

Child poverty and child-well being in the European Union
Policy overview and policy impact analysis
A case study: Poland

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1 The nature of child poverty and the underlying factors

1.1 The children affected and the underlying factors

EU- SILC data confirm previous results from national statistics, which indicate that children and young people in Poland are particularly exposed to the risk of poverty. According to EU-SILC data for 2007, 24% of children and young people in Poland in 2006 were exposed to the risk of poverty, with this defined as having income below 60% of the median. Poland is one of the EU countries where the poverty rate of households with children is higher than for the population as a whole. This applies to all types of household with children except those with only one child.

Although Poland also has a high poverty rate for total population, this does not explain the high proportion of children at risk of poverty. The difference between the risk of poverty for children and that of the population aged 18 and over is much wider than the average for the EU-25. Moreover, differences in income between households with children are greater than for the population as a whole. This indicates not only that households with children are more exposed to the risk of poverty than those without children but that among households with children there are factors leading to marked differences in their income.

As is evident from statistical analysis, demographic factors such as age of the child or the age of parents are not significantly correlated with the risk of poverty among children (though children of parents aged less than 35 have a slightly above average risk). There are significant differences, however, in the risk of poverty between different types of household. The risk for those in large families of three or more children is over 1.5 higher than the average for all children. In total, children in such households make up 27% all children at risk of poverty. Children with lone parents are slightly more exposed to the risk of poverty than those in large families, but these are much less numerous as compared with the latter (accounting for only some 9% of all children at risk).

The education level of parents is of major significance as a factor underlying the risk of poverty. The risk is doubled for children of parents who have only a low level of education (i.e. no more than basic schooling). More than one-fifth of children at risk live in families, in which the father and/or the mother have only this level of education. More than 40% of children live in households where the parents have little education (primary or lower secondary), which is the highest in the EU. This is due to the growing importance of educational attainment levels on the labour market. A low level of educational attainment in Poland is linked with a high probability of inactivity or unemployment or employment in a low paid job. Research shows that education is the most important factor that affects the occupation of both women and men in Poland (Sztanderska, Grotkowska 2007). According the OECD (OECD 2008), Poland is characterised by a very high unemployment rate among people with low education (77% in 2006).

The link between level of education and increased risk of poverty is particularly significant among single parents and couples with three or more children. This is because in these types of family the parents have on average lower education levels than in the total population (Woycicka 2007). These findings are supported by the results of research on lone parents in Poland, which shows that single parenthood is strongly related to a fairly substantial risk of educational disadvantage (Trifiletti 2007).

In addition, children living in households with low work intensity face much more risk than other children. More than 40% of children at risk live in households where work intensity is less than 0.5. In jobless households the risk of poverty is more than twice the average for all children. At the same time, 13% of children at risk are in households in which work intensity is equal to 1 (those in which both parents are in full time employment).

A specific trait of poverty among children in Poland is that it applies mostly to those living in rural areas. The risk of poverty is more than 1.2 higher than the average for all children (62% of children at risk live in thinly populated areas). Only 23% of children at risk live in highly urbanised areas. In these areas,

however, it is often the case that low income is combined with a deprived social environment (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2005).

The characteristics of children at risk of poverty in Poland are not dramatically different from the average characteristics in the EU. Compared with the EU average, the risk of poverty differs according to the type of family: those at relatively high risk as compared with the EU average are children in large families (which also make up a relatively high percentage of children at risk), while a lower risk applies to single parents (which also represent relatively fewer children). In Poland the importance of low work intensity of households and of joblessness parents as factors of poverty among children is lower than in other Member States.

As indicated above, a significant factor contributing to child-poverty is unemployment of the parents. The probability of children in jobless households being at risk is 29%, while for single-parent households, it is 23%. However, there is also a high probability of poverty in households where either one or both parents work part-time.

In this context it is relevant to explore the link between the economic inactivity of mothers who give up work in order to take care of their children and the risk of poverty among children. Even though so far there is a lack of in-depth analyses of the link between the way childcare is organised and low levels of household income in Poland, there is a confirmation of the link between low labour market activity of women and their family responsibilities. As shown by national studies, cultural factors (embracing the traditional family model in the context of employment and family care) and structural factors (mainly lack of access to childcare and the possibilities available as regards maternity leave) lead to long-term withdrawal from the labour market of a significant proportion of women after having a child (Sztanderska, Grotkowska 2007).

