



ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”

Malta

2017

*Mario Vassallo & Anna Borg
June 2017*



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
Directorate C — Social Affairs
Unit C.2 — Modernisation of social protection systems

Contact: Giulia Pagliani

E-mail: Giulia.PAGLIANI@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

**ESPN Thematic Report on
Progress in the implementation
of the 2013 EU Recommendation
on “Investing in children:
Breaking the cycle of
disadvantage”**

Malta

2017

Mario Vassallo & Anna Borg

The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in July 2014 on the initiative of the European Commission to provide high-quality and timely independent information, advice, analysis and expertise on social policy issues in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

The ESPN is managed by the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and APPLICA, together with the European Social Observatory (OSE).

For more information on the ESPN, see:

<http://ec.europa.eusocialmain.jsp?catId=1135&langId=en>

***Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers
to your questions about the European Union.***

Freephone number (*):

00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(*) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission, however it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://www.europa.eu>).

© European Union, 2017

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged

Contents

- SUMMARY..... 4
- 1 OVERALL SITUATION WITH REGARD TO CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION 5
- 2 ASSESSMENT OF OVERALL APPROACH AND GOVERNANCE..... 7
- 3 PILLAR 1 – ACCESS TO RESOURCES..... 9
- 4 PILLAR 2 – ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE QUALITY SERVICES 10
- 5 PILLAR 3 – CHILDREN’S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE 12
- 6 ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND CHILD WELL-BEING IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER 13
- 7 MOBILISING RELEVANT EU FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS 14
- REFERENCES 17

Summary

Malta is concerned about the fact that, despite a growing economy over the last few years, poverty, though not so obvious at the surface level, persists. However, substantial gains have been achieved in the form of a reduction in the number of persons at risk of poverty, as a result of very specific policies. The overall reduction in at-risk-of-poverty levels is readily reflected in households with children. Single parents with children have experienced the best rate of positive change, but concerns remain in relation to two-adult households with one dependent child.

Change has been brought about primarily as a result of a two-pronged approach: a) job creation; and b) targeted measures and initiatives. The basic tenet of planners has been that the availability of jobs is the most secure way to decrease poverty. In the context of a growing economy this was achieved, and effectively Malta has transformed itself from an emigration country into an immigration country with many non-nationals seeking work in Malta. The availability of work opportunities by itself does not necessarily reduce poverty, and these had to be complemented by targeted initiatives and various active labour market schemes and policies – in order to stimulate the employment rates of those who were previously relying on benefits and those who were not in work or seeking employment, especially women. These measures include the ‘tailoring of benefits scheme’, which allows individuals to retain social benefits for a specific period; and the ‘in-work benefit scheme’, which provides a financial top-up to low-earners with children in order to make work pay. Simultaneously, free childcare was provided to working parents, and breakfast clubs were introduced in government schools. During the summer months parents can send their children to Skolasajf, summer schools which concentrate on character formation and skill development. Special units, such as the multi-disciplinary CDAU (Child Development Advisory Services), seek to address unusual problems affecting children at a very early stage. It is to be noted that free childcare was not aimed primarily at solving children’s own problems but those of their parents, and as such the scheme does not meet the criteria of breaking the cycle of disadvantage for all children. However, in overall terms these active labour market schemes have been positive even if not universal. There are still gaps in access, especially in respect of family units caught in situations that in no way allow them to benefit from existing work opportunities – because they are afflicted by mental ill-health, addiction problems, abuse or other social problems. The argument that measures should not entice persons to remain dependent on social security is a very strong one, but schemes that specifically cater for these residual groups are necessary and urgent.

A number of national strategies have been launched over the last few years to address major specific issues, primary among which are early school-leaving and obesity. It is still quite early to assess the long-term effect of these policies, but the fact that they now exist reflects an awareness that targeted action is required. What has not been firmly addressed yet are the problems associated with the institutional care of children. Children’s homes, originally set up by the Church, have been radically reformed by their carers. Fostering has become much more widespread. But the homes lack the level of institutional state support required, especially to address the problems created by children with very challenging behaviour. Not only are specialised services insufficient because of a lack of funding, but the long-felt need has not been addressed for a specialised, rehabilitation-oriented but secure place, manned by professionals, to deal with the very severe issues created by this group of children with very challenging behaviour.

The role of children in decision-making in areas directly affecting them is still very limited in Malta, but the Commissioner for Children and the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society have taken seminal steps in this regard, and one hopes these will be followed through.

Malta has made quite ample use of EU financial resources to enable it to develop the policies that have been implemented. Commitment of funds has been especially strong in

the area of job creation and the provision of the support services described above. But in other areas, use has hitherto been weak. In the current situation, right in the middle of an election campaign, it is practically impossible to get reliable answers as to why this is the case.

