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Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty

Report¹

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

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Summary

The situation of the most vulnerable children is becoming critical. The last hopes of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1.2 (“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.”) will not survive the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite the efforts being made, poverty, especially extreme child poverty, is far from being eradicated. In Europe, there are still too many people living in squalid conditions and, in 2022, children, whatever their gender or origins or the situation of their parents, should no longer go to bed or school hungry. Children should be protected from disease, deplorable housing conditions, disproportionate consequences of the climate crisis, exclusion, and lack of access to healthcare, hygiene, education, culture, and sport.

The coinciding of the climate emergency with the migrant, health and social crises demands strong government responses of public authorities to end extreme child poverty. Member States should adopt a holistic approach in shaping and implementing public policies to combat extreme child poverty, based on the European Social Charter.

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15107, Reference 4518 of 26 June 2020.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Despite all the efforts being made, poverty, especially extreme child poverty, is far from being eradicated. In Europe, there are still too many people living in squalid conditions and, in 2022, children, whatever their gender or origins or the situation of their parents, should no longer go to bed or school hungry. Children should be protected from disease, deplorable housing conditions, disproportionate consequences of the climate crisis, exclusion and lack of access to healthcare, hygiene, education, culture and sport. These situations are reminiscent of stories from another century and tell of unbearable human rights abuses against those most vulnerable.

2. In 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed 150 million more people into extreme poverty worldwide, especially women and girls, who were disproportionately affected. In Europe, it confirmed the collective failure of public policies to combat extreme child poverty. We will be unable to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”. Without the salutary intervention of States during the health crisis, the already serious situation of these children could have been disastrous. As far as the pandemic’s adverse impact on the effective protection of the human rights of girls and boys is concerned, the Parliamentary Assembly refers to its [Resolution 2385 \(2021\)](#) “Impact of the covid-19 pandemic on children’s rights”.

3. The coinciding of the climate emergency with the migrant, health and social crises demands strong responses of public authorities to end extreme child poverty. In light of unacceptable situations and with reference to [Resolution 2399 \(2021\)](#) “The climate crisis and the rule of law” emphasising the need for climate resilience, the Assembly calls on member States of the Council of Europe to demonstrate the political will to address every dimension of extreme child poverty and ensure no one is left by the wayside.

4. The Assembly urges member States of the Council of Europe to adopt a holistic approach in shaping and implementing public policies to combat extreme child poverty. This will involve impact assessments that take account of all aspects of child poverty, which are that many violations of a child’s well-being and best interests, without discrimination regarding their origins, birth environment, family, gender or personal orientation.

5. In light of the above, the Assembly urges member States when determining and drawing up their public policy to combat extreme child poverty to:

5.1. increase their commitments contained in the Revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163) especially Articles 30 (right to protection against poverty and social exclusion) and 31 (right to housing) and ensure that national constitutions enshrine these rights and that they are implemented;

5.2. translate these commitments into concrete measures through action plans that make the child’s best interests, well-being and right to be heard the focus of public policies to combat extreme child poverty by 2030;

5.3. intensify the efforts to benefit children in their development programmes in order to end extreme child poverty worldwide by 2030.

6. Referring to [Resolution 2410 \(2021\)](#) “Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance”, the Assembly urges member States to invest heavily in combating extreme child poverty and to return quickly to the initial goals laid down by the United Nations. The aim of this commitment is to establish environmental equity and:

6.1. ensure that all children living in Europe benefit from universal free social protection, capable of providing adequate and appropriate care, while contributing to a better understanding of the challenges of living together;

6.2. muster the vast resources needed to initiate a careful policy covering the first 1 000 days of life in order to combat the inequalities that develop from this decisive period of childhood by taking account of the accumulation of exposures to which individuals are subjected (their “exposome”);

6.3. ensure that children have the right to food in sufficient quantity and quality. To reach this goal, it calls on member States to waive all VAT taxes on essential food items;

6.4. provide children living in poverty in neighbourhoods in which it is concentrated with the facilities and programmes necessary for their educational, health, cultural and sporting development and to adopt financial measures to help them escape poverty, such as adequate child benefits;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 17 March 2022.

- 6.5. promote, with regard to mobility, parents' access to green conversion bonuses to ensure that the benefits of environmental transition are enjoyed by everyone and do not create new inequalities;
 - 6.6. enable improvements to be made to the detection by school health services of children's developmental problems, including cognitive and sensory disorders, and ensure follow-up;
 - 6.7. ensure children's access to free and adequate health services, including preventive and restorative dental care, since teeth are a strong social marker of inequality;
 - 6.8. ensure that the housing where these children live benefits from energy efficiency measures and that their parents actually receive the assistance available in the event of spiralling energy costs.
7. The Assembly encourages the remaining nine member States that have not yet ratified the Revised European Social Charter to resume their work to accede to it. It urges the ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Charter Providing for a System of Collective Complaints (ETS No. 158) in order to speed up concerted efforts to combat extreme child poverty. It also calls on Switzerland and Liechtenstein to sign and ratify the Charter.
8. The Assembly welcomes the European Union's recent initiative to establish a European Child Guarantee. It encourages member States to support this initiative or adopt corresponding policies. It calls on member States to:
- 8.1. regularly monitor the implementation of this guarantee at parliamentary level, taking into account the voice of children, in accordance with [Resolution 2414 \(2022\)](#) "The right to be heard: child participation, a foundation for democratic societies";
 - 8.2. support the efforts of education services to include the most vulnerable children and combat inequalities.
9. The Assembly reiterates its desire to bring about synergies between the Council of Europe and the European Union agencies responsible for the European Pillar of Social Rights. It renews its invitation to the European Union to accede to the European Social Charter.
10. Lastly, the Assembly proposes to carry out a mid-term review in 2026 on the implementation of environmental equity in public policies and the progress of the various public measures in Europe aimed at combating extreme child poverty with a view to achieving United Nations [Sustainable Development Goal 1.2](#).

