

Child and Youth Policy Is Cross-Sectoral Policy! Considering Young People in Economic and Fiscal Policy Instruments at EU Level

**Position Paper by the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ¹ on the
European Semester²**

Abstract

The European Semester has been an integral part of the European Union's economic policy since its introduction in 2008. Its relevance in terms of child and youth policy is emphasised every year by the shadow reporting of the European children's rights organisation Eurochild. In Germany, the AGJ participates in the compilation of the annual report together with the National Coalition Germany as National Partner Networks of Eurochild. Building on this shadow report, this position paper comments on selected aspects of the European Semester that are relevant for German child and youth welfare.

On the one hand, the position paper aims to make the relevance of this economic and fiscal policy coordination tool for child and youth welfare in Germany more visible. On the other hand, recommendations are developed as to how the European Semester can be further developed with regard to the consideration of child and youth issues. To this end, the first chapter explains the European Semester as a mechanism for economic coordination. The second chapter explains the relevance of the European Semester for youth policy. The third chapter comments on relevant aspects of the European Semester for child and youth welfare. Finally, the fourth chapter takes a stance on how the European Semester must be further developed from a child and youth policy perspective.

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1 The European Semester

The European Semester provides the framework for coordinating economic, fiscal, labour and social policies within the European Union (EU). It was introduced in response to the economic and financial crisis in 2008 and aims to ensure stability in the EU through stronger governance and coordination. During this annually recurring process, which takes place over the first six months of a year, EU member states align their budgetary and economic policies with the rules agreed at EU level. The EU uses the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for this purpose, which is mainly applied in policy areas where European cooperation is considered an added value by the member states, but a harmonisation of national policies through European legislative competence is not intended. Examples of such areas are social, education and youth policy.

Having originally been a framework for economic governance, the European Semester has since evolved to encompass other relevant policy areas. For example, since the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017, the European Semester has also provided a framework for coordinating and monitoring member states' efforts to implement the principles and rights integral to the EPSR.³ In 2019, the European Commission announced that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁴ would also be included in the European Semester.

The procedure of the European Semester is the same every year: The European Semester starts with an autumn package published by the European Commission in November of the previous year. The autumn package includes the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, in which the EU Commission sets out its policy priorities that EU member states should take into account when setting out their economic policy for the coming year. On this basis, the member states draw up (progress) reports on implementation, the National Reform Programmes, in the spring. Officially, a cycle of the European Semester ends with the country-specific recommendations, which are usually published in May. These provide tailored advice to individual member states, based on a review of each member state's economic and social performance from the previous year and the EU-wide priorities set out in the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey. The country-specific recommendations are presented by the EU Commission and subsequently adopted by the EU Council in July. This is followed in the second half of the year by the implementation phase in the member states.⁵

³ The principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights are divided into three chapters: "Equal opportunities and equal access to the labour market", "Fair working conditions" and "Social protection and inclusion". The focus is therefore on employment, training and poverty reduction, which is reflected in the three headline targets of the EU for 2030. See: [The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 Principles | EU Commission \(europa.eu\)](#); [Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights | EU Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁴ [THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development \(un.org\)](#).

⁵ For an overview of the procedures in the European Semester, see: [European Semester: Who does what? - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#).

2 The Relevance of the European Semester for Youth Policy

Developments and progress in the various thematic areas of the European Semester are reviewed within the framework of the OMC using jointly formulated indicators and benchmarks. In addition to financial support through programmes, this benchmarking is an important EU policy lever, which finds expression in the country-specific recommendations in the European Semester. The country-specific recommendations therefore give the European Commission the opportunity to advance the implementation of common goals also in policy areas where the EU has only supporting competence, and to initiate structural reforms in the member states. The recommendations relate to a wide range of economic, fiscal, labour and social policy issues, such as youth unemployment or poverty reduction. The European Semester is therefore also of significance for child and youth policy.

This is shown on the one hand by the fact that the European Semester covers topics that young people consider highly relevant (e.g. climate change) and on the other hand by proposing measures in thematic areas that have a direct impact on the lives of young people and their possibilities for development (e.g. development of digital infrastructure).

