



## Red Cross Approach

Actions to tackle child poverty: promoting key services in support of the European Child Guarantee

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Our sincere appreciation goes to everyone who contributed to the development of this publication.

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Cover photo:

A Swedish Red Cross volunteer supports a child with homework, 2022.

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# Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
Key recommendations	6
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1. Child poverty in the EU	10
1.2. EU policies on child poverty	12
<b>2. RED CROSS APPROACH TO TACKLING CHILD POVERTY</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1. The life course approach	15
Evidence-based programming	15
Innovation and responsiveness	17
2.2. Community-based approach	17
Inclusion and diversity	17
Family support	19
Child protection	21
<b>3. KEY SERVICES FOR ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY IN EUROPE</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1. Early childhood education and care	23
3.2. Education	25
3.3. Access to adequate housing	28
3.4. Access to health and care	30
3.5. Healthy nutrition	33
<b>4. CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>END NOTES</b>	<b>38</b>

# Executive summary

In 2022, Eurostat estimated that 24.7% of children (under the age of 18) in the EU were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared with 24.4% in 2021. This represents a 0.3% increase over the year. The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one of the reasons for this rise, and the situation is likely to have only worsened because of the impacts of the international armed conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

In this context, the EU has undertaken several important policy initiatives to support Member States in addressing the issue of child poverty at the national, regional and local levels. At EU level, there are two key initiatives. Firstly, the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan aim to lift at least 15 million people out of poverty by 2030, of which at least 5 million should be children. Secondly, the European Child Guarantee which was adopted in 2021. Since then, Member States have been working on their National Action Plans to ensure access to key services: early childhood education and care, education, health, adequate housing and healthy nutrition.

By presenting practices by National Red Cross Societies across Europe, this publication highlights the Red Cross' commitment to supporting the implementation of the European Child Guarantee at national level – ensuring access to key services to fight child poverty.

## Early childhood education and care

National Societies offer early childhood education and care services, which contribute to guaranteeing and facilitating access to these key services for every child in need. Red Cross childcare services allow children to grow and develop by discovering the world around them and their relationships with others in a stimulating environment. The services include maternal and parental centres that work to support the whole family. These are places where parents can learn their role in a stable and reassuring environment and strengthen the parent-child relationship, thanks to the support of professionals in the social, educational and psychological fields.

## Education

From an early stage in life, education promotes equality and social inclusion and plays a key role in the fight against poverty, improving health, nutrition and emotional well-being, as well as promoting gender equality, school success, peace and democracy. National Red Cross Societies employ a socio-educational approach based on building bonds, in the best interests of the child and focused on the needs and rights of children and adolescents. When it comes to formal education, the Red Cross works in partnership with relevant education authorities and other key stakeholders to strengthen the assessment of needs and the implementation of complementary activities.



A group of children play at a German Red Cross daycare centre in Großbeeren, which hosts 211 children between the ages of 1 and 7, November 2022.

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## **Adequate housing**

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Through direct support to families and children experiencing housing issues, National Red Cross Societies provide services to prevent homelessness and help to ensure stable transitions for children and young people from state care to a life of independence. The scope of assistance offered includes dedicated accommodation for families who are experiencing homelessness and for survivors of gender-based violence and their children. These services are designed to provide protection, ensure access to essential health and social services and identify long-term housing solutions based on the needs of children and their families.

## **Health and care**

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Ensuring that everyone, everywhere has access to the health services they require in all contexts defines Red Cross work in health and care. Working towards ensuring effective access to quality health services throughout the life course, National Red Cross Societies in the EU pay particular attention to children, young people and families. Red Cross health programmes are designed to reach people from an early stage of life with the aim of promoting a healthy lifestyle and positive mental health, as well as increasing knowledge on how to prevent and combat communicable and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

## **Healthy nutrition**

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While tremendous strides have been made in reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, progress has failed to adequately address the needs of vulnerable women and children. To further improve maternal and child health, there must be seamless integration of services across the lifecycle. The Red Cross works on promoting good nutrition, while at the same time acting to prevent malnutrition among children from a very early age.

# Key recommendations

To ensure the successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the Red Cross recommends that EU Member States' National Action Plans (NAPs) consider the following general recommendations:

- » Recognise that child poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon which must be tackled through a comprehensive and integrated approach. For this reason, the European Child Guarantee NAPs should be integrated with broader national instruments and departments (social, health, education, migration) to ensure complementarity in actions to combat and end child poverty.
- » Ensure that the implementation of the NAPs includes targeted investments to address existing structural and staffing shortcomings in the areas of social services, education, health and housing, as well as other complementary services, which seek to support children and their families.
- » Provide a universal child benefit as an effective and easily administered tool to reach everyone, and thus the most vulnerable families with children.
- » Ensure that all children have child-centred care plans that are tailored to their individual needs to guarantee access to essential services without distinction or discrimination, regardless of their legal status. Special attention should be paid to migrant children, be they accompanied or not.
- » Involve service providers, such as the Red Cross, in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the NAPs and their effectiveness in combating family and child poverty at the national, regional and local levels. It is important that Member States establish and share an M&E process that is transparent and inclusive, together with a predictable timeline to allow all stakeholders to plan their contributions.
- » Recognise that current crises are putting the targets of the European Child Guarantee and Member States' NAPs at risk. Therefore, it is important that Member States invest in their social protection systems and social service providers to ensure continuity of care and services for children and their families in times of crisis.

When it comes to ensuring children's access to the five key services outlined in the European Child Guarantee, the Red Cross has the following recommendations for EU Member States for their NAPs.

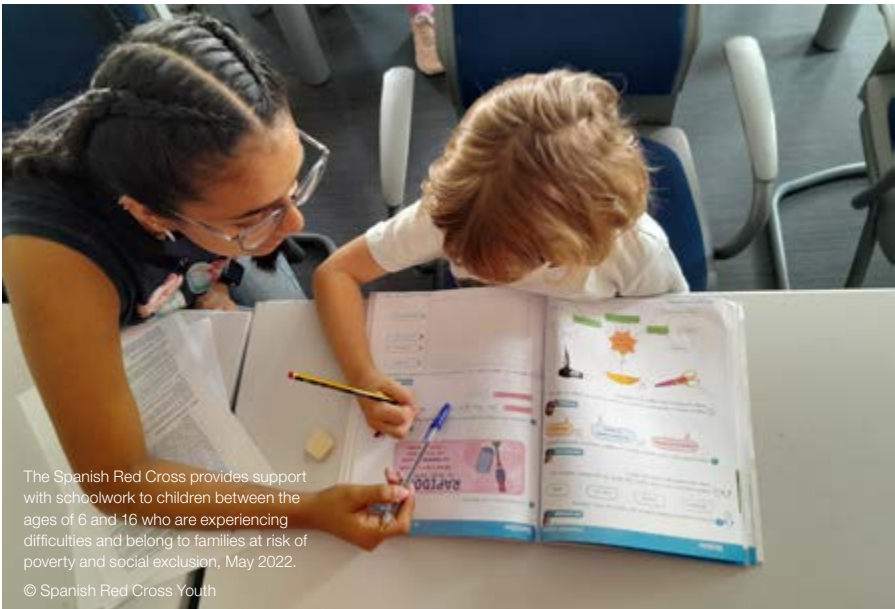
## Early childhood education and care

- » Improve access to affordable high-quality early childhood education and care systems in line with the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care and Principle 11<sup>1</sup> of the European Pillar of Social Rights. In this context, ensure that all families who want to use these services have access to them, ideally by working at the appropriate governance level towards making this a right for each child.

- » Address barriers that families might encounter when accessing and using early childhood education and care services, such as costs, poverty-related barriers, geographical location, barriers related to inadequate provision of early childhood education and care services for children with special needs, cultural and linguistic barriers, discrimination and a lack of information.

