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## **European Committee for Social Cohesion (CCS)**

### **STUDY REPORT**

### **ON**

### **CHALLENGES RELATED TO SOCIAL COHESION**

### **IN IMPLEMENTING THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

### **TARGETS 1.2 AND 11.7**

**Prepared by<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> All positions and views expressed in the paper are of the authors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report was commissioned in 2021 by the European Social Cohesion Platform (PECS), which was previously an intergovernmental committee of the Council of Europe.<sup>2,3</sup> The purpose of the study was to identify challenges related to social cohesion in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), focusing on two specific goals: Goal 1, Target 1.2 on child poverty, and Goal 11, Target 11.7 on access to public spaces for persons in vulnerable situations. The SDGs were agreed upon at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, which set the agenda for sustainable development until 2030. Under SDG Target 1.2, the countries undertook to: *“by 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.”* Under Target 11.7, the countries committed to: *“by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.”* The Council of Europe, with its pan-European membership, has been engaged with the SDG process from the outset, and, by means of its bodies and processes, has contributed to it, in particular by monitoring and following up, including by collecting data, assessing progress made and providing guidance towards attaining the SDGs.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of the study, PECS member countries were asked to reply to a questionnaire (see Annex II) concerning the relevant SDG targets (1.2 and 11.7), and, in particular, the challenges in implementing these goals and the effects on social cohesion. This report provides an overview of the situation in the Council of Europe member states based primarily on the information provided by the countries which replied to the questionnaire circulated by the Platform: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland and Turkey. Based on the challenges highlighted by the member states, some recommendations on addressing the challenges have been formulated.

Any opinions expressed in this report, as well as the choice of the policy measures highlighted, are those of the author and not of the member states or of the Council of Europe. Similarly, the author takes sole responsibility for any mistakes, misinterpretations or omissions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/european-social-cohesion-platform-about>

<sup>3</sup> From 2022, the European Committee for Social Cohesion was established to follow up on social cohesion initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/un-agenda-2030>

## 2. ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY

Target 1.2 of SDGs sets the goal of reducing by 2030 by at least half the proportion of children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions, as defined by each country. Firstly, the target sets an ambitious quantitative benchmark for poverty reduction: by at least 50% over the 15-year time horizon from 2015 to 2030. Secondly, the multidimensional nature of poverty must be recognised. Thirdly, member states may use national definitions of poverty to monitor the situation and assess progress towards poverty reduction.

### 2.1. Indicators to monitor child poverty

As the information submitted by the CoE member states in their country reports indicates, there is a considerable variation in the approaches that the states take regarding monitoring child poverty and different sets of indicators are in use to measure the prevalence of child poverty and the impact of policies to reduce it.

It should be noted that of the current 46 member states of the Council of Europe, 36 countries are part of the Eurostat data collection framework. For these countries, the Eurostat poverty and social exclusion indicators are available, including the at-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP) and the severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children, i.e. persons aged under 18 years.<sup>5</sup> Operational definitions of the respective indicators are provided in Annex I.

Unfortunately, those Council of Europe member states which are not part of the Eurostat data collection framework did not provide answers to the PECS questionnaire. This has meant that we have been unable to find out about the national approaches towards monitoring child poverty in these countries.

Nonetheless, even among the countries which do participate in the Eurostat data collection framework, practices vary considerably in terms of the extent to which they rely on the Eurostat indicators in their national policy-making and policy assessment, and whether they use some national poverty indicators in addition to the Eurostat measures. Several different approaches can be outlined in this regard.

Czechia, France, Hungary and Lithuania indicate that they mainly rely on the annual at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates to assess the situation of child poverty. Notably, focusing on AROP entails scrutinising the monetary dimension of poverty.

The AROP rate is also used in Germany, even though some points of criticism have been raised expressing concerns on the limitations of the AROP approach in capturing the poverty situation of children. The German report points out that the AROP, since it is based on the equivalence-weighted income of the entire household, translates the issue of child poverty into one of parental or family income, and does not provide direct information on individual need. At the same time, there is no applicable national definition of poverty in Germany that is free of such limitations.

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2017, Eurostat has preferred to use the severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD), replacing the earlier indicator of the severe material deprivation rate (SMDR).

Norway also underlines that income is only an indirect indicator of living standards and the income poverty threshold does not take into account the way in which welfare services, such as free or publicly subsidised childcare, education and health services, reduce the consequences of low income. While generally relying on the AROP approach, Norway specifically applies the *persistent* AROP rate of children, which addresses long-term poverty.

Ireland refers to the indicator of *consistent* poverty, which combines the AROP rate with elements of material deprivation – persons are regarded as being in consistent poverty if their income is below 60% of the median income (AROP threshold) and they are deprived of at least two of the 11 items on the material deprivation list (see Annex I).

Austria, Cyprus and Portugal are in a group of countries which use a broader range of Eurostat poverty and social inclusion indicators, i.e. the AROP rate in combination with the material deprivation rate (MDR) and/or the very low work intensity (VLWI) rate.

Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Luxembourg and Switzerland use some specific national poverty indicators in addition to the Eurostat indicators. Croatia applies the entitlement to the guaranteed minimum benefit as the indicator of the highest risk of poverty for children. Estonia uses the subsistence minimum calculated by the statistical office on the basis of the social survey data, as the absolute poverty threshold. Switzerland applies the social living minimum (*minimum vital social*), which is the basis of entitlements to social assistance, as the absolute poverty threshold. Luxembourg uses the *reference budget* approach in addition to the Eurostat indicators. The reference budget is a monthly amount that represents the value of goods and services that a certain type of household needs to live a decent life and to participate actively in society. In 2019, Luxembourg revised the reference baskets and added new baskets, including a basket dedicated to early childhood expenditures for the better targeting of policies for families with children. In Belgium, the Walloon Institute for Evaluation, Foresight and Statistics calculates a Social Situation Index (*indice de situation sociale*), which summarises a set of indicators on the living conditions and quality of life (including health, housing, education, culture, security, life satisfaction), and on socio-economic imbalances (including income and employment).

Finally, some countries do not appear to use the Eurostat indicators for domestic policy evaluations, but do not have national poverty definitions either. Denmark indicates that the government plans to introduce a national poverty threshold to help measure future developments. Turkey claims that “*the concept of child poverty is not accepted and is questionable because of how it is measured*”, while the scope of the relevant ministry’s policies and programmes is “*fighting poverty within the family, since well-being is a shared phenomenon in the household as a whole.*”

## **2.2. Measures taken to reduce child poverty**

As regards the policy measures deployed to reduce child poverty, most of the countries refer to their child and family benefits systems. These benefit systems have multiple layers and comprise of different cash benefit schemes for different target groups. Since a comprehensive analysis of the child and family benefit systems in the member states would go beyond the purposes of this study, the overview that follows will focus on a selection of poverty reduction policy ideas, as well as developments in these policies over the last 5 years.

In addition to benefit schemes, several countries, including Denmark, Germany and Norway, emphasise the importance of parental employment in reducing the poverty of families with children. In this regard, the countries are striving to actively help unemployed parents into work, as well as to help parents to reconcile family responsibilities with paid work.

### *Child benefits*

Several countries – Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania – apply higher rates of benefits for families with many children, taking into account the higher poverty risk of large families.

The Czech Republic modified the child allowance scheme in July 2021, considerably extending the number of children benefiting (from 240,000 to 600,000), while at the same time increasing the levels of benefits by 26–38%.

Beyond the regular child benefit schemes, Denmark introduced in 2019 a targeted ‘temporary child benefit’ to help reduce poverty among children.

### *Parental benefits*

As regards parental benefits, there is a notable trend towards greater flexibility, allowing parents more room for manoeuvre in adjusting their work-family life balance.

In Austria, for births from 1 March 2017, the childcare allowance can be taken flexibly with the duration of 365 to 851 days (about 12 to 28 months) from the birth of the child by one parent, or 456 to 1,063 days (about 15 to 35 months) for both parents. The rate of the childcare allowance varies depending on the duration of payment, from €33.88 per day (in the case of the shortest period) to €14.53 per day (in the case of the longest period).

In the Czech Republic, the total maximum sum of the parental allowance is fixed at 300,000 Czech Koruna (CZK) (or €11,775), although a parent has some flexibility to choose the period they draw down the allowance, which may not be less than 7 months and cannot go beyond the child’s fourth birthday. Accordingly, the total amount of parental allowance is spread over the chosen period of parental leave.

In Estonia, as of 1 July 2020, the right to claim parental benefit was extended until the child reaches three years of age (previously, the first 1.5 years were covered with a parental benefit), and the benefits may be claimed in instalments over the three-year period so that payments can be suspended and resumed by calendar months to allow parents to adjust their benefits to the family’s needs.