Against this background, the European children's rights organisation Eurochild – as well as some other European networks, e.g. in the health sector – has prepared and published a shadow report on the European Semester every year since 2015 with the help of its member organisations.⁶ In this report, attention is drawn to the consequences for children's rights of the measures and guidelines recommended in the European Semester. Children – which in the European context means persons under 18 years of age – are understood as rights holders and are entitled to e.g. health, education, participation and leisure. On the basis of this rights-based approach, Eurochild's shadow reporting highlights both violations of children's rights and positive developments regarding their implementation. With regard to Germany, for example, the shadow report 2019 noted considerable deficits in the implementation of child and youth participation mechanisms on a federal level and pointed out that the intended anchoring of children's rights in the Basic Law, which was already being discussed in Germany at the time, was not mentioned in any of the documents on the European Semester. At the same time, however, the positive developments at state level were highlighted, where 15 out of 16 constitutions explicitly recognise children's rights.⁷

3 Commentary on Relevant Aspects for Child and Youth Welfare

It makes sense for two reasons to look at the European Semester as part of EU economic policy also from a child and youth policy perspective. Firstly, child and youth policy is cross-sectoral policy and policy that is focused on life situations of young people, i.e. issues that affect young

⁶ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU suspended the normal procedure of the European Semester in 2021 in favour of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The shadow report by Eurochild was therefore also omitted. The process was resumed for the year 2022, and so was Eurochild's shadow reporting. This year's shadow report focuses on poverty and social exclusion of children and young people. It is due to be published in December 2022.

⁷ Eurochild: New opportunities for investing in children. 2019 Eurochild report on the European Semester (2019), p. 50.

people (directly or indirectly) are part of child and youth policy. In the European Semester, there are several thematic areas that have an impact on children, young people and their families, which is why it is relevant for child and youth policy. Secondly, the EU emphasises the need to invest in youth, because this is the only way Europe can grow economically. Against this background, it is surprising that there are hardly any explicit references to child and youth policy in the European Semester, including in the country report as well as in the country-specific recommendations for Germany.⁸ The AGJ is therefore of the opinion that child and youth policy concerns are not sufficiently taken into account in the European Semester, even more so since the child and youth (aid) policy implications of some topics are enormous. In the following, the AGJ takes a critical look at four of these topics, namely the reduction of inequalities, social exclusion and poverty; digital transition; education and training; and the green transition. First, the statements of the country report and the country-specific recommendations on Germany are summarised for each of the four thematic areas. Subsequently, based on existing AGJ positions, recommendations for measures in the respective areas are formulated from a specialised policy perspective.

Reducing inequalities, social exclusion and poverty

Poverty reduction is one of the EU 2030 headline targets under the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan. Overall, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁹ across the EU should be reduced by at least 15 million, including by at least 5 million children and youth. In order to contribute to the achievement of this headline target, the country report states the need for Germany to strengthen social policy measures in order to lift people out of poverty. In addition, the report identifies the reduction of inequalities, social exclusion and poverty as crucial to making the economy more inclusive in line with the EPSR. In Germany, inequalities in wealth and income, as well as in-work poverty, are above the EU average. The proportion of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion is relatively high, especially among children. In addition, the pandemic-related restrictions on school attendance have had a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged families, children and youth, risking the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities. Furthermore, the country report considers political action necessary with regard to housing prices, as affordable housing in cities and especially for low-income earners is becoming a challenge.

The AGJ understands the reduction of inequalities and poverty as an overarching goal and thus as a framework for commenting on the three further thematic areas of education, digital and green transition. Measures in these areas also have an impact on equal opportunities and social justice. This perspective is based on the understanding of poverty as not only a lack of material but also of cultural and social goods (including, for example, quality of housing, education and

⁸ European Commission: [2022 Country Report – Germany](#) (2022); Council of the EU: [Council Recommendation on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Germany](#) (2022).

⁹ The AROPE indicator (abbreviation for "At risk of poverty or social exclusion") used by Eurostat is considered the main indicator for measuring the risk of poverty or exclusion in Europe. The AROPE indicator is composed of various parameters, such as poverty risk, material and social deprivation, as well as volume of employment. See: [Glossary: At risk of poverty or social exclusion \(AROPE\) - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#).

participation). The focus is therefore on realisation opportunities¹⁰ for children and young people, which should be promoted through measures in all policy areas.

