



For a Europe which invests in shaping a healthy society,
environment and economy fit for children

COFACE FAMILIES PERSPECTIVE

NOVEMBER 2020



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COFACE Families Europe has always pushed for a society and work-life that are kind to all children and families, without discrimination and based on values of gender equality, human rights, and social inclusion. In the “New Deal for Families of Today”, COFACE calls on the European institutions to invest in child well-being and to shape a healthy society, environment and economy fit for children.¹

In October 2019, together with 100 key stakeholders from across Europe, COFACE Families Europe triggered a discussion on the different dimensions that impact the health and well-being of children, collecting different types of feedback and data.² On this basis, and using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, we have developed our **Child Compass 2030**. The aim of the Child Compass is to guide policy-making and service development in the social field, but also in multiple other fields that impact children and their families.

Since the adoption of the European Commission “Recommendation on Investing in Children” in 2013, the EU monitors families and child policies across member states. **We see two general trends**. On the one hand, family policies are being reviewed across countries to meet new challenges and needs of the great diversity of family forms that have become widely accepted, such as single parent families, patchwork families, rainbow families and many more. In some cases, policies are being strengthened. In other cases, they are being weakened. On the other hand, there is an increasing tendency to focus on the rights of the individual members of the family, most lately foremost on the rights and well-being of children.

With the Child Compass, COFACE Families Europe wants to provide a comprehensive, integrated and long-term strategy that brings both trends together and to develop appropriate 21st century policies to support both children and their families. Putting the well-being and development of children at the centre by no means collides or conflicts with concepts and positions of a family orientated policy, on the contrary. It is the family that is the indispensable place where people stand up and take responsibility for each other. This means that policies focusing on children’s well-being must support families and their inherent capabilities with a focus on empowerment, participation, and strengthening competences of all families in their daily lives.

European and national social and family policies should act towards establishing the conditions for a family to be autonomous, responsible, stable, active and able to independently perform its functions, thus ensuring the well-being of generations. This is the basis for the development of healthy, vital, and creative societies. To fulfil this task, policies must prioritise investing in children and their families and ensure that both children and families receive adequate support through a systemic **two-generation approach** based on the interrelated well-being of children and their parents.

The Child Compass promotes the **operationalisation of this systemic two-generation approach** into programmes addressing both the child and the parent / care provider by fostering their learning and social competences. This includes actions to support parents in their fundamental role, filling gaps in education, training, social inclusion, parenting skills, psychological well-being, access to services, employment and income,³ while also looking **beyond social policy**.





The child is an individual and a member of a family and community with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development and with the right to quality of life. The rights of the child recognised by the UNCRC can be subdivided in the commonly used three Ps: Protection, Provision, Participation.

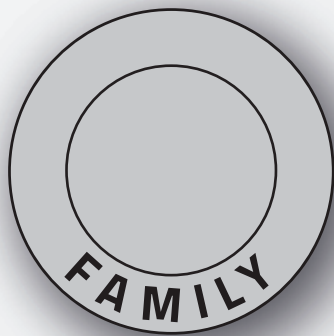
Children need protection as they are dependent on adults and government for their survival and development. While adults can vote and have access to legal redress and formal complaints procedures if their rights are not realised, children are generally excluded from these mechanisms. Children are thus powerless in the policy-making process, and their interests can remain invisible to government if there is not a conscious and systematic effort to protect and promote them.

At the same time, children need provision, such as goods and services to foster their learning and social competences, starting from inclusive early childhood education and care, protection from neglect and abuse, counselling, and psychological support. They are among the largest recipients of public services and vulnerable to government failures and omissions. Practically every area of government policy affects children to some degree and, due to their development stage, the negative effects of a policy or programme on children can result in long-term impacts on their potential as healthy, productive, and peaceful adults. Short-sighted policy-making that fails to take children into account has a negative impact on the future of not only the children but all members of society.

