

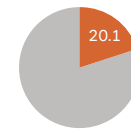
“ Country recommendation

Belgium should take action to systematically consult a representative group of children to allow meaningful participation of children in policy decisions that impact their lives.

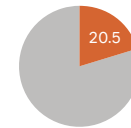
Country Profile 2022



Belgium



Child Population:
2.32 million
(20.1% of total population)



Child Poverty Rate:
20.5% (2021) ▼*

* [lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019](#)

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Office of Birth and Childhood \(l'Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance - ONE\)](#)

[Child Rights Coalition Flanders \(Kinderrechtencoalitie Vlaanderen\)](#)

European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

Overview of the country report: identification of children in need

This year's *European Semester Country Report for Belgium* covers some areas affecting children in the country, especially in terms of **education**. The country report states that quality of education is not in line with the high investments included in the national budgets. The Office of Birth and Childhood (ONE) and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders argue this problem is related to the complexity of the education system, which consists of a mixture of private, public, and subsidised schools. Moreover, the competences of education fall on the regions or 'communities' – (Region of Flanders and the 'French speaking community of Belgium', composed by the Region Brussels-Capital and Wallonia), the provinces,

and the municipalities, adding **fragmentation to the management of education** and leading to very different results of investments.

The significant **gap in educational outcomes** depending on students' socio-economic and migrant background is also raised, along with other challenges related to teacher shortages, digital skills gaps, and children with special needs.

The differences in terms of child poverty between Belgium's three regions (the capital Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders) is also highlighted. For instance, while the national average was at 15.6% in 2020, in Brussels 41% of children were living in poverty in 2019. Eurochild members welcome the recognition of the urgent need to strengthen 'active social inclusion', referring to planned investments in childcare and social housing.

Regarding **childcare**, the report points out that the participation

of young children (0-3 years old) in child care is high in the general population (54.6%), but it falls sharply among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (34.3%). Even though the shortage of places in childcare facilities affects the whole country, this is especially critical in **the region of Flanders, where they are facing a childcare crisis**, with a critical lack of staff. More effort needs to be put on making the care profession more attractive with relevant training, better salaries, and overall working conditions. With such a high child-to-worker ratio, this crisis has the risk of becoming a child protection issue.

There is **no direct mention of children besides these two topics**. However, matters concerning employment, housing affordability, climate resilience, sustainability, and road congestion – which are discussed in the report – impact children's lives as well. For instance, the report briefly mentions actions, under the National Recovery and

Resilience Plan (NRRP), to support deinstitutionalisation of persons with disabilities in Wallonia. This year's report for Belgium **fails to address children with a migrant background, the situation of children in alternative care in Flanders, and mental health**. Urgent reforms are particularly needed for the latter, especially to address the long waiting lists and affordability of mental healthcare.

Overall, **the country report does not address children's needs from a rights perspective**. Children's rights are not made explicit in the report or the recommendations in general and when so, it is only regarding education and enhancing its market relevance. Similarly, the emphasis on the green transition does not include a focus on the child rights perspective, nor on housing affordability.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

In the [Country Specific Recommendations for Belgium](#), Eurochild members welcome the social recommendation to improve 'performance and inclusiveness of the education and training system, including by strengthening the quality and labour market relevance of the vocational education and training and of teachers' career paths and training'.¹ However, this recommendation is broad and does not relate to children's rights exclusively, but rather to the socio-economic utility of education.

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

Child poverty in Belgium

Belgium [has a total child population of 2.32 million, 20.5% of which live at risk of poverty and](#)

[social exclusion in 2021](#). Behind this number, we can identify **specific groups of children** namely children in low-income households (particularly in single-parent households), children with a migration background with disabilities, and children in alternative care. The pressing services are affordable housing, education, and childcare.

A good example of interventions that can contribute to the mitigation of child poverty rates is Krijt vzw's activity, which helps schools to identify and tackle financial barriers for students growing up in poverty by setting up trajectories and training for schools and teachers.

The Office of Birth and Childhood asks the **French-speaking community of Belgium** to prioritise investment on:

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC), by investing in quality care, increasing the

number of places offered and making the profession more

attractive through the provision and expansion of preventive services.

The Flemish Government's Coalition for the Future of the Flemish Community wants to invest on:

- Providing accessible, affordable, and quality ECEC, by lowering the child-to-worker ratio, improving the working conditions of professionals, and making childcare facilities more inclusive for children with disabilities and/or with special needs.
- Increasing the pace of construction of social housing, while making the housing subsidies more accessible, and tackling discrimination in the private housing market.
- Ensuring that education acts as a social equaliser, by introducing the maximum investment in secondary education, moving away from

early tracking and working towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in the 'regular' education system.