B. Draft recommendation³

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution... (2022) “Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty”. Child poverty is far from being eradicated in Europe and has, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, started to grow again after decades of improvement. The Assembly proposes to use the momentum from the pandemic to rekindle the original global goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030.
2. The Assembly congratulates the Committee of Ministers on continuing its efforts and retaining the fight against extreme child poverty among the objectives of the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-27) and invites it to monitor the development and implementation of national strategies for preventing and combating child poverty.
3. The Assembly supports the action taken by the European Union regarding the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. It calls on the Committee of Ministers to support this initiative by:
 - 3.1. taking into account the urgency of addressing extreme child poverty in order to eradicate it by 2030, in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1.2;
 - 3.2. contributing as far as possible to the European Union’s Europe-wide work, including by supporting the establishment of a network of national co-ordinators and in the context of joint co-operation projects;
 - 3.3. encouraging member States of the Council of Europe to make children’s best interests and well-being the focus of public policies to combat extreme child poverty by 2030;
 - 3.4. supporting efforts to ensure that children’s voices are heard when introducing policies to combat extreme poverty.
4. The Assembly reiterates its appeal to the Committee of Ministers to call for negotiations to be opened as soon as possible on the European Union’s accession to the Revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163) in order to enhance the consistency of European socio-economic rights standards.

3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 17 March 2022.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. If I had to answer the question “How are children faring?” today, I would have to say, “not so well in Europe, and the situation of those most vulnerable is becoming critical”. The last hopes of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1.2 (“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”) will not survive the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴

2. In her report “Ending child poverty in Europe”⁵, our colleague, Ms Sevinj Fataliyeva (Azerbaijan, EC/DA), already warned us in 2014 that child poverty was “creeping back in Europe”. This concern was strongly echoed by the Committee of Ministers in its reply to [Recommendation 2044 \(2014\)](#) and was reiterated in its declaration of 11 December 2019.⁶ In [Resolution 1995 \(2014\)](#), the Parliamentary Assembly already urged member States of the Council of Europe to redouble their efforts in the fight against poverty, but this warning was clearly not heeded.

3. At a joint meeting of the Sub-Committees on Children and on the European Social Charter,⁷ we had the opportunity to discuss the question: “Across Europe, a quarter of children are at risk of social exclusion in Europe – what should parliaments do to protect them?”. If child poverty remains a major concern in Europe, it is because levels of extreme poverty are alarming. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, these levels were growing steadily in our prosperous societies. It was with the aim of taking stock of the measures taken since 2014 and with a view to taking effective action against this scourge, which destroys the best interests of children, that Mr Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL) initiated a motion for a resolution which was referred to the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development in May 2020. On 7 July 2020, I was appointed rapporteur.

4. The failure of the fight against extreme poverty is, to date, a collective failure. We must get a grip and reverse that trend. As the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021) has come to an end and a new strategy has been prepared, would it not be appropriate, in light of the established standards and the Committee of Ministers’ declaration, to continue efforts to achieve wider social protection; to promote integrated social policies; and to better measure and combat child poverty?

5. The Covid-19 pandemic is not a temporary shock to our economies and societies. Its effects will be felt for decades to come, as Mr Hunko explained in his report entitled “Overcoming the socio-economic crisis sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic”⁸. The pandemic is a catalyst that has highlighted and amplified weaknesses in child protection across the world, including Europe. According to the World Bank, for the first time since 1998, poverty rates will rise again as the global economy enters recession and per capita GDP falls sharply. According to the same sources, the pandemic could drive an additional 150 million people into extreme poverty.⁹ Even before the current crisis, UNICEF estimated that 385 million children were living in extreme poverty worldwide. Although statistics are not available for all member States, the Committee of Ministers noted with concern in its declaration of 11 December 2019 that more than one child in four was living below the poverty line and called on member States to take action. The current situation could be more alarming, I fear.

6. Precise definitions of poverty and extreme poverty are difficult to make. They vary from one country to another and depend on the ways and means of meeting people’s needs. Poverty is “a human condition characterised by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights”.¹⁰ Whereas the World Bank has decided to adopt a purely monetary approach to extreme

4. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission accepted its failure to tackle poverty even as a Social Europe was born at the Gothenburg Summit. The World Bank announced that it would not be able to fulfil its mandate to end extreme poverty in the world by 2030. UNICEF also recognised, as did its partners, that SDG 1.2 was no longer achievable.

5. [Doc. 13458](#).

6. [Committee of Ministers Declaration on Addressing Child Poverty](#) adopted on 11 December 2019.

7. [Minutes, AS/Soc/Child/ESC \(2019\) PV 02](#).

8. [Doc. 15310](#).

9. “Further 150m people face extreme poverty by 2022, warns World Bank”, *The Guardian*, 7 October 2020.