This is confirmed by results of statistical analysis. According to the EU_SILC, the employment of women (aged 25-49) with the youngest child under of 3 is less than half the rate of employment of women without children when they are single and less than a quarter when they are married. Among women with a child aged 3-5, the respective percentages are 34% and 14% and with a child aged 6-11 26% and 6% respectively. These data do not differ significantly from the overall EU average, though but the employment of single mothers is less than elsewhere. Statistical data also shows that the use of childcare in Poland, particularly formal care, is among the lowest in the EU.

There is a lack of in-depth analysis of the persistency of the poverty in Poland. The available studies do not show the picture clearly. Surveys of social mobility carried out during the 1990s point to a growing trend of inherited social positions among those with the lowest income levels, who tend to be those with a low level of education (Domański 2000). However, surveys covering 2005-2007 do not confirm this finding. They reveal that for most households, poverty in Poland during 2005-2007 did not have a lasting effect (Social Diagnosis 2007 Report). Social Diagnosis 2005 and 2007 surveys show that out of the 7.5% of households suffering extreme poverty¹ in February 2005, less than a quarter (23%) remained with income under the poverty line in February 2007. The highest mobility in this regard during this period was among couples with 3 or more children and multi-family, multi-person households, while poverty was most ingrained among childless couples and single-person households. It should be noted, however, that the time period in question favoured families, due to rapidly decreasing unemployment and increasing income.

Longitudinal data from the EU-SILC for the three year 2004-2006 gives a further insight into the risk of persistent poverty in Poland as compared with other countries. These show that around 56% of children who were at risk of poverty in 2006 were also at risk in each of the two preceding years, which is relatively high as compared with other countries (it is the fourth highest figure among the 20 countries for which data are available for these three years). The EU-SILC data, therefore, suggest that the ability of households

¹ The extreme poverty basket takes into account only the needs which cannot be put off in time, and consumption below this level leads to biological degradation. It is established by the Institute of Labour and Social Affairs.

with children to escape from a low risk of poverty is less than implied by the national study, though this was concerned with extreme poverty rather than simply having income below 60% of the median.

1.2 Trends

National statistics based on results of HBS show high economic growth and a substantial fall in unemployment since 2004 have resulted in a reduction in the risk of poverty. Between 2004 and 2008 the relative poverty rate in Poland, defined as monthly household spending below 50% of the mean², declined by 3 percentage points, from 20.3% to 17.6% (Table 1). There was a steeper than average decline among families with 3 or more children. Nevertheless, data for the last two years point to growing differentiation of incomes, resulting in a higher risk of poverty among households of single parents and stabilisation for households with two and three children. During 2006-2008 there was decline in the risk of extreme poverty, particularly for families with 3 or more children.

The introduction of personal income tax deductions for every child in the family for the first time in 2008 and increases in social assistance and family benefits have resulted in a reduction in child poverty. Micro simulation based on HBS 2007 data show that the effect of the tax deductions is estimated to have reduced the overall risk of for the population as a whole (with the poverty line equal to 60% of median equalised income) by 1.1 percentage points. The increase in social assistance payments and in the income threshold for eligibility is also likely to have reduced the number at risk of poverty (Simpl 2008). The same is true of the increase in family benefits for families with more than one child, which took place in 2006. However, there is no statistical evidence to support this.

Table 1 Trends in terms of income poverty in Poland, 2004 -2008

	% of children in households with income under poverty threshold									
	Relative poverty ^a					Extreme poverty ^b				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2004	2005	2006 [<i>break in series - data not comparable with earlier years</i>]	2007	2008
Total	20.3	18.1	17.7	17.3	17.6	11.8	12.3	7.8	6.6	5.6
Single households	6.1	4.9	4.9	6.4	7.5	3.3	3.1	1.9	2.0	2.3
Households: without children	5.6	4.4	5.3	5.9	5.8	2.8	2.7	1.9	1.7	1.5
with 1 child	12.3	9.0	8.9	8.4	7.1	6.4	5.5	3.0	2.9	1.8
with 2 children	18.5	17.2	17.2	15.2	15.2	9.7	10.4	6.7	5.2	3.8
with 3 children	35.6	31.4	28.5	28.3	28.1	21.4	22.0	13.9	10.5	8.8
with 4 or more children	55.9	54.5	49.9	48.9	45.0	40.1	43.5	26.2	25.4	17.8
Single parents	23.8	20.5	23.0	19.1	21.6	15.2	14.5	11.2	6.9	7.7

Note: Data based on HBS.

a) 50% of average monthly household spending (original OECD equivalence scale).

b) Extreme poverty is based on a basket of goods and services which takes into account only the needs which cannot be postponed, a lower level of consumption being damaging to health.