European Child Guarantee

Belgium National Action Plan

The [Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee](#) asked Member States to submit a National Action Plan (NAP) that would outline how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at national level by 15 March 2022. These Action Plans should indicate the children most in need, the planned and existing policy actions, and measures to support them, and a monitoring and evaluation framework. The plans should also be drafted in consultation with children, civil society, and national authorities.

[The National Action Plan of Belgium](#) was published in August

¹ 2022 Country Specific Recommendations for Belgium, p. 12.

2022. Eurochild member, the Office of Birth and Childhood, was slightly involved in the drafting of the NAP. According to their experience, **real and meaningful participation was not possible** due, among other things, to tight deadlines.

Unfortunately, children were not involved at all in the drafting of the NAP.

However, the Belgian government conducted several bilateral meetings with civil society organisations such as Eurochild or the Child Rights Coalition Flanders, although only upon civil society taking the initiative. The Child Rights Coalition Flanders also published a [position paper](#) outlining the gaps in current policies and putting forward recommendations to address these gaps. This paper was presented to the national coordinator, and to different federal authorities and entities that provided input on the NAP.

A **meeting to consult various civil society organisations** was eventually organised within the framework of the Platform on Combating Poverty. The National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRK/CNDE), a coordination platform gathering 90 governmental and non-governmental actors in the children's rights realm in Belgium, was also consulted in the process. For instance, ONE participated through an informal coordination network, the Centre interdisciplinaire des droits de l'enfant (CIDE), which is in turn a member of CNDE.

However, it did not render meaningful and timely participation as the content of the NAP was already decided upon. This participation was also very much **focused on organisations working on child poverty, rather than children rights**. In addition, the specific complexity and administrative fragmentation of Belgium did not help. Finally, the recommendations made by civil society organisations during this

meeting were added as an annex to the NAP.

ONE and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders believe that the creation of an ad hoc platform for civil society organisations, with child-rights and poverty-oriented NGOs working together, for the drafting of the NAP would have improved the resulting plan. Should they receive a stronger mandate related to the Child Guarantee, the NCRK/CNDE could provide a platform for civil society to participate.

Overall, **a structural and overarching approach to child poverty and social exclusion is missing**. As opposed to a fundamental rights approach, several of the listed measures consist of temporary projects or are optional for the institutions involved (i.e. schools, local governments).

ONE and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders welcomed the appointment of a national coordinator and were pleased to

see that the **recommendations made by civil society were included in the annex**, which may prove helpful for accountability reasons. The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country but fails to propose new measures to address their needs. In fact, **the Belgian NAP is limited to an overview of existing measures**, without an assessment of the current actions in place. This is insufficient, as data and research show that child poverty and social exclusion are still an issue in Belgium, as acknowledged in the NAP itself.

Some existing measures that did not fit within the scope/aim of that particular section of the NAP were also included. For instance, the 'maximum invoice' in Flemish education targets all children and does not enable children with disabilities to participate. Moreover, some measures that constitute a good practice were omitted, such as the community health centres in Flanders, enhancing healthcare accessibility (wijkgezondheidscentra). Finally,

numerous measures were vaguely described and in several cases a description was missing.

ONE and Child Rights Coalition Flanders expressed some concerns regarding the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the NAP, especially due to the **high level of Belgian territorial and political decentralisation**. A coordinated response to child poverty and social exclusion is therefore challenging. However, they are hopeful in light of the compromise to include civil society in the monitoring and evaluation. The first evaluation will take place in 2024, which is sooner than the evaluation in five years put forward by the European Commission.

EU Funding

Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Belgium for actions that invest in children.

ONE and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders are fairly aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional and local levels to invest in children, but there are some barriers to introducing EU-funded projects. For instance, the process to apply for project-based funding is not only very complex, but also very burdening especially for small NGOs. This is foremost related to the high accountability standards required at every step of the application procedure and the lack of sustainability for these funds after the project lifespan. Moreover, language barriers often make it more difficult to find partners in other European countries, for example for organisations working in Wallonia due to a low level of English speakers in this region.

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.

The rest of Member States, such as Belgium, should allocate an ‘appropriate’ amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty. In this framework, ONE and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders call on Belgium to prioritise investment in child poverty, more specially in the areas mentioned before, namely childcare, healthcare, social housing, and education.

Children should be the ones setting the priorities on funding that primarily affects them. Therefore, ONE and the Child Rights Coalition Flanders stressed the importance of listening to children and evaluate their needs and desires to set such funding priorities.