10. www.ohchr.org/en/Issues/Poverty/Pages/About.aspx.

poverty, namely US\$1.90 per day, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have chosen to look beyond a lack of income to better assess the complexity of the phenomenon. The long-term effects of extreme poverty on children's development can be significant, even if the situation is temporary.

7. The fight against extreme poverty has multiple dimensions that go beyond the financial aspect. It includes an educational dimension, access to basic services and access to health and the right to security. The Covid-19 pandemic adds a further difficulty: not only may people living in poverty experience extreme poverty, but, above all, those who have managed to lift themselves out of poverty may sink back into it.¹¹ With the future uncertain, there is also a need to harness creative solutions. As UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed pointed out at the launch of the Alliance for the Eradication of Poverty, formed by 39 countries in June 2020,¹² we must “not lose sight of the urgency of climate action, which provides an unprecedented opportunity to unlock massive economic and social benefits and accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development”.

8. In the course of my work, I have been able to consult experts and partners on the situation of children living in extreme poverty and was able to discuss the instruments at our disposal to put an end to this situation. On 17 June 2021, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development welcomed Mr Jacques Vandenschrik, President of the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA); Mr Zachary Parolin, Researcher at the Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy (USA) and Assistant Professor at Bocconi University (Italy); and Ms Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová, Chairperson of the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. The meeting was introduced by Mr Bjørn Berge, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

2. Extreme child poverty should be a cause for concern in Europe

9. Almost 385 million children in the world, namely 19.5% of all children, are living in extreme poverty (that is to say, on less than 1.90 US dollars per day), compared to 9.2% of adults.¹³ In 2018, UNICEF estimated that 22 million children were living below the poverty line in Europe and Central Asia.¹⁴ The report is illustrated with images of situations of extreme child poverty in Armenia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey. The situation is worrying in all member States, considering the typical profile of children living in poverty or extreme poverty. While countries in the region have experienced significant economic growth over the past two decades, the overexposure of children demonstrates that the sharing of wealth and progress is unevenly distributed, leaving them in a vulnerable position. Regrettably, extreme poverty has continued to rise during this period of almost uninterrupted growth.

10. This situation would seem to show that family policies have not provided the necessary protection for children and to suggest that our countries are in breach of Article 2 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child which specifies that this protection is afforded to “each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status”.

11. We lack precise figures on the number of children who are poor or victims of extreme poverty. According to the World Bank, most poor people can be found in rural areas, have little education and are mainly from vulnerable groups. Children are particularly at risk, especially girls and young women; children with disabilities; migrant, refugee, and stateless children; children from minorities and those in detention. As General Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Campaign to End Immigration Detention of Children, I have already had the opportunity to speak out against the distress and misery caused to migrant children.

12. By 2030, two-thirds of the poorest people will live in fragile or conflict-ridden economies. While our Organisation's primary role is to ensure peace, Europe is not free of conflict zones. The impact of the fighting on civilians living in places such as Donbass, Nagorno-Karabakh and the border areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan is extremely worrying. As a reminder, the World Bank Group's goal of ending extreme poverty within a generation includes a quantified target: the rate of extreme poverty should not exceed 3% of the world's population in 2030. The World Bank's second objective is to foster shared prosperity by accelerating

11. See the following Assembly reports: [Doc. 15310](#) “Overcoming the socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic”, and [Doc. 15311](#) “Impact of Covid-19 on children's rights”.

12. IISD-SDG Knowledge Hub, 1 September 2020, “[39 Countries Form Alliance for Poverty Eradication](#)”.

13. See the website referred to in the Committee of Ministers Declaration on Addressing Child Poverty of 11 December 2019, <https://data.unicef.org/>.

14. “Ending Child Poverty, Promoting social protection to tackle child poverty”, UNICEF, October 2018.

income growth for the poorest 40% of the population in each country. The Bank, which operates in 145 countries, including Council of Europe member States, has recognised that it will not be able to achieve this goal.

13. Child poverty poses challenges to public authorities. Solutions are often tailor-made. In [Resolution 1995 \(2014\)](#) “Ending child poverty in Europe” the Assembly has already urged member States to meet these challenges, which are described by UNICEF as follows: social protection programmes benefiting children and families have not been prioritised in many European and Central Asian countries; some governments do not provide social protection to adolescents over 14 years of age; government budgets for social protection are limited and there is a lack of human resources for effective social protection programmes; social services are limited or unavailable, especially in rural areas.

14. Families that do not receive enough support to keep disabled children at home are more likely to place them in institutions. Those who should benefit from social protection face obstacles such as bureaucratic procedures and a lack of information about their rights and the programmes available; social protection benefits and services remain fragmented and segmented, which means that children and families do not receive the integrated support required to overcome the multiple challenges and vulnerabilities they face; those most vulnerable to poverty – including people receiving social protection – are discriminated against. For example, families from Roma communities may be unable to access benefits to which they are entitled. Legal support is required to help families claim their rights.

15. Equal opportunities for all children were central to the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021).¹⁵ It has provided an opportunity for a mid-term evaluation,¹⁶ during which the Director General of Human Rights and Rule of Law of the Council of Europe, Mr Christos Giakoumopoulos, emphasised that children’s rights, and those who advocate them, have been instrumental in furthering the dynamic interpretation of human rights: from the development of social rights to the introduction of transgenerational justice, for example, through demands for older generations to ensure a healthy environment. In closing the conference, the rapporteur, Ms Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou, Chairperson of the Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child (CAHENF),¹⁷ emphasised that “[a] lack of equal opportunities, through a rise or persistence in poverty, exclusion and discrimination, destroys children’s dreams and aspirations and divides societies”. While the fourth Strategy (2022-2027) was launched on 7-8 April 2022, the work here will remain one of the main areas of development at the Council of Europe. At the hearing held by the committee, the Deputy Secretary General stressed the need for collective efforts.