### *Assistance for low-income families in need*

From 2019, Luxembourg introduced a social inclusion income scheme, replacing the former guaranteed minimum income system. Among other things, the new scheme aims to reduce the poverty of children and single-parent families by upgrading the share allocated to them.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Austria created a family crisis fund to help parents who received unemployment benefits, emergency benefits, social assistance or minimum income, with an additional allowance of €100 per child in 2020. The programme continued in 2021 and an additional amount of up to €300 per child could be granted.

### *Benefits for children with disabilities*

Child disability is a risk factor for family poverty since caring for a disabled child entails additional costs and parents are frequently unable to work due to care responsibilities. As a rule, countries pay higher rates of family benefits or additional benefits for disabled children – this applies to Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Romania.

### *Support for single parents*

As single-parent families have a higher risk of poverty, several countries, including Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal and Romania, have additional benefits or higher benefit rates either for the single parent or for children living in single-parent families (depending on whether the beneficiary is the parent or the child). In 2021, Ireland abolished the former earnings limit on single-parent family payment.

In addition, a number of countries have introduced a system of advances for maintenance payments in the cases where the other parent does not fulfil the maintenance obligation. Such a scheme is in place in Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary and Luxembourg. The Czech Republic introduced a substitute maintenance scheme in 2021 to help single parents when the other parent fails to pay child maintenance. In 2019, Ireland introduced an allowance of €95.23 supplementing the amount of maintenance received by single parents who were receiving the working family payment, thus increasing the income of single parents.

### *Tax concessions*

Austria has a child tax credit scheme, which pays €700.80 per child per year (or €58.40 per month). The child tax credit is paid together with family benefits, and families who pay no taxes receive it in the form of a negative tax. Germany has raised the tax relief for single parents which is progressive depending on the number of children. There are also tax concessions (rebates, deductions or relief) for families with children in Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania and Switzerland.

### *Social services*

Besides the cash benefits and tax concessions schemes, several countries make reference to the role of social services, including counselling and childcare, in helping to fight child poverty. Childcare services cover certain costs of families with children and enable parents to reconcile income-earning work and family obligations.

To combat social exclusion, Austria implements an early childhood intervention programme, providing counselling services for pregnant women and families with children up to three years of age in difficult living circumstances, as well as a supervised visits programme, enabling regular contact between vulnerable, low-income parents and their children not living in the same household. Austria also offers support services for children living in households receiving social assistance.

The Czech Republic has extended early childcare services to children under 3 years with the purpose of enabling the employment of parents with young children. In France, creating additional places in crèches and facilitating their access by the poorest families is considered to be a flagship measure.

Germany posits that the opportunity to earn income from employment by parents continues to be the key to combating poverty. For this purpose, Germany aims to improve work-life balance by, among other things, expanding child day care services, and has exempted families that receive certain social benefits from paying child day care fees. In 2021, the Act on Providing All-Day Care and Education for Primary School Children was adopted, introducing a legal entitlement to all-day care for primary school children. From August 2026, this entitlement will initially apply to primary school children in the first grade and thereafter will be gradually extended to the other grade levels so that, from August 2029, every primary school child in grades one to four will be legally entitled to all-day care. This measure is seen as an important element of the social infrastructure that is required for reconciling work and family life.

Romania is implementing a project in 139 rural communities with a medium to severe risk of marginalisation which involves introducing a system of integrated social services for families in vulnerable situations.

Norway has adopted a national strategy (2020–2023) to improve living conditions of children growing up in low-income households and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The strategy includes a set of measures in areas such as family, housing, health, education, leisure activities and employment.

### *European Child Guarantee*

Several EU Member States – in particular Austria, Croatia, Lithuania and Portugal – emphasise the importance of the European Child Guarantee, welcoming the recommendation adopted by the Council of the European Union in June 2021, which aims to combat poverty and social exclusion among children and young people between now and 2030 by offering access to six essential services including education, health, nutrition and housing services.

Croatia considers it important to reach out and ensure the access to services for the most disadvantaged and excluded children, such as children with disabilities, children in precarious family situations and Roma children, who are the focus of the country's Child Guarantee Programme.

Lithuania has participated in the EU Preparatory Action to prepare for the implementation of Child Guarantees. In cooperation with UNICEF, it has conducted an in-depth analysis of the provision of child guarantees in Lithuania. This analysis serves as a basis for developing recommendations for measures to reduce child poverty and social exclusion, in particular for the most vulnerable groups of children.

Portugal is developing the Child Guarantee measures, focusing on the specific needs of children.

Spain has also adopted an Action Plan to implement the European Child Guarantee in Spain.

### **2.3. Measures taken to reduce material deprivation of children**

The focus of measures to reduce material deprivation of children is on the coverage of costs related to attaining education both in the form of cash benefits and various benefits in kind.

In Germany, since August 2019, low-income families have been exempted from child day care fees if they receive child supplement, housing allowance, unemployment benefit or other benefits under the Social Code or the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act. From 2021, Germany significantly increased the funds to provide public children's and youth services, in particular offering opportunities for children and young people from socially disadvantaged families to engage in regular leisure activities.

In France, social centres and social living spaces have been created to address the needs of families and children in terms of social ties and to provide access to extracurricular activities.

Several countries, e.g. Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Poland, allocate school grants at the start of the school year topping up the regular child benefits to compensate for the additional costs for purchase of school supplies. In Austria, a School Start Allowance (*schulstartgeld*) of €100 is paid in September for each child aged 6 to 15. In Belgium, the amounts of the child benefits granted in July are increased by an annual back-to-school grant, the rate varying with the age of the child. In France, a School Year Allowance (*allocation de rentrée scolaire*) is a means-tested payment for children aged 6 to 18 years, the amount of which depends on the age of the child. In Ireland, there is a means-tested Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, which is paid annually to help low-income families meet the cost of clothing



and footwear for children (aged 4 to 22) going to school. In Lithuania, financial assistance is granted to low-income families to purchase school supplies at the beginning of the school year. In Luxembourg, a lump-sum annual New School Year Allowance is paid for children over 6 years, with different rates for children aged 6–11 years and 12+ years.

Besides these dedicated cash allowances, benefits in-kind, such as free or subsidised school meals, textbooks and public transport for pupils, are widely used.

In Austria, there is a school starter programme to relieve the financial burden of starting school for low-income families. This provides pupils living in households receiving social assistance with high-quality school teaching materials. Vulnerable students are also provided with IT equipment.

In Belgium, the Walloon poverty eradication plan 2020–2024 has envisaged the provision of free healthy snacks, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, soup and smoothies in kindergartens and primary schools in economically disadvantaged areas as a new measure to address childhood poverty and the associated nutritional problems.

In the Czech Republic, EU-financed programmes are used to pay for school children's lunches and snacks for families that fall under the material need threshold. Within the Assistance in Material Need Scheme, Extraordinary Immediate Assistance is a flexible benefit which is designed to cover unexpected, sudden one-off expenses. It may be provided in various situations such as covering the costs related to education or leisure-time activities of a dependent child, securing essential activities related to social and legal protection of a child, or covering the purchase or repair of an essential item of long-term consumption.

In Estonia, a hot school meal is provided free of charge to all students in all grades in general education schools, including upper secondary schools. In addition, there are free school milk and fruit and vegetables programmes in pre-school childcare institutions and general education schools financed from the EU structural funds.

In France, measures have been adopted to reduce the burden of food expenditures for disadvantaged families. From 2019, there have been so-called '€1 canteens', targeted at disadvantaged families in rural areas. Moreover, in 2021, nearly 3,000 schools offered free breakfasts.

In Ireland, there is a School Meals Programme providing state funding towards food for some 1,500 schools benefitting around 230,000 children. Since 2019, a scheme providing hot school meals in primary schools has been considerably extended, focused primarily at schools with no onsite cooking facilities where children had earlier received the cold lunch option.

Lithuania provides free school lunch to pupils from low-income families. In Luxembourg, the price to be paid for a lunch at school is adjusted according to the income of the household from which the child comes. In Luxembourg, the government has also adopted a new measure to provide children from low- and moderate-income families with free meals in primary and high schools.

Portugal runs a School Social Action programme, which includes food aid, school cafeterias, school buffets and the School Milk Programme, as well as school insurance, accommodation, economic aid and school transport.

Several countries provide free school textbooks – Austria, Hungary, Luxembourg, Portugal and Turkey.

In Switzerland, the Federal Supreme Court, in its ruling from 7 December 2017, held that the principle of free compulsory schooling implies the provision of school supplies, equipment and cultural and sporting activities, organised within the school framework by the public authorities (cantons/communes). Since then, school supplies and activities are no longer at parents' expense.