With regard to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, the country report notes that Germany has made progress on most of the goals. However, there had been no improvement in important areas. Germany must take measures to reduce inequalities (SDG 10), improve the quality of education (SDG 4) and fight poverty (SDG 1). Against this background, the AGJ emphasises the insufficient implementation of the SDGs from a child and youth policy perspective and points out the discrepancy between commitment to the SDGs on the one hand and their actual implementation on the other. Consequently, the AGJ calls for the systematic implementation of all SDGs. In order to combat poverty and reduce social exclusion and inequalities, the AGJ emphasises the relevance of creating and further developing a social infrastructure. As part of this infrastructure, child and youth welfare services make a central contribution to supporting children, youth and families affected by poverty in coping with the consequences of poverty. There is a need for poverty-sensitive and needs-oriented youth services planning and an action plan that understands poverty reduction as a cross-cutting issue and for this reason ensures interdepartmental cooperation. This cooperative approach is also required to implement the European Child Guarantee¹¹ for combatting child and youth poverty. In the corresponding Council Recommendation, EU member states have committed to ensuring access to essential services, including early childhood care, education, healthcare, nutrition and housing.¹² At the same time, the AGJ calls for the creation or improvement of social infrastructure to be considered together with monetary benefits and therefore welcomes the federal government's plan to introduce the *Kindergrundsicherung* (a form of child benefit in Germany). Furthermore, in addition to a social infrastructure and monetary support, a poverty-sensitive attitude is needed on the part of professionals, representatives of organisations and decision-makers in politics and administration.¹³

*Digital transition*¹⁴

The country report and the country-specific recommendations for Germany state that digitalisation remains relatively weak, and that progress on digital networks and digital public

¹⁰ The realisation opportunities approach in poverty and wealth reporting is based on Amartya Sen's "capability approach", which the AGJ already referred to in the position paper "Armut nicht vererben – Bildungschancen verwirklichen – soziale Ungleichheit abbauen!" (2017). According to this, realisation opportunities are defined as "the possibilities and comprehensive abilities of people to lead a life for which they could decide with good reasons and which does not call into question the foundations of self-respect". See: Amartya Sen: "Ökonomie für den Menschen. Wege zu Gerechtigkeit und Solidarität in der Marktwirtschaft" (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000), p. 9.

¹¹ The EU Children's Rights Strategy and the European Child Guarantee | EU Commission (europa.eu).

¹² European Union Council: Recommendation on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee (2021). For implementation in the EU member states, they have committed to submitting National Action Plans for the period until 2030. The German National Action Plan "Neue Chancen für Kinder in Deutschland" is due to be presented at the end of 2022.

¹³ AGJ position papers on poverty: Armutssensibles Handeln – Armut und ihre Folgen für junge Menschen und ihre Familien als Herausforderung für die Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (2022); Armut nicht vererben – Bildungschancen verwirklichen – soziale Ungleichheit abbauen! Fünfter Armuts- und Reichtumsbericht: Konsequenzen und Herausforderungen für die Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (2017); Kinderarmut und Familienpolitik in Deutschland – eine fachpolitische Einordnung (2015).

¹⁴ Regarding the digital transition, see in particular: European Commission: 2022 Country Report – Germany (2022), p. 34, Annex 8.

services has been slow. The developments so far are thus not sufficient to realise the planned digital transition. Germany lags behind other countries in the coverage of fibre-optic and very high-capacity networks in rural areas. The need for investment is particularly pronounced at the local level, since after decades of negative net investments, much needs to be made up in order to maintain the quality of the municipal infrastructure. In addition to the lack of a digital infrastructure – and the inadequate framework conditions for corresponding investments – there is also a lack of digital skills training. There is therefore considerable potential for improving the digital skills of the population, including teachers.

Life in the digital world is common practice for young people. However, an insufficient development of digital infrastructure affects the lives of children and young people in two ways and reinforces inequalities: on the one hand, there is insufficient access, equipment and opportunities for use (first level digital divide). On the other hand, opportunities are lacking for training media literacy (second level digital divide). This contradicts the right of young people to social participation that is age-appropriate and non-discriminatory.