Moreover, children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Participation can take many forms and differing levels of children's involvement – from simple consultation on needs and problems to influence on designs and plans and active involvement with adults in governance structures, all the way to children conceiving of and driving their own development initiatives. To be most effective, meaningful children's participation requires

widespread changes in political and institutional structures, as well as in attitudes, values, and cultural practices, so that children are recognised as citizens and stakeholders. In any participatory process with children, adults are necessarily involved. Thus, capacity building for adults to support children's participation is as important as capacity building for children to voice and make their claims. It is also important to foster parents' consultation and the structural involvement of child rights and family organisations in policy-making.

Decision-makers should systematically apply child rights mainstreaming to assess the impact of an initiative on children and their rights. This will help determining how actions will affect girls and boys differently, how negative effects can be minimized, how actions will affect both early and later childhood, and what can be done to respect, protect and fulfil rights for all children.



The family environment is a key environment. Parents and caregivers are fundamental in the cognitive physical and emotional development of the child. Parents' (quality) time with their children enables the transmission of abilities, skills, aspirations, attitudes, values, self-worth and emotional intelligence that affect how well they do in life. Families can also be considered as "natural" social protection systems. A warm and supportive (grand)parent-child relationship is an essential element of children's well-being and resilience and can limit harm caused by bullying, family poverty, domestic violence.

Parents usually do everything they can to give their children a good future, thereby making sacrifices in their own lives. Studies show that, especially in economically poor families, parents will save as much as they can on their own needs to make spending for their children possible.⁴ Still, there are circumstances that make it impossible for parents to do this, and there always will be children who lack parental support for whatever reason. It is the State's obligation to give parents the best opportunities so that they can give their children the best possible support. There have to be low entrance services that help parents early enough to avoid children falling behind. If, for whatever reason, this situation does occur, children should be looked after by other family members, in family settings. When this is not possible, there should be services that are person-centred, with staff respecting their religion, culture, language, individual choices, and other aspects of their lives.

Modern family life is increasingly diverse and children are more likely to experience different family settings during childhood. Regardless of their family setting, all children must be treated equally. In other words, the partnership status, sexual orientation, or gender status of parents, or their migrant or ethnic minority background should not affect entitlements to child-related support within tax / benefit systems, or access to quality health services (mental and physical health). It is the ambition of COFACE to work towards a family-friendly environment, enabling all families and their members to benefit from a mix of sufficient financial resources, quality services, and adequate

time arrangements in order to live and enjoy their family life in dignity and harmony.

Families can be made vulnerable by external factors, including parents' unemployment and material deprivation, poor housing and unfavourable living conditions, absence of one or both parents, parents' chronic diseases. And by internal factors such as disorders of internal interpersonal relations in the family, parents' pedagogical failures, inadequate emotional bonding and poor communication and transmission of essential emotions such as love and trust between parents and children, and violence in the close environment. When experiencing these challenges, children are at risk of facing more social problems because their feeling of safety and confidence in themselves and confidence in their ability to face the external environment are not formed: difficulties in communication, anxiety, lack of self-control, tendency to engage in conflictual behaviour, and aggression might increase, while other forms of positive cognitive activity might decrease⁵.

Depending on their background and on their children's needs, parents and caregivers might need early intervention family support, including universally-designed family support services such as pre-natal guidance, family planning, parenting support, counselling, family mediation, sexuality and emotional education, respite services, peer support, financial, employment, and education support, psychological support, and more. This is relevant for early childhood, but also interventions in later childhood can have long-lasting positive effects on children's lives.

21st century family policies are needed to ensure support for all families and especially for families in vulnerable situations. Those policies must guarantee parenting and family support, work-life balance, take-up of adequately paid maternity, paternity and parental leaves, carer's leave, support services, flexible work arrangements, and family-friendly workplaces. All these social rights are firmly highlighted in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and they benefit health and well-being of both children and their families.



INTERRELATED WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

COFACE Families Europe wants to shape a healthy and safe environment fit for children and families. We believe that all measures that affect society should be adapted to children, the most vulnerable and valuable elements of our societies. This child-centred approach has always been important for COFACE, but has gained new significance in these new COVID-19 times⁶ in which health and health systems are driving many policy debates.