In Cyprus, a Babies' endowment programme provides basic material assistance (stroller, bed and mattress, baby bath, baby changer and rocking chair, linen, baby diapers and baby care items) to newborn babies of deprived families. Those eligible to receive the endowment include guaranteed minimum income recipients, public assistance recipients and people who face multiple social and financial difficulties. As a prerequisite to receiving such assistance, beneficiaries attend training to enhance their parental skills. Support and information about programmes that enhance their employability is also provided.

Denmark cites a leisure passes programme for socially disadvantaged children and young people, which has been introduced for the 2021–2023 period. Under this programme, subsidies are given to the municipalities to introduce leisure pass schemes, including financial support for vulnerable children and young people to participate in leisure activities, for example to cover expenses of membership fees and equipment, salary expenses for the remuneration of professional staff, courses for leisure advisors and association volunteers, and the distribution of the leisure passes.

Luxembourg has made a large part of music education classes (at least the first four years of music lessons) free for all children from the 2022/2023 school year. This measure has been taken to contribute to equal opportunities among children and adolescents, to foster their artistic creativity and to promote their access to culture.

In Switzerland, since 2021, the cantons have to reduce the compulsory health insurance premiums for children from low and middle income families by at least 80%.

## **2.4. Challenges with regard to reducing child poverty**

The main challenges outlined by countries with regard to reducing child poverty may be grouped under several headings: how to address specific groups with particularly high poverty risk; how to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty; how to simplify the complex benefit systems; how to cover some of the high costs of services for vulnerable families; how to ensure co-operation between relevant actors and the coordination of different policy measures.

### *Target groups with higher risks of child poverty*

As regards specific target groups for social cohesion policies, children living in single-parent households, children of parents with low educational attainment, children of unemployed parents, children with disabilities and children of migrants or with an ethnic minority background are most frequently identified as facing higher risks of poverty and social exclusion.

Austria classes children of parents with low educational background, children in single-parent or multiple child households and children in households of third country nationals as groups facing a particularly high risk of poverty. In Wallonia, in Belgium, children living in households with unemployed parents are pinpointed as a group at an increasing risk of poverty. The Czech Republic identifies single-parent families and single mothers with children as having a significantly higher risk of poverty. Croatia targets children from families in which no one is employed, children from families receiving social assistance benefit, children from low-income single-parent families, children with developmental difficulties, children placed in social care institutions, Roma children and children living in large families as the groups of children who are at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Cyprus considers that the risk of poverty or social exclusion of children is strongly linked to the level of education of their parents, and the risk is much higher for children of parents with low levels of education. In Estonia, children living in a single-parent household and children with disabilities remain a challenge for poverty reduction policies, although the country has been successful in recent years in reducing the earlier high poverty rate of children living in large families (with 3+ children) to below the average. France pinpoints disadvantaged families in rural areas and children living in single-parent families as the target groups for social cohesion policies aimed at reducing child poverty. The Lithuanian report also points to the particularly high risk of poverty for single-parent households with children. In Norway, children of immigrant parents and single-parent families face a higher risk of poverty compared with other children. In expanding its system of family allowances and social benefits, Portugal is placing a special focus on single-parent families with a view to protecting these children from poverty. Switzerland has envisaged specific integration measures for children with a migrant background.

These categories of children should be given special attention when designing measures and activities aimed at combating child poverty.

### *Challenges related to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty*

Among the other core challenges that the countries face with regard to reducing child poverty, a recurring theme expressed in several country reports is the intergenerational transmission of poverty from parents to children.

Austria is concerned by the low levels of social mobility and by the fact that inequality of opportunity in terms of income, education and socio-economic status is inherited by children from their parents. Croatia stresses that public policy measures should focus on the early stage of child development since experiencing poverty at an early stage of life may have significant negative consequences for the achievements of children in later years of life: children growing up in poverty are more likely to be in poorer health, perform worse in school, and experience a higher risk of unemployment and long-term poverty as adults. The Czech Republic is also concerned about breaking the vicious circle of poverty, pointing out that children who grow up in poverty face a higher risk of unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty in their adulthood. Cyprus considers that the risk of poverty or social exclusion of children is closely linked to their parents' level of education, the risks being considerably higher for children of parents with low educational attainment. In a similar vein, Denmark finds that the fundamental challenge in reducing child poverty is that it is linked to parental resources and that even targeted policy initiatives depend to some degree on the parents' commitment. The report notes that economic poverty is often accompanied by other social problems such as parental substance abuse, which may result in a lower priority being given to children's needs, or a very high level of debt, which eat into social benefits. Along the same lines, Norway finds it difficult to identify which measures are the most effective in preventing the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next, and to study the long-term effects of different preventive measures on children's chances of escaping poverty in the future. Portugal considers that one of the structural challenges to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty is the development of a more comprehensive education system.

### *Complexity of benefit schemes and administrative systems*

Another set of challenges, pointed out by certain countries, relates to the sophistication of benefit schemes, as well as to the effective coordination by the authorities responsible for various measures and activities.

Germany notes that while various social and family benefit schemes ensure that children and families in Germany are comprehensively protected, the benefit system partly lacks transparency, is not fully utilised and is excessively bureaucratic. In this regard, the key challenges are to improve access to benefits, as well as to pool and to simplify them. Hungary notes that during the planning phase of services, precisely identifying the target group's needs and demands and defining the activities to address these remains a challenge, as does securing the continuity of funding. Ireland regards as the main challenges the need for continued engagement from all relevant government departments and agencies in fostering a cross-sectoral approach in alleviating child poverty and working collaboratively with NGOs and community organisations. Ireland also observes a need for a stronger focus on service provision and resourcing in the areas of education, housing, health, childcare and employment incentives. For Lithuania, the main challenge is how to ensure a multidimensional approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion. Since child poverty and social exclusion are widely perceived as exclusively social problems, it appears difficult to prove that health and education solutions also offer relevant contributions to

addressing these problems. Romania notes that to succeed in implementing measures focused on improving the situation of the most vulnerable children, the strong commitment and involvement of the authorities at community level is fundamental. Given that the powers given to the local authorities need to be accompanied by adequate funding, the central public authorities must provide them with the necessary financing and supports.

#### *Supporting the high costs of services*

Cyprus is concerned with the high costs of private kindergartens and nurseries, which present a considerable burden for families. Cyprus relies heavily on informal structures and private institutions for the provision of childcare, with monthly fees ranging from €100 to €400. To address the issue, free childcare in public kindergartens and in public day care for pre-school-aged children is provided to minimum income recipients, who may also receive price subsidies for private childcare.

Switzerland also notes that their childcare costs remain very high, and that health insurance premiums and health costs also remain a significant burden on households, despite the implemented reduction in premiums.

## **2.5. Summary analysis**

While the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate, measured on the basis of disposable income at household level, attempts to capture the risk of monetary poverty, the material deprivation rate is designed to determine the proportion of persons whose living conditions are severely restricted so that they cannot afford certain goods and services generally considered necessary to lead a satisfactory life. As several experts have pointed out, the interplay between income poverty and material deprivation is not straightforward. Current income relates to a person's financial resources, whereas the material deprivation rate corresponds to the person's actual achieved functioning (Notten and Guio 2020). Thus the respective indicators complement each other, addressing different dimensions of poverty.

Although the share of children living in households with incomes below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold or in severe material and social deprivation has decreased between 2015 and 2020 in most of the Council of Europe member states, the SDG target of reducing the ratio of children affected by poverty at least by half by 2030 still remains far from being reached.