Prioritised recommendations:

1. Develop specialised service packages, including free childcare, to cover vulnerable children coming from disadvantaged families (such as migrant children) who would benefit most, regardless of the employment status of their parents.
2. Ensure that the issue of quality in childcare is given priority.
3. Ensure that after-school services become available in all schools and that all children can access them.
4. Continue the active labour market schemes, such as the tapering of benefits and the in-work benefit schemes.
5. Continue to actively curb early school-leaving.
6. Continue offering the youth guarantee scheme.
7. Implement the National Children's Policy.
8. Find ways to extend decision-making by children in areas that affect them directly.

1 Overall situation with regard to child poverty and social exclusion

Over the last few years, Malta has experienced a steady decline in the risk of poverty among children. Table 1 and Figure 1 show that all the indicators have started to show a downward trend, except in respect of the categories comprising two adults with one dependent children and households without dependent children, after the increases experienced around 2009. The levels reported in 2015 are close to those in 2007, and in some respects (especially single persons with dependent children) are substantially lower.

Table 1: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by household type, Malta (%)

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Single person with dependent children	68.2	69.5	74.1	74.8	65.8	65.8	60.0	64.1	56.9
Two adults with one dependent child	16.4	13.2	15.3	14.8	18.2	19.0	19.3	15.6	16.2
Two adults with two dependent children	18.3	19.5	18.7	18.1	21.4	22.4	26.7	23.8	19.0
Two or more adults with dependent children	17.6	17.7	19.7	21.1	22.0	25.1	25.4	24.1	21.3
Three or more adults with dependent children	13.0	13.9	17.4	22.5	21.0	26.9	24.2	25.3	21.8
Households without dependent children	18.9	19.5	17.9	18.4	19.6	19.2	19.8	20.1	20.9

Source: SILC [ilc_peps03]

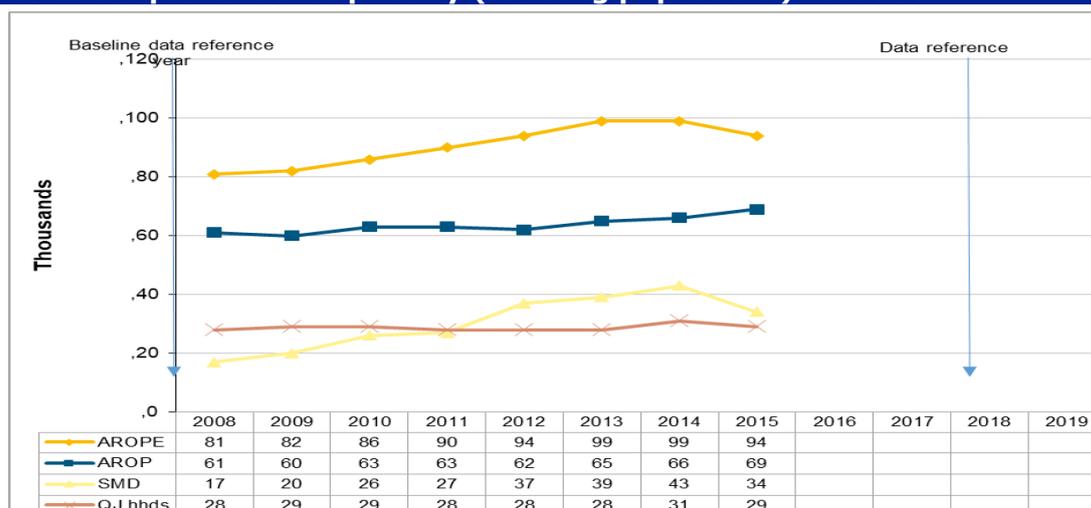
Figure 1: People at risk of poverty (working population) in Malta


Table 2 and Figure 2 below in turn confirm this declining trend. The indicators for AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion), AROP (at risk of poverty), Quasi-Jobless Families and SMD (severe material deprivation) all show very positive trends in respect of children aged up to 18. The only figure available for 2016 (in respect of SMD) actually suggests that when the full figures for 2016 are available, record improvements will be registered.