3. Extreme child poverty is multidimensional and undermines the best interests of the child

16. When children are living in extreme poverty, this is above all because their parents are too. This is particularly the case in single-parent families.¹⁸ When the household income depends on jobs in the informal economy, this not only creates a challenge for society but above all has consequences that, as well as being almost unimaginable, are often dire.¹⁹

17. Quebec has regularly analysed the effects of poverty on children.²⁰ More than a hundred indicators have been defined and used to illustrate the differences in health, both physical and mental, development and social adaptation, between poor children and those from better-off families. Through these regular reports, the authorities have noted that the health divide between Quebec’s most advantaged and disadvantaged children is “disconcertingly wide”. This disparity does not lessen over time. Hospital admissions and deaths are linked to child poverty. Eradicating poverty would prevent all these adverse effects, which contribute to a vicious circle.

15. See <https://rm.coe.int/168066cff8>.

16. See www.coe.int/en/web/children/strengthening-the-rights-of-the-child-as-the-key-to-a-future-proof-europe.

17. In 2020, CAHENF became the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) in order to take account of its permanent status, www.coe.int/en/web/children/cdenf.

18. In 2019, one child in eight lived in a family where neither parent was employed, according to the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). Three quarters of those children were living in monetary poverty. INSEE, 2020, “France, Social Portrait”.

19. “Woman in ‘extreme poverty’ found dead next to crying baby in Glasgow”, *The Guardian*, 25 August 2020,.

20. “Third national health report for Quebec - Our children make us rich, but many are not. Poverty and its impact on the health of young people under 18”, published by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (gouv.qc.ca - in French).

18. Our States have made firm commitments to children's rights through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Extreme poverty is a violation of the best interests of the child. Such vulnerability is harmful to children's well-being, triggering a cascade of negative effects. In its reference framework, the United Nations have identified five areas where action for children can bring about change.

3.1. Nutrition

19. The link between obesity and poverty is widely acknowledged. Our Assembly has dealt with this subject on several occasions, notably in [Resolution 1804 \(2011\)](#) and [Recommendation 1966 \(2011\)](#) "Safeguarding children and young people from obesity and type 2 diabetes". One of today's most worrying public health issues, obesity is spreading throughout society like another pandemic, bringing with it a host of chronic diseases that reduce life expectancy. [Resolution 2373 \(2021\)](#) "Discrimination against persons dealing with chronic and long-term illnesses" initiated by our colleague, Ms Martine Wonner (France, ALDE), and recently adopted by the Assembly, is also relevant here. After North America, obesity is most prevalent in Europe, according to the World Health Organisation. It affects children, especially those living in poverty, who need proper education, greater access to a better-quality and more balanced diet, and physical activity. It is worth noting that in many cases, it is through schools that children have access to healthy, balanced meals, compounding the difficulties faced when they were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic.²¹

20. Fortunately, hunger is no longer widespread in Europe - but it does persist among some people living in extreme poverty. The pandemic brought this sad reality home to us. Having some families who rely on outside help for food is nothing new, but the situation became much worse during the health crisis. Between April and June 2020, UK food banks recorded over 100 000 new users, with an estimated 61%-rise in activity for the whole year.²² In Belgium,²³ 500 000 people use food aid, and NGOs deplore the fact that the country has not enshrined the right to food in its Constitution. The French foundation Break Poverty estimates that the crisis has plunged more than 100 000 newborns into food insecurity in France.²⁴ According to another French charity, Secours catholique, 40% of vulnerable households could no longer afford the food they needed daily in November 2020. There was a tremendous wave of solidarity during the crisis, but the footage of people travelling far and wide to get a bite to eat and queuing to be given groceries certainly make for shocking viewing in our wealthy societies.

3.2. Education

21. Education remains the best insurance against the threat of generational poverty, enabling people to gain access to work and play a role in society. The pandemic forced schools to close their doors and poverty not only prevented pupils from pursuing their education, but also deprived them of the physical activity required for their development and often of a healthy and balanced meal. The health crisis has been particularly challenging for the poorest families because they frequently lack access to the technological equipment needed for distance learning.

22. Poverty passes from generation to generation. Children born into extreme poverty have few opportunities to escape from it without outside help, especially if they are vulnerable for other reasons. Providing access to quality education supporting and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law is vital. Children must be equipped with the tools empowering them to choose their own path and taught the cultural skills required for life in a democratic and inclusive society.

23. All around the world, poverty is particularly hard on girls, who, according to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, are almost always locked out of training forever once they have left school. In such cases, they are not only deprived of enjoying their childhood, but above all of control over their lives.

24. Children living in poverty, particularly when it is extreme, are more likely to drop out of school and, unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has only heightened this phenomenon. Lack of education or training helps perpetuate the cycle of poverty passing from one generation to another.

21. European Union, "Overweight and Obesity".

22. "Extreme poverty 'will double by Christmas' in UK because of Covid-19", *The Guardian*, 14 September 2020.

23. "People are going hungry in Belgium", *Le Vif*, 12 February 2021.