Children depend on the care of adults in the relationship they live in. The quality of a child's home environment is most influential for their development and parents as well as caregivers play a central guiding role in a child's life. They have the privilege and the duty to care and provide for their children, and this duty requires support from the State. Children will thrive only if their family thrives and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them.

The first years of a child's life provide lifelong foundations for health, development, and well-being. Healthy development requires that children grow and learn in supportive and nurturing families and environments. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are crucial for early brain development, building the foundations for their lifelong health in a process that continues well into adolescence.

Children are no mini adults. Their developing bodies and minds are more vulnerable to poor living conditions such as poverty, inadequate health care, malnutrition, poor public water distribution, inadequate housing and environmental pollution. The effects of disease, malnutrition and poverty threaten the future of children and the future of the societies in which they live. We must ensure children grow up in a healthy environment and receive healthy building blocks for their physical and emotional development. Based on the precautionary principle, we must also prevent damage to children's developing bodies and minds.

More than 30 years ago, the International Community signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This was a very important step, offering a

significant guideline for family and children policies, since, while putting the children at the centre of perspective, it also reflects on the family that surrounds the child.

The UNCRC, and in particular articles 5 and 18, are key references for COFACE Families Europe. It offers a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to its age and stage of development. By recognising child rights in this way, the Convention firmly sets the focus on the whole child. It recognises the fundamental human dignity of all children and the urgency of ensuring their well-being and development. It makes clear the idea that a basic quality of life should be the right of all children, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a few.

Article 5 introduces the idea that children should be able to exercise their rights as they acquire the competence to do so. Article 5, and the Convention as a whole, places parents centre stage in child development: families are needed to achieve child well-being, so that strengthening the rights of the child should be seen as the strengthening of the rights of the parents / families as well. Together with article 18, which asserts parents' common responsibilities in raising their children, it provides a basis for the relationship between children, their parents and the State. "States Parties shall ensure recognition of parents' primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child and render appropriate assistance to parents in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children".

The relationship between **Families – Children – State** is clearly established in this text: parents are the first and most important setting for the development of the children and the State remains responsible to secure the main structural framework for families to fulfil their responsibilities. This means the State must enhance family support and build preventive and early intervention supporting systems which

provide a child- and family-friendly basis including low-threshold provisions and measures in the daily lives of all families.

It is thus fundamental for States to ensure the well-being of both children and their families through programmes assessing and addressing the needs of both generations coming from the awareness that parents and caregivers are fundamental in the cognitive, emotional and physical development of the child and based on the assumption that serving parents and children simultaneously with high quality programmes would be more effective than serving them individually. This provides a compelling justification for effective **two-generation programmes**, which help parents advance their own education and achieve economic stability while promoting healthy development of their children, thus expanding life opportunities for both generations.

The Child Compass promotes the **operationalisation of this systemic two-generation approach** and provides a conceptual framework situating the child and their family at the core of a system with 5 priority and interlinked spheres of influence on individual child and family health and well-being:

1. EDUCATION
2. COMMUNITY
3. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
4. ECONOMY
5. ENVIRONMENT

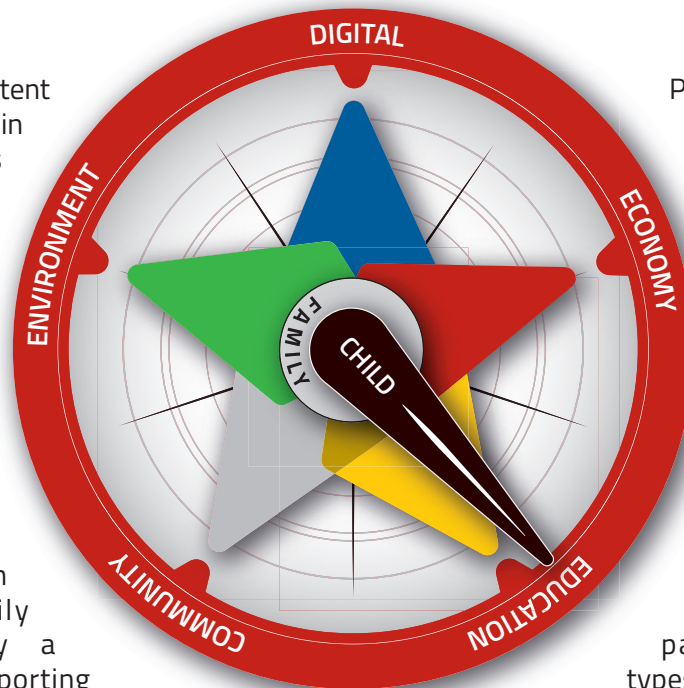
This Compass will guide our work in the design, implementation and monitoring of family and child policies and programmes to ensure that child and family well-being are both systematically taken into account and fully operationalised in policy and support terms. It can help bring different policy departments (e.g. for an inter-ministerial taskforce) or different service sectors (e.g. for building a child-friendly city) together to build child- and family-friendly societies that put children, young people and families at the heart of their decisions and policies. Consideration of all dimensions of the compass are essential to build more intersectional policy-making and ensure a favourable environment for empowerment and well-being of the child. Such a systemic approach is intended to help governments to address child and family well-being in a more holistic manner, transcending administrative and professional boundaries.