Source: CSO 2006, 2009

The positive, if limited, effect of economic growth and policy on reducing poverty could be eroded or disappear altogether due to the worsening economic crisis in Poland. If the economic slowdown turns into

² Based on the original OECD equivalence scale.

a longer crisis it could result in an increase in absolute poverty, while relative poverty is likely to increase more modestly, due to the widening of the gap in pay rates slowing down. The government has already announced a significant increase in family benefits³. However, these benefits are received by a declining number of families since the income threshold for eligibility has remained unchanged since 2004⁴.

1.3 Absolute poverty

As shown by the UNICEF Report, in terms of material well-being measured by a set of indicators, Polish children are bottom of the 21 developed countries surveyed (UNICEF 2007). Research on child poverty shows that in low income families with children there is an accumulation of the negative factors connected with meeting basic daily needs: food, clothing, schoolbooks, housing conditions, security and rest (Tarkowska 2007).

It is estimated that in Poland there is widespread child malnutrition, resulting from a variety of factors: illnesses, lack of proper care in the household and poverty. According to school principals, during the 2005/2006 school year, 29% of children aged 7-15 required supplementary food. During this period, around 20% of school children were provided with supplementary meals (Danone 2007).

Economic well-being also involves participation in cultural and leisure activities. In 2007, among households with single parents and families with 3 or more children, 45% did not take part in cultural activities for financial reasons. This proportion has decreased for families with 3 or more children since 2005. Nearly a half of households refrained from sending children to summer centres and camps and almost 60% from family holidays for economic reasons. In 2007 households of couples with 3 or more children and single parents were the most likely not to send their children on holiday. 62% of such households did not send their children on group holidays, 4% less than in 2005 (Social Diagnosis 2005, 2007).

2 Impact and effectiveness of policies in place

2.1 Overall approach

Main policy features

The first official document referring to child poverty and deprivation was the National Strategy for Social Integration 2005-2010, adopted by the government in 2004. This strategy referred in part to the phenomenon of poverty among children, lack of access to pre-school care, quality and differentiation of educational opportunities, particularly for children with disabilities, and difficulties of access to health care for mothers and children. The document set the general strategic framework for government operational programmes contained in NAP Inclusion documents. In practice, it ceased relatively soon to play a significant role in programming measures directed at social inclusion.

Successive government operational documents: NAP Inclusion 2006-2008 and 2008-2010 specify the priorities relating to countering poverty and exclusion of children.

They are focused on:

- Income of families with children,
- Childcare services,

³ Family benefits are indexed every three years. The increase of these benefits by about 40% for every child will be implemented from November 2009.

⁴ While the CPI increased by 15% since the third quarter 2004.

- Education of children.

The efforts aimed at improving the income of families in these documents cover both income support and measures to increase of employment of parents.. Both seem well founded, in view of the relatively large impact of the limited employment activity of parents on child poverty as well as the extent of poverty connected with a large number of children in the family and the widespread phenomenon of working poor. One of the main barriers to the employment of women with small children is limited access to pre-school care (Kotowska, Sztanderska, Woycicka 2007).

Ensuring general access to such care is also imperative for ensuring an equal start to education for children. The considerable disparities in the quality of education shown by the OECD –PISA study is one of the most important challenges to be addressed (OECD PISA 2006).

While the objectives of the policy are fully justified, they seem to be insufficiently addressed in some areas.

The government operation documents targeted at counteracting poverty and deprivation among children are insufficiently focused on the problem of those children experiencing the most serious disadvantages. The documents fail to take account of the needs of those children most exposed to the risk of social exclusion, such as children with disabilities⁵, particularly in the context of access to day care, education, health care and rehabilitation.

Although the low education of parents seems to be one of the important factors leading to child poverty, it does not address the problem of access to education and vocational training. While participation in secondary and tertiary education has been improved significantly since 1990, the participation of adults in education and training is still very low in Poland (4.7% of 25-64 year olds in 2008, according to LFS data). In particular, there is a lack of policies targeted at updating and improving the qualifications of mothers (and fathers) on parental leave and at improving access to vocational training.