24. The Break Poverty Foundation's [Urgence Premiers Pas](#) campaign is supported by infant and toddler food manufacturers.

3.3. Health

25. In [Resolution 2284 \(2019\)](#) “Addressing the health needs of adolescents in Europe”, the Assembly reiterated that “health is a human right and health services appropriate for every age group are an essential element of cohesive and democratic societies”. As all children in extreme poverty are affected by numerous vulnerabilities, their health is particularly at risk.

26. The poorest children are unfortunately those who have the least access to dental care, primarily because of cost and a lack of trained professionals. Beyond the repercussions of poor dental care for the body as a whole, teeth are an important social marker. Too often, the poorest children are left without preventive and restorative care. Beyond public action, access to care is hampered by a market system that is unfavourable to the most vulnerable, as described by the French researcher Olivier Cyran.²⁵ Access to free and adequate health care is necessary to enable these children to escape extreme poverty.

27. Respecting certain ground rules for good health is just as important. Good hygiene is not just about personal cleanliness, it also means being able to take care of oneself in terms of eating, sleeping and lifestyle choices. Poor hygiene not only affects people themselves, but also those around them. Take alcohol consumption, for example. While children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome account for only 1% of births in the United States, these children overwhelmingly face problems at school.²⁶ Tobacco also interferes with human embryonic development and may impact behaviour in adult life.

28. Furthermore, poverty takes its toll on people’s mental health.²⁷ Adult stress levels – which were already running high before the Covid-19 outbreak – were considerably increased by the stress which the pandemic brought, and those of children inevitably followed suit. In the United Kingdom, the number of people experiencing some kind of depression doubled in early 2021, compared to pre-pandemic figures. 35% of adults who reported being unable to afford unexpected expenses experienced depressive symptoms in that period, compared to 21% before the pandemic. Depression was more prevalent among black people and those from minority ethnic groups, but also among young women and people with disabilities. The crisis has also led to a considerable deterioration in the situation of children with disabilities, as parents have had to bear additional costs. Domestic violence, although it affects society as a whole, may have worsened the plight of those children. The effects of the crisis will certainly be felt for a long time to come.

3.4. Housing and over-borrowing

29. Children’s well-being depends largely on the quality of the parental home and whether they feel comfortable and safe there. Housing has been high on this Assembly’s agenda since 1949. In [Resolution 2285 \(2019\)](#) “Sustainable urban development fostering social inclusion”, it called on member States to promote human rights-based housing “to ensure that no one is left behind, and to pay attention to the specific needs of children, the elderly, women, migrants and refugees, the poor and people with disabilities”. The resolution as a whole is relevant here.

30. High parental debt also has a negative impact on children’s futures.²⁸ Governments have a responsibility to implement policies to tackle over-borrowing. Although efforts to eradicate it entirely have failed, the number of households in excessive debt has fallen. The most deprived continue to be the hardest hit,²⁹ however, raising the issue of families being trapped in a cycle of poverty.

31. The health crisis has hit ethnic minority parents particularly hard, as they are often over-represented in low-skilled jobs in the sectors that were most severely affected by the pandemic. When you are not sure when the next pay check is coming in, the fear of losing your home becomes very real. Job and housing insecurity are affecting families who had managed to escape poverty and spreading to groups who are seeing their income levels fall and are worried about paying the rent. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is concerned about the implications for the mental health of the wider UK population. It says every effort must be made to rebuild society on solid foundations, including having a proper social welfare net to catch those falling on hard

25. Interview with Olivier Cyran: “Being unable to afford dental care is a policy akin to social warfare”, *Libération*, 25 May 2021.

26. “The Way to Beat Poverty”, *New York Times*, 12 September 2014.

27. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Rachel Casey, 12 May 2021, “Relieve the pressures of poverty to improve our mental health”.

28. “Extreme poverty blights even the lives of those who work”, *The Guardian*, 9 December 2020.

29. “Excessive debt has fallen sharply and is now concentrated among the poorest households”, *Le Monde*, 6 February 2020.

times, good quality jobs and decent, affordable, and secure housing. It calls on the national authorities to provide stable homes where people can put down roots and build a better life for themselves and their families.³⁰ The pandemic is a historic opportunity to rethink our societies.

3.5. Access to water and energy sources

32. While most EU citizens have access to safe drinking water,³¹ the question remains as to its quality and cost across the continent. That question prompts broader questions about all the other essential services. Like their parents, children not only need access to water to keep clean but also to transportation that meets their needs - which in their case means being able to get to school, do sport or access culture. It is unfortunate that the poorest people find themselves living side by side, in neighbourhoods or areas with poor transport links, close to schools with no social mix, and without access to a variety of cultural and sporting activities. These circumstances affect children's lives and shape their future. They reinforce inequalities, leaving children stuck in a trap that is hard to escape.

33. In addition to access to drinking water, there is the issue of connection to essential amenities in places where children live. Malfunctions have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable households, and the children living in them are primarily affected by the poverty of their parents. The Council of Europe Development Bank estimated in 2019 that around 30 million people in Europe were suffering from energy poverty.³² In its report, the Bank notes that "energy prices and income levels influence energy consumption to different degrees of magnitude and in different directions", adding that "in the short run, changes in prices of energy (be it electricity or gas) or in household income levels have a small impact on household energy consumption. However, in the long run, household demand for electricity tends to be price-inelastic". The quality of housing has deteriorated. It appears that people at risk of poverty live mostly in countries with higher levels of energy poverty. The Bank also noted that in 18 countries the income growth of the poorest 20% was slower than the increase in energy costs between 2007 and 2019. Energy is a factor that drives poverty.