## Education

- » Target children from socio-economically disadvantaged families who are more likely to drop out of school at an earlier age and achieve lower educational attainment than their peers. Member States should offer specific support to ensure their ongoing participation in education, including: early identification of children at risk of school drop-out or falling behind their peers, in-class and after-school assistance for children who require additional support, and subsidies for parents to purchase schoolbooks and materials.
- » Guarantee accessible, free and subsidised activities, as well as free access to public transport for children to get to their activities. Children in socio-economically disadvantaged areas experience much lower participation in sports and leisure activities. This is due, among other factors, to activity fees and public transport costs.



The Spanish Red Cross provides support with schoolwork to children between the ages of 6 and 16 who are experiencing difficulties and belong to families at risk of poverty and social exclusion, May 2022.

© Spanish Red Cross Youth

## **Adequate housing**

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- » Underline the importance of social service providers identifying vulnerable households to prevent them from experiencing poverty or social exclusion, which could lead to homelessness.
- » Ensure specific measures to support housing and other basic needs of young people transitioning from state child protection systems, including unaccompanied and separated children and young people.

## **Access to health**

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- » Ensure universal health coverage which guarantees each child's right to quality, accessible, affordable, available and resilient health and mental health services throughout their lifetime. To this end, invest in stable and sustainable national healthcare systems' frontline service providers.
- » Ensure health promotion in schools to inform children and young people about how to maintain and protect their health and to prevent NCDs later in life.

## **Healthy nutrition**

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- » Ensure that all children and their families have access to healthy food and information on food to promote good nutrition and healthy lifestyles.
- » Provide free access to quality food in early childhood directly inside schools.
- » Provide free and easy access to tangible educational tools, such as books and digital tools, to share with families, as well as training sessions on nutrition and professional support to schools.
- » Offer adequate tutoring to support people working with children so that they are able to recognise, report and respond to their specific needs.
- » Promote healthy nutrition across the board, with a particular emphasis on issues closely linked to nutrition, such as sustainability, sports and socialisation.



# Introduction

1.



The Bulgarian Red Cross raises awareness in schools about healthy habits, including personal hygiene, hand washing and disease prevention, January 2023.

© Bulgarian Red Cross

## 1.1 Child poverty in the EU

As an essential frontline actor, the Red Cross witnesses and responds to many of the ongoing challenges associated with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, including children. Across the EU, National Red Cross Societies provide essential services to address child poverty and meet the needs of children, without distinction or discrimination, and regardless of their legal status.

In 2022, Eurostat estimated that 24.7% of children (under the age of 18) in the EU were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared with 24.4% in 2021.<sup>2</sup> This represents a 0.3% increase over the year. The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one of the reasons for this rise, and the situation is likely to have only worsened since because of the impacts of the international armed conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. According to Eurostat, the two key risk factors influencing child poverty and social exclusion are:

- 1) More than one-fifth (22.4%) of people living in households with dependent children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which was slightly higher than the respective share among households without dependent children (20.8%).<sup>3</sup>
- 2) the parents' level of education – 61.9% of children whose parents' level of education was low were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 10.2% of children whose parents' level of education was high.<sup>4</sup>



As part of a partnership with Kellogg's, the Italian Red Cross organises a 'Breakfast Summer Camp' where children learn about healthy lifestyles, proper nutrition, adequate physical activity and combating food waste.

© Italian Red Cross

## In practice: Assessing how the economic situation affects families with children – Sweden<sup>5</sup>

In March 2023, the Swedish Red Cross, together with NGOs Hyresgästföreningen, Majblomman and Rädda Barnen, conducted a survey to investigate how the current economic situation affects families with children in Sweden. A total of 1,240 parents with children under the age of 18 who live at home participated in the survey. The results are based on the respondents' own data on income, marital status and number of children.

### Analysis of results

**Major financial concerns among families with children.** The majority of families with children, regardless of their income, are worried that their household expenses will increase over the next six months, but families with lower incomes are significantly more worried.

**Families on lower incomes with children are most affected.** Families on lower incomes with children are the most affected, regardless of whether the concern is about concrete everyday difficulties. A large share of the parents surveyed reported that the strained financial situation is detrimental to their children's needs and affects children through increased anxiety.

**Children are affected in terms of basic needs.** Children in families of single parents and cohabiting people on lower incomes are affected in several ways. They struggle to meet their most basic needs; such as eating nutritious food, having clothes for the changing seasons, and participating in leisure activities such as trips during weekends and holidays.

### Recommendations to Swedish authorities

**Children should not be deprived of food and clothing.** Child benefits are an effective and easily administered tool to reach everyone, and thus the most vulnerable families with children. The child benefit allocation should therefore be increased.

**All children have the right to secure housing.** The housing allowance is a way for the state to give low-income families with children an increased opportunity to obtain decent housing. The housing allowance has been eroded and needs to be increased in line with growing costs.

**Children should not be forced to start the school day hungry.** We know that this clearly impairs children's learning outcomes. It should be mandatory for all schools to offer school breakfast to children and young people.

**Children should have the right to meaningful leisure time.** Children in socio-economically disadvantaged areas have much lower participation in sports and leisure activities. This is due, among other factors, to activity fees and public transport costs. Free and subsidised activities, as well as free access to public transport to get to the activities, should be offered.

The increase in the risk of poverty or social exclusion for children in the EU between 2020 and 2021 (from 24.0% to 24.4%) shows that the efforts to address the issues need to be strengthened. To face this challenge, the EU has undertaken several important policy initiatives to support Member States in addressing child poverty at the national, regional and local levels.

## 1.2 EU policies on child poverty

***Efforts to address the risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by a growing number of children in the EU must be reinforced.***

At EU level, there are two key initiatives which seek to address the most pressing aspects of child poverty. The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan aim to lift at least 15 million people out of poverty by 2030, of which at least 5 million should be children. To monitor progress towards this goal, the European Commission revised its Social Scoreboard with a new child-specific headline indicator on child poverty. Moreover, the Action Plan offers many opportunities to set up initiatives at Member State level that could positively impact the well-being of children. These include guaranteeing adequate minimum income, fighting in-work poverty, reducing unemployment, ensuring access to affordable housing and extending social protection for children and families.

Secondly, the European Child Guarantee aims to ensure that all children can access essential rights, such as education and healthcare. Meeting the commitments on combating child poverty that are set out in the objectives of the European Child Guarantee requires preventing and combating social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access to a set of key services for children in need:

- » free early childhood education and care
- » free education and school-based activities
- » adequate housing
- » free healthcare
- » healthy nutrition.

Article 11(c) of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, 14 June 2021,<sup>6</sup> asks EU Member States to submit National Action Plans (NAPs) on how they will