The policy documents specify quantitative targets in selected areas only. They fail to provide a full and clear picture of policy aims, are fragmentary and seem haphazard in their selection. They lack the general target of reducing child poverty. The adopted fragmentary indicators are not rooted in thorough analysis and diagnosis. Some of the indicators, such as the increase in the employment rate of women, seem excessively ambitious; while others, relating to improved care for small children, are attainable provided there is a dedicated, consistent policy. Successive documents lack continuity in terms of setting specific policy objectives and quantitative targets; other indicators (for instance, those relating to pre-school care) keep changing without real forethought or justification.

2.2 Income support

The main form of income support for families with children is means-tested family benefit. The system comprises the standard benefit – family allowance, and a range of different cash benefits adjusted to specific family situations (such as childcare allowances paid to parents on parental leave, supplements for lone parents and benefits paid to those caring for children with disabilities). All these benefits are payable if the family income falls below a certain level, at present PLN 504 per month per person in the family (e.g. 47% of the median equivalised income of households with children in 2006 which is below the European poverty threshold)⁶.

⁵ There is also lack of attention paid to the children of refugees and Roma children, even if there are not many such children in Poland.

⁶ The income criteria for families with disabled children are higher and amount to PLN 583 per month (around EUR 138) per head in the family.

The family benefits system provides income support to low income families. However, the income threshold for eligibility and the level of benefits are very low.

Family allowances differ according to the age of the child and current monthly amounts are:

- PLN 48 for one child up to 5 years old (around EUR 12; 4.5% of the median equivalised income for households with children in 2006)
- PLN 64 for one child between 6 and 18 years old (around. EUR 15; 6% of the median equivalised income for households with children in 2006)
- PLN 68 for one child between 19 and 24 years old in education (around EUR15; 6% of the median equivalised income for households with children in 2006).

An additional allowance of PLN 50 monthly (about EUR 12; 6% of the median equivalised income for households with children in 2006) is paid for every third and subsequent child in the family. The supplements for single parents amount to PLN 170 a month per child (around EUR 40) on condition they do not receive alimony payments.

The additional monthly allowance for a child with disabilities is:

- PLN 60 (EUR 14) for a child up to the age of 5 and PLN 80 (around EUR 19) for a child aged 16 and under or aged 24 in cases of moderate or serious disability.

There were on average monthly payments of family allowances to around 3,768 thousand children in 2008 which is 32% of the total.

If total household income (including family benefits) falls below the social assistance threshold (currently PLN 351 per month per person in a household - 33% of the median equivalised income for households with children), additional benefits from the minimum income scheme are available. However, social assistance benefits are very limited and they alleviate rather than diminish poverty. The standard social assistance benefits are non compulsory and amount to 50% of the differential between the income of households and the social assistance threshold.

In 2008, a tax deduction of PLN 1173 (around EUR 279) a year for every child in the family was introduced.

In practice too little has been done since 2004 when the first Polish NAP was adopted to bolster income support for poor families with children, while new risks emerged, reducing policy effectiveness. In 2006 there was an increase in family allowance for every third and successive child in a family and the amount of allowance varied according to the age of the child, rather than as earlier, by their number. However, support in the form of family allowances reaches an ever-decreasing number of families, because since 2004 there has been no increase in the income threshold for eligibility for such benefits, even though this should be adjusted every three years⁷. Unfortunately, the last decision of the government has left the income threshold unchanged until 2009. The benefits are also very low. However, Parliament has adopted a regulation preventing family allowances from falling below 40% of the cost of living. The effect is to increase benefits significantly (by around 40%) in November this year⁸.

The amount of social assistance payable has been increased since 2004 as a result of the reform and indexation of the social assistance income threshold in 2006. This had the effect of reducing poverty

⁷ Number of people covered by family benefits declined from 5,547,000 in 2004 to 4,268,000 in 2007 (MOLSP data)

⁸ The Act from 28 November 2003 on the Family Benefits, Art. 19, p.3 (Official Journal 06.139.992 j.t.).

among the poorest households (Simpl 2008). However, social assistance payments are still inadequate to diminish the extent of poverty (Woycicka 2009).