In turn, European and international frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the SDG Agenda 2030 as well as the future European Child Guarantee and the EU strategy on the rights of the child, can, and must, play a fundamental role in boosting support for families and children at local level.

Education has large, persistent intergenerational payoffs in many areas of children's lives. Policies and practices must be oriented towards the individual growth and learning pathways for every child and parent. All parents should benefit from parenting support and life-long opportunities of education and training.

Schools, education institutions, and family organisations play a fundamental role in supporting parents and children in their education and learning efforts, both formally and informally. This means developing interventions equipping them with a greater understanding of child development and developing parental confidence through knowledge on e.g. good nutrition, the impact of second-hand smoking on infants, health practices during pregnancy, use of digital technology, and more.

Education should be holistic and include citizenship, human rights and age-appropriate sexuality and emotional education. Addressing stereotypes from early childhood on and for all the education pathways, plays an important role in preparing young people for a safe and fulfilling life, free from (cyber-)bullying. This means providing inclusive and high quality early childhood education and care, including for children with disabilities, laying the foundation for further learning.



Parental educational level can be an important predictor of children's educational and behavioural outcomes. For this reason, it is essential that school environments provide every child with the same opportunities independently from their family setting or background.

Furthermore, the routine of family life, the daily interactions between parents and children, the types of hobbies and recreational activities the family enjoys, all have a bearing on children's readiness for school learning. Schools should be not only environments of learning but also environments of living where children learn to become autonomous and to develop as a person.

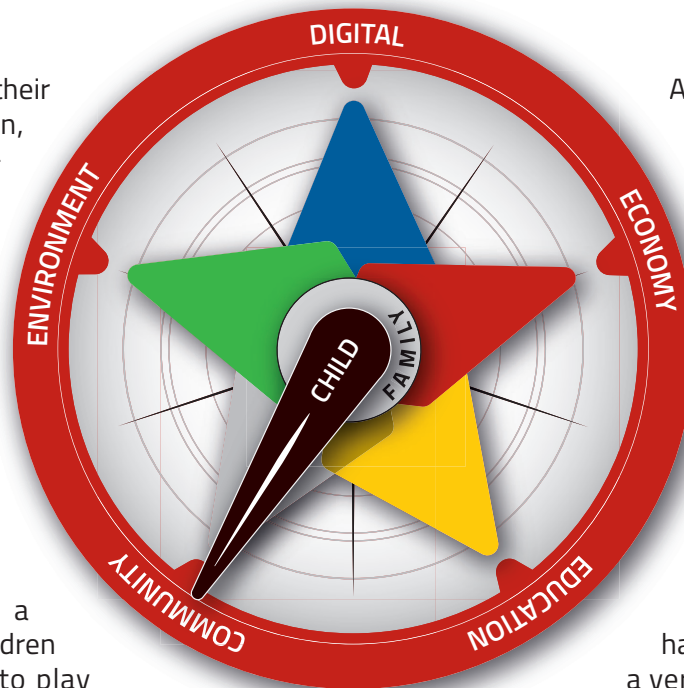
Children need both education and free time. Education systems need to set up environments which provide a mix of learning, recreational and social activities, without schoolwork replacing these essential activities for personal growth and learning. While parents can help their children find this balance, educational systems need to have this built in from the outset.