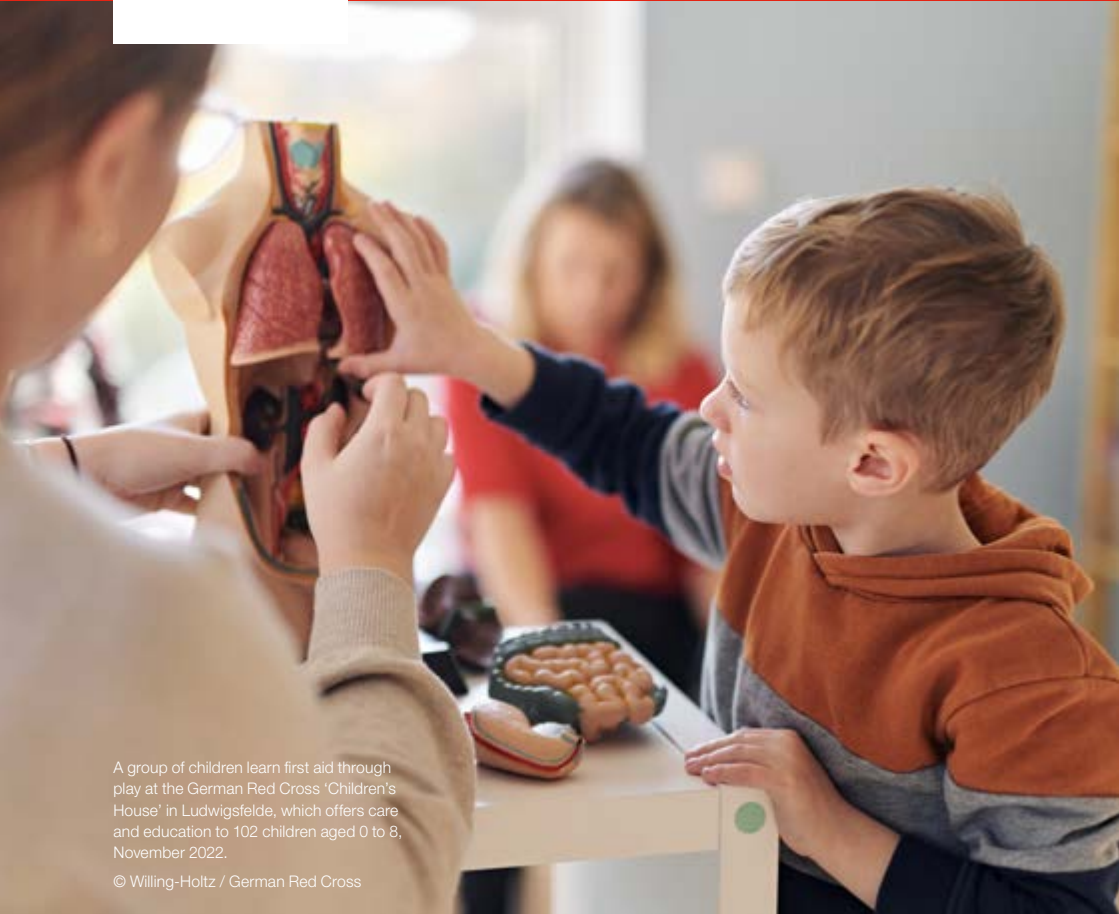
implement the Child Guarantee. Realising the guarantee for all children, but particularly children at risk of poverty, requires that each Member State develops a NAP with country-specific measures for implementation. The main purpose of the NAPs is to describe the existing and planned national and subnational policy measures which aim to improve access for children in need to the set of key services covered by the European Child Guarantee. They should cover the period until 2030 and consider national, regional and local circumstances, as well as existing policy actions and measures to support children in need. The NAPs should include:

- » target groups
- » quantitative and qualitative targets
- » planned or implemented measures, including financial resources and timetables
- » a framework for monitoring.

Engaging and working with service providers, such as the Red Cross, will be central to ensuring that the implementation guarantees access to quality child and family support services.

## 2.

# Red Cross approach to tackling child poverty



A group of children learn first aid through play at the German Red Cross 'Children's House' in Ludwigsfelde, which offers care and education to 102 children aged 0 to 8, November 2022.

© Willing-Holtz / German Red Cross

The Red Cross works to ensure that the needs of the people being supported are met through a holistic, person-centred approach. In this regard, a specific methodology characterises the Red Cross' work and guides service delivery for vulnerable populations.

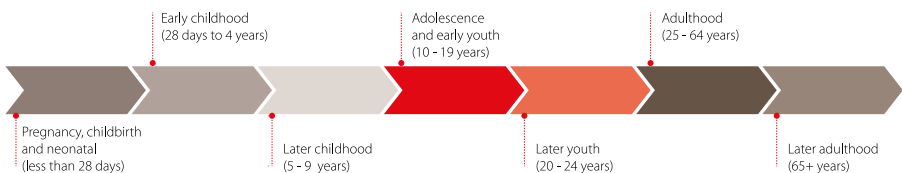
## 2.1 The life course approach

The life course approach states that each stage of an individual's life – from infancy to old age – influences the next stage. The social, economic and physical settings where a person lives, works and plays across their life course has a huge impact on their health and the health of those around them. As endorsed by the World Health Organization, the life course approach is a holistic way to optimise people's health and well-being throughout life, with links to human capital and sustainable development. Almost 70% of NCDs and mental illness in later life are associated with exposures to risks and inequities in earlier years. The benefits and returns of the life course approach to health are 10 times more with increased effectiveness, efficiency and equity.<sup>7</sup>

National Red Cross Societies provide a wide range of services and programmes across the life course – ranging from promoting healthy lifestyles and offering services for adolescents and young people, to providing care and specialised support for infants, pregnant women and older people, including home visits and home care. Many National Red Cross Societies engage in direct services, for example child and maternal health, community mental health and psychological support, and social services.<sup>8</sup>

▼ Figure 1 IFRC life course approach

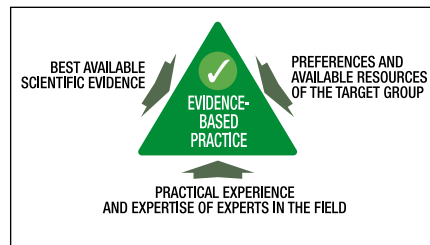
► Figure 2 Centre for Evidence-Based Practice (CEBaP): three pillars of evidence-based practice



## Evidence-based programming

Providing high-quality, evidence-based programming is an important factor in the success of Red Cross programme delivery, particularly in fighting poverty. Finding the right balance between approaches that are community identified, led and delivered, while maintaining appropriate standards, is critical. In this context, training and supervision are important for Red Cross volunteers and staff involved in delivering high-quality community-based programmes to support vulnerable groups. Designing evidence-based programmes, appropriate monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance mechanisms, as well as conducting field-based research to contribute to the body of knowledge on how communities change and transform their behaviour, are all essential to the implementation of impactful actions.<sup>9</sup>

The Red Cross works with evidence-based practice guidelines, which consist of a set of recommendations, advice and instructions that aim to support good practice and guide decision-making in the field. To qualify as 'evidence-based', the guideline should be developed in such a way that it becomes informed by all three pillars of evidence-based practice: 1) the best available scientific evidence, 2) the practical experience and expertise of experts in the field, and 3) the preferences and available resources of the target group.



## In practice: Evidence-based guidance to assist volunteers working with at-risk children in a school context – Belgium<sup>10</sup>

Inequality in educational performance exists among school children in many post-industrialised countries. In Belgium, the performance gap between low achievers and average students is one of the highest in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.<sup>11</sup>

The Belgian Red Cross (Flemish community) Bridging the Gap project promotes the involvement of adult community volunteers in support programmes for at-risk children at the request of the child's school. The educational interventions and activities provided by the volunteers are the result of a study on evidence-based guidance developed by the Centre for Evidence-Based Practice (CEBaP) of the Belgian Red Cross.

### Aim

The aim of the study was to develop evidence-based guidance for the volunteers to help them choose the right pedagogical approach for supporting at-risk children with poor performance at school.

### Method

**Definition of at-risk children.** This considers any factor that makes a child vulnerable, including a low socio-economic status, being non-native, living with a disability, the loss of a family member and divorce between parents.

**Step 1. Systematic literature review.** This included discussion with stakeholders to select educational activities, the identification of a research strategy to identify the best available evidence, the selection criteria for study selection and the data extraction and quality assessment of the evidence reported.

**Step 2. Discussion with stakeholders.** A multidisciplinary panel of external experts was put together (policy maker, schoolteacher, teacher trainer, volunteers and children) in the Bridging the Gap project.

### Final guidance

Based on the best available evidence and the consensus of the expert panel, the following activities were recommended for volunteers of the *Bridging the Gap* project to support at-risk preschool children in the local school context: book reading, education games, number games, puzzle making, road safety education in practice, singing and block-building activities.

### Conclusion

**Implications for research.** First, there is a need for further research to investigate the effectiveness of single didactical interventions to support at-risk children. Second, future studies should also focus on the provider of the activity.

**Implications for practice.** The evidence-based guidance is being used in practice in Flanders and integrated in the training for *Bridging the Gap* volunteers by the Belgian Red Cross.



