

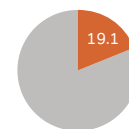
## “ Country recommendation

Cyprus should take action to advance civil society participation in policy-making, ensuring that children are included in all steps of this process.

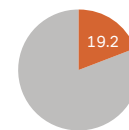
## Country Profile 2022



# Cyprus



**Child Population:**  
**171,476**  
(19.1% of total population)



**Child Poverty Rate:**  
**19.2% (2021) ▼\***

\* lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)

## European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

In this year's *European Semester Country Report for Cyprus*, children are only visible indirectly; when there is attention on measures related to maternal employment, 'market needs' and education. In fact, the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC), observes that **children are portrayed only as 'future workers'** and not as individuals bearing rights that must be recognised and upheld.

The country report does not represent the needs of children and the reality on the ground. It also does not include issues of child poverty and social exclusion. There are mentions of early childhood education and

care (ECEC) for under 3-year-olds but primarily in relation to women's employability. 'Children's development' is not referred to anywhere. ECEC is viewed mainly through the lens of employability, even though a strategy is expected to be implemented in 2024 according to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

As with many children across Europe, children in Cyprus have been unhappy with the education they receive. Despite this, issues in the Cypriot educational system in terms of achievement are only aligned with market needs. In fact, the country report focuses extensively on **education**, but it **mainly references on 'training and market needs', teachers' assessment schemes and student attainment**, rather than focusing on quality education.

There is **no mention of children in alternative care (CiAC) and deinstitutionalisation**. According

to the PCCPWC, this has never been discussed or considered an issue in Cyprus, despite their ongoing efforts to explain the devastating impact that living in institutions has on children's lives.

There is also **no mention of children's right to be heard, mental health and well-being, or children's rights in the digital environment**.

Children with a migrant background and efforts to integrate them into the educational system (supported by the ESF+) are mentioned but without elaboration. There is also no mention of the needs of people fleeing Ukraine and the need to adjust to changing situations, primarily from a fiscal perspective. The PCCPWC have concerns regarding the existing efforts for effective integration, and the lack of involvement of Local Authorities. Our member believes that the country report should have pointed out the need

for Government services to link to Local Authorities, and strongly recommend that integration programmes should be run by communities, decentralised and adjusted to the needs of the specific people within the community. Adjustments should not only be fiscal but based on changing needs, especially to meet the needs of children and their full integration into the education system and the community.

Although the pandemic and its consequences are included, there is no adequate reference to children or how the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities.

The PCCPWC welcomed the recognition that there is very little involvement of civil society, with the comment in the chapter on public administration/local government stating that 'despite the *Better Regulation Project*, open public consultation of legislation is rare at an early stage'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *European Semester Country Report for Cyprus*, Annex 11, p.43.

Although the report lacks content that directly focuses on investing in children, the PCCPWC welcomed the statement – ‘both the ESF+ and Cyprus’ RRP<sup>2</sup> will support measures to strengthen early childhood education and care in Cyprus by focusing on equal access and affordable services. Tackling these challenges will help Cyprus to reach the 2030 EU headline target on employment.’<sup>3</sup>

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The Recommendations included in the country report need to address the needs on the ground sufficiently. For example, in the [Country Specific Recommendations for Cyprus](#), the European Commission made four recommendations focusing on growth, environment, energy etc. However, there was no direct mention of children or education.

Nevertheless, reforms within the National Reform Programme (NRP) and the NRRP, if successful, will benefit children and adults. For example, in education and health care, several suggested reforms would benefit children.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

#### Child poverty in Cyprus

[Cyprus has a total child population of 171,476, 19.2% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021. Children are not adequately considered in general decision-making in the country.](#) During the COVID-19 pandemic and in its aftermath, income, energy crisis, and housing have become the main issues, completely disregarding the effect they have on children’s mental health and well-being.