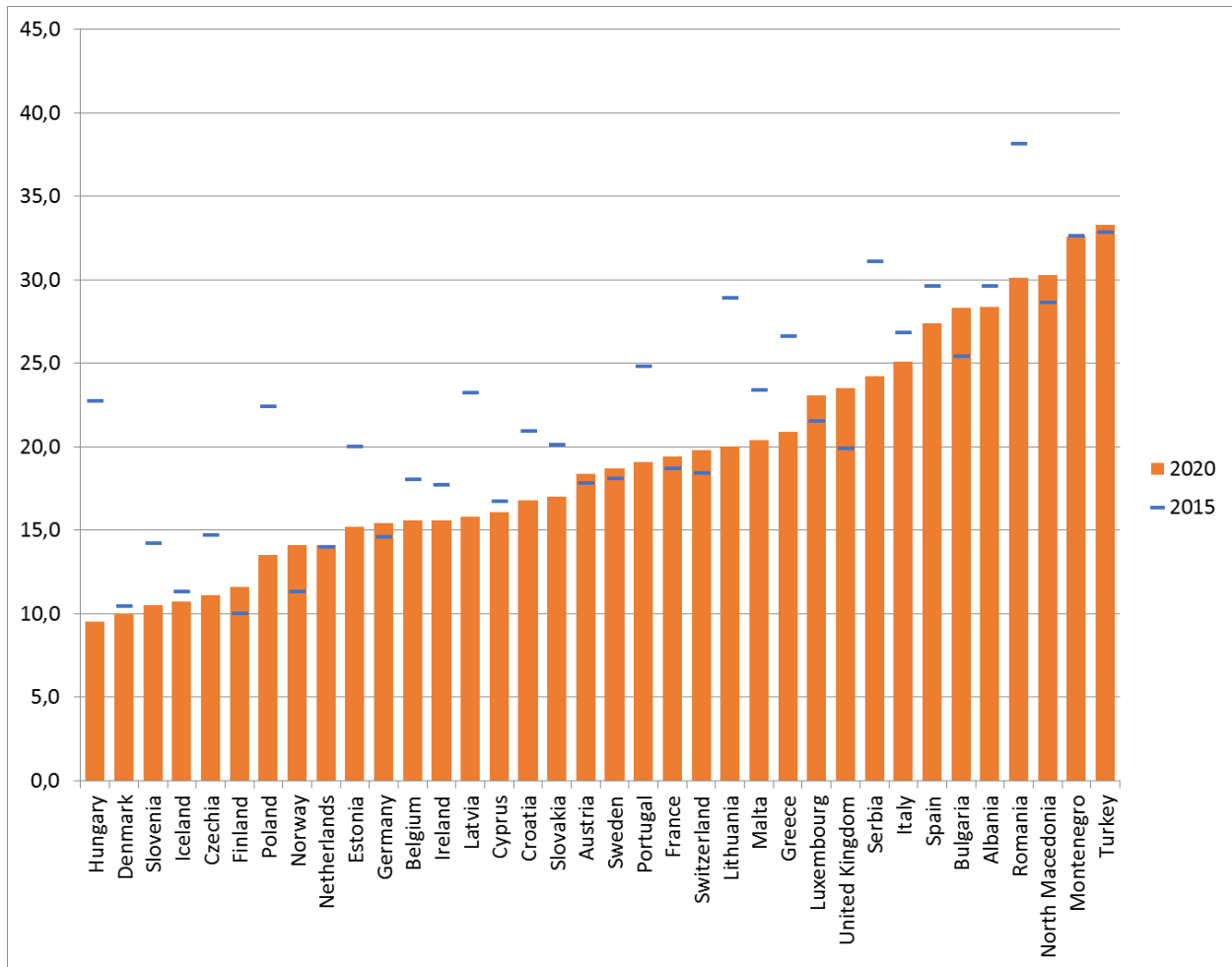
In nine countries – Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia – i.e. in a quarter of the 36 countries for which comparative data are available, the at-risk-of-poverty rate of children under the age of 18 is lower than the rate for the total population. In Latvia and Estonia, the at-risk-of-poverty-rate of children is more than 5 percentage points lower than for the population as a whole. At the same time, in the remaining three quarters of European countries the at-risk-of-poverty rate of children is higher than that of the general population, indicating that this age-group is disproportionately affected by the risk of poverty.

Nonetheless, in most of the countries, the at-risk-of-poverty rate of children has decreased over the period from 2015 to 2020 (Figure 1). In nominal terms, the highest decline in the AROP rate of children is observed in Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Latvia, Serbia, Portugal and Greece, where the AROP rate has decreased by more than 5 percentage points. In relative terms (the decline of the AROP rate as a ratio of the 2015 value), the AROP rate of children has been reduced by more than one-fifth in Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Portugal, Greece and Serbia.

On the other hand, there are a dozen countries where the AROP rate has increased over the observed time period. However, some caution is needed when interpreting such results. The AROP rate, as a relative poverty indicator, is affected, among other things, by the complex interplay between economic growth and income distribution. In this regard, Eurostat has noted: *“The relativity of monetary poverty means the at-risk rate may remain stable or even increase even if a country’s average or median disposable income increases. Absolute poverty measures, however, are likely to decrease during economic revivals.”*<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, only a few countries in Europe report using absolute measures of income poverty to evaluate the effect of poverty reduction policies at the national level.

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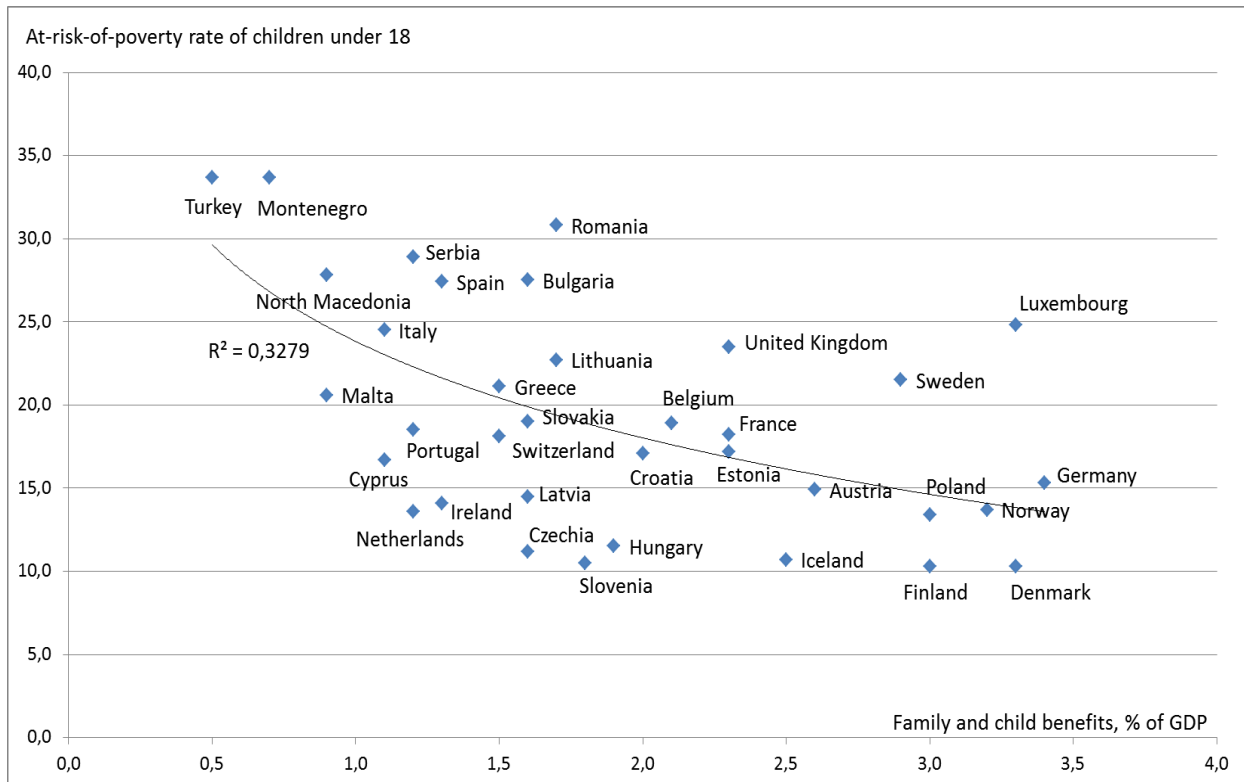
<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Europe\\_2020\\_indicators\\_-\\_poverty\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion&oldid=211016](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Europe_2020_indicators_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion&oldid=211016)



Source: Eurostat database. Note: the 2020 data for some countries are provisional; Iceland, UK – 2018 data.

Figure 1. At-risk-of-poverty rate of children under the age of 18, in 2015 and 2020

There is an association between the at-risk-of-poverty rate of children under the age of 18 and the expenditures on family and child benefits as a percentage of GDP (Figure 2). In general, countries with higher expenditures on family and child benefits tend to have lower at-risk-of-poverty rates of children. However, this association is relatively weak ( $R^2=0.3279$ ), implying that differences in expenditure levels of family and child benefits only partly explain the differences in the children’s AROP rates. There are clearly other factors at play beyond the generosity of cash benefits, which influence the poverty rate of children. Firstly, the market-based income inequalities between families with and without children play a role. Secondly, other public expenditures beyond the direct function of family and child benefits also mitigate the poverty risk of children, such as expenditures on education, health, social assistance and housing.