## Innovation and responsiveness

Since its creation in 1864, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – comprising 191 National Societies around the world – has always strived for a more humane and peaceful world: one in which the well-being and aspirations of the most vulnerable people are cared for and prioritised. The Red Cross promotes open innovation and local experimentation to optimise the social impact of its activities to the benefit of the people it serves. Due to the proximity of National Societies to affected people and communities, they can devise innovative solutions, which are person-centred and needs-based, to improve their support to vulnerable groups. They do so while considering the increasing complexity of accessing financial resources in a constantly evolving environment, for example, at times of crisis.

Social innovation comprises all solutions created to meet new or unmet needs. It brings effective solutions to complex issues that cannot be tackled by the state or the market. All actors in society can be involved in social innovation, including children and young people. By imagining new socio-economic models, creating new uses for technology or transforming the way they work, social innovation allows National Societies to act in the most appropriate and efficient way possible to tackle all forms of vulnerability.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Community-based approach

The community engagement and accountability approach taken by National Red Cross Societies recognises and values all community members as equal partners, whose diverse needs, priorities and preferences guide everything they do. This is achieved by integrating meaningful community participation, open and honest communication, and mechanisms to listen to and act on feedback within programmes and operations. Evidence and experience show that when communities play an active role in designing and managing programmes and

operations, the outcomes are more effective, sustainable and of a higher quality.<sup>13</sup>

## Inclusion and diversity

To help children and young people to overcome disadvantaged backgrounds, support structures need to follow a comprehensive approach. Bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of quality or one-sided programmes prevent children in need from receiving specific support. Indeed, poorly designed and implemented services that aim to improve the situation of disadvantaged children can often result in the opposite, compounding further stigmatisation and social exclusion. Therefore, the needs of the children themselves must be at the centre of child-related programmes and policies, considering the specific situation of at-risk children and allowing flexibility and tailored solutions.

Unfortunately, many children in the EU do not have equal access to basic services like education, health and care, or culture and leisure activities. This also applies to children with a migrant background, especially those who are undocumented.<sup>14</sup> At EU and national levels, there is a need to increase and improve the collection of data and the assessment of the needs of children and their families. Capacities should be expanded, and legal and administrative obstacles removed to ensure access for all children, regardless of their legal status. Ensuring equal access means that migrant children who face limitations or barriers in the education, health and care systems should be provided with additional support to access services. This support could include assistance in navigating information on how to access services, the assignment of a cultural mediator and help to overcome financial and language barriers.

## **In practice: Social inclusion of vulnerable children through educational and psychosocial support activities in Athens, Thessaloniki, Volos and Kalavryta – Greece**

A key pillar of the Hellenic Red Cross mandate is to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable populations, through community-based programmes and actions implemented by its national network of volunteers and its specialised/technical staff. Through its Social Welfare Division, the National Society runs multifunctional centres, shelters for unaccompanied minors and a network of social services. These provide vulnerable groups, such as refugee families with socio-economic difficulties, women and children, with psychosocial support services and liaison with other specialised services and agencies in the public and private sectors.

### **Issue/challenge**

Climate change and extreme weather phenomena have a crucial impact as properties, jobs and businesses are lost resulting in many households facing a sudden financial crisis. Prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences has a negative impact on people's well-being, resilience, ability to handle the issues of everyday life, and thus on their efforts towards social inclusion. Marginalised children and youth often drop out of public education, in particular children and young persons with learning difficulties and symptoms of mental, behavioural or neurodevelopmental disorders for which there is no free public provision of special treatment.

### **Objective of the practice**

To reduce vulnerabilities of children and their families, enhance their resilience, and shape a positive impact on the local communities. To ensure dignity, access, participation and security through the collaboration of an interdisciplinary team of professionals that approaches each child's needs in a holistic way.

### **Description of the practice**

Assistance and services include provision of vaccinations, first aid education, primary healthcare services, provision of accommodation/shelter, provision of psychosocial support services, organisation of intercultural events, psychoeducation, leisure time activities, tailor-made tutoring, events participation, recreational activities, provision of in-kind and cash assistance to families, support towards school enrolment, legal aid, and protection services. Most children assisted either belong to multimerbered or single-headed families, face severe socio-economic difficulties, or are unaccompanied third-country nationals accommodated in the shelters run by the Hellenic Red Cross (three shelters in Athens, one in Volos and one in Kalavryta). The Social Welfare Division runs multifunctional centres and social services in many parts of the country with the active contribution of well-trained and specialised volunteers and collaborators. An interdisciplinary team works closely on every activity to observe and identify children who need further monitoring and evaluation by experts so that appropriate counselling is provided, and necessary actions are taken for the benefit of the children and their families.

### **Outcomes**

During 2022 the Hellenic Red Cross has indicatively provided services to more than 44,500 minors. In total, 3,698 children and youth along with their families participated in language teaching, kindergarten, youth club and psychological support activities. Public kindergartens and schools that received children participating in educational and psychological support activities reported that they were well prepared and integrated well with fellow students. The parents spoke of a markedly changed behaviour in their children – in some cases very drastic, a change in the children's socialising skills and ability to follow rules, and improvements in their mental well-being. The children developed their abilities to share, interact and make friends, all of which contribute to their feeling of belonging in a group.

## In practice: Itinérances<sup>15</sup> – Belgium

The Belgian Red Cross (French Community) has trained, supported and coordinated more than 1,170 volunteers to accompany children's visits to parents detained in prisons within the framework of the project Itinérances (Itineraries). The Belgian Red Cross collaborates closely with the Relais Enfants-Parents and the Services of Assistance to Detainees, which address the needs of detained persons and aim to maintain and foster the relations between them and their children.

### Issue/challenge

For many reasons (relational, geographical, economic, financial, social, etc.), children often do not have access to visitation rights. Being unable to maintain a bond with their parents has a considerable impact on children's mental health and their psychosocial and emotional development, especially in a detention context.

### Objective of the practice

Maintaining the link between the child and their incarcerated parent ensures that the separation does not result in a rupture in their relationship. This is done through supporting children to express themselves and helping them to make sense of their parent's incarceration.

### Description of the practice

There is an assigned team for each child. The psychologist (operational partner) assesses whether the visit is in the best interests of the child before, during and after the visit. The volunteers take the children from their homes to the prison where they are taken care of by the psychologist who supervises the meeting between the child and their imprisoned parent. Volunteers and psychologists welcome the child's story and allow them to express their experiences and their emotions to better understand the absence of the parent and their incarceration (before and after the visit). This service is available in all prisons of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

### Outcomes

Children enjoy the right to know their roots and origins, and the right to meet and maintain their relationship with their father or mother – as long as it is in their best interest. Through the project, children have a safe space to discuss with experts any anxiety they may experience around the imprisonment of their parent. In 2022, 189 children restored or maintained links with an incarcerated parent and were able to talk about the situation with professionals. 891 outreach visits were conducted by 227 volunteers.

### Family support

Focusing on children alone is insufficient when aiming to tackle child poverty. By disregarding the family situation, support measures will only result in short-term improvements, but will not end poverty or social exclusion for the child. Therefore, measures must also apply to the families of children in need. National Red Cross Societies offer a wide range of family and parental support programmes that aim to support families in their care-taking responsibilities.

Supporting children, for example in childcare facilities or schools, is often the starting point to working with their families.