34. Children who experience extreme poverty inherit it from their parents and risk replicating it with their own offspring. They have less access to basic hygiene, in the broadest sense of the term. They often live in unhealthy environments, in substandard, poorly heated housing where they feel unsafe and cannot do their homework in proper conditions. They cannot engage in sports because of the lack of proper facilities, they do not enjoy a balanced diet and have to eat junk food, and they are far from the health, education and cultural services available in city centres. It is here that inequalities develop, mental health is damaged, and frustrations arise.

4. Covid-19 is driving more and more children into extreme poverty

35. The Covid-19 pandemic alone is responsible for a 7% increase in extreme poverty worldwide, according to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Progress in the fight against poverty and extreme poverty belongs to the past. We must resign ourselves to acknowledging the reality of an increase in extreme poverty among children with the consequences that this can have for the equilibrium of our societies. As the 2020 Goalkeepers Report drily notes, "we've been set back about 25 years in about 25 weeks".³³

36. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) annual wage report³⁴ found that the pandemic resulted in US\$3.7 billion of lost wages in 2020, driving down average pay. The situation in Europe differs from country to country. While in some places, average wages appeared to rise because of strong job retention measures to contain job losses mainly affecting those at the lower end of the wage scale, they fell drastically in several countries which reported statistics, like the United Kingdom. This decrease has affected the lowest earners, but also women. As women are more likely to have child custody, we have reason to fear a negative impact on children. While the ILO acknowledges that minimum wage schemes and adequate wage policies can effectively ensure a satisfactory standard of living, it regrets the impact of the pandemic in reinforcing inequalities.

30. "Good jobs and stable homes - a platform for building a better life", Joint Research Center, Katie Schmucker, 7 May 2021.

31. To follow the European Parliament's recent work on access to drinking water, see www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20181011STO15887/drinking-water-in-the-eu-better-quality-and-access.

32. Council of Europe Development Bank, March 2019, "Energy Poverty in Europe: How Energy Efficiency and Renewables Can Help".

33. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2020-report/#GlobalPerspective.

34. International Labour Organization, 2 December 2020, Global Wage Report 2020-21.

37. The Covid-19 pandemic has placed at greater risk families who formerly lived in extreme poverty and recently emerged from it. With the memory of that situation still fresh, they live in fear of returning to it. This is particularly noticeable in vulnerable families where at least one member has disabilities, comes from a migrant background or belongs to a minority group such as Roma. Even when having broken free from poverty once stands as proof of these families' resilience, the fear of slipping back into it could come to haunt them, as is evident from the work of the US researcher Homi Kharas.³⁵

38. UNICEF has published the most chilling forecasts. It estimates that the number of children living in poor families worldwide could soar by 117 million to reach 691 million in 2020.³⁶ In this context, it is crucial to make a precise assessment of the situation in Europe. This is confirmed by the European Food Banks Federation, which has seen a 34.7% increase in demand for food aid from its members. It has recorded 1 161 091 children among the beneficiaries³⁷ and noted a steady increase in poverty in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic.

39. While extreme poverty had been in decline for more than 20 years, the pandemic not only stopped that trend – it reversed it. At the same time, government funding was reallocated to address the health crisis. Children who depended on school lunches for a balanced diet were left wanting when their schools closed. Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown has raised the alarm.³⁸ He has pledged his support to Save The Children's campaign to restore a commitment of at least 0.7% of GNP to social policies to fight extreme child poverty. He has also called on the international community to get behind a Marshall Plan to help Africa effectively combat this scourge.

40. In order to help the poorest and most vulnerable in the context of the health crisis, the United Nations launched a Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19 in April 2020³⁹ which established five streams of work with a direct or indirect impact on children: ensuring permanent access to health services; helping people cope with adversity through access to social services; protecting jobs, supporting small and medium-sized companies, as well as informal employment, through economic response programmes; supporting measures to assist the most vulnerable; and promoting social cohesion and investing in resilience policies. The aim is to initiate a reconstruction and recovery process ("To build back, better"). It is the Council of Europe's responsibility to co-ordinate its work with the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank in order to contribute to this objective by avoiding gaps and duplication of effort, and to ensure that no child is left by the wayside.

41. As the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response notes, there is an urgent need "to connect health needs to social, economic and environmental well-being". Without this response, poverty and inequality could reach unprecedented levels and even go so far as to threaten the world as we know it. Choices should be guided by the objective of the society we want to see. Combating child poverty, especially extreme poverty, must be a priority and must be given the resources needed to have the required effect.

42. Although the effects of the virus on fertility are still unclear, we do know that the pandemic has put adults and children under greater stress. This is also reflected in the dramatic drop in birth rates in most of our countries, which were already below the replacement level. In the European Union, the birth rate was already worryingly low in 2019 with an average of 1.53 births per woman.⁴⁰ Anxiety about the future and the economic crisis explain why people are choosing to postpone or stop planning to have a child. This is common among those who are already living in extreme poverty or have experienced it in their lifetime. Paradoxically, in some cases, the pandemic is also responsible for unintended pregnancies resulting from domestic violence or lack of access to family planning. Overall, this "baby bust" could be set to continue. The United States expects a further 7% decline in the birth rate in 2021.⁴¹ "This crisis could lead to a drop that will irrevocably compound

35. Homi Kharas, Brookings Institute, 21 October 2021, "[The impact of COVID-19 on global extreme poverty](#)".

36. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/how-covid-19-is-changing-the-world-a-statistical-perspective-volume-2/>.