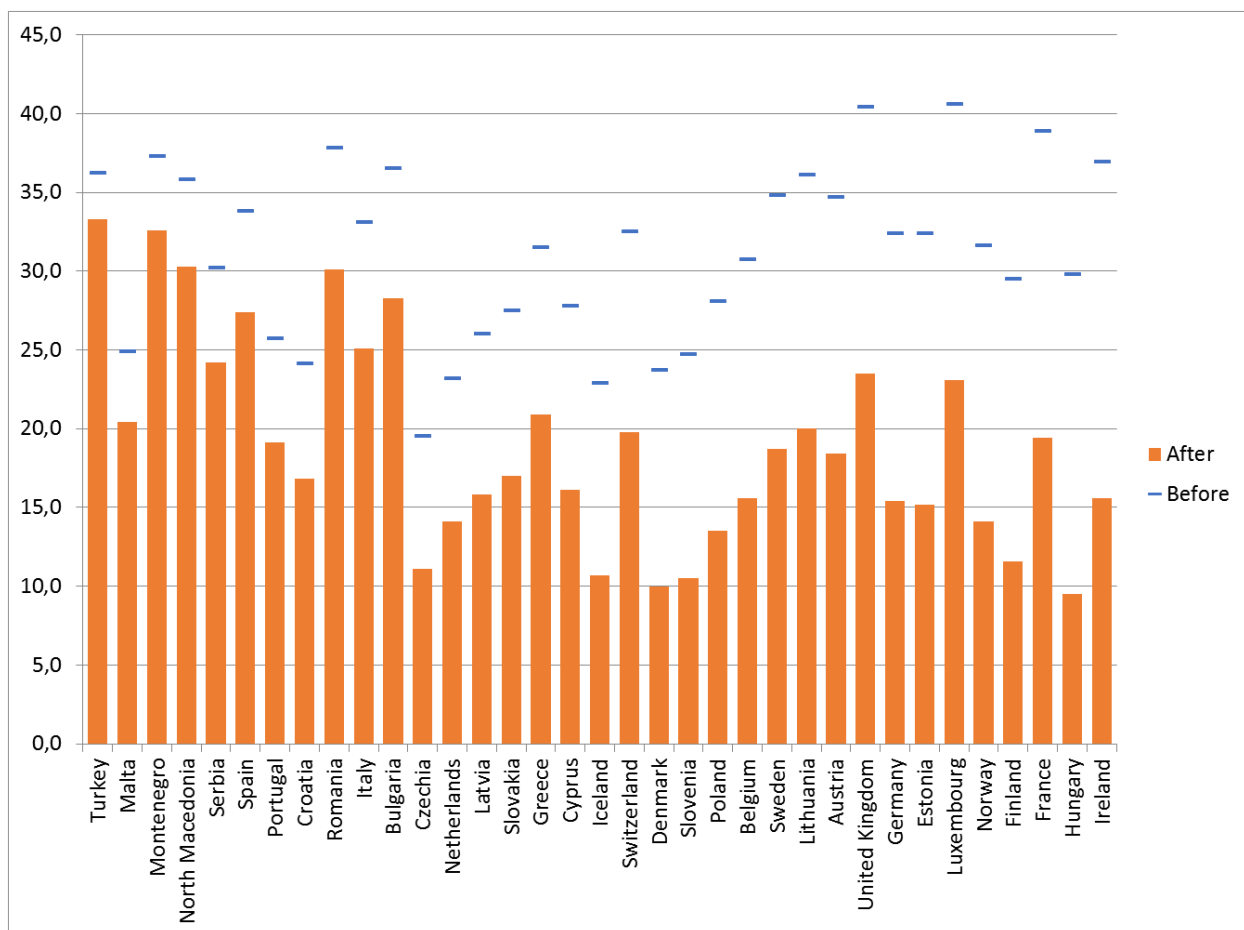


Source: Eurostat database. Note: expenditures on family and child benefits in the UK, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey reflect 2018 data, North Macedonia 2017 data; at-risk-of-poverty rate of children in Iceland and UK 2018 data.

*Figure 2.* At-risk-of-poverty rate (%) of children under the age of 18 and expenditures on family and child benefits as a percentage of GDP (%) in 2019

On the other hand, as family and child benefits may also serve other policy aims beyond poverty reduction, higher expenditures do not always translate into lower levels of poverty risk for children, while in some countries where expenditures levels are lower, the benefits systems include more redistributive features. This is illustrated by the comparison of AROP rates of children before and after all social transfers.





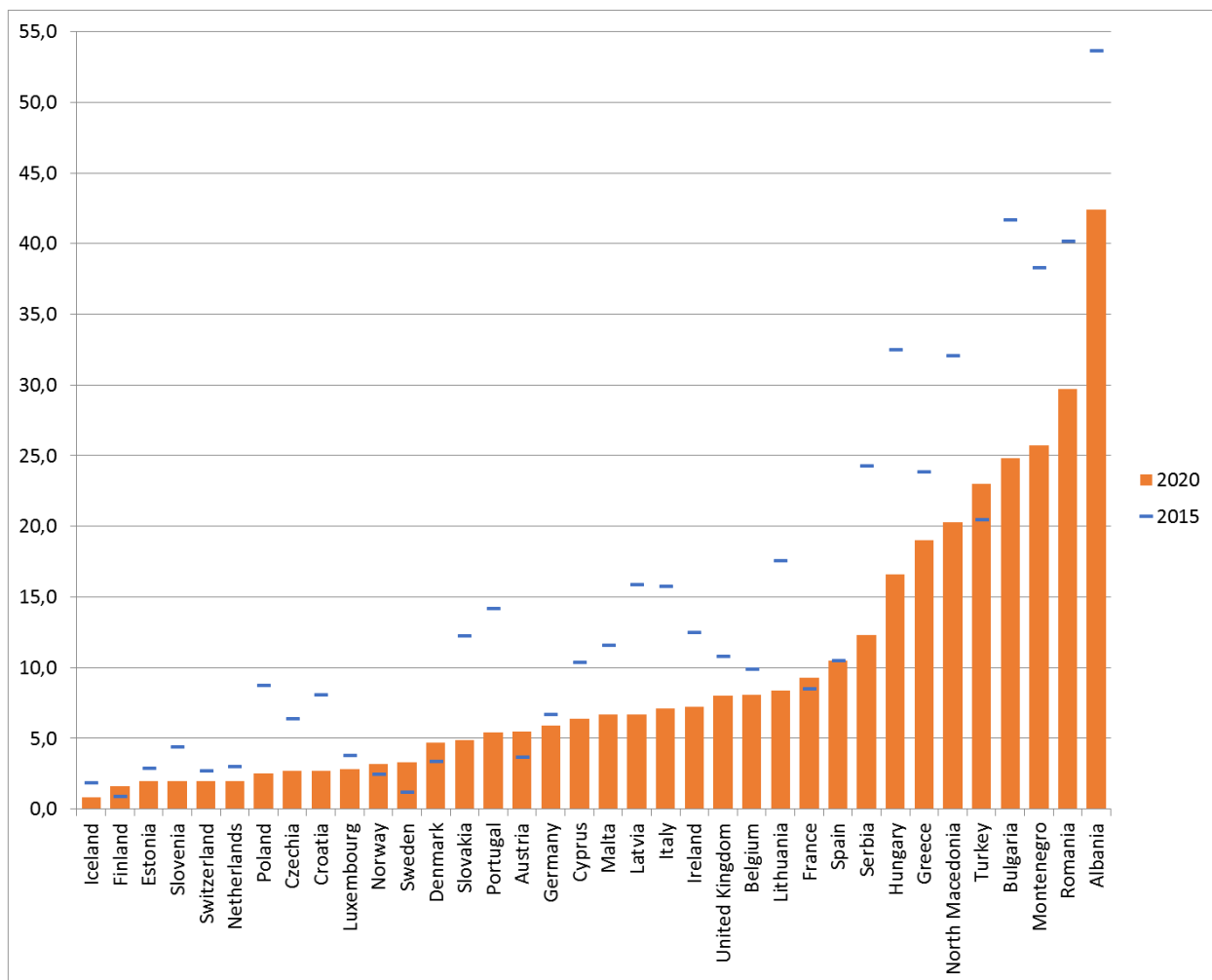
Source: Eurostat database. Note: the 2020 data on some countries are provisional; Iceland, UK – 2018 data.

Figure 3. At-risk-of-poverty rate of children under the age of 18 before and after social transfers, in 2020

In Figure 3, countries are ranked according to the reduction in the AROP rate of children after social transfers. Ireland, Hungary and France stand out as countries where social transfers appear to be the most effective in reducing the AROP rate of children. In these countries, the AROP rate of children after social transfers is about 20 percentage points lower than before social transfers. Nevertheless, it is still important to note that in practical terms the eventual AROP rate after social transfers is the most relevant. In countries, such as Denmark, Iceland, Czechia and Slovenia, where the difference between the AROP rate before and after transfers is smaller, the higher level and/or the more equal distribution of income of families with children counteracts the somewhat less redistributive features of the social transfer schemes.