Family reunification of separated migrant<sup>16</sup> families is a core activity for the Red Cross which helps realise the right to family life and is key to integration. National Red Cross Societies in Europe provide various services<sup>17</sup> to separated families of migrants, including people receiving international protection. Beyond restoring and maintaining contact between family members, they may

offer legal and administrative assistance throughout the family reunification procedure, including travel arrangements and support to reunited families to integrate smoothly in their new communities.<sup>18</sup> National Red Cross Societies also provide integration support as soon as possible when families are

reunited, and even before the arrival of family members. This includes offering socio-cultural orientation sessions, psychosocial support and language classes, as government measures to assist newly reunited families are sometimes underdeveloped.<sup>19</sup>

### **In practice: online 'Parents' Campus' tool, family centres and courses for families<sup>20</sup> – Germany**

Originally created in response to the acute COVID-19 pandemic situation, the Parents' Campus of the German Red Cross has now developed into an online platform where parents and families can find a wide range of support options and information. Through virtual courses, the Parents' Campus (Elterncampus) accompanies families in different life situations. By June 2023, 4,000 families had been reached by the programme. The courses are delivered to parents by professionals, such as paediatric nurses and midwives.

#### **Challenges**

For most children, family is the first and most important place where they grow up. Here they develop their identity, experience community, security, stimulation, love and care. Families need strength and guidance to provide their children with a safe 'base camp'. However, they also need strength and orientation to be able to give their children the independence that is necessary for good development.

#### **Description of the practice**

Planning of the training: regular users are consulted as well as user inquiries to find out what parents need. German Red Cross local branches have their own ways of analysing what families need and want as support mechanisms, and the training portfolio is constantly adapting to these changing needs. Each time a new training topic is promoted on Elterncampus, the instructor is trained. The training instructors are trained volunteers, educators or other professionals according to the specific topic. Elterncampus course instructors are qualified and certified professionals with a high range of different professions, backgrounds and qualifications (nurses, paramedics, childcare and social education workers, physical therapists, midwives etc.). Each instructor is interviewed and selected by a participating German Red Cross local branch before being admitted to offer courses.

Available training: baby nutrition and complementary food, baby massage, baby's first year, first aid for children, pregnancy and childbirth, pedagogy and parenting skills.

#### **Feedback from users**

'In the courses at the Parents' Campus, I see that other parents feel the same way as I do! That takes the pressure off me ... it's just that I'm sometimes overwhelmed!'

"The offer is so diverse. Every time I go to the homepage, I find a new course that interests me."

"My daughter Anna choked on a piece of apple, which was a big shock. I was so happy that I was able to fall back on the content from the Parents' Campus."

## Child protection

As an operational organisation, child protection and safeguarding are central to the work of the Red Cross in every aspect of the services provided to vulnerable children. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) aims to ensure that the principle of the best interest of the child, as described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, guides all decisions related to the children supported by its programmes. This is regardless of their nationally, migration status, disability, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious or political

beliefs, socio-economic status, family background, criminal record, physical or mental health, or any other differentiating factor. To support this undertaking, the IFRC has a robust Child Safeguarding Policy<sup>21</sup> to provide a framework for ensuring that IFRC programmes are designed and implemented with the best interests of the child in mind, and the protection of children at their centre. The policy aims to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect in all IFRC programmes, that prevention actions are prioritised, and that accountability is ensured.



The Belgian Red Cross trains volunteers to accompany children to visit parents detained in prisons, December 2011.

© Belgian Red Cross

### 3.

## Key services for addressing child poverty in Europe



A group of children spend time in the garden of the German Red Cross daycare centre in Großbeeren, November 2022.

© Willing-Holtz / German Red Cross

Ensuring access to basic services is crucial to overcome discrimination and inequality from an early stage. National Red Cross Societies have a wealth of experience in providing support for children and families in need. Focusing on the needs of vulnerable people, the Red Cross often fills the gaps in insufficient support structures at the national, regional and local levels. Based on their experience, National Societies directly contribute to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee and NAPs through ensuring equal access to social services and support for all persons in need, including children and their families. Following the European Child Guarantee definition of key services, the following section shares models and practices from National Red Cross Societies who are contributing to the implementation of the Child Guarantee NAPs.

### 3.1. Early childhood education and care

Education is a fundamental human right and an essential public service. It has the power to contribute towards transforming

children's lives and safeguarding their dignity by developing their knowledge, values and skills to strive for a better future. Access to, and provision of, quality education is key to addressing systemic vulnerabilities, preventing and preparing for future crises, fortifying economic development and fostering resilience and peace. Education and care start in the very first phase of a child's life. From the birth of a child, it is necessary to guarantee high-quality services that safeguard the well-being of the child and their family.

The Red Cross pursues a strong child protection approach to its work, aiming to ensure that the fundamental rights and needs of children are taken into account, with the aim of supporting their physical, emotional, intellectual and social development, as well as preserving their health, safety and education. This includes organising preventive actions involving children and their families in identifying situations of danger or risk of danger for children, as well as understanding the legislative frameworks which exist to protect them.

Parents can receive counselling and support at the French Red Cross' 'Baby-Parent Spaces', which are designed for parents and children under the age of 3, February 2023.

© Alex Bonnemaïson



National Red Cross Societies offer early childhood education and care services which contribute to facilitating access to these key services for every child in need. Childcare services allow children to grow and develop by discovering the world around them and their relationships with others in a stimulating and safe environment. Accompanied by a team of professionals specialised in early childhood, children participate in games and activities that are sources of pleasure, sharing and experimentation. Singing, musical initiation, cooking workshops, drawing and psychomotor activities encourage them to explore their environment, gain self-confidence and interact with other children. Activities are adapted to their desires and needs.

Maternal and parental centres are also at the core of Red Cross childcare services. These are places to learn the role of parent, where a stable and reassuring environment is enabled by the support of professionals in the social, educational and psychological fields. The focus is always on the individual needs of families and on strengthening the parent-child relationship. The support provided accompanies families in different life situations, for example the baby's first year of life, or the new role as a parent. Baby-parent spaces also provide forums for parents to share their needs and issues with trained volunteers who can offer information and advice, but also help with administrative procedures. On site, children enjoy play areas to experiment, express themselves and interact with other children.

### **In practice: Families with babies and toddlers resource centres<sup>22</sup> – France**

Managed by French Red Cross volunteers, these baby-parent spaces are specially designed for parents with children under 3 years' old, and provide a space where parents can receive counselling and support. In particular, the service is intended for families with low incomes, single parents and people with a change in their family situation.

#### **Issue/challenge**

The service focuses on the mental and socio-economic issues that parents can face when expecting a child, after birth and in the first years of child development, such as loneliness among parents, early childhood poverty and negative impacts of poverty on child development.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Objective of the practice**

The centres have three main objectives. 1) to support families living in poverty by providing material assistance to help with child-related costs; 2) to offer a space for babies to explore and encourage cognitive development; and 3) to create a place for parents to openly ask questions and share their experiences with other parents and volunteers.

#### **Description of the practice**

Families with babies and toddlers resource centres unconditionally welcome families with children below the age of 3. The staff and volunteers in the centres carry out an individual needs assessment for each family and develop a comprehensive and holistic support plan which can include sharing of information, family bonding activities, parenting techniques and material assistance.

#### **Outcomes**

Parents feel less lonely, participate in activities and strengthen their parenting skills while children enjoy spaces to play, experiment, express themselves and interact with other children. In 2021, 23 centres across France reached over 2,300 children and provided 210 activities and training sessions with the support of 290 volunteers.



## 3.2 Education

Education is a learning process that enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and values that contribute to their personal, social and professional development with a view to ensuring that they build their resilience, achieve their potential and live in dignity and solidarity. From an early stage in life, education promotes equality and social inclusion. It has a key role in the fight against poverty, in improving health, nutrition and emotional well-being, and in promoting gender equality, school success, peace and democracy. In the best interests of the child, National Red Cross Societies employ a socio-educational approach based on building bonds that focuses on meeting the needs and rights of children and adolescents.