According to the Pancyprrian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children, the children most in need in Cyprus are:

- All children with a migration background – not only Ukrainian children fleeing the war. For example, a large number of Syrian children have arrived on the island in the past few years. Many of them are still not integrated in their communities, cannot speak the language and most of their adult relatives are not working full time.
- Among children with a migrant background, unaccompanied minors especially, are increasing in numbers and they are not receiving the appropriate supports they need.

These children need adequate programmes for learning the local language and, where possible, such programmes should be offered to their families as well. Integrating the children who are

most in need through sustainable community programmes that will encourage all family members to do the same is crucial to resolve many of the barriers these children are currently facing.

Additionally, there is an urgent need for policies in Cyprus in the following areas:

- An adequate Minimum Income Scheme that would allow decent living conditions.
- Housing schemes for those who cannot afford rent (these have increased drastically over the past three years).
- Integration programmes for newcomers in schools and in communities with widespread awareness raising within the communities.

The PCCPWC believes that children should be seen as citizens, with needs to be met outside the family and not only through it. Additionally, the organisation has concerns

<sup>2</sup> (Editor’s Note) RRP = Recovery and Resilience Plan.

<sup>3</sup> [European Semester Country Report for Cyprus](#), Annex 12, p.46.

regarding the current method of offering financial support to families with children. The government should explore alternative ways to ensure children can access the key services they need. Such as making the services free for all children in need. Often parents use funds that are expected to directly support children, on other items or household bills. This often means that some children cannot access childcare or extracurricular activities.

## European Child Guarantee

### Cyprus National Action Plan

The [Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee](#) asked Member States to submit a [National Action Plan \(NAP\)](#) outlining how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at national level by 15 March 2022. However, **some countries had yet to publish their NAP when Eurochild members provided their input. This is the case for Cyprus.**

The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children were not asked to partake in any preparatory processes for the NAP. The organisation has been informed that the NAP would be drafted after responses from the different Ministries have been received. At that stage, they expect that a consultation about the draft NAP would be opened. A draft was shared with the PCCPWC in March 2022, and a consultation with children was planned for April 2022. However, the consultation was postponed at the last minute, and no further date was offered. **The PCCPWC has shared comments with the Ministry and requested a face-to-face meeting to discuss them but has not received a response to this request.** In the draft seen in March, the PCCPWC could see potential to improve the lives of children growing up in poverty with the indicated activities. However, there was nothing concrete regarding impactful policy measures.

The PCCPWC felt that **the drafted NAP presented a 'rosy' picture**

**of children's lives in Cyprus** and portrayed no real need for further investment in children, which is far from accurate. Most of the proposed actions ended in 2027. This is concerning as the European Child Guarantee should cover the period until 2030.

Most of the mentioned actions and policy measures did not include a specific budget and relied on national resources for implementation. The **lack of transparency** regarding funding is worrying, and **raises questions over the Child Guarantee's implementation in Cyprus** and accountability for the government's (in)action. PCCPWC worries that this lack of transparency could allow the government to cite 'insufficient funds' as a reason to cancel actions and policy measures in the NAP.

Most actions and policy measures in the March draft related to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. The PCCPWC stress that fighting child poverty and social exclusion needs to be addressed collectively by

all authorities, including local authorities and civil society. They feel that the real needs of children, and the goal of lifting them out of poverty and social exclusion, were not understood nor considered in preparing this draft.

Overall, the PCCPWC was disappointed that **the March draft NAP included many actions and policy measures already implemented.** This suggests that the Government lacks vision and is not planning for a sustainable improvement of children's well-being and eliminating poverty in Cyprus.

In fact, the current actions and policy measures are not effectively combating child poverty and social exclusion. This is why we need bolder commitments and forward thinking in the Child Guarantee National Action Plan.

**A consultation with children was held in October 2022.** Shortly after, it is believed that the NAP was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. However, the timing of this approval **puts into question**

**whether the information from the consultation with children has actually been included in the NAP.** Therefore, it needs to be determined how the implementation and monitoring of the NAP will be carried out and how children and civil society organisations will be involved. **The PCCPWC is aware that a committee has been created to monitor and evaluate the NAP.** However, to their knowledge, no civil society organisations are in membership at this time.