In most of the European countries, the severe material and social deprivation rate of children is considerably below the at-risk-of-poverty rate (Figure 4), indicating that in general a smaller share of children living in low-income households witness effective deprivation in living standards. While, in 2020, the AROP rate was below 10% in only two countries (Hungary and Denmark), the number of countries with an SMSD rate below 10% was 26. Over the five year period from 2015 to 2020, the severe material and social deprivation rate has decreased by at least 50% in ten countries

(Iceland, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Czechia, Slovakia, Croatia, Portugal, Latvia, Lithuania), while a further 16 countries have achieved a decline of SMSD rate in the range of 20–50%.



Source: Eurostat database. Note: Iceland and UK – 2018 data.

Figure 4. Severe material and social deprivation rate of children under the age of 18, in 2015 and 2020

To sum up, poverty is a multidimensional and multifaceted social problem. Income poverty of children is associated with a number of factors including the household structure (household size and the number of dependent family members), the socio-economic status of parents (including income and level of education) as well as any special needs of the child.

Poverty is also a dynamic problem, which may be short-term or long-term. Given the particularly negative effects of persistent poverty on children, a special focus should be on alleviating the long-term poverty of families with children as this bears the high risk of the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Given the multidimensional nature of the problem, the policy response to mitigate the risks of poverty and material deprivation of families with children should include all relevant dimensions and different policy fields, such as social protection, health, education, culture, housing etc. While

family benefit schemes do play an important role in reducing child poverty (ODI/UNICEF 2020), the cash benefit schemes are not capable of addressing the non-monetary aspects of poverty, e.g. those related to parental capabilities. It is therefore clear that a policy package to address child poverty needs to be tailored to the specific circumstances in a given country, with reference to the needs of groups particularly affected and to any shortcomings of the existing institutional framework. Finally, it is important to coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders, including state agencies, local municipalities and non-governmental organisations.

### **3. ACCESS TO SAFE AND INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES FOR PERSONS IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS**

Target 11.7 of SDGs sets the goal of providing — by 2030 — universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities. According to the agreed SDG indicators, progress towards attaining this target is to be assessed by two measures:

- the average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities, and
- the proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months.

The former indicator is to evaluate the accessibility of public urban environment, while the latter indicator is to assess the safety of the public spaces.

#### **3.1. Legal and practical measures to secure access to safe and inclusive public spaces**

Most of the countries have adopted legislation (laws and implementing regulations) setting norms on accessibility of public space and buildings. There is, however, some variation in terms of the scope of such legislation. Some countries have taken steps to broaden the scope of accessibility legislation or stipulate the respective norms in a more specific and detailed manner.

In Flanders, in Belgium, new legislation on the accessibility of public buildings was introduced in 2010 imposing standards to ensure minimum accessibility of public buildings in construction and renovation. The implementation of this legislation was evaluated in 2019 and, based on this evaluation, the legislation is being revised towards adopting a stronger and clearer regulatory framework.

In Croatia, the accessibility of buildings is regulated by the Construction Act and the Ordinance on ensuring the accessibility of buildings to persons with disabilities and with reduced mobility. To simplify the procedures related to the reconstruction of existing buildings with the purpose of enabling safe access and movement of persons with disabilities, such as adaptations to staircases, hallways and access areas of buildings, it is not necessary to obtain a building permit or submit a project declaration, provided that the adaptations do not impair the function and purpose of the building, or affect the mechanical strength, stability or safety of the construction.

In Estonia, a new version of the regulation on the accessibility requirements for public buildings and outdoor areas to meet the special needs of people with disabilities was adopted in 2018, setting out the accessibility solutions in a more detailed manner compared with the earlier regulation.

In Luxembourg, the scope of the legislation currently in force is limited to new construction and major renovation projects of places open to the public which are the responsibility of the state, municipalities or public establishments. A draft law, which is currently under discussion, envisages extending the scope of the accessibility legislation to all spaces for collective, public and private use and introducing time-limited state subsidies to speed up the process of making existing public spaces accessible.

In Switzerland, the Federal Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against People with Disabilities, which came into force in 2004, requires that publicly accessible buildings and structures, whether public or private, be adapted to the needs of people with disabilities when undergoing new construction or renovation requiring a building authorisation.

Germany points to the New Leipzig Charter for a future-oriented and sustainable transformation of European cities, adopted in 2020 under the German presidency of the EU.<sup>7</sup> Among other things, the Charter calls for the design and management of safe and accessible public spaces providing a healthy living environment for all citizens.

In addition to legislation, the implementation of programmes and providing public financing for urban development projects to reconstruct public space in accordance with accessibility requirements are an essential element in securing accessibility to public spaces.

In Belgium, the Flemish Agency for Roads and Traffic has launched the Accessibility Master Plan, aiming to make the infrastructure of bus and tram-stops more accessible by 2030.

In Germany, the federal government is pursuing a national urban development policy by funding urban renewal. The urban support programme includes measures to increase the accessibility of public places. The social cohesion programme also has federal funding for the inclusion of disadvantaged population groups, including structural improvements and adjustments of public places. In addition, the KfW, the German state-owned investment and development bank, provides low-interest loans to municipalities and municipal companies to invest in the accessibility of public buildings, infrastructure and public spaces under the Accessible City programme.

Another key aspect in securing effective access to public spaces relates to supervision.

In the Czech Republic, it is the responsibility of municipal authorities to supervise the construction process both during the planning phase when approving construction projects and upon the completion of construction works when new buildings are to be opened.

Besides supervision, it is also relevant that technical advice and counselling is available.

In Ireland, there is a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority.<sup>8</sup> The Centre's work on universal design for the built environment involves conducting research and developing design recommendations for use by professionals on a range of building types and spaces, including homes, shared spaces, and educational facilities. The Centre provides guidance on how to design, build and manage buildings and spaces so that they can be accessed and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/brochure/new\\_leipzig\\_charter/new\\_leipzig\\_charter\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/brochure/new_leipzig_charter/new_leipzig_charter_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://universaldesign.ie/Built-Environment/Building-for-Everyone/>

## 3.2. Monitoring progress towards universal access to public spaces

### *Availability of data on the share of open and safe public space*

Most of the countries find it difficult to provide comprehensive data on the SDG indicator about the proportion of public space that is open, accessible and safe for all. Some countries – the Czech Republic, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland – explicitly acknowledge that they do not have such quantifiable data, while in other cases the missing data on this matter appear to suggest that this information is not available.

Norway, while noting that an unambiguous percentage for the whole country is difficult to calculate, indicatively estimates, on the basis of data available, that this share exceeds 60%.

In some cases, information on accessibility is only available for certain types of public services or some means of transport. For example, Croatia reports data on accessibility of social welfare centres, trains and coastal ferries. The Czech Republic provides information on accessibility of trains and railway stations.

Denmark offers data on the proportion of the public outdoor space in relation to the total urban area of the country, indicating that this amounted to 26.1% in 2020. Public open air spaces include paths, roads and streets (14.5%), green spaces, e.g. parks, forests, natural reserves (5.5%) and other open spaces, e.g. playing fields and areas around public institutions such as sports centres, schools etc (6.1%). The data do not include covered public spaces, such as shopping centres or railway stations. Moreover, as these data only relate to the share of open air public spaces (as opposed to private closed areas) in the total urban areas, they do not directly indicate whether these spaces are universally accessible for all.

### *Practical information on the accessibility of public spaces*

Belgium, Estonia and Norway have developed web-based map applications with practical information on the accessibility of specific public places.

In Flanders, in Belgium, the *Toevla* database<sup>9</sup> has been developed with information on accessible public buildings and sites. However, as the database does not contain enough information to monitor progress, the Flemish government is working on a new application, *Toegankelijkheidswijzer* (Accessibility Pointer)<sup>10</sup> to inform persons with disabilities, but also to promote awareness and encourage local governments and property owners to work towards better accessibility. In the context of the Accessibility Master Plan, the accessibility of the bus and tram-stop infrastructure is currently being mapped out.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://toevla.vlaanderen.be/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://toegankelijk.vlaanderen.be/>

In Estonia, the capital city of Tallinn has an accessibility information system with a web-based map application<sup>11</sup> on the accessibility status of various public and private services, transport and certain public areas (e.g. ports, train stations and stops, car parks). Accessibility information for the mapped sites is presented in the form of pictograms, distinguishing between the groups of reduced mobility (including users of manual or electric wheelchairs), persons with visual impairments, hearing impaired or deaf, elderly persons and parents with baby strollers.

In Norway, the Norwegian Mapping Authority maps and monitors places for accessibility and universal design. It has developed a dedicated website<sup>12</sup> with detailed information on accessibility (or non-accessibility) of public sites all over the country for persons with disabilities, specifying, among other things, the accessibility of sites for persons using manual and electric wheelchairs and for persons with visual impairments.