Table 2: At-risk-of-poverty indicators –Malta, persons less than 18, %
a) AROPE

People at risk of poverty or social exclusion [ilc_peps01]

GEO/TIME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	19.7	20.1	20.3	21.2	22.1	23.1	24.0	23.8	22.4	:
Less than 18 years	23.9	25.0	26.5	26.7	27.8	31.0	32.0	31.3	28.2	:

b) AROP

At-risk-of-poverty rate (cut-off point: 60% of median equivalised income after social transfers)

GEO/TIME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	15.1	15.3	14.9	15.5	15.6	15.1	15.7	15.9	16.3	:
Less than 18 years	19.8	20.4	21.2	22.1	23.0	23.1	24.0	24.1	23.4	:

c) Quasi-jobless

GEO/TIME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total <60 yrs	9.6	8.6	9.2	9.2	8.9	9.0	9.0	9.8	9.2	
Less than 18 years	10.0	9.8	10.4	9.7	10.0	10.4	11.2	12.3	10.8	

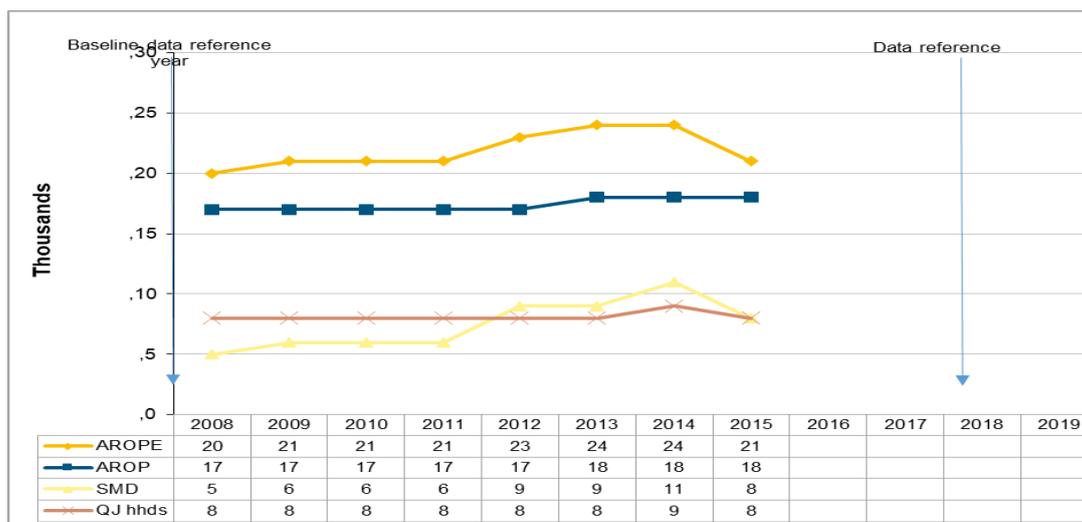
d) Severe material deprivation

GEO/TIME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	4.4	4.3	5.0	6.5	6.6	9.2	9.5	10.2	8.1	4.4
Less than 18 years	6.4	6.3	7.2	7.7	7.7	12.3	11.8	13.9	10.4	6.4

Source: Eurostat SILC

These gains are the result of focused policy measures. Obviously problems still remain, but the trends are very encouraging.

Figure 2: At-risk-of-poverty indicators – Malta, persons less than 18, thousands



2 Assessment of overall approach and governance

Child poverty in Malta has been reduced as a result of two main factors:

- a) a strong economy and
- b) targeted measures to make gainful employment of parents attractive and easier.

2.1 A strong economy

Over the last few years, the Maltese economy has been doing quite well, with unemployment reaching a record low, and the deficit controlled to the extent that for the first time a surplus has been registered. In recent years, the construction industry has again been extensively engaged: traditionally the Maltese economy always responds very positively when construction activity increases, because of the multiplier effect. The positive effect of this trickles down to individual families and creates work for a wide number of trades. In addition to this, tourist arrivals have continued to increase and the financial sector has continued to expand. These prime movers have made Malta very attractive even to non-Maltese workers, to the extent that instead of being an emigration country, Malta has now become an immigration country for persons seeking work. It is claimed that there are at least 30,000 foreign workers in Malta at present. Naturally there have also been negative effects resulting from this strong economic activity, especially affecting the environment: on the one hand, urban sprawl is heavily reducing open spaces; and, on the other, housing demand has raised rent levels beyond the abilities of the more needy. But the overall effect on child poverty, in a situation in which the economy is growing, has been positive.

2.2 Targeted measures

A set of targeted measures have been introduced over the last few years to reduce child poverty. Some of these were not directly aimed at reducing child poverty as such, but had a direct positive result in this direction. The main ones are set out below.

