviour, delinquency, racism, bullying and cyberbullying, truancy, gambling, addictions and substance abuse, and eating disorders" p. 33); children who have a minor mother or father or are themselves a minor mother; and children who drop out of school.

In the target group of children with a migration background or from ethnic minorities, ten countries explicitly include Roma or dedicate a separate target group to them, and eight countries explicitly include refugee children from Ukraine.

⁵ NAP Greece, pp. 6, 7.

⁶ Art. 5. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004>

FOCUS AREAS

The EU Recommendation has set out five key content areas that form the core of the European Child Guarantee and indicate where access to “key services” should be guaranteed.

"Member States are recommended to guarantee for children in need:

- (a) effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day and healthcare;
- (b) effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing."⁷

Sixteen of the 18 National Action Plans adopt these fields of action, with some mixing key services and target groups. Estonia and Finland, on the other hand, present their measures solely on the basis of target groups.

Six Member States add additional areas to Key Services: Administration and System Infrastructure (Italy), Cultural and Leisure Facilities (Denmark), Income Support (Ireland), Help and Support for Parents (Luxembourg), Neighbourhood Services (Croatia) and Support for Ukrainian Refugee Children (Czech Republic).

EXISTING AND (NEWLY) PLANNED MEASURES

Almost all Action Plans report in detail on measures introduced so far. However, not all plans include actions specifically designed for the Child Guarantee: four of the 18 plans, or almost a quarter, thus fail to specify any planned actions. France, for example, reports only measures that "should" or "could" be implemented, in addition to ongoing measures. Sweden mentions some newly planned measures, but the largest part of its very detailed Action Plan is taken up by the existing measures.

Only rarely is it stated whether an objective or measure is new or goes beyond previous plans or was even devised specifically for the NAP. Mostly, it seems to be just about previously decided objectives and measures. This subsequent relabelling of already planned or existing measures is considered legitimate by the EU Commission, but basically contradicts the spirit of the Child Guarantee and the overwhelming wish of civil society organisations to initiate additional new activities set out in an Action Plan. For example, the Belgian action plan "currently only takes into account policies recently implemented or announced" (ch. 2). The Dutch Action Plan is subtitled: "Dutch situation regarding policy on child poverty in light of the Council recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee".⁸ Luxembourg's plan is summarised as "an *inventory of existing and/or planned measures*". Denmark's Action Plan "adapts the European Child Guarantee to Danish conditions".

Another deficiency in most of the plans is the lack of information on planned costs or timetables for the implementation of the measures. Costs are mentioned in most plans, but mostly only in the form of general statements about EU funding or (mostly previous) total expenditure, not in relation to the measures proposed. Exceptions here are the very systematic Action Plans of the Czech Republic, Italy, Malta and Cyprus. Croatia provides placeholders for costs in its descriptions of proposed measures.

⁷ Art. 4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004>

⁸ The introduction explains this subtitle and the nature of the Action Plan as follows: "This national plan sets out the current situation as regards policy to tackle child poverty and promote the wellbeing of children, in light of the Council recommendation dealing with these particular areas. It also looks at what the fourth Rutte government has set out in its coalition agreement for 2021–2025, and includes a report on a conference with various stakeholders" (p. 3).

NEW INITIATIVES IN THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS?

The basic aim of the Child Guarantee, with its system of Action Plans including quantified targets and measures and subsequent monitoring, is to stimulate new initiatives and interventions. However, many Action Plans have the character of a report rather than a plan for action. Whether the European Child Guarantee initiative has stimulated new goals and measures at the national level is often not made transparent. In view of this lack of transparency, even the detailed report of the EU Parliament on the measures in the NAPs to support Ukrainian refugee children does not go beyond counting the number of mentions of single EU Commission keywords and selectively presenting single measures without being able to create and evaluate an overall picture.⁹

On the other hand, Ireland's Action Plan, for example, formulates explicit political will. This is reflected in the foreword by a minister (it is the only Action Plan with a foreword written by someone at ministerial level), a consistent language of commitment, great operational systems and ambitious goals. In the Czech Action Plan, the existing measures are presented primarily in terms of their gaps and deficits in order to derive goals and initiatives from them. Croatia, Poland and Spain refrain from presenting their existing measures at all and instead focus on the planned measures – in the case of Spain in a very comprehensive, detailed plan with 88 measures guided by 25 objectives. Similarly, Bulgaria presents an Action Plan with 15 quantified targets for 2030 and a list of associated actions, with responsibilities and funding sources. In addition, several Action Plans refer to the holistic approach of the Child Guarantee and the potential synergies that can be developed through cooperation between different ministries and with civil society.