37. [AS/Soc \(2021\) PV06add](#).

38. Gordon Brown, "Rishi Sunak is paying Covid bills off the backs of the poor. It shames our country", *The Guardian*, 3 February 2021.

39. www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_framework_report_on_covid-19.pdf.

40. In 2019, Malta had the lowest birth rate in the European Union with 1.14, compared to 1.86 in France. Initial reports show births dropped by 20% in Spain and 13.5% in France.

For more information about EU fertility rates, see Eurostat's website: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics#live_births_per_woman_in_the_EU_in_2019.

41. Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip Levine, Brookings Institute, 17 December 2020, "[The coming COVID-19 baby bust: Update](#)".

the demographic imbalances we are facing, which are incompatible with a robust future for our country,” said Italian researcher Alessandro Rosina.⁴² Covid-19 once again raises the question of the role of family and migration policies.

5. What are the options for ending extreme child poverty?

43. In December 2020, the United Nations launched a historic plan to tackle poverty. It says it will require \$US35.1 billion to assist the 160 million people most in need across 56 countries. In total, 235 million people need help worldwide, namely one in 33 people.⁴³

44. In 2015, the European Parliament called for the establishment of a children’s guarantee ensuring access for vulnerable children to free healthcare, free education, early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition.⁴⁴ Despite strong commitment, undeniable progress and long before the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union acknowledged that it had been unable to meet its 2008 anti-poverty targets⁴⁵ of reducing the number of people affected by poverty and exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020. In 2017, 24.9% of children were still at risk of poverty or exclusion. Within member States, the situation is very mixed in terms of results, and social protection systems do not all have the same impact. The most effective system has reduced the risk of poverty by 57%, while the least effective has lowered it by just 16%. The EU average is 34%. The Gothenburg summit highlighted 20 principles that make up the European Pillar of Social Rights⁴⁶ and set precise, quantified objectives.

45. The European Commission presented its proposal for a European Child Guarantee on 24 March 2021.⁴⁷ It aims to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic rights. It estimated that 18 million children were at risk in 2019. This is more than one child in five, namely 22.2 % of all children. These children are more likely to face barriers in accessing services, which are key for their well-being and the development of social, cognitive and emotional skills. The widespread support for this proposal will help combat social exclusion and promote equal opportunities. Its key recommendations include effective and free access to early childhood education and care, education, and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, and healthcare; and effective, convenient and affordable access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

46. At the same time, the European Parliament adopted a widely backed resolution tabled by its Committee on Employment and Social Affairs⁴⁸ urging the EU Council and member States “to be ambitious in the full and rapid adoption of the recommendation and in its implementation”. In its resolution, the Parliament focused on the financial aspect and called on EU member States to: mainstream the European Child Guarantee in all policy sectors; allocate at least 5% of the resources of the new European Social Fund (ESF+) under shared management to supporting activities under the European Child Guarantee; ensure a co-ordinated approach in the programming and implementation of EU funds, speed up their implementation and dedicate all possible national resources, complemented by EU funds.

47. To control and curb poverty, the European Parliament calls on EU member States to specifically task a public authority, such as a commissioner for children or an ombudsman, with measuring the effects on children of national and regional legislation and of the national measures to implement the Child Guarantee, as well as generally promoting children’s rights in public policy; and to urgently address learning disruptions and educational inequalities caused by the Covid-19 crisis, both to enable children to learn remotely as swiftly as possible and to propose long-term solutions to structural inequalities.

42. “Covid-19: why 2021 risks bringing a baby bust”, *France Télé Info*, 21 January 2021.

43. United Nations, “Global Humanitarian Overview 2021”.

44. See: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

45. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=751&langId=fr>.

46. In order to monitor progress on social Europe, the EU’s joint research centre in Ispra has produced a scoreboard. The statistical data made available seem to be incomplete for many EU countries.

<https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/>.

47. EU Council Recommendation on Establishing a European Child Guarantee.

To follow the European Parliament’s work on this subject, please consult its [Legislative Observatory](#).

48. On 29 April 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution by the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs by 510 votes to 42, with 139 abstentions. See:

[https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/printficheglobal.pdf?reference=2021/2605\(RSP\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/printficheglobal.pdf?reference=2021/2605(RSP)&l=en).

48. With regard to housing, it urges EU member States to: safeguard children's right to adequate housing, by providing related support to parents having difficulties with maintaining or accessing housing so that they can stay with their children, with a particular focus on young adults exiting child welfare institutions; prioritise the provision of permanent housing to homeless children and their families, and to include housing solutions for children experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion in their national Child Guarantee action plans.

49. It calls on EU member States to strengthen efforts to prevent harm from coming to children and to protect them from all forms of violence by developing strategies to identify and prioritise children at risk for prevention and response interventions; to work out specific strategies to protect children from online sexual abuse and exploitation, since isolated children spend more time online, which increases the risk of their exposure to online abuse, including child pornography and online bullying.

50. Lastly, the European Parliament called on the Commission to examine the possibility of establishing a European Authority for Children to support and monitor EU member States' implementation of the recommendation, co-ordinate national work, ensure the exchange of good practices and innovative solutions, and streamline reporting and recommendations. The Parliament considered that the Child Guarantee should become a permanent instrument to prevent and tackle child poverty in a structural manner in the EU.