2.2.1 Free childcare

Free childcare was introduced in 2014 for all parents who are either in work or in training. The scheme was introduced with the aim of helping families achieve a work/life

balance. The childcare service is provided either directly through government services or alternatively through private registered childcare centres. ‘Parents in work’ refers to both parents/guardians who are employed, or a single mother/father/guardian who is employed and paying social security contributions. ‘Parents in education’ refers to parents/guardians who are pursuing their education, leading to a recognised qualification. Whilst the employment of parents is one of the best ways to break the cycle of poverty, as argued earlier, the decision to exclude children under 3 whose parents are not in work is likely to be detrimental to the children most in need.

The age group for this scheme is for children from 3 months up to 3 years of age. Free childcare is terminated once the child is eligible to enrol in a free kindergarten.

2.2.2 Breakfast clubs service in schools

The breakfast clubs service is open to primary-school students whose parents are in employment. The service, offered in every primary state school, gives students the opportunity to have a healthy breakfast before school commences, and to interact with other students through play and other activities. Breakfast clubs operate on a daily basis on school days.

2.2.3 Klabb 3-16 [after-school services] and Skolasajf [summer school]

The Foundation for Educational Services¹ also runs Klabb 3-16, an after-school service which runs throughout the year in 30 government schools. Similarly, the government operates *Skolasajf*, which is a summer programme full of educational and fun activities for children aged between 3 and 16. Parents can make use of any *Klabb 3-16* or *Skolasajf* centre according to their needs, although the services are not available in all localities. The services are open to children attending state, Church or independent schools for a nominal payment. The overall effect of this has been to make it easier for parents to engage in gainful employment. This service is not available in all schools and there are long waiting lists in some cases.

2.2.4 Tapering of benefits

The tapering of benefits scheme is intended to introduce persons in receipt of unemployment assistance (UA), social assistance (SA) and social assistance for single unmarried parents (SUP) to employment. Tapering of benefits is given for a three-year period to those beneficiaries who become engaged in employment, and is also given to those who become self-employed as long as they earn the national minimum wage or more. Eventually this scheme was extended to single parents with children under the age of 23. In these cases, the tapering of benefits is given for a three-year period to those single parents who become engaged in employment or self-employment as long as they work at least for 10 hours per week earning the hourly rate equivalent to the national minimum wage. Before the introduction of the tapering of benefits scheme, social benefits were stopped as soon as a person found gainful employment: whereas with this scheme benefits are reduced gradually over a three-year period, thus making employment more attractive than simply staying at home.

2.2.5 In-work benefit

The in-work benefit scheme was introduced to cater for low-earning couples and single parents with children under the age of 23. The idea is to encourage such persons to enter or remain active in the labour market rather than switch to benefits, by enhancing their income. The maximum rate paid to couples is €1,000 for each child per year, and €1,200 for each child per year for single parents. This benefit is open to couples where: both

¹ See: <http://fes.org.mt/>

people are in employment; combined annual earnings/net profit from gainful work is between €10,000 and €20,400; and the annual earnings/net profit of each of them is not less than €3,000. They must have children under 23 who live at the same address. Couples also qualify where only one of the spouses/partners works and whose annual income from work is between €6,600 and €13,000, provided they have children under 23 living with them. Single parents qualify when their annual earnings/net profit from gainful work is between €6,600 and €15,000 and they have children under 23 living with them.

The measures described above clearly indicate that poverty-related issues in respect of children have been focused and acted upon very specifically in Malta. This is further illustrated in the forthcoming sections in which the individual Pillars are discussed. The policies promulgated and actions undertaken are part of a search for an integrated and multi-dimensional approach, particularly in the educational, medical and social benefits fields. In these three specific domains, the proposals of the *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* have undoubtedly been taken on board. In other areas, especially in respect of the economy, the starting point of policy in Malta has not been children, but a belief that if the economy works and wealth is generated, children would be the first to benefit. Indeed, Malta’s unstinting efforts to support the *participation of parents in the labour market* (to use the exact words used in the Recommendation), have been its major success over the last few years and have therefore had a very positive effect on children’s lives. The other area, also referred to below, in which progress has been slow, is the creation of a ‘children’s rights ethos’ and an effective infrastructure which implements it. Although successive Children’s Commissioners have given attention to this domain, and the President’s Foundation has actually undertaken specific initiatives, not enough has been undertaken: but what has can serve as a solid basis for future developments.

In summary, therefore, it can safely be said that although in Malta there does not exist a formally integrated and multi-dimensional approach dealing with *all* the aspects covered by the Recommendation, extensive work has been undertaken to address most of the issues it raises. What is missing is an integrated multi-dimensional structure that caters, holistically, for *all* the issues raised by the Recommendation, and a clearly defined evidence-based approach that nurtures decision-making based on scientifically collected data covering the various domains in an exhaustive trans-disciplinary way.