The PCCPWC has advocated for children to be involved in the drafting of the NAP. The organisation could have helped the ministries collect children's views and suggestions before the beginning of the drafting process. This was a missed opportunity for the government. Commenting on an already finalised draft, without taking on board comments from stakeholders to influence or amend it in any way, does not equate to meaningful involvement.

If the PCCPWC had the opportunity to provide input, they would have proposed measures that would bring forward:

- deinstitutionalisation and alternatives to institutions that could be considered;
- how to meaningfully and sustainably achieve child participation in public life;
- what 'quality education and ECEC' should be all about;
- how linking market needs to education could benefit the lived experiences of children;
- how to meaningfully include children with migrant backgrounds, not only within the school environment but in the community, supporting their families in this process;
- the importance of prevention, as opposed to therapy, including children's mental health, reproductive and sexual education, nutrition, substance abuse etc.;
- the need for child protection in all environments, including online;

- the need to address violence and bullying more substantially.

The PCCPWC's main recommendation would be to bring all actions and measures in line with the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) and view all children residing in Cyprus equally without discrimination based on one's disability, migrant background etc.

## EU Funding

### Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There is a variety of European funds available in Cyprus for programmes investing in children. **The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children is aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional, and local levels to invest in children.**

One of the main principles of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) regulation is social dialogue and civil society engagement. However, the PCCPWC states that this has been very limited in Cyprus and has been, unfortunately, subsiding over the last three years, with the pandemic often being used as a pretext.

The restructuring of social services in Cyprus (pending since 2013, with no progress on the matter until recently), is expected to be funded by 85% through ESF+. This is reported in the country report: 'To foster equal opportunities and social inclusion, the ESF+ will support measures to restructure social welfare services in Cyprus and to establish a new network of social inclusion services for people with disabilities. These measures will also be key to reaching the 2030 EU headline target on poverty reduction.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [European Semester Country Report for Cyprus](#), p.47

However, the PCCPWC is unaware of what will be funded by ESF+ and how this will be decided. This issue is directly linked to the fact that the existing legislation on children (using a Law from 1959 with numerous amendments and by-laws on different issues such as corporal punishment, family violence, child-friendly justice etc.) is still pending. It is unknown as to what the new law will include, or when it will be brought to Parliament for voting. The PCCPWC was involved (both as the PCCPWC and as Children's Parliament) in the drafting of the proposal for the restructuring of the social services (2019), but there has been no feedback or face-to-face discussions since submitting comments, and no information or updates on its progress.

**The PCCPWC was heavily involved in drafting the Health Strategy for Children in 2017,** and both the PCCPWC and

the Children's Parliament are participating in the monitoring and evaluation committee. The PCCPWC also influenced the original proposed actions and policies, and many of their suggestions were accepted. The PCCPWC continue to be consulted and asked for suggested updates on this strategy. Due to the lack of funding transparency in Cyprus, it is impossible to state if the programmes within the strategy are funded or co-funded by ESF+. However, this is a good example of the importance of child participation and real involvement in policymaking and monitoring and evaluation by civil society, led by the Ministry of Health.

### **Priorities for EU funding in Cyprus**

On 28 January 2021, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement that compels Member

States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23.4% - AROPE 2017–2019) to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty.<sup>5</sup> Cyprus is one of the countries bound by this agreement.

The PCCPWC therefore calls on the Government of Cyprus to prioritise investment in:

- Restructuring of social services, including a new network of social inclusion services not limited to children/people with disabilities (as proposed in the NRRP and the NAP).
- Enhancing education and community measures aimed at students (primary and secondary levels) with a migrant background for better integration and inclusion.
- Supporting the Action Plan on Early Childhood Education and Care (to be drafted in 2023) through ESF+ and NRRP, as stated in the country report.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013

<sup>6</sup> European Semester Country Report for Cyprus, p.48.