EXEMPLARY CONTENT AREAS

While the vast majority of Action Plans discuss free education and health services, they do not do so comprehensively, making comparisons difficult. The Finnish Action Plan reports that, for children, school education, meals at school and – with few exceptions – healthcare are free, and children have a subjective right to early childhood education. The French plan mentions free breakfast at school and 1 Euro canteens for lunch, as well as that stressing that public schooling is free, accessible to all and now compulsory from the age of three. The Estonian and Swedish Action Plans also refer to free school meals, and the NAPs from the Czech Republic and Greece report the same, particularly for children in need and in selected schools. The Danish NAP states that there are subsidies or price reductions for school meals or free school meals in the municipalities. It emphasises that children in asylum centres have access to the same free healthcare as Danish children. Bulgaria, Sweden and Spain, too, emphasise that there is free access to healthcare for children. In Luxembourg, the country with the highest per capita income in the EU, there is free help with homework in primary school. From the school year 2022, all children will receive free meals and most music lessons in the municipal sector will be free of charge. In Bulgaria, since April 2022, parents would not have to pay fees for the use of kindergartens and crèches, nor for meals, as part of compulsory pre-school education. It is not clear whether these measures introduced in 2022 were inspired by the EU Child Guarantee. Spain's goals include ensuring access for all children to the first cycle of early childhood education, early childhood care and extracurricular and educational leisure and recreational activities. Public spending on education is to be increased to at least 5% of GDP by 2030.

Regarding the situation of children in care or in foster care, France announces to develop boarding schools of excellence as part of a new policy called the "boarding school of the 21st century". Spain sets the goal of further de-institutionalising the placement and care of children.

⁹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/734004/IPOL_STU\(2022\)734004_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/734004/IPOL_STU(2022)734004_EN.pdf)

With regard to improving the situation of homeless children or children affected by severe housing deprivation, France declares the ambitious goal of "zero children on the streets by 2030".

INDICATORS, TARGETS AND MONITORING

Greece presents several hundred indicators, Croatia and the Czech Republic more than one hundred each, Ireland 70 (although they were already used before the NAP), Italy 36, Poland 27 and Estonia 21. Five other Member States use nine to 18 indicators. The remaining six states do not mention any indicators (except for the AROPE indicator for a reduction target, if applicable; see above). Most Member States use more output- than input-related indicators.

Nine countries have set numerical and time-bound targets, mostly in addition to their overall child poverty reduction target. Greece aims for 25 quantified targets, Estonia 21 (most of them "to reduce", without mentioning a specific target value; likewise Luxembourg and Sweden). Spain aims to ensure universal access to the first cycle of early childhood education as well as early childhood care and healthy nutrition for all children. Ireland is working towards ending homelessness by 2030. Four Member States have not set any quantitative targets.

The systematic approach of a system of targets, indicators and measures seems to be most fully realised in the Action Plans of Croatia, Bulgaria and Spain.

All submitted NAPs deal with reviewing the implementation of the Child Guarantee in different ways, but two of them limit themselves to monitoring previous developments or postpone the creation of a monitoring system. Only four Action Plans contain clear commitments to collect new data for monitoring, whereas other Action Plans emphasise the need for this.

SUMMARY

The NAPs for the Child Guarantee submitted by the end of 2022 present a very diverse picture, manifesting subtle degrees of light and shade. The broad support for the goals anchored in the Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee is gratifying. This approval is also crystallised in many interesting ideas and approaches, in the political commitment and systematic approach of many Action Plans. But it is difficult to determine what exactly has been initiated, because this is not made transparent. Many Action Plans only recapitulate existing policies and achievements, and some Action Plans are "action" plans only in name, lacking actions. Several display gaps in quantified targets and indicators, while others lead the way in this respect.