All children, regardless of their origin, family composition, disabilities and socio-economic status, have the right to grow up in an environment where they feel safe and secure, have access to housing, basic services and clean air and water, can play, learn and grow and where their voice is heard and matters.

Suitable housing in a neighbourhood where children feel safe and confident to play and explore is important for their optimal development. Having access to neighbourhood spaces, participating in culture and leisure activities allows children to play and explore and allows parents to build their social networks.

Play is useful for child development on many levels (e.g. boosting learning, physical exercise, social contact, communication skills, entertainment), but also for adults (e.g. combating stress). and the public space must be a meeting place between children, between families and between generations.

Less and less children play outside due to the lack of nearby public spaces adapted to the needs of children. Furthermore, the lack of room and time for play has been compounded due to COVID-19 confinement measures in some countries restricting outdoor access to children.



Access to inclusive parks, community and sport centres for all families and children is urgent and associated with increased physical activity and decreased screen time and encourages children to positively interact with peers and adults in their community, thus preventing isolation and social exclusion. Moreover, access to nature close to the families is essential to help children have contact with nature from a very young age.

Inclusion of children and families in the community means also enabling the children's participation in decision-making processes e.g. in the redevelopment of streets and squares and the construction of new residential areas, promoting family-based care, child-friendly spaces and cities, transport, access to play, recreational, social, cultural and sport activities and volunteering.

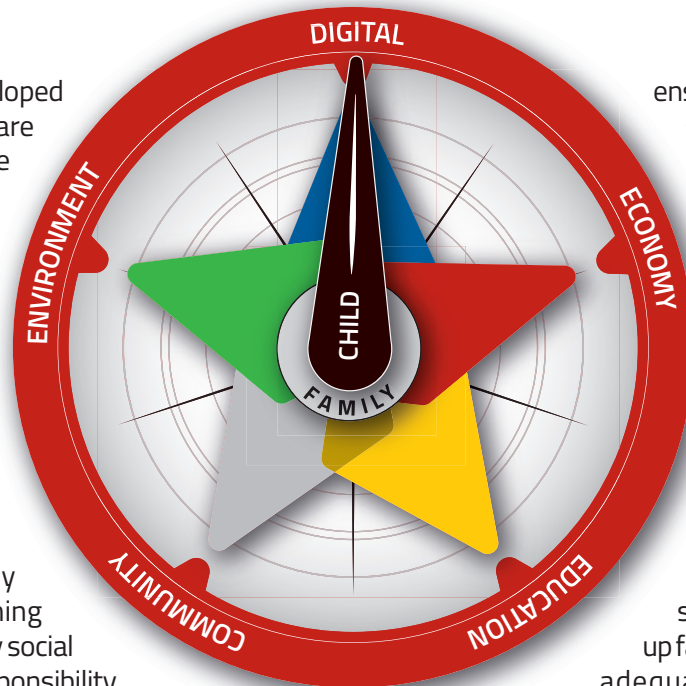
Urban and city planning from a child's perspective has to be further developed, as well as ensuring that family and child centres are positioned accessibly. Providing services to families at neighbourhood level is essential to facilitate low-threshold and early intervention support facilities close to families.

Child rights have been developed over several decades and are still mainly applied to the offline world. However, children and adults increasingly interact and play through online communities, which are as relevant as offline / neighbourhood communities in shaping identities and well-being. Hence, not only the State and the social actors but also industry e.g. the toy industry but also the gaming industry and more generally social media platforms have a responsibility in facilitating and building more inclusive societies.

A recently published DigiGen review indicates that the ways families engage with digital technologies are complex and have varying effects. On the one hand, ICT offers unique opportunities for all family members. On the other hand, children – and adults – face online risks and challenges.⁷

Digital technologies have already changed the world, and as more and more children go online, they are also increasingly changing childhood in particular. From the moment children are born, they are steeped in a steady stream of digital communication and connection. Child rights need to be applied to the online world through inclusive and accessible digital environments which allow for the acquisition of media literacy and enable online democratic and civic participation, safety, and respect. Protection of children online needs to be age-specific: the younger the age, the more the protection must be highlighted.