Croatia refers to the plan to register the accessibility of buildings through the system of e-Permits (*e-Dozvola*) for physical planning and construction, which will include a database on the accessibility of new constructions and the reconstruction of existing buildings. This plan is one of the measures envisaged in the National Plan for Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2027. The Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and State Assets is responsible for monitoring and will develop a methodology for assessing the accessibility of buildings.

#### *Monitoring through inspection and sanctions*

In Portugal, the legislation confers the National Institute for Rehabilitation (INR) and the General Inspectorate of Finances with the tasks of monitoring and inspecting accessibility conditions, as well as of imposing sanctions. In the context of the 2021 state budget, the Mission Structure for the Promotion of Accessibilities questions the different areas of government and the municipal councils about the amount of money included in the budget, as well as the actions taken to eliminate architectural obstacles. In addition, the National Strategy for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities 2021–2025 envisages the preparation of multi-annual plans to promote the accessibility of public buildings and surrounding areas.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://lips.tallinn.ee/eng>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.kartverket.no/geodataarbeid/tilgjengeligheit-og-universell-utforming/data-om-tilgjengeligheit-i-tettstader-og-friomrade>

### **3.3. Challenges for securing universal access to public spaces**

Belgium highlights the relevance of the accessibility chain – to achieve a fully accessible society, it is important that the entire route that a user can take to and within a building, and the activities that he or she wishes to carry out in and around the building are accessible, walkable, usable and understandable by all. To achieve this, the various authorities and policy areas must each play their part in the accessibility chain.

France recognises that its current urban planning policies sometimes only offer partial inclusion of certain groups of vulnerable people by means of access ramps or route markings, whereas it is important to also take into account persons with cognitive impairments (e.g. neurodegenerative diseases) to avoid the risk of exclusion of these persons from public spaces. The ageing of the population will present major challenges for universal access to public spaces in the decades to come.

Norway indicates that its generally steep and hilly landscapes present a challenge to achieving universal design, along with the issue of upgrading existing public spaces to high-quality universal design.

Croatia notes the need to prepare an inventory of the existing public and business buildings which still need to be made accessible and to create a database to record the relevant data.

Czechia is concerned about the authorities' slow procedures for the approval of construction work (including renovation and reconstruction).

Croatia and Portugal indicate as one of the main challenges the need to raise the awareness of all relevant stakeholders (including property owners, managers, designers, contractors, local governments and the general public) about the importance of the safety and accessibility of public spaces, which should not be limited to the needs of persons with disabilities and must not be regarded as an additional cost in construction projects.

Czechia and Cyprus point to the trade-offs involved in adapting historical buildings, archaeological monuments and churches whose historical values should be preserved in accessibility projects. A recurring theme noted in several national reports (Czechia, Cyprus, Portugal) is the need for financial resources to implement projects to remove existing barriers. Portugal also stresses the role of human resources in this respect.

### **3.4. Summary analysis**

As regards making the physical environment, including public spaces, accessible for persons with disabilities, reference can be made to several international policy documents outlining the general principles of an accessibility strategy, as well as to legal instruments setting out the relevant international standards.



Rule 5 of the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1994) emphasises the importance of accessibility of the physical environment in the context of the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities.<sup>13</sup> The measures and action programmes to make the physical environment accessible and to remove the obstacles to participation must address all categories of persons with disabilities, and must include the development of standards and guidelines, as well as the adoption of legislation on the accessibility of housing, buildings, public transport, streets and other outdoor spaces. States should also ensure that architects, construction engineers and other professionals involved in the design and construction of the physical environment have access to adequate information on disability policies and measures to ensure accessibility. Stressing the expert and advisory role of the organisations representing persons with disabilities, the Standard Rules also call on public authorities to always consult with such organisations when developing rules and standards, and to also involve them locally from the initial planning stage when public construction projects are being designed, to ensure maximum accessibility.

The Revised European Social Charter (1996)<sup>14</sup> was the first treaty at the European level to stipulate, in its Article 15, the right of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community. According to the interpretation of the European Committee of Social Rights<sup>15</sup>, Article 15§3 of the revised ESC requires the Contracting Parties to take measures to remove barriers to communication and mobility in order to enable people with disabilities to have access to transport (land, rail, sea and air), housing (public, social and private), cultural activities and leisure (social and sporting activities). This provision applies to all persons with disabilities regardless of the nature and origin of their disability and irrespective of their age. To give effect to the undertakings stipulated by Article 15§3, the States must set in place mechanisms to identify the barriers to mobility faced by persons with disabilities, define the support measures that are required to assist them in overcoming these barriers, and ensure that all newly constructed or renovated public buildings and facilities open to the public, as well as cultural and leisure activities, are physically accessible.

According to Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities — CRPD (2006) on accessibility, States Parties must take appropriate measures to ensure persons with disabilities have access to the physical environment on an equal basis with others.<sup>16</sup> This entails an obligation to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to the accessibility of buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities. States must also take measures “to develop, promulgate and monitor the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public; to provide training for stakeholders on accessibility issues facing persons with disabilities; and to provide forms of live

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/standard-rules-on-the-equalization-of-opportunities-for-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/168007cf93>

<sup>15</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/digest-2018-parts-i-ii-iii-iv-en/1680939f80>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public.”

In 2016, the Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs issued a guidebook with a compilation of case studies on good practices of accessible urban development, which includes case studies from Denmark, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.<sup>17</sup>

According to the 2019 UN report on Accessibility and the Status of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto<sup>18</sup>, almost all (95%) Contracting States of the CRPD in Europe have developed standards or guidelines on the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public. Furthermore, 77% of the States in Europe have national disability plans or strategies addressing accessibility and the needs of persons with disabilities. Whereas in several European countries the legislative framework on accessibility is supplemented with national action plans and strategies, the UN 2019 accessibility report and the 2019 Resolution of the UN General Assembly on “Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto: accessibility” note that reliable data on the actual accessibility situation are often lacking.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, the UN 2019 accessibility report calls upon States to step up the efforts to better monitor and evaluate accessibility by improving the relevant data collection and by developing accessibility indicators to monitor and assess progress achieved. As the report indicates, the official data sources, such as national assessments and surveys of accessibility can be complemented with alternative means of data collection, such as crowdsourcing applications to collect bottom-up reviews and assessments from users on the accessibility of facilities. In this respect, several free online and smartphone applications are available which allow users to publicly review the accessibility of public facilities. Such crowdsourced information reflects the direct experience of users, provides useful hints for other users, and the reviews can also be utilised as a data source to initiate the upgrading of the public spaces.

In the context of the European Union, ensuring accessibility of the built environment was a key feature of the commitments undertaken in the context of the European Disability Strategy (2010–2020).<sup>20</sup>

According to the 2012 study on accessibility by the Academic Network of European Disability experts (ANED), in nearly all EU Member States covered by the study (with the exception of Hungary), there were specific national requirements for the accessibility of government buildings, schools and other educational facilities, hospitals and medical facilities, as well as leisure and sporting facilities open to the public. In contrast, 80% of countries reported the existence of specific accessibility requirements for urban street facilities, such as traffic lights, road crossings and parking meters (Priestley, 2013).

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<sup>17</sup>[http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/desa/good\\_practices\\_in\\_accessible\\_urban\\_development\\_october2016.pdf](http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/desa/good_practices_in_accessible_urban_development_october2016.pdf)

<sup>18</sup><https://undocs.org/A/74/146>

<sup>19</sup><https://undocs.org/A/RES/74/144>

<sup>20</sup><http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM%3A2010%3A0636%3AFIN%3AEN%3APDF>

A 2014 study by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights analysed whether mandatory accessibility standards for the construction or significant alteration of public authority buildings are in place in the EU Member States. The analysis indicated that such mandatory accessibility standards for national and local authority buildings had been adopted in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. These accessibility requirements were mostly provided for in building regulations, meaning that to be granted a permit to build or to alter existing buildings, accessibility standards must be met. In Cyprus, Germany, Greece and Sweden, the legislation allowed for certain exceptions or only required the partial application of accessibility standards when altering existing buildings.<sup>21</sup>

The DOTCOM (The Disability Online Tool of the Commission) database provides information on the applicable legislation for accessibility of the built environment and public transport facilities in the EU Member States, as well as some EU candidate countries (Serbia) and EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein).<sup>22</sup>

In 2020, the European Standardization Organizations, CEN and CENELEC, approved the first European standard on the accessibility and usability of the built environment to help architects in particular to guarantee accessibility to the physical environment<sup>23</sup> for persons with disabilities and other people with functional limitations. The accessibility standard was drafted in response to a European Commission standardisation request (Mandate 420), with the participation of European organisations representing all the relevant stakeholders, including national standardisation bodies, organisations representing persons with disabilities, consumers and businesses. The new European standard is labelled as EN 17210: Accessibility and usability of the built environment – Functional requirements. It sets out the requirements for the built environment, including urban areas, to be considered accessible and usable.