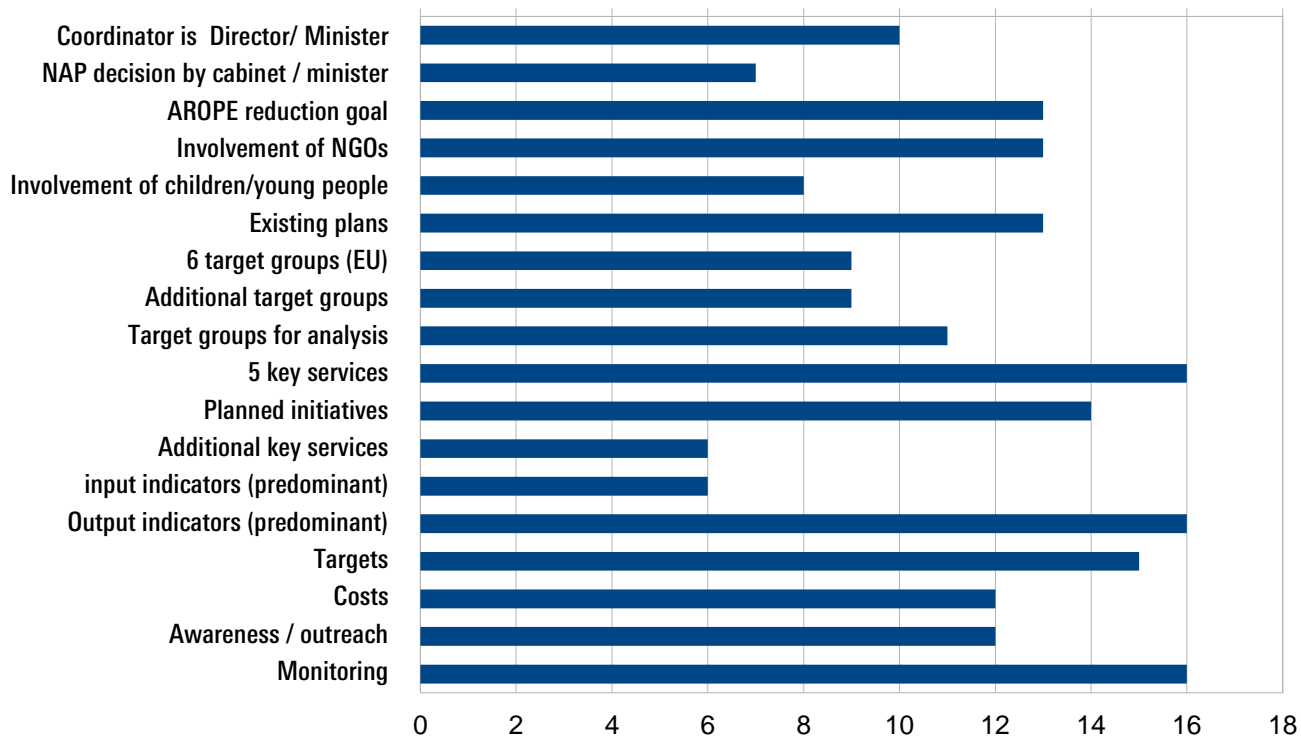
There is no direct correlation between the very different degrees of ambition of the Action Plans and the initial situation in the countries concerned. The degree of detail and operationalisation of the goals also varies greatly. Fortunately, the outcome goals outweigh the (also numerous) input goals. However, it is scarcely possible, on the basis of the plans alone, to see whether there will in the future be a stronger commitment to tackle child poverty in the Member States or whether measures that had been planned anyway have simply been put under the label "Child Guarantee". The institutionalised cooperation and advocacy of the national coordinators and the interdepartmental handling of child poverty and social exclusion, supported and fuelled by cooperation with NGOs, could have a positive effect. It is to be hoped – and every effort should be made to ensure – that the recognisable positive factors can prevail even and especially in times that are characterised throughout Europe by inflation, energy poverty, the inevitable costs of war and the pandemic, public debt and the threat of cutbacks.

For Germany, the Action Plan would have to do more than limit itself to citing already planned or existing measures. The debate about the Action Plans and the Child Guarantee offers a good opportunity to work towards writing new goals, measures and indicators into the German Action Plan and to make it possible to objectively review the successes of Germany's commitment to the goals of the Child Guarantee. By covering the five social rights or areas

of action, the Action Plan should anchor ambitious goals permanently in German policy and contribute to reducing the risk of poverty for children and to substantially improving social participation for all children in these areas of action.

ANNEX

Table: Number of states (=18) that have the following elements in their NAP



PUBLICATION DETAILS

Author:

Lars Vogelsang

Editorial:

Association of German Family Organisations (AGF)

Contact and information:

Association of German Family Organisations (AGF)

Karl-Heinrich-Ulrichs-Straße 14

10785 Berlin

Fon: + 49 (0) 30 2902825-70

Email: info@ag-familie.de

Web: www.ag-familie.de

The AGF is funded by the



Bundesministerium
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen
und Jugend

AGF

■ Arbeitsgemeinschaft
■ der deutschen
■ Familienorganisationen e.V.

- Deutscher Familienverband e.V. (DFV)
- evangelische arbeitsgemeinschaft familie e.V. (eaf)
- Familienbund der Katholiken e.V. (FDK)
- Verband alleinerziehender Mütter und Väter e.V. (VAMV)
- Verband binationaler Familien und Partnerschaften e.V. (iaf)
- Zukunftsforum Familie e.V. (ZFF)