3 Pillar 1 – Access to resources

As can be seen above, Malta’s success in reducing poverty is the direct result of policies and measures aimed at stimulating parents to become actively engaged economically rather than stay at home. The various measures discussed in the preceding section had this clear objective: to get people out of their homes (and possible involvement in the black economy) and into the active economy. In particular, the tapering of benefits measure provided a very strong incentive, because it translated into a substantial gain for all those who had previously been relying only on social security payments. The latter can now still be received for the first year on top of wages, and with deductions only being made in the second and third years – by the end of which time it is hoped that recipients would have acclimatised themselves to the culture of active engagement in work, and found jobs which made life sustainable without state support.

The targeted measures supported this basic policy because they provided additional services and benefits in kind (especially in the form of free childcare) for parents, making it harder for them to concoct excuses for not being able to go to work. The strict availability of childcare facilities only to parents in work or in training has actually been criticised because it allegedly does not provide support to the most needy children, whose parents are more unlikely to be in work because of social, mental health or addiction problems.

The implementation of this scheme has not been without criticism. Some argue that if the scheme were extended to non-working parents it would become ineffective. Others insist that in its present form it make matters more difficult for families afflicted by mental ill-health, addiction problems, cases of abuse or other social problems.² Those upholding this argument insist that, as it stands, and in the existing conditions, the current free childcare scheme in Malta works against very poor out-of-work families. It is essential that this is remedied to ensure that policies and programmes, perhaps under a different scheme, are in place to tackle the situation of the most vulnerable families, especially those on a very low income, with weak attachment to the labour market, and/or affected by mental health, addiction and social problems.

The quality of care in some childcare centres has also raised serious questions following a report by the National Audit Office (NAO), which revealed abuse and misconduct by the operators in a minority of childcare centres.³ Amongst other things, the report claimed that there was no enforcement of child capacity restrictions: in one case a centre with a set capacity of 15 children was actually accommodating 87.⁴ Careful scrutiny is required to ensure that children at their most vulnerable age are properly safeguarded.

In respect of specialised care for children who are born with a disadvantage, whether this is physical, psychological or otherwise, the multi-disciplinary Child Development Advisory Unit (CDAU) provides considerable professional support to ensure that problems are caught and treated soon after birth.⁵ In this way the full potential of the individuals is better ascertained. The programmes initiated within the CDAU are eventually followed up through the school system, where medical services are strong: but they require further investment to ensure the right level of support on a multi-disciplinary level as a trans-systemic service.

4 Pillar 2 – Access to affordable quality services

Education (at all levels) and healthcare are completely free in Malta. Medicines for a long list of chronic diseases are also free as part of the national health system. Dental care is also available for free to persons with limited means. The housing authority provides social housing for persons who meet the requirements, and special assistance is provided to families with disabled members. In addition, a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) provide additional, good-quality services that might not be provided by the state. One problem in Malta in this regard is that, although there is statutory provision for revising the assessment of need, this is practically never undertaken in respect of social housing, with the consequence that a culture of entitlement exists. The housing authority is bedevilled by this, because there is no revolving stock of housing; families continue to live in social housing even after they have objectively ceased to be in need.

The set of additional targeted measures described above are also predominantly free of charge. Childcare is free, but parents have to pay for any unused days they book when their children are sick and cannot attend childcare. This raises concerns for low-earning families, who may be tempted to send their children to childcare even when they are sick so as to avoid paying extra for the unused service. Membership of the 3-16 Club or *Skolasajf* carries fees, but these are far below commercial rates, whilst breakfast clubs in

² At present the only chance for such children is to be placed in one of the childcare centres run by the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) around the island. However, placements are not automatic and the centres are not available in each locality. In fact, there are currently only 13 such operating centres across the two islands.

³ See: www.parlament.mt/file.aspx?f=59566, p.94-114.

⁴ See: http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/72273/operators_deny_claims_of_abuse_across_free_childcare_scheme

⁵ The CDAU was set up following a special action-research project run by the Department of Sociology at the University in the late 1980s, managed by one of the authors of this report.

government schools are also free. Fees were justified as a measure to ensure that users feel committed to them, and do not simply register children and then fail to use the services provided.

Within the educational system, specialised services, including psychological and counselling services and medical care, are provided directly through the school system. Teaching support is provided for students with learning difficulties within the school classroom itself through *learning support assistants*, often provided on a one-to-one basis. It is at times claimed that referrals, especially in the case of psychological services, take a long time, and in this area more resources are necessary.

Despite these measures and their success, two major areas of concern exist:

- a) *Children in institutional care*. The number of children in institutional care in Malta has dwindled significantly but a number still exist. A good proportion are children of non-Maltese nationals who have not been fostered. Another group is made up of children with very challenging behaviour. Both groups require special attention.

