

Child development: How to promote sustainable prevention and social investment strategies in the EU?

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1. Prevention targeting disadvantaged children and families

Throughout Europe, efforts to battle poverty while improving well-being and education among children and youth are facing increasing challenges. In Germany, we find a strong relation between individual health and education levels and parents’ social background.

However, the educational opportunities of disadvantaged children can be improved considerably with even a few good preventive measures. Prevention takes place in the living environment of families and children, that is, in educational institutions such as day nurseries and schools, in open all-day schools, sports clubs and the homes where young people live. However, studies have shown that children and families with low socioeconomic status are less likely to participate in preventive offerings as children and families with higher socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, while families in need of assistance find support, this support is siloed, meaning it is provided by different agencies tasked with specific issues. Unable to take into account the interdependent nature of problems that arise in a child’s life, siloed support offerings are thus not as effective as they could be. We therefore need to reform governance if we are to “leave no child behind.”

2. The “Leaving no child behind” initiative

Since 2012, the Bertelsmann Stiftung has worked as a partner with the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia on an initiative aiming to strengthen local community support for child development (in German: “Kein Kind zurücklassen!”). Within the framework of this support, the Stiftung assumed responsibility for scholarly research accompanying the project. The goal of the initiative is to provide all children and young people – of all backgrounds – the opportunities and environment needed to ensure a successful transition into adulthood.

An important finding of the accompanying research was that municipal “child-centered” policy depends strongly on the political will of municipal decision-makers, the various stakeholders’ ability to cooperate, and the breadth of local resources. As a consequence, not all children and

youth – particularly those from families in need of assistance – are given the support and care necessary to ensure successful growth into adulthood. Drawing on this finding, the Bertelsmann Stiftung explores in the now-pending phase of the project the question of how to design binding, sustainable and appropriate-to-local-needs municipal activity. This involves considering local, regional and national systems as well as financial and organizational conditions.

3. European cross-national comparisons

The Bertelsmann Stiftung aims to gain an overview of how other European countries design vertically and horizontally integrated social policy for children and youth from families in need of assistance, and how this is implemented in various regions and municipalities. Of particular interest for the German context are examples from other European countries of municipal-level preventive activities that are structurally designed to enable the most comprehensive support to the target group.

Most EU member states have in place preventive strategies targeting diverse social and health problems in childhood and youth. However, they are not uniformly interpreted and applied or implemented – conceptually, structurally but also with regard to specific items. The program “Kein Kind zurücklassen” (*Leaving no child behind*), which focused on prevention and social investment at the local level in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, highlighted the potential for improvement in German prevention-oriented institutions. Located at the intersection of the health, education and child/youth welfare systems, prevention is a highly complex issue in need of effective coordination and cooperation, both of which – in Germany – need improvement.

It thus seems promising to look beyond our national borders and identify more successful facilities and institutional arrangements with potential applicability for the German welfare system. Although Germany’s federalist system and other distinctive features of its institutional architecture may prohibit a direct transfer, it still seems fruitful to look for effective arrangements that could be adapted in one way or another.¹

In order to identify and communicate effective governance, including institutional arrangements and incentive facilities, provided at the local level in different EU member states that promote child and youth-centered objectives, the “Leaving no child behind” project has three phases:

¹ Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage, A study of national policies

First, a study will be conducted to map the prevention-oriented arrangements in 10 EU member states in terms of their respective goals, contents, legal framework, information structure, financing, and organization and cooperation structures. These states are selected according to the following criteria:

- a) States with institutional arrangements similar to those found in the German context, which allows for a smoother transfer of successful strategies and practices (Austria, France, Netherlands),
- b) States that traditionally place greater emphasis on prevention, which potentially allows for more innovative and consolidated strategies and practices (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) and
- c) States subject to a high degree of “problem pressure,” which can also lead to more innovative strategies and practices (Spain, Portugal, Ireland, UK).

Second, the project will build on the results of this initial (rather broad) analysis and take a closer look at three member states and their successful prevention strategies. These three case studies will feature insights from interviews conducted with local officials and further data that highlight the conditions for effective prevention on the local level.

Third, through our exchange with a network of European experts, our project aims to:

- Identify opportunities for cooperation across policy fields.
- Establish an overview of advantages and disadvantages associated with various structural designs for integrated social policy.
- Create opportunities to discuss findings with relevant EU actors.
- Foster acceptance of findings among stakeholders.
- Distribute results through various stakeholder networks.

4. Key questions for a European debate

- What is the EU’s role in fostering prevention locally?
- How can the EU influence prevention policies in states and municipalities? Are there signs of positive developments already underway in EU states or regions as a result of the current extended ESF programming?
- How can an integrated, cross-sectoral approach (i.e., that includes health, child welfare and education) be promoted at the EU level?
- In which EU institutions or networks is the issue of child and youth-oriented social inclusion addressed? Which issues are identified as high-risk for social exclusion in the European discussion?

- In general, what impact do EU child policy recommendations have on national policies?
- How can the Bertelsmann Stiftung study's findings help promote EU policies targeting disadvantaged children and their families? How should the Bertelsmann Stiftung communicate these findings?

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