Designing, supporting and/or providing quality educational interventions and programmes implies ensuring that different elements are in place, such as accessible education delivered through multi-channel routes, for example by an educator, or through multimedia. Several educational options must be made available to allow the right blend of learning for each individual. In addition, the approaches, resources and materials should be adaptable to reflect learners' needs and requirements, as well as external changes, for example in the curriculum or the person's life situation. Finally, the overall learning process and experience must be suitable (based on research and evidence) for it to be engaging and to generate positive outcomes.<sup>24</sup>

Access to education is key to entail the development of personal, social and professional skills of children and young adolescents. When it comes to formal education, the Red Cross works in partnership with relevant education authorities and other key stakeholders to strengthen the assessment of needs and the implementation of complementary activities. This work aims to address and remove barriers that may hinder the full and effective participation of all individuals in education. Creating and ensuring safe, secure and supportive learning environments is key to guaranteeing and enhancing educational access, attendance and achievement. Equity in education is a means towards greater equality in society. It entails reducing discrepancies based on gender, age, ability, socio-economic status, geographic location, ethnicity, marital status, language and other aspects of identity.<sup>25</sup>

National Red Cross Societies provide a wide range of services in support of access to quality education. Volunteering is a core component of education since becoming a volunteer means taking part in continuous training and activities that develop knowledge that can be applied to different aspects of life, whether personal or professional. In the context of the Red Cross' educational programmes, children and young adolescents can learn and promote a culture of non-violence and peace, discover sports to address isolation and exclusion, increase their knowledge about healthy habits and learn first aid skills, among others.<sup>26</sup>

The Romanian Red Cross offers support to children of primary and secondary school age through socio-educational activities, January 2020.

© Romanian Red Cross Media Centre



## **In practice: Training in Digital Competences for vulnerable children and adolescents<sup>27</sup> – Spain**

In the framework of the programme Community and educational support for children and adolescents, the Spanish Red Cross improves learning processes and provides extracurricular education for young people, including training on digital competences.

### **Issue/challenge**

Children and young people who are living in poverty or who are vulnerable have less access to digital training, which promotes their awareness of digital media. For young people, this also stifles their employment opportunities.

### **Objective of the practice**

The objective of the project is to close the digital social divide by providing basic digital skills training for girls and boys. The project also starts teaching advanced digital skills to adolescents, promoting training for employability with a gender perspective.

### **Description of the practice**

The activity intends to promote 'digital skills competences'<sup>28</sup> – fostering key competencies so that children and young people can adapt to the continuous changes of digital societies and acquire knowledge, capacities, values and attitudes that facilitate the learning process throughout a person's life.

Each child is offered at least 30 hours of extracurricular training in digital competencies. Children aged 9 to 13 receive training in basic digital competencies, while children aged 14 to 17 learn advanced digital skills.

### **Outcomes**

Close to a million (950,000) people participate in the digital skills pathway. This includes 9 to 13-year-old children experiencing moderate, high or severe poverty, or highly vulnerable environments, vulnerable adolescents aged 14 to 17 and young people from vulnerable groups aged 18 and over.

## **In practice: Social inclusion of vulnerable children in Romania through community-based support in Botoşani, Craiova, Lupeni and Babadag – Romania**

Since 2015 the Romanian Red Cross has set up four community day centres in Botoşani, Craiova, Lupeni and Babadag. The EGAL centres (EGAL stands for education, generosity, skills and freedom) are places where children, young people and their parents participate daily in an integrated development programme, carried out with the support of volunteers.

### **Issue/challenge**

Romania is struggling with high poverty rates, weak institutions, poor education, high rates of school drop-out, unemployment, rising inequalities and lack of social protection – all of which have been exacerbated by the financial crisis. Vulnerable groups face considerable income disparities, exclusion and stigmatisation. Children and youth from socially marginalised families are at higher risk of dropping out of the educational system. Deliberate outreach and targeting is therefore needed to reach those groups of children and youth.

### **Objective of the practice**

To improve the capacity of local branches to build the resilience of socially marginalised children and youth and their families to prevent school drop-out and build motivation for education. This significantly contributes to social and emotional well-being among marginalised children and youth in Romania.

### **Description of the practice**

Over the years, more than 2,500 children and youth of primary and secondary school age and their parents have benefitted from support through mainly volunteer-based support and activities like socio-educational support, life skills sessions on Youth as Agents for Behavioural Change methodology, assistance to formal education and school homework for school children.

In 2022, 179 children were assisted in the centres with the support of 82 volunteers.

Parents are part of the programme too, as volunteers or as pupils in the 'School of Life' where they learn about first aid and the environment, attend group sessions on communication skills, develop positive behaviour towards children, and spend quality family time.

### **Outcomes**

The activities have proved to be extremely relevant to the communities where the project was developed, given that the children reached have greatly improved their attendance at school, their grades and their general well-being (self-esteem). The project contributes to mobilising the community, the locals participate voluntarily in the centres' activities, the parents became human resources, the schoolteachers also feel motivated to contribute and support the centres and the local authorities are involved in the decision-making process within the centres.

### 3.3 Access to adequate housing

Living in adequate and stable housing should be considered a fundamental right, especially for families with children. Housing should not simply be considered the provision of four walls, but as a safe environment with adequate access to all essential basic services. However, in many countries the increases in housing costs have become a real burden for families, especially those experiencing socio-economic hardship. The human right to access adequate and affordable housing is recognised by article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>29</sup> In the European context, Principle 19<sup>30</sup> of the European Pillar of Social Rights supports actions and initiatives to provide social housing or housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness. However, despite this recognition, accessing housing and combating homelessness remains one of the EU and Member States' biggest social challenges.

National-level data on homelessness in European countries are often not available. If available, they are difficult to compare because of the different definitions of homelessness and ways of collecting data on it. Due to these disparities in homelessness data between European countries, it is difficult to provide an overall figure on homelessness among children and young people in Europe.<sup>31</sup> Yet, based on the data collected from several EU countries, family and child homelessness are on the rise. For example, it was reported that in Ireland in 2019, children made up 38% of the homeless population, while in France, families represent the fastest-growing segment in the homeless population, especially in urban areas.<sup>32</sup> This has been further verified by recent research by the OECD, which noted an ongoing increase in family and child homelessness.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from children who are part of households facing poverty and homelessness, there are other groups of children and young people who are at higher risk of experiencing

homelessness. Children transitioning from state child protection systems are one such group, often leaving state care at the age of 18 or younger without the necessary skills to live independently. This specific group of children are at increased risk of social isolation, homelessness and conflict with the law. Unaccompanied and separated children also fall into this category. Often, these children are ejected from child protection services before the age of 18 into an asylum system which does not consider the best interests of the child, including into shelters which do not protect or safeguard children.

Through direct support to families and children experiencing housing issues, National Red Cross Societies provide services to prevent homelessness and help ensure stable transitions for children and young people from state care to a life of independence. The scope of assistance offered includes dedicated accommodation for families who are experiencing homelessness and for survivors of gender-based violence and their children. These services are designed to provide protection, ensure access to essential health and social services and identify long-term housing solutions based on the needs of children and their families. By providing dedicated programmes for children and young people, National Red Cross Societies work to identify children at risk of homelessness, to offer accommodation and to support skill development to ensure a successful transition to independent living.

## In practice: Temporary accommodation for families at risk of becoming homeless – Hungary

The Hungarian Red Cross runs temporary housing programmes all over the country through 10 local branches to prevent families from becoming homeless and to prevent their children from being taken into state care.<sup>34</sup>

### Issue/challenge

The Hungarian Red Cross works with families who have serious housing and household budget challenges. Some parents have limited levels of formal education and low professional skills; many have never had a permanent job or permanent housing. Very often, they were raised in state care.

### Objective of the practice

One of the main goals of the programme is to provide children with as much support as possible in their education to help prevent them from leaving school and minimise their potential future social exclusion. The children also have group work and individual development classes with teachers.

### Description of the practice

Once the family is at the centre, a social worker is assigned to attend to the family's needs and to design the psychosocial support they will receive during their stay at the shelter. During this time, social workers support families to strengthen their relationships and connections, as well as helping them find a job and a solution for affordable, permanent housing.

### Outcomes

Families can usually stay for up to a year. But this year can be prolonged by an additional six months or until the end of the school year to maintain stable circumstances for the families.