Accordingly, the AGJ states that social participation also means that all young people have equal access to media and formal and non-formal (media) education, and that they are supported, involved and protected in an increasingly digitised world. Firstly, the AGJ emphasises that against this background, an expansion of the digital infrastructure is urgently needed throughout Germany. Equality in digital access and participation must be ensured. Therefore, special effort and investments are needed, especially in rural areas, to ensure the provision of stable and high-speed internet connections to prevent young people beyond big cities from being separated from their peers and the rest of the world. Secondly, the AGJ emphasises the importance of media education and training that supports children and young people in their development and specifically promotes the competent use of media. This includes active guidance in media use by parents and professionals.¹⁵ Thirdly, child and youth welfare services, too, operate in the digital world and must therefore be enabled to create or further develop digital services in the interest of their addressees. In this context, the AGJ calls for a strategy for digital transformation in the field of child and youth services that involves equipment, funding and training (in Germany also called *Digitalpakt*). This digital strategy must ensure non-discriminatory participation opportunities as well as child and youth protection in the digital space, thereby contributing to reducing digital disadvantages. The strategy should aim at accessibility of services, set professional standards and prevent exclusion in the digital world. This requires child and youth services to be adequately equipped with the necessary hardware and software. Furthermore, the professional quality of child and youth services must be secured and expanded in view of the digital transition. This also requires a corresponding qualification of professionals with regard to the respective requirements in the different fields of work.¹⁶

¹⁵ Discussion paper of the AGJ on digitalisation: [Digitale Lebenswelten. Kinder kompetent begleiten!](#) (2016).

¹⁶ See also: Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ: [Deutscher Kinder- und Jugend\(hilfe\)MONITOR 2021](#) (2021); Position paper from the Federal Youth Board: [Digitalität von Kindheit und Jugend: Digitalpakt Kinder- und Jugendhilfe](#) (2021).

*Education and training*¹⁷

The country report notes that investment in the education system as a whole, and in skills in particular, is crucial to achieving the EU's headline target for adult learning by 2030. This target stipulates that at least 60 % of all adults take part in training each year. Labour and skills shortages are cited as a problem in certain sectors, including care, construction, IT and education. The country report also warns that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in educational achievement. Educational outcomes are therefore even more strongly influenced by socio-economic status and migration background than before. Improving access to and the quality of early childhood education and care as well as the provision of all-day school facilities in line with the EPSR would contribute to improving both pupils' educational outcomes and women's full-time employment. At present, Germany lags behind the EU average and EU-level targets in terms of participation in early childhood education and care as well as in tertiary education.

The AGJ supports the assessment on the relevance of high-quality early childhood education and care as well as all-day care, which contribute to increasing the employment rate of parents, as stated in the country report.¹⁸ Limited parental employment is often a reason for family poverty, which directly affects children and young people and often turns into a cycle of poverty. To break this cycle, education is of pivotal importance. Education is an important prerequisite for a self-determined lifestyle, social participation and opportunities for development. For this reason, from the perspective of child and youth welfare, the prospect of early childhood care facilities as places of education that promote development and equal opportunities of young people should take precedence over the labour market and employment perspective. This perspective is neglected in the country report. At the same time, the truth is that children and youth in Germany have unequal opportunities to achieve their potential. Despite progress in educational achievement and participation, it has not yet been possible to sustainably break the close link between social background and educational success. A learning environment must therefore be created inside and outside of school that promotes educational success and thereby supports children regardless of the resources of their parental home. This is inconceivable without the contribution of child and youth services, in which the promotion of personal development and educational processes is in the foreground in all fields of work.

Skilled workers are needed for these efforts. Yet, the shortage of skilled workers mentioned in many places in the country report affects child and youth welfare, too, for example in day care, youth work and youth social work, as well as in outpatient and inpatient socio-educational support services. Pursuant to this, ensuring already existing offers and services – not to mention additional tasks in the field of poverty reduction and prevention – is endangered. The growing demand for skilled workers can no longer be met by adopting isolated strategies for recruiting

¹⁷ On education and skills, see in particular: European Commission: 2022 Country Report – Germany (2022), p. 44, Annex 13.

