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The Social Justice Challenge for Children

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My topic is the social justice agenda for children.

I would like to start by showing you a nice picture from the city of Benevento: the Trajan Arch [slide 2], one of the most renowned monuments of Roman art (also known as the Golden Gate).

Emperor Trajan –and this monument in part- are linked in two ways to my topic:

1. This emperor is remembered for his enlightened and progressive rule, inspired by sound principles of social justice
2. Among his social reforms one of the most important was the establishment of a Fund for child nutrition ("Institutio Alimentaria"), which greatly contributed to improving the living conditions of young people within the Empire (on the detail of the arch [slide 3] one can see some children collecting money from a public officer).

All this happened about 19 hundreds years ago. A lot of things have changed, but the issue of children's well-being is still on the agenda. Like Trajan, European leaders have to turn their attention to this issue, be bold and creative and find ways for investing in youth.

As recommended by an increasing number of scholars, policy analysts and research institutions, a child-centred re-orientation of the European social models is in order if we want to preserve or reestablish a right balance between efficiency and solidarity.

What exactly is the rationale for this child-centred reorientation?

What can be done at the national level?

Is there a role for the EU?

I would like to suggest brief answers to these 3 questions.

Let me start with **the rationale**

Children and young people more generally are not faring well in Europe today.

Poverty indicators are everywhere higher for children than those for the general population [slide 4].

There are about 94 million children and young people below 18. Around 20 million of them (19%, one out of five) have known an above average risk compared to adults of income poverty – and the risk is remarkably higher for children of lone mothers or work-less households. In a number of countries the incidence of child poverty exceeds that of poverty among the elderly [slide 5].

Poverty is an evil *per se* of course, that must be contrasted for any age group that suffers it.

But there are good reasons why child poverty and the fight against it should receive a higher priority.

Ethical reasons, to begin with: poor children are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, not only materially, but also politically, as they cannot make their voice heard.

But there are also strong economic and social reasons (highlighted by the new welfare paradigm school in social research, pioneered by Esping Andersen).

Early childhood experiences are of paramount importance in the development of human capital.

Deficiencies and limitations in the formative environment of children (in particular those which are linked to poverty in the family) lead to a number of serious problems in the subsequent phases of life: problems involving learning, lack of motivation to learn, a greater likelihood of truancy and early school drop out; inadequate skills, worse health conditions and in general fewer chances of social mobility.

As the chart shows [slide 6] a poor start in life has a number of very negative consequences for all the subsequent phases of the life cycle, from the phases of education to that of employment and even retirement. The negative implications of a poor start in life affect each poor child as an individual, but they also affect society as a whole.

What can be done? The short answer is: prioritize investment in children and young people at both the national and the EU level, even if –due to budgetary constraints - this means shifting resources from (and thus downsizing) other policy areas.

A number of youth policy initiatives have been implemented across Europe in the last decade and the UK does stand out –at least from a South European perspective- as a good performer on this front: child poverty went down from 22% (above the EU average) to 15% (below). But the youth agenda must be pushed forward in all countries by setting specific targets, deploying new instruments and improving policy coordination.

Two are in particular the top priorities [slide 7].

First: the **fight against income poverty and exclusion** among children. In too many EU member states there is simply no universal safety net catering to the basic needs of families with small children. Italy, to name and shame my own country, does not have a minimum income guarantee nor a universal scheme for child benefits.

Second: **more investment in education**.

Within this policy area, the priority front is what the experts call *early childhood education and care*. Investments on this front would create a veritable virtuous circle: if children are given appropriate developmental opportunities early in life they are much more likely to be successful in later phases of the education cycle and in the labour market. At the aggregate social level, these investments are likely to generate significant new employment, additional tax revenues and important savings in later educational and social expenditure (the opposite of what was depicted in the chart).

Finally, the third question: **is there a role for the EU?**

I strongly believe that there is a role for the EU and that, indeed, the EU should strive to make children and child policies as visible as possible within the social flag of Europe, in order to reveal its “caring” dimension.

The EU can help in a variety of ways [slide 8].

As a minimum, it can help to invest more in children by highlighting the issues, mobilizing knowledge and actors and putting more of its own budget into child- and youth centred initiatives.

When emperor Traianus established his Child nutrition fund, he drew a huge sum from the emperor’s personal treasury. I certainly do not want to suggest the idea that the EU is or should become a new emperor. But I definitely want to suggest that the EU should reform its budget, thinking less of farmers and more of young people.

A more ambitious agenda could also be envisaged, establishing some binding commitments at the EU level as regards a minimum income guarantee, a childcare guarantee or an “endowment” for children.

Placing children and women at the centre of Social Europe was one of the items of the Hampton Court agenda that was agreed upon by the EU leader during the UK presidency a bit more than a year ago [slide 9].

A new political momentum is now needed, to stress the importance of investing in youth, enhance the coherence between EU and national actions and take more concrete initiatives.