Connectivity and digital skills can be a game changer for some of the most marginalised children, helping them fulfil their potential and break intergenerational cycles of poverty, as long as the access to IT devices and platforms and essential digital competencies are



ensured to all, and in line with age specificities. Digital technology can also make children more susceptible to harm, both online and offline. Already vulnerable children may be at greater risk of harm, including loss of privacy, vulnerability to aggressive advertising techniques, and more.

Mitigating such adverse effects of technology must be addressed by a mix of strong legal frameworks setting up favourable online environments, adequate self-regulation by the industries concerned, and support to educators (formal and non-formal, parents) in their digital competences.

Policies and practices must ensure the general interest, the rule of law and due legal process are always respected, to avoid arbitrary concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch of government or private companies.

Children must be respected and appropriately protected from user generated content online which may come from other children, but especially from predatory or ill-suited business models which may have an effect on their overall online experience. Child rights, especially those of younger children, should be respected by all media and advertisers, and children should be especially protected as consumers.

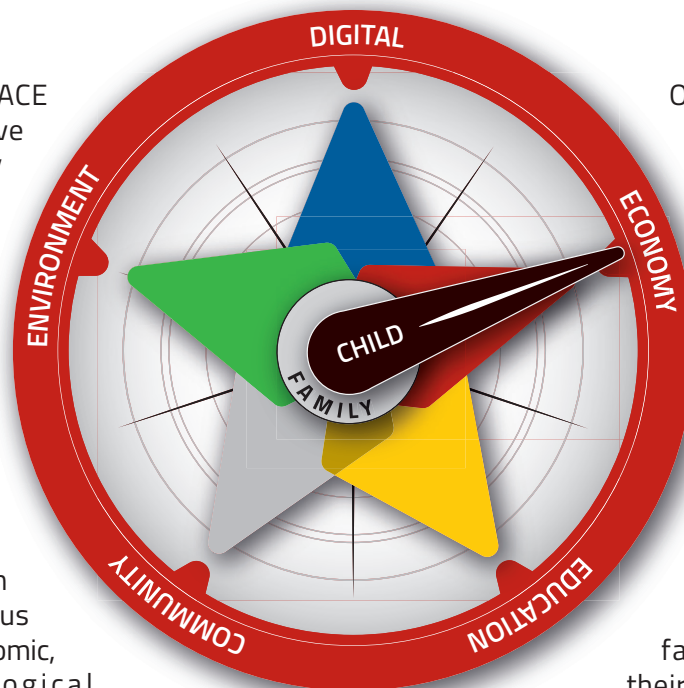
Our 13 COFACE Families Europe digitalisation principles taken together, paint a picture of an Internet and a web managed and maintained by reconciling and balancing the roles and responsibilities on the end user and private / public actors, creating a better Internet and web for children and their families.⁸

It is the ambition of COFACE Families Europe to achieve a reconciliation economy by developing policies around three axes: access to Resources, Services and Time.⁹

The economic status of families has a huge impact on child health and well-being. Growing up in a family environment at risk of poverty or in poverty can have disastrous consequences on the economic, social, and psychological development of children. A healthy economic environment which benefits society supports the family's ability to nurture, care and provide for one another. In turn, quality of family functioning is fundamentally important to economic health and resilience.

Economic conditions that determine the quality of family functioning include secure parental employment, financial security, adequate housing, access to decent and affordable health care, access to social services and support. Families facing adversities in these areas are likely to experience levels of dysfunction that will have health, behavioural and social repercussions for young family members, and poorer outcomes for them later in life, very often leading to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Conversely, families functioning well may be hit by external factors like an economic policy orientation focused more on supply than demand.

Reduction of child and family poverty, via a mix of universal and targeted measures, is needed to ensure material resources, financial inclusion, quality employment, addressing in-work poverty and energy poverty.