¹⁸ On the topic of day care for children, see the following AGJ positions: Qualitätsentwicklung nach dem „Gute-Kita-Gesetz“? Rückblick und zukünftige Entwicklungspotentiale (2021); Zugänge zur Kindertagesbetreuung. Eine Betrachtung aus kinderrechtlicher Perspektive (2018). Furthermore, on the topic of all-day schooling: Guter Ganztags?! Rechtsanspruch auf Ganztagsbetreuung im Grundschulalter mit Qualität verbinden (2020); Kind- und jugendgerechte Ganztagsbildung (2019).

skilled workers alone. Hence, from the AGJ's point of view, it is necessary to realign the recruitment of professionals and to increase the society's awareness for child and youth services as a field of work. In order to contribute to greater recognition, there is a need, among other things, for adequate financial resources for child and youth services and better remuneration for professionals working in this field. In addition, the working conditions in the institutions must be improved and a sufficient number of free and generalist-oriented training and study places for social professions in child and youth services must be ensured. In this context, the qualification of (university) teachers must also be taken into account.¹⁹

*Green transition*²⁰

Germany has set itself ambitious climate targets, which, according to the country report, will require an acceleration of the economic transformation. Intensifying climate protection measures and the use of renewable energies are moreover crucial to reduce Germany's and the EU's high dependence on imported fossil fuels. In order to be able to obtain more electricity from renewable energies, further efforts are needed in the expansion of the electricity grid, the deployment of decentralised energy and the reduction of investment bottlenecks. The measures for the current expansion of electricity grids are not sufficient to realise the planned green transition. Especially in rural areas, there is a great need for investment. What is more, environmentally harmful subsidies, tax reductions and exemptions undermine the goals of environmental sustainability and stand in the way of decarbonisation, energy efficiency and the use of renewable energies. At the same time, tax bases that advance the green transition are not sufficiently utilised. The ratio of environmental taxation revenues to total taxes as well as in terms of GDP is below EU average, with the share of environmental taxes being particularly low in the area of pollution and resources. The country report moreover notes that biodiversity is under pressure in Germany, particularly because of agriculture. It is likely that the commitments to reduce nitrogen oxides and particulate matter from 2030 onwards will not be met. The decarbonisation of the transport sector must be driven forwards, including by increasing the use of sustainable public transport, the quality of which must be improved for this purpose.

The country report further states that the social dimension of the green transition might become a major challenge, which involves ensuring access to essential transport and energy services. Energy poverty in Germany is above the EU average and affects low-income groups in particular. While low-income earners are most affected by the green transition, their carbon footprint is smaller than that of high-income earners. Ensuring a just transition is therefore central.

¹⁹ On the topic of skilled workers, see the following AGJ positions: Gesellschaftliche Anerkennung und Aufwertung der Sozialen Berufe in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – Fachkräfte gewinnen, Qualität erhalten und verbessern! (2019); Dem wachsenden Fachkräftebedarf richtig begegnen! Entwicklung einer Gesamtstrategie zur Personalentwicklung mit verantwortungsvollem Weitblick (2018).

²⁰ On the green transition, see in particular: European Commission: 2022 Country Report – Germany (2022), p. 27, Annex 5 and p. 30, Annex 6.

What adds to this, from the AGJ's point of view, is the fact that the burdens resulting from environmental problems are unevenly distributed.²¹ This applies not only globally but in terms of health also to Germany. Socio-economic factors and the social environment influence people's lifestyles, housing conditions, available resources and therefore the associated health risks for people. Social status determines whether and to what extent someone is exposed to environmental pollutants.²² In this context, the AGJ draws attention to the relevance of ecological children's rights²³ and calls for their consistent implementation. The impact of the climate crisis affects children and young people in particular, as environmental degradation will continue to affect their lives for decades to come and jeopardises their health and development opportunities.²⁴ In this context, environmental and climate protection have become the most important topics for young people. They often show active commitment to protecting the climate, a considerate approach to the environment and to the preservation of natural resources.