Notably, the scope of Target 11.7 of the SDGs goes beyond ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities, aiming to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces. Women, children and older persons are the other specific target groups explicitly mentioned in Target 11.7.

In the UN context, the UN-Habitat leads urban development initiatives to build inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. Among other things, the UN-Habitat has developed guidelines of public space site-specific assessment, advocating a participatory process in the design of public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2020). The guide advises users at municipality level

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<sup>21</sup> <https://fra.europa.eu/en/content/are-there-mandatory-accessibility-standards-national-and-local-authority-buildings>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1542&langId=en>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.edf-feph.org/first-european-accessibility-standard-on-built-environment-approved/>

on the type of qualitative and quantitative information needed about particular spaces to develop adequate design and planning solutions. The UN-Habitat has also drafted a public space toolkit to provide local and central governments with a practical framework on how to translate the general principles for improving access to good public space into practical urban development initiatives (UN-Habitat, 2015). Within the context of its Public Space Programme, the UN-Habitat has also taken initiatives to promote child-friendly public spaces.<sup>24</sup>

In 2020, the World Urban Forum, UNICEF and UN-Habitat launched an initiative to develop Principles and Guidance for Public Spaces for Children.<sup>25</sup> The initiative is based on a participatory approach whereby the principles and guidance for children are developed with the involvement of children. The consultation process with children should capture children's perspectives and experiences in the public spaces in their communities, focusing on child-centred characteristics of that experience (Stephenson, 2020):

- Proximity and accessibility – children should be able to access public spaces independently within walking or biking distance.
- Safety – children should be able to access public spaces through a safe journey and without obstacles.
- Cleanliness – children are most vulnerable and potentially most exposed to air pollution, soil pollution and waste.
- Stability, usability and playfulness – children should be able to use the space for defined and undefined forms of play, physical activity and intergenerational interactions.

As regards women, the UN Women has led a global initiative on Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls, working with leading women's organisations, local and national governments and UN agencies to develop, implement, and evaluate approaches to prevent and respond to sexual harassment against women and girls in public spaces.<sup>26</sup> From Europe, Brussels (Belgium), Dublin (Ireland), Madrid (Spain) and London (UK) have participated in this global initiative.<sup>27</sup> In 2019, the UN Women published an international compendium of practices that have led to positive outcomes, involve collaborative partnerships and innovative action, and address women's safety in public spaces with an intersectional approach (UN Women 2019).

As regards access to safe and inclusive public spaces for older persons, in 2010, the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities was established to connect cities, communities and organisations with the vision of making their community a great place to grow old in.<sup>28</sup> The network has developed a Global Database of Age-friendly Practices<sup>29</sup>, which includes examples of good practices from European countries, including:

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<sup>24</sup> <https://s25924.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/02-Child-friendly-public-spaces-UN-Habitat.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/public-spaces-children-consultation-children-their-use-urban-public-spaces>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/creating-safe-public-spaces>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/How%20We%20Work/flagship%20programmes/UN-Women-Flagship-programme-Safe-cities-public-spaces-en.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-FWC-ALC-18.4>

<sup>29</sup> <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/afp/>

- The Municipality of Esbjerg in Denmark – working with developers to integrate the planning of different neighbourhoods to help support social interaction across generations.
- The City of Vaasa in Finland – mapping the accessibility of the outdoor environment with specific focus on streets and pedestrian crossings, pedestrian and bicycle lanes, as well as entrances of crucial public buildings.
- The municipalities and counties of Norway – a handbook on age-friendly communities with examples of universal design and age-friendly society, developed by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.
- The City of the Hague in the Netherlands – development of a questionnaire and running a representative survey on the perceived age-friendliness of the city among its older citizens. A validated questionnaire with a total of 64 questions to evaluate the concept of age-friendly cities is available in English.

The WHO Age-friendly Cities framework has developed the Global Age-friendly Cities Guide (WHO 2007), which proposes eight interconnected domains, including outdoor spaces and buildings,<sup>30</sup> helping to identify and address barriers to the well-being and participation of older people. The WHO Regional Office for Europe has published a handbook on domains for policy action for age-friendly environments in Europe, which includes strategic directions for policy interventions and practical examples for outdoor environments from local age-friendly action plans and assessments (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2017). The handbook has been supplemented by a set of domain-specific indicators and a description of participatory approaches to monitoring and assessing the success and sustainability of age-friendly policy initiatives, including in the domain of outdoor environments (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018).

Similar initiatives have also been taken at the national level. In Ireland, the Age Friendly Ireland platform has developed practical guidelines and a collection of good practice on age-friendly public space to make outdoor areas and public realms pleasant, accessible and safe for older people (Age Friendly Ireland, 2018). In Norway, in 2014, Oslo City Council adopted common principles for the local implementation of the Norwegian national action plan on universal design to be implemented by 2025.<sup>31</sup> In Portugal, the University of Lisbon has developed a Participatory Seniors' Walkability Assessment Tool – a participatory instrument to evaluate and rate the quality of streets for walking from the viewpoint of older adults.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/age-friendly-practices/outdoor-spaces-and-buildings/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-Common-Principles-of-Universal-design-City-of-Oslo.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.agefriendlyeurope.org/node/677>

Finally, it should be emphasised that the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) serves as a partner for cities seeking to diversify their financing to enhance the resilience and inclusion of local communities in the context of SDG Goal 11. In the last ten years, the CEB has provided loan finance and grant-financed technical assistance to help local governments deliver inclusive and sustainable social services, as well as improved access to public spaces for persons in vulnerable situations. The CEB can support cities through different financial instruments, including direct lending to cities (including metropolises and municipalities) and municipal companies, as well as loans to specialised municipal finance institutions.

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## Annex I

### Applicable definitions of Eurostat poverty and social exclusion indicators

*At-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP)* is the share of persons with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers.

*Material deprivation rate (MDR)* is the percentage of the population that cannot afford at least three of the following nine items:

- to pay their rent, mortgage or utility bills;
- to keep their home adequately warm;
- to face unexpected expenses;
- to eat meat or proteins regularly;
- to go on holiday;
- a television set;
- a washing machine;
- a car;
- a telephone.

*Severe material deprivation rate (SMDR)* is the percentage of the population that cannot afford at least four of the above-listed nine items.

*Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)* is the proportion of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least 7 out of 13 deprivation items, of which 6 are related to the individual and 7 are related to the household.

List of items at household level:

- capacity to face unexpected expenses
- capacity to afford paying for one week annual holiday away from home
- capacity to being confronted with payment arrears (on mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, hire purchase instalments or other loan payments)
- capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day
- ability to keep home adequately
- have access to a car/van for personal use
- replacing worn-out furniture

List of items at individual level:

- having internet connection
- replacing worn-out clothes by some new ones
- having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes)
- spending a small amount of money each week on him/herself
- having regular leisure activities
- getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month

*Very low work intensity rate (VLWI)* is the share of persons from 0-59 years living in households where the adults (aged 18-59, excluding students aged 18-24) worked a working time equal or less than 20% of their total combined work-time potential during the previous year.

## **Annex II**

### **Questionnaire**

#### **PECS study on the identification of challenges in implementing UN SDGs**

1. What is the applicable national definition of poverty to monitor the situation of child poverty and what is the applicable poverty line according to this definition? What is the proportion of children under the age of 18 living below the national poverty line and how has the share of children living in poverty evolved from 2015 up to date?
2. What measures have been taken to reduce child poverty in the last five years? Which measures have proven to be the most effective in this regard?
3. What specific measures have been taken to reduce material deprivation of children, such as securing regular fresh and healthy food, new clothes and fitting shoes, books suitable for the children's age, indoor games and outdoor leisure equipment, regular leisure activities, participation in school trips and events that cost money, age-appropriate furniture and access to internet?
4. What are considered the key challenges with regards to reducing child poverty, whether in implementing measures outlined in points 2 and 3, or notwithstanding those measures? Are there specific target groups for particular social cohesion policies (e.g. by age group of children, urban/rural, ethnic background, disability, household composition, employment status of parents etc)?
5. What legal measures are in place to secure access to safe and inclusive public spaces for persons in vulnerable situations, in particular persons with disabilities, older persons and families with children? What practical measures have been taken over the last five years to increase public spaces that are accessible for persons in vulnerable situations?
6. How does the government monitor the situation in practice as regards the goal to provide universal access to public spaces?
7. What share of the public built-up areas in cities and towns is estimated to be currently open and accessible for all, irrespective of age or disabilities?
8. What are considered the key challenges for securing universal access to public spaces?