In respect of the first group, the trend now is to have smaller units and to seek to create a family-like environment in the homes. But since these are primarily run by religious persons and have to employ outside professionals, they are constantly facing financial difficulties. Without an increasing state subvention, the prospects for these institutions continuing their long-standing services are bleak.

In respect of the second group, a more stringent set of difficulties exist. In the absence of a secure place, where personalised rehabilitation programmes run by professionals exist, this group of children and adolescents create enormous problems for those caring for them. They often ‘escape’, and are at times violent. Carers have constantly requested the creation of a secure place where rehabilitation can be entrusted to a team of professionals, but this request has not been acceded to, with the consequence that these children soon get caught, despite the care given, in a cycle of violence and crime outside the homes.⁶

- b) *Preventive services in the community*. Most services provided for children are ‘curative’ rather than ‘preventive’, particularly when children are very young. As part of the strategy for children currently in place, absenteeism from school is also addressed by extension services aimed at influencing the families concerned. But when children are young and still outside schools, no outreach services exist, based on specific scientific research, to address the needs of ‘difficult’ families. This lacuna is very pressing and only through outreach programmes can the nurturing of these children be affected in the long term.

No initiatives have been undertaken in respect of either of these two main concerns since 2013, other than the limited preventive care services undertaken by the Church-run organisation called *Ejjew Għandi* (Come to me), which is also responsible for policies and their implementation in the children’s homes run by the Church.

During the recent electoral campaign, reference was made to providing parental leave on a part-time basis. It is hoped that this issue will be addressed as the new legislation starts settling in.

⁶ Information provided directly through a personal communication and interview with one of the authors of this report.

5 Pillar 3 – Children’s right to participate

5.1 Policies to support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities

There are few policies in place that support the participation of children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities. Many parents complain that children are given a lot of homework to do after school and this takes up a lot of the children’s time. Whilst boys are more likely to be involved in sports through football, in overall terms Maltese children are amongst the most obese children in Europe, with over 40% of children being either overweight or obese.⁷ One reason for this situation stems from the fact that many parents do not view sports as an important subject, and they typically put much more emphasis on homework and academic subjects rather than on sports. Furthermore, because Malta is one of the most overcrowded and built-up countries in the world, in many towns there are hardly any green spaces for children to play in, although it is quite common to find a football ground which mostly serves boys and men.

The vast majority of Maltese children are involved in after-school activities related to the teaching of religious doctrine offered by the Catholic Church, and some have to attend up to three times a week when they are preparing for their confirmation. Other children coming from more affluent families go to ballet or drama classes or are sent to sports classes such as judo, with some having multiple activities during the week. There are few cultural activities which are specifically aimed at children. Children depend on their parents to, for example, attend concerts, go to the theatre or visit an art gallery.

5.2 Mechanisms that promote children’s participation in legal decision-making in areas that affect their lives, in after-school activities and general attention for vulnerable groups of children

The Office of the Commissioner for Children focuses on the protection of children and the promotion of children’s rights whilst ensuring the participation of children. Amongst other things, this office is responsible for the Council for Children. The aim behind this Council is to ‘assist and advise the Commissioner in the work carried out by her Office’. The Council for Children is chaired by the Commissioner and includes: representatives from the ministries responsible for family and social policy, health, education, home affairs, and justice; the Chairperson of the Social Affairs Committee; and a maximum of seven children co-opted on to the council. The Council for Children is required by law to meet a minimum of once every three months.⁸ In 2015, the Council for Children held five meetings.⁹

5.3 Changes in policies or mechanisms since 2013

Since 2013, a number of policies have been formulated and issued:

⁷ See: <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20160509/local/40-of-maltese-boys-are-obese-or-overweight-new-study.611492>

⁸ See: www.tfal.org.mt

⁹ See: Annual Report 2015 retrieved from: <http://tfal.org.mt/en/publications/PublishingImages/Pages/Annual-Reports/Annual%20Report%202015.pdf>

a) A *National Children’s Policy* was issued in 2016. The policy is built around four pillars, namely: i) health services and the healthy lifestyle of the child; ii) the family structure; iii) education; and iv) active participation in the community.¹⁰

b) A *National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social Inclusion, Malta 2014-2024* was also issued in 2014.¹¹

c) A *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019* was launched in June 2014.¹²

d) A *Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta* was published in 2014.¹³

These strategies were formulated after extensive consultations and are bound to have a long-term effect. It is, however, too early to assess the extent to which this is true, and only focused research will be able to provide this kind of evaluation for the medium and long terms. However, the data provided in the first section in respect of poverty levels are very encouraging and augur well for the future if these policies are consistently adhered to.