The Hungarian Red Cross housing programme supports families facing serious challenges with their household budget, February 2015.

© Hungarian Red Cross

### 3.4 Access to health and care

Globally, governments around the world are grappling with an increased prevalence of population movements, epidemics, climate change, conflicts and disasters. Resisting crises and mitigating their impacts requires strong health and social protection systems which are accessible and act as safety nets for affected people, preventing poverty and social exclusion. The socio-economic factors that give rise to and exacerbate disparities in health are complex and interlinked. Because of the social gradient in health within EU Member States, it is often people in vulnerable situations who are most affected by health inequalities, particularly children.

Ensuring that everyone, everywhere has access to the health services they require in all contexts defines Red Cross work in health and care. Working towards ensuring effective access to quality health services throughout the life course, National Red Cross Societies in the EU pay particular attention to children, young people and

families. They strive to reduce any barriers for children, young people and their families to access national health services through education and increasing skills, providing first aid classes, organising peer-to-peer exchanges on health matters or parental education. The evidence Community Based Health and First Aid (eCBHFA) is a unique approach built on evidence-based behavioural change theories, designed to improve the health literacy of community members and thus empower them to identify health risks and improve their health. The eCBHFA approach is planned and implemented through participatory methods based on community needs in any kind of environment or context such as urban areas, rural areas, schools, emergency shelters, migrant camps and even prisons.

The health programmes developed by the Red Cross are designed to reach people from an early stage of life with the aim of promoting a healthy lifestyle and positive mental health, as well as increasing their knowledge on how to prevent and

Bulgarian Red Cross staff distribute hygiene kits as part of a health promotion programme implemented together with the National Network of Health Mediators, October 2022.

© Bulgarian Red Cross



combat communicable diseases and NCDs. For example, National Red Cross Societies across the EU have reacted to the psychosocial consequences of COVID-19 and are striving to make mental health a priority for all, working to ensure that people remain both physically and mentally healthy.

Red Cross health education programmes contribute to bridging gaps in accessibility of healthcare and are carried out in partnership with governmental and NGOs. Training in first aid for preschool and school children is a core activity, but there are many other activities aimed at children and young people in different countries.

### **In practice: Health education sessions for children from Roma communities and distribution of personal hygiene kits – Bulgaria**

The Bulgarian Red Cross together with the National Network of Health Mediators implemented a programme to build the skills and increase the knowledge of children from vulnerable groups on topics related to health promotion and building a health culture. This included providing sports equipment for schools to encourage physical activity among students. The initiative is primarily aimed at children from the Roma community, as they are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of access to reliable information.

#### **Issue/challenge**

The initiative focuses on the problems faced by Roma communities, and in particular children, who face difficulties in terms of access to relevant and reliable information and skills on health topics such as personal hygiene, hand washing and disease prevention.

#### **Objective of the practice**

The initiative has three main objectives:

1. Facilitating children of Roma origin to gain basic skills and knowledge on health issues and build a health culture
2. Providing personal hygiene kits to children with limited access to these
3. Providing an opportunity for children of Roma origin to meet volunteers and employees of the Bulgarian Red Cross who are outside their community.

#### **Description of the practice**

Volunteers and staff members of the Bulgarian Red Cross and the Bulgarian Red Cross Youth, together with the National Network of Health Mediators, conducted regular health sessions across the whole country, mainly in schools where children of Roma origin study. During the sessions, the children learned about hand hygiene, proper tooth brushing, etc.

Specifically for children, they organised 15 health celebrations in schools and distributed 1,000 hygiene kits.

Overall, between January 2022 and June 2023, more than 2,500 health sessions were held and more than 16,200 people in Roma communities were reached.

#### **Outcomes**

Youth from Roma communities acquired knowledge and gained basic skills related to personal hygiene, received personal hygiene kits (toothbrush and toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc.) that they often do not have access to due to financial reasons. They could also share what they learned among families and the community in order to build a health culture.

## In practice: Youth Shelters – Finland

To help young people and their families, the Finnish Red Cross has developed the ‘Youth Shelter’ model, which is a unique support model in Finland. The first shelter was established in Helsinki in 1990. Since then, four more facilities have been set up in other cities. The operations have expanded to also reach people who can't access physical support and who prefer digital assistance. Youth Shelters continuously develop and now provide diverse online support for young people and their communities, regardless of place of residence, including : anonymous chat-support, psychosocial online support for young people and their families and relatives, online youth participation platforms, digital counselling and guidance, digital volunteering.

### Issue/challenge

When faced with challenges and difficulties in their lives, many people struggle to adapt and need guidance. In many ways, young people deal with such emotions more than any other group. The challenges related to coping with daily life, mental health-related problems, the pressure of finding a meaningful path for the future in an uncertain world, choosing a career path, relationship problems or troubles at home can greatly impact young people's lives and push them to look for support outside their usual circles. Youth Shelters provide essential preventive support. Most often young people and families are supported when public services may be insufficient. In the provision of the support, the Red Cross works closely with public authorities.

### Objective of the practice

The Youth Shelters help young people and their families with diverse problems in a flexible manner without queues or bureaucracy to cope with acute crisis and address long-term psychosocial needs. The aid is based on teamwork between professionals and volunteers, and on a sensitive dialogue with young people and their families and other communities.

### Description of the practice

Providing quick shelter and accommodation for young people, the shelters are run by around 60 multi-professional employees and more than 600 volunteers. The activities sit at a multi-professional crossroads between social work, youth work and civic/voluntary action, and provide temporary accommodation, counselling and guidance, community work with families, support in the transition to independent life, digital support, group activities to prevent loneliness and rootlessness, and local voluntary activities. They work in cooperation with a young person's family and the wider network of people around them. Youth Shelters are accessible to young people and families 24/7, the service is free and they arrive voluntarily. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finnish Red Cross started piloting a national digital psychosocial aid platform for young people and their relatives, using the potential of digital to also reach people who can't access physical support.

### Outcomes

In 2022, more than 13,000 young people aged 12–28 and their relatives were involved in the shelters' activities.



### 3.5. Healthy nutrition

While tremendous strides have been made in reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, progress has failed to adequately address the needs of vulnerable women and children. To further improve maternal and child health, there must be seamless integration of services across the lifecycle. Nutrition is integral to a child's well-being. It is a prerequisite for healthy growth, protection from infection and NCDs, body functioning and overall health. Adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life is necessary for cognitive development and will affect education outcomes. Importantly, good nutrition allows an individual to cope with and recover from crisis.<sup>35</sup>

Good nutrition is important even before birth and is especially important for children under the age of two. Good nutrition is also critical for girls during adolescence and for women of childbearing age. A child born from a well-nourished mother is more likely to have adequate weight at birth and to grow healthy and become strong. The Red Cross works on promoting good nutrition, while at the same time working to prevent malnutrition among children from a very early age. The three key principles of good nutrition are: following an adequate diet, eating enough of the right foods, and the absence of disease.<sup>36</sup>

#### In practice: Breakfast Club and Breakfast Summer Camp<sup>37</sup> – Italy

Since 2017 the Italian Red Cross, as part of a multi-year partnership with Kellogg's, has provided vulnerable primary school children with an adequate breakfast and the tools and training to take care of their health by adopting healthy lifestyles. The activities are part of the Breakfast Club and the Breakfast Summer Camp programmes implemented all over Italy.

#### Issue/challenge

Breakfast should provide about 20% of total daily calories, an amount that is useful for restoring energy reserves after the long night fast. In fact, about 8–10 hours elapse between dinner and breakfast the next day. Research supports the importance of breakfast as a fundamental daily habit for achieving and maintaining good mental and physical fitness. And even more so when it comes to children and adolescents, as the nutrients lost by skipping breakfast are difficult to recover during the day.

In Italy, however, not all children manage to eat a healthy and nutritious breakfast that can give them the energy to get through the day.