The mission of child and youth welfare to support young people, to get them involved and to maintain or create a child and family-friendly environment, is consistent with children's environmental rights. This implies that child and youth services must advocate on behalf of young people on environmental issues, especially where children and youth themselves do not have access. Therefore, the AGJ firstly calls for professionals and volunteers in child and youth welfare to recognise the relevance and topicality of the climate crisis as well as environmental degradation and deal with their consequences. Secondly, child and youth services must embrace the issue of sustainability in all its dimensions and set an example. It is not enough to explain the principle of sustainability to children and youth. Instead, actors in child and youth welfare should implement sustainable principles as comprehensively as possible and ask themselves how a sustainable transformation can be implemented in recommendations for action, guidelines, concepts and discourses within their field of work and action (Whole Institution Approach). Thirdly, child and youth welfare cannot fulfil this task satisfactorily if not politics and industry, too, take into account the concerns of young people concerning the green transition. This also means involving children and young people in relevant discussions and decisions, for example at European level with regard to the implementation of the European Green Deal and in Germany with regard to decision-making surrounding the maintenance of conventional energy production and the development of renewable energies.

²¹ See the following AGJ discussion paper: [How dare you? The responsibility of child and youth welfare for the implementation of ecological children's rights](#) (2020).

²² [Environment, Health and Social Situation | Federal Environment Agency](#).

²³ Ecological children's rights are children's rights relating to the environment and development conditions. They can be derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which many rights relate to the environment and to the healthy growing up of children and young people. See: [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF](#).

²⁴ In Germany, as part of the [decision of the Federal Constitutional Court on the constitutional complaints against the Climate Protection Act](#), it was stated that the Climate Protection Act of 2019 was incompatible with the fundamental rights of the younger generation. Generational justice was thereby recognised as a central motive for effective climate protection; BVerfG, 24.03.2021 - 1 BvR 2656/18, 1 BvR 288/20, 1 BvR 96/20, 1 BvR 78/20, bVerfGE 157, 30 et seqq.

4 Evaluation of the European Semester from a Child and Youth Policy Perspective

The commentary on selected aspects preceding this chapter highlights the impact of the decisions taken in the European Semester on the lives of young people. However, these effects are hardly explicitly pointed out in the country report and country-specific recommendations. For example, poverty reduction is identified as key to making the economy more inclusive. But there is no mention of the impact of poverty on children and young people, or of the cycle of poverty that often results from family poverty and which also has economic implications. The same applies to the three other thematic areas. With regard to the digital transition, the documents on the European Semester focus on the development of digital infrastructure – an area that is of significant relevance for young people, especially in rural areas. Yet, the effects of unequal access to digital media and thus to opportunities to develop media literacy remain underexposed, even though this access is a major component of social participation and, in today's digital world, will in all likelihood have lifelong effects, especially on educational and career paths of young people, which in turn has implications for the economic success of a country. With regard to the green transition, the shaping of a socially just transition is rightly emphasised as a major challenge in the reports on Germany. However, the fact that the impact of the climate crisis has implications for young people in particular – alongside people affected by poverty – remains unmentioned, as does the need to implement ecological children's rights. In the field of education and training, there is a focus on adult education, in accordance with one of the EU's 2030 headline targets under the EPSR. The role that education plays in the context of equal opportunities for children and youth is hardly mentioned. Similarly, the lack of skilled workers in child and youth welfare is not mentioned, not even in view of the special importance of child and youth services in (post-)pandemic times to promote social interaction and educational processes, to compensate (learning) inequalities, to experience community, to create open spaces and to support young people in coping with the consequences of the pandemic.

Although the impact of economic, fiscal and labour policy on young people does not seem to be of great importance in the documents pertaining to the European Semester, the country report does address many aspects that are relevant from the perspective of child and youth welfare. This contrasts with the country-specific recommendations, in which topics relevant to children and young people remain almost completely unmentioned. Poverty reduction, for example, is not part of the recommendations addressed to Germany for the years 2022 and 2023, even though the country report notes deficits in this area. Overall, there are no recommendations with regard to young people and hardly any references to child and youth policy. This is at the very least surprising against the background that the young generation is the future of Europe, including the European economy. Accordingly, a 2001 White Paper on Youth from the European Commission states that investing in youth is key to successfully achieving the political objective of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.²⁵

²⁵ European Commission: White Paper "A New Impetus for European Youth" (2001), p. 6.