6 Addressing child poverty and social exclusion and child well-being in the European Semester

The recommendations from the Country Specific Recommendations focus on two main aspects, namely: improving basic skills, and reducing early school-leaving (ESL).

6.1 Improving basic skills

As indicated above, a National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019 was launched in June 2014. The work of the relevant agency (the National Literacy Agency) is based on action plans drawn up every three years by the responsible departments or directorates. Amongst other things the unit offers the NWAR Programme, which is a family literacy programme for students who have not acquired basic skills by the end of year 3.

In October 2014, tablets were introduced in classrooms to promote reading and writing and to enhance the numeracy and digital skills of pupils. Following an evaluation report it was suggested that innovative pedagogical practices using technology should be introduced in the 2016-2017 scholastic year.

The focus to improve basic skills also extends to post-secondary institutions such as the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS).

Since teachers have a fundamental role in raising basic skills, they will be offered more training through the ‘train-the-trainers’ system.

¹⁰ See:

<http://tfal.org.mt/en/professionals/PublishingImages/Pages/Documents/National%20Children%27s%20Policy%202016.pdf>

¹¹ See: www.parlament.mt/file.aspx?f=49869

¹² See: <http://Education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf>

¹³ See: <https://lifelonglearning.gov.mt/dbfile.aspx?id=47>

The EU Agenda on Adult Learning is also being adopted through various courses which aim to reach Level 1 and are addressed to the adult population. Teaching includes basic literacy and numeracy and IT skills courses.

6.2 Reducing early school-leaving

In December 2013, Malta confirmed that it aims to reach the ESL Europe 2020 target of 10 per cent.¹⁴ For this purpose, a strategic plan for ESL was published in 2014.¹⁵ The plan is based on a three-pronged approach to prevent, intervene and compensate. The prevention pillar mentions the free childcare scheme as a means to reduce ESL. However, the report fails to note that not all children are eligible to attend the free childcare scheme. Emphasis is placed on a ‘new curriculum based on learning outcomes in basic skills which include creativity, critical thinking and active citizenship’.

As part of this plan, new vocational subjects – such as engineering technology, information technology, health and social care, hospitality, and agribusiness – were introduced at secondary level. Measures have also been taken to tackle the issue of school absenteeism through psycho-social teams. Initiatives to deal with the issue of ESL include: the introduction of the Youth Focus programme; the Youth Inc. Programme; learning support zones in state secondary schools; the alternative learning programme; and the core curriculum programme. As from the scholastic year 2013-2014, a multi-disciplinary team approach has been adopted to tackle this problem. The team includes youth workers, counsellors, guidance teachers, career advisors, social workers and support workers.

The ‘youth guarantee’ can also be listed as a measure to combat ESL and to give a second chance to those who do not manage to attain a good level of education that will allow them to enter the labour market. The measures include the identification of those who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs): a NEETs activation scheme; traineeships; alternative learning programmes; and secondary education certificate revision classes.¹⁶

7 Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments

The successes and positive trends described in the preceding sections are to a large extent attributable to the financial investment made. Without the use of the EU’s financial instruments, Malta would not have been able to do as much as it has. But a summary of the use of these instruments, in Table 3, shows that Malta’s usage has not been uniform, and could be much further increased.

¹⁴ See: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-mt_en.pdf and <https://mfin.gov.mt/en/Library/Documents/NRP/NRP2016.pdf>

¹⁵ See: <https://lifelonglearning.gov.mt/dbfile.aspx?id=47>

¹⁶ See: <http://education.gov.mt/en/youthguarantee/Documents/More%20About%20our%20Initiatives.pdf>

Table 3: Use of EU financial Instruments – Malta, €

Category Code	Cat. of Intervention Code	Malta	IMPLEMENTATION		
		Total amount of EU money in the programme budget for the 2014-2020	Total Eligible EU Cost Amount	Total Eligible Cost Amount	Total Expenditure Declared Amount
8	8i access jobs	16,000,000.00	15,101,744.80	18,877,181.00	223,079.61
	8ii self empl	4,800,000.00	4,025,255.20	5,031,569.00	0.00
	8iii ALMP				
	8iv				
	8v				
	8vi Integr young				
	8vii				
Total 8		20,800,000.00	19,127,000.00	23,908,750.00	223,079.61
9	9i equal opps	28,000,000.00			
	9ii marginal comm				
	9iii access health				
	9iv	4,000,000.00			
	9v				
	9vi				
Total 9		32,000,000.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
10	10i ESL and ECEC	12,000,000.00			
	10ii Tertiare Ed	7,539,848.00	8,392,984.80	10,491,231.00	2,622,003.00
	10iii LLL	12,000,000.00	3,003,335.20	3,754,169.00	221,667.00
	10iv VET apprentice	6,400,000.00			
Total 10		37,939,848.00	11,396,320.00	14,245,400.00	2,843,670.00
11	11i	8,000,000.00			
	11ii	800,000.00			
Total 11		8,800,000.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	TA	6,353,600.00	6,353,600.00	7,942,000.00	502,188.47
Total		6,353,600.00	6,353,600.00	7,942,000.00	502,188.47
Grand Total		105,893,448.00	36,876,920.00	46,096,150.00	3,568,938.08