#### Objective of the practice

The challenge is not only to provide children with healthy food but also to raise awareness among the younger segments of the population on healthy lifestyles through proper nutrition, adequate physical activity and combating food waste. The Breakfast Club and Breakfast Summer Camp programmes aims to:

- » offer a complete and balanced breakfast to children who, for various reasons, would not have the opportunity to eat one otherwise
- » provide the energy and nutrients needed for active learning, improving concentration and school performance
- » create healthy habits that are adopted throughout life and improve health
- » give children the opportunity to socialise, listen and talk about nutrition in a calm environment.

## Description of the practice

Thanks to the Breakfast Club, everyday breakfast, consisting of a mix of carbohydrates, proteins and including varied vitamins and minerals, is served in the early morning hours. The activities are accompanied by the support of the Italian Red Cross volunteers who, as well as distributing breakfast, offer important stimuli such as playful-educational activities or meetings with professionals, thus helping to create the basis for long-term acquisition of healthy habits and lifestyles.

During the academic year 2021/22 the Italian Red Cross provided over 46,000 breakfasts to more than 900 children (among them 591 vulnerable children) in partnership with nine primary schools in six Italian cities (Milan, Turin, Isernia, Caserta, Catania and Caltanissetta), involving around 90 volunteers. For the academic year 2022/23 (data until March 2023) the Breakfast Club project provided approximately 32,000 nutritious breakfasts across 10 clubs in Italy.

In 2022, the Italian Red Cross rolled out the programme Breakfast Summer Camp (developed for the first time in 2021) in 14 locations, reaching a total of 276 children and distributing 6,169 meals.

## Outcomes

The project has entailed positive effects on students from a nutritional, educational and social perspective. Besides access to a nutritious and balanced meal, the breakfast offered helps students improve cognitive function and memory, classroom behaviour as well as school performance and attendance. In terms of social relationships, more opportunities for social interaction are created, social barriers are broken down and bullying is reduced.



Italian Red Cross staff distributes a nutritious breakfast to primary school children.

© Italian Red Cross

## In practice: School Meals programme (schoolmaaltijden) – Netherlands

Due to inflation and rising fixed costs, more and more people in the Netherlands do not have enough money to buy enough and nutritious food for themselves or their families. The Netherlands Red Cross therefore supports families with children to ensure they receive enough breakfast. The National Society does this firstly via the School Meals programme (schoolmaaltijden), started in 2023 together with another partner (JEF) and funded by the government. Families receive vouchers of €11 per week to buy breakfast products. Secondly, the Breakfast Bags (ontbijttassen) programme, started in 2022 and funded by the National Society's own funds, supports families with breakfast products so that the nutritional needs of their children are met. These packages have a value of €10 and go to families whose children would otherwise often go to school on an empty stomach. After three months, the bags are replaced by vouchers, so that families can shop for breakfast themselves. The Breakfast Bags programme is implemented with schools and in partnerships with other organisations, such as community centres. Collaborations are made with formal social work institutions, so that families' situations are likely improved within 6 months of receiving aid.

### Issue/challenge

Since the COVID-19 crisis, the Netherlands Red Cross has been receiving more and more signals from people in need of food. Among people living in food poverty, there is a lot of shame and mistrust of the system. Because of that, many people find it difficult to seek help. And that in turn can lead to social isolation, stress and (psychological) health problems.

### Objective of the practice

The aim is to address food shortages for families with children who do not receive food aid anywhere else, to prevent issues related to their (mental) health, specifically by providing healthy meals.

### Description of the practice

For the School Meals programme, the National Society works together with an NGO. In the Red Cross' part of the programme, there are currently 11,570 children enrolled from 7,820 families and 418 schools taking part. The Red Cross' part of the programme shares supermarket vouchers through an online system; there are no volunteers involved.

Since 2022, the Netherlands Red Cross reached several provinces in the country with breakfast packages. Activities have already been implemented in multiple districts. On average at least 3,000 bags or vouchers are distributed every month to around 900 children. There are currently nine schools or community centres involved. By estimation, 140 volunteers help with the programme.

### Outcomes

The Breakfast Bags programme has shown various impacts and outcomes. Every week, children and families receive healthy products that contribute to their health and well-being. The most important outcomes of the Breakfast Bags from the first evaluation with families are: reduced stress about whether or not the child will have food (80%), the ability for the child to have variety in breakfast (70%), the family feeling better mentally (70%), and the child having had enough food for breakfast (65%). All aspects of the Breakfast Bags score very well in the evaluation (logistics, products in the bag, registration process). Only the length of the programme scores relatively low (30% of people think the programme is too short); all other aspects score at least 80–90%.

# Conclusions

***EU Member States must address the causes and consequences of poverty, focusing on the provision of high quality person-centred services.***

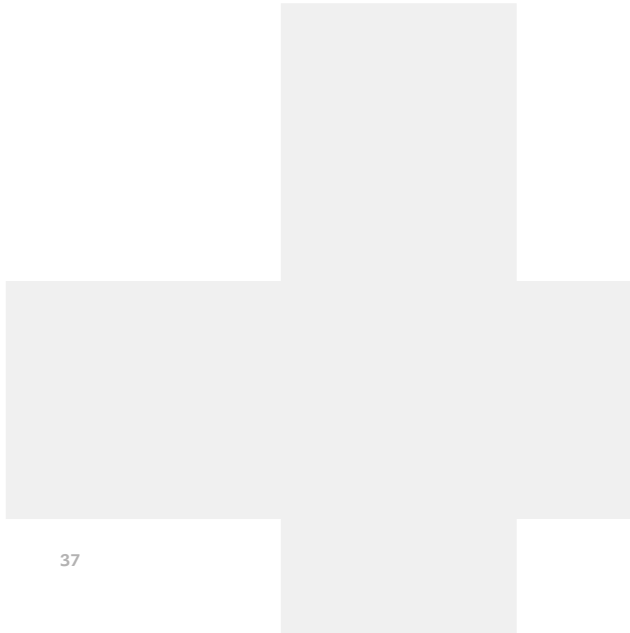
The European Child Guarantee and its subsequent NAPs are vital to address the topic of child poverty throughout the EU. In 2022, 24.7% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Compared with 2021, this share slightly increased by 0.3%.<sup>38</sup> This increase is undoubtedly a result of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, which is placing additional financial pressure on children and their families. Furthermore, this increase underlines that the efforts to address child poverty at the national, regional and local levels are falling short and need to be strengthened.

Addressing these challenges requires that Member States, in their NAPs, develop a comprehensive approach to addressing both the causes and consequences of poverty. It is imperative that such an approach is focused on the provision of high-quality, accessible services which are person and needs centred. In their work with families and children at risk of or already experiencing poverty, National Red Cross Societies in the EU work with a range of community actors, including children themselves, to meet their needs and support them out of poverty. Member States alone cannot implement the NAPs effectively, which underlines the importance of partnering and consulting regularly with not-for-profit social organisations such as the Red Cross, to ensure efficient implementation, monitoring of progress and impact of interventions.

Addressing child poverty at the national, regional and local levels requires that all actors work together in a comprehensive and joined-up way. To this end, Member States must recognise the crucial work that not-for-profit social organisations undertake to support children and their families out of poverty. An important sign of this recognition is stable and predictable investment in these community-based actors in their provision of high-quality and accessible services. As a community-based actor, National Red Cross Societies operate in proximity to children and families experiencing poverty, or at risk of doing so. As such, the Red Cross is ideally placed to both recognise and respond to needs through innovative and inclusive services which are person centred and of high quality.



A group of children running at the German Red Cross daycare centre in Großbeeren, November 2022.  
© Willing-Holtz / German Red Cross



# Endnotes

- 1 Principle 11, European Pillar of Social Rights. Childcare and support to children: Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality; Children have the right to protection from poverty; Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en>
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# The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

## Humanity

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## Impartiality

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It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## Neutrality

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In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## Independence

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The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## Voluntary service

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It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## Unity

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There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## Universality

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.