Child and youth policy should be implicitly and explicitly thought of as policy for, by and with young people. It is not only developed and implemented in the youth sector (e.g. the EU Council on youth and the corresponding directorate general of the European Commission) but by those actors who are involved in policy-making that has an impact on children and youth. This is the case for the European Semester. Hence, in order to exercise a comprehensive child and youth policy, it is indispensable that those involved in policy and decision-making of the European Semester consider their recommendations cross-sectorally as child and youth policy.

The AGJ therefore calls for the European Semester to also be understood as child and youth policy and for the inclusion of more references to child and youth policy, the EU Youth Strategy as well as the respective national youth strategies in the country reports and recommendations.

Consequently, the question arises as to the significance of the European Semester – including the measures and recommendations pertaining to it – for young people as well as to how this relevance can be made more visible. To this end, mechanisms must be developed to raise awareness for the impact of the decisions taken in the context of the European Semester on the lives of children and youth, and to highlight the consequences in terms of child and youth policy.

Accordingly, the AGJ calls for more information on the impact of policies in the individual thematic areas of the European Semester on children and youth to be included in the country reports and country-specific recommendations. An example of what such a legislative impact assessment might look like is provided by the “Youth Check”²⁶ in Germany.

With the "dual approach", the EU Youth Strategy claims not only to promote developments in the youth sector but also to represent and advocate for the interests of young people in other policy fields. Many of the issues addressed in the European Semester touch on young people's lives, but they do not have a say in them.

The AGJ calls for concrete participation opportunities for children and youth to be integrated into the European Semester, thereby enabling them to have a say in policy that has a direct impact on their lives. This could happen in the member states when drawing up the National Reform Programmes and at European level when drawing up the country-specific recommendations developed by the European Commission.

The European Semester is based on commonly formulated indicators and benchmarks through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Benchmarking is an important EU policy lever for implementing common objectives in policy areas that fall within the competence of EU member states. If child and youth participation were included in the European Semester, benchmarking on participation would also be possible.

²⁶ A youth-focused impact assessment of new legislation and policies at federal level. See: [The “Youth Check”](#). A so-called EU "Youth Test" as a tool for impact assessment and youth participation on an EU level was also one of the measures under Proposal 47 – European Youth Issues in the [Final Document of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (May 2022).

Hence, from the point of view of the AGJ, there is a need not only for a mechanism for child and youth participation, but also for considerations on how participation can become part of the benchmarking in the context of the OMC. The proposal for a revised dashboard of EU youth indicators,²⁷ which has included indicators for measuring participation, can serve as example.

Furthermore, beyond benchmarking, EU funding programmes can serve to promote the participation of children and youth in policy-making both in member states and at EU level. It must therefore be possible to use EU funding for the development and testing of participation processes. A possibility for this might be the funding programmes of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) within the framework of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF Plus), through which, among other things, a programme to increase the participation of older people will be funded during the funding period 2021–2027.

The AGJ therefore suggests using funding programmes such as the ESF Plus to promote participation processes in order to be able to enter into a dialogue on policy-making with young people. The participation process for shaping inclusive child and youth welfare, which is being implemented in Germany, can serve as a possible example.

5 Conclusion

With the topics of reducing inequalities, social exclusion and poverty; digital transition; education and training; as well as green transition, the European Semester includes important topics that are of significance for children and youth. Nevertheless, the European Semester has so far hardly been perceived as an instrument of child and youth policy, neither at European level nor in Germany. This position paper shows that there is an urgent need for actors in child and youth welfare as well as actors in other policy fields to recognise it as just that.

The European Semester started out as an instrument of economic and fiscal policy. However, it has the potential to become a good and important instrument for child and youth policy, too, if it is developed further accordingly. This opportunity must be seized by all actors.

Board of the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ
Berlin, 22/23 September 2022

²⁷ The dashboard of EU youth indicators was developed in 2011 and is a collection of indicators from European surveys containing data on young people, e.g. youth unemployment rate, internet use, life satisfaction and health status. A proposal for revising the dashboard was published by the European Commission in 2021: [Proposal for an updated dashboard of EU youth indicators \(2021\)](#).