Source: EU Commission

Malta's use of funding for job creation (category 8) has been substantial, as the amounts committed clearly show, even in respect of the self-employed. Under equal opportunity initiatives (category 9), however, no money appears to have been committed so far, This leaving the full amount reserved still untouched.¹⁷ Under education and training

¹⁷ It is interesting that on 26 January 2017 the President of Malta complained about the fact that EU money that could be used to help migrant children is 'being lost in bureaucracy'. See:

(category 10), there appear to have been commitments in excess of what was available, according to the data provided by the Commission for the purpose of this report. On the other hand in respect of category 10iv, covering apprenticeships, no commitment appears to have been entered into. The same is true for commitments under enhancing institutional capacity and public administration (category 11).

At the time this report is being written, Malta is in election mode, as a snap election is due to be held in a few weeks' time. It is currently very difficult to have access to reliable information, as whatever is supplied is normally coloured through partisan politics. As such, this commentary does not have any comments to add except that in certain areas it is clear that extensive positive use has been made of EU financial instruments, and the data presented above clearly prove this. In other areas, however, more effort appears to be needed to ensure that valuable sources of funding are not lost.

References

- Commissioner for Children <http://tfal.org.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>
- Commissioner for Children. 2016. Annual Report 2015. <http://tfal.org.mt/en/publications/PublishingImages/Pages/Annual-Reports/Annual%20Report%202015.pdf>
- EU Commission. 2016. Education and Training Monitor – Malta. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-mt_en.pdf
- Foundation for Educational Services. 2017. Childcare. <http://fes.org.mt/>
- Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2017), “Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage: A study of national policies”, European Social Policy Network (ESPN). Brussels: European Commission.
- Malta Government. 2014. A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta. <https://lifelonglearning.gov.mt/dbfile.aspx?id=47>
- Malta Government. Malta: National Reform Programme. 2016. <https://mfin.gov.mt/en/Library/Documents/NRP/NRP2016.pdf>
- Malta Government. EU funds for Malta 2014-2020: Youth Guarantee. <http://education.gov.mt/en/youthguarantee/Documents/More%20About%20our%20Initiatives.pdf>
- Malta Government. 2014. A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019. <http://education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf>
- Malta Parliament 12 Legislatura. 2015. National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social Inclusion, Malta 2014-2024. www.parlament.mt/file.aspx?f=49869
- Malta Parliament. Report by the Auditor General: Public Accounts 2015. www.parlament.mt/file.aspx?f=59566
- Maltatoday 8 December 2016. ‘Operators deny claims of abuse across free childcare scheme.’ http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/72273/operators_deny_claims_of_abuse_across_free_childcare_scheme#.WRMUIuV942w
- Times of Malta. 9 May, 2016. ‘40% of Maltese kids are obese or overweight.’ <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20160509/local/40-of-maltese-boys-are-obese-or-overweight-new-study.611492>
- Times of Malta. 26 January 2017. ‘Funds for migrant children being lost in bureaucracy, President complains: Expresses disappointment at lack of social conscience.’ <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170126/local/funds-for-migrant-children-being-lost-in-bureaucracy-president.637632>
- Vassallo Mario 2015. Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Malta. EU Net.

Annex: Summary Table – Progress since February 2013

Policy area or approach	Overall have policies/ approaches been strengthened, stayed much the same or been weakened since February 2013 (in the light of the EU Recommendation)?		
	Stronger	Little Change	Weaker
Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-dimensional strategy with synergies between policies Children's rights approach & effective mainstreaming of children's policy and rights Evidence-based approach Involvement of relevant stakeholders (including children) 	X	X X X	
Access to resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents' participation in the labour market Child & family income support 	X X		
Access to services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECEC Education Health Housing & living environment Family support & alternative care 	X X X X X		
Children's right to participate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> in play, recreation, sport & cultural activities in decision making 		X X	
Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester	X		
Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments	X		