51. On taking office, US President Biden⁴⁹ launched a comprehensive plan to combat extreme child poverty. Under America's US\$1 900 billion stimulus package, he has made provision for permanent monthly family allowances and the building of numerous affordable nurseries and childcare facilities.⁵⁰ The plan calls for more visits to parents and for specialists and officials to monitor vulnerable children to ensure their protection and harmonious development.

52. The new administration initially intended the American response to be massive and unprecedented. The plan was to be flexible and adapted to local circumstances since the perception of poverty differs from one place to another and according to the opportunities available. The poverty line is defined as US\$28 000 a year for a family of four living in a city where prices are around the national average (such as in Phoenix, Arizona). The original plan was intended to benefit a segment of the US population⁵¹ that does not vote, write plaintive op-eds or recruit lobbyists – namely children. The Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy estimated in June 2021 that the American Rescue Plan could have led to a reduction of more than 50% in child poverty by the end of 2021.⁵² Despite the difficulties encountered when the reform was passed, the first effects are already being felt.⁵³ The original plan provided for direct assistance in order to increase access to food for the poorest,⁵⁴ a one-time allowance of US\$1 400 per adult and child and an annual tax credit of US\$3 000 per child extended to childcare and dependent care expenses.

53. As our colleague, Ms Françoise Hetto Gaasch (Luxembourg, EPP/CD), noted in her report entitled "Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance",⁵⁵ we need to invest heavily in our children to ensure that their best interests are preserved. She adroitly quotes an 19th-century American saying that "it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men". The First 1 000 Days policy is a tool for tackling child poverty, including extreme poverty, and inequality at birth as poverty is handed down from generation to generation. The most spectacular development of the brain takes place during this period beginning shortly before birth and ending around the age of two. Researchers see this policy as an opportunity for multidisciplinary interventions to come together to protect the best interests of the child.

6. Conclusions

54. There is no magic formula for helping children out of poverty. The increase in inequalities predates the Covid-19 pandemic and is continuing today. As Mr Vandenschrik said, "no child should go to bed or school hungry. No child should ever suffer the consequences of not having enough to eat". Given this situation,

49. New York Times, 24 March 2021, "[Biden Plots a Revolution for America's Children](#)".

50. Childcare apparently costs only 7% of parents' income.

51. cf. Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*, op. cit.

52. Zachary Parolin, Sophie Collyer, Megan A. Curran and Christopher Wimer, 2021, "[The Potential Poverty Reduction Effect of the American Rescue Plan](#)" Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Columbia University. This objective depends on the new administration's ability to find the majority in Congress to pass its reforms.

53. Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy, "[What we know from the first 6 months of the expanded Child Tax Credit](#)".

54. For more information on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), see: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.

55. Doc. 15405.

Council of Europe member States must get back to fighting poverty and reverse the rise in extreme child poverty in Europe. We have collectively lacked the ambition and will to provide the 22 million poor children in Europe with the necessary benefits.

55. The Covid-19 pandemic has served as a useful reminder that life must take precedence over the economy. With inequality rising sharply in recent decades, our countries have sought to reduce its impact on us. It is plain to see that we have failed to protect some children from extreme child poverty. We must get our act together to ensure that the best interests of the child are always safeguarded. Success will depend on the amount of investment that public authorities are able to mobilise. Given the simultaneous health, social, democratic and environmental crisis, the requirement to balance the public accounts no longer holds in such circumstances. We must provide a satisfactory response whatever the cost and make human beings the focus of public policy once again.

56. We have an obligation to make fundamental changes to our societies so that they are more just and resilient. Ending extreme poverty requires a collective effort. We owe this duty not only to the children who are suffering from this scourge, but also to future generations. Everyone must have access to a healthy, decent and secure life, no matter where they live. We need to redouble our efforts to ensure that existing mechanisms for combating extreme child poverty are more effective and address the challenges relating to nutrition, education, housing and excessive debt. Both *ad hoc* and sustained action are required. The issue of the value of minimum social benefits and the lowest wages can no longer be sidestepped.

57. Even if the United States are already one step further down the line from us in terms of family policy, we must follow in their footsteps and invest heavily in our children and put an end to poverty, including extreme poverty. We must redouble our efforts to ensure that there is a safety net to catch the most vulnerable long before their situation worsens. We need to provide wider, more integrated social protection and to better measure and combat child poverty. The focus is not on assistance, but on achieving results. We need to lift people out of poverty and into their rightful place in society. Our vision must follow the lead proposed by UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed. We must “not lose sight of the urgency of climate action, which provides an unprecedented opportunity to unlock massive economic and social benefits and accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development”.⁵⁶

58. The Council of Europe is helping to build this safety net to not only lift children out of extreme poverty, but also to prevent their parents from falling into it. The Revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163) provides us with an appropriate framework for combating all the harmful effects of environmental factors on children (their “exposome”), and we should once again call for its ratification by more countries, as well as by the European Union. The fight against poverty must become mandatory. Eradicating poverty would prevent many of its adverse effects, which contribute to a vicious circle. Our Assembly should call on all member States to ratify Articles 30 and 31 of the Charter and ensure that national constitutions enshrine the basic rights set out in these articles.

56. IISD-SDG Knowledge Hub, 1 September 2020, “[39 Countries Form Alliance for Poverty Eradication](#)”.