Other actions are needed to pave the way for an economy at the service of society including child-friendly allowances, family-friendly VAT policy and other tax-related policies, investing in ECEC and work-life balance measures and especially in adequately paid family leaves. Those leaves lead to better outcomes for women, men and children. They allow all families to better reconcile their professional work and their family so they are not exposed to severe stress that spills over into the family life.

Special attention should be paid to gender equality. All over the world families are the primary caregivers and they carry out the bulk of care work. Within families, women still bear a disproportionate burden of this care. This hidden engine of the world economy keeps families, societies and markets going and represents an invisible contribution to the world economy. It is time to make this invisible work visible and foster gender equality in families and societies, namely by closing the gender care gap.

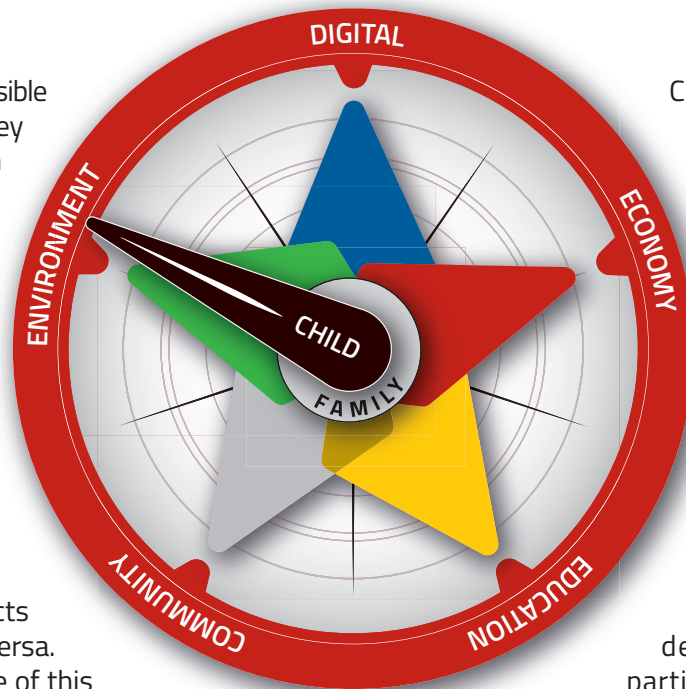
This also means further reflections in economic thinking and shift towards a system which strikes a balance between economic growth and the well-being of families and children.

Children are the least responsible for climate change, yet they bear the greatest burden of its impact. Children are more sensitive and vulnerable to environmental risks than adults. Their organism (body) constantly changes, structures are being developed, and vital connections such as the nervous system are formed.

The health of parents affects children's health and vice versa. Genetics account for some of this relationship but much of it can be traced to environment and behaviour. Environmental policies should therefore take children's physical and mental health as a starting point to reduce children's exposure to environmental hazards.

Environmental hazards exist outside the home (e.g. pesticides, air pollution in cities), but they can also be found inside a child's home or school: bad indoor air quality, mould, asbestos, flame retardants in furniture and building materials, endocrine disruptors in products like plastics / cosmetics / toys / clothing, noise pollution, insufficient HVAC, and more. While broad governmental measures and safety standards are essential to avoid negative impacts on the health and well-being of children, it is important also to raise awareness of parents on how to reduce risks and to promote prevention and healthy behaviours.

Action in public service provision must also be taken into account. For instance, drinking water from a community water system is a major concern if it is contaminated. Bacteria and other harmful chemicals can be a threat to anyone's health, but especially to young children. When children are exposed to a toxic environment before and after birth, this impacts their ability to attain decent standards of health, development, and physical integrity.



Children around the world have many lessons to share with us. Lessons about what they need, confronting us with the results of our failure to invest in the environment. We not only need common action for addressing climate change and promoting sustainable lifestyles, but especially a broader systemic change addressing the growth-oriented economy. Taking into account children's demands and letting them participate is a necessity if the interests of future generations are to be safeguarded.

EU / international frameworks like the EU Green Deal, the future EU Child Rights Strategy, and especially the UNCRC, should consider how to firmly anchor green rights of children.

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