The introduction in 2007 of family tax deductions was a controversial decision. It provoked disputes between political parties and experts. Even though the deductions contribute significantly to reducing poverty among children in families with income above the tax threshold, it has been pointed out that these deductions do not benefit the families with children most afflicted by poverty. This applies to those earning their living in agriculture and those dependent on social benefits other than pensions. Such families cannot make use of the tax deduction for children, as they are not income tax payers. In both these groups of families, child poverty is very high. Furthermore, families with multiple children and low income families benefit from the deduction only to a limited extent, because the amount of taxes they pay is lower than the amount of family deduction they can claim. These conclusions are supported by the results of model simulations which show that the greatest impact of the tax deduction is on households in the second, third and fourth deciles rather than in the bottom decile (Simpl 2008).

In assessing income support for low income families with children, it is important to point to the very low level of the social budget spent on the benefits for these families in relation to other social expenditure. In 2006 spending on benefits other than pensions represented 7.3% of GDP, while the EU-25 average is 14%. Total spending on family benefits, social assistance and housing in Poland represented less than 6% of all social spending, while the average for EU countries is twice as much (Eurostat).

Analysis of EU-SILC 2007 data shows that social transfers other than pensions have a relatively small effect in reducing poverty among families with children compared to the EU-25 average (30% poverty reduction in Poland and 42% in EU-25). They contribute less to the income of households with children than the average for EU-25 (13% vs. 16% respectively).

The key conclusion to be drawn is that there is insufficient spending on social transfers other than pensions. Analysis of the distribution of social spending shows that there is room for improvement in targeting benefits. This applies in particular to transfers directed at jobless households with children, which are markedly less effective in reducing poverty than is the case for other types of households.

It is beyond question that bolstering the income support for poor families with children should become one of the prime tools for countering child poverty. However, this policy should also lead to strengthening the social safety net, particularly unemployment benefits and social assistance.

2.3 Access to the labour market and income from employment

Access to the labour market

The measures aimed at increasing access to the labour market for parents of children are focused mainly on reconciling employment with family responsibilities. Efforts targeted at reducing unemployment in this area are much less developed, which is one of the prime factors pushing up the risk of child poverty.

The main objective of government efforts to improve access of parents to the labour market is to increase the active employment of women by reconciling family obligations with holding down a job. Indeed, cultural and structural factors result in low employment of women with children (Kotowska, Sztanderska, Woycicka 2007). Statistical analysis also shows that economic inactivity of one parent or of a single parent increases the probability of child poverty.

The so-called "Family Act", implemented in January 2009 contains measures facilitating return to work after parental leave (which reduce employers' social contributions for parents returning from maternity or parental leave) and increasing job security for parents (mainly women) reducing working hours to enable them to take care of children. The Act also provides incentives for changing the traditional, male breadwinner family model into a partnership model (individualised paternity leave).

Poland has one of the lowest levels of provision of pre-school childcare in the EU. Access to such care for children with disabilities is extremely limited and there are wide disparities in access between urban and rural areas. For this reason, development of day care is one of the most crucial challenges; both in the context of ensuring equal educational opportunities and enabling parents to work. All the measures bolstering access to childcare, including incentives for the establishment of infant and pre-school day care centres by employers (through tax allowances) and the development of alternative forms of childcare in rural communities, financed by the ESF, are very important. In addition, starting with the 2009/2010 school year there will be an extension of compulsory pre-school care centres for children aged 5.

It is still too early to assess the impact of these legislative changes on the employment of women mentioned earlier (Family Act). It would seem, however, that the proposed actions are insufficient to ensure significant growth in the employment of women raising children. Above all, the policies proposed so far need to be bolstered by efforts to prevent discrimination of women in the labour market. In addition, there needs to be a development of active labour market measures to prevent the erosion of skills of those taking time off to take care of their children. Also, even though some progress has been made in providing access to child day-care facilities between 2004 and 2008, continuation of the present rate of change will not make it possible to meet the ambitious goals set (see Table 2). A significant factor slowing the rate of change is the limited state budget allocation for financing pre-school care⁹.

Table 2 Day care, 2004-2008

Percentage of children attending day care or nursing facilities	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2010 target
Children aged 3-5, total					NAP Inclusion: 70% in 2012
Of whom:	38.2%	41%	44.6%	47.3%	NSSI ^{b)} : 70% in 2010
rural	14%	na	21%	22%	NAP Inclusion: 30% in 2013; NSSI 40%
urban		na	61%	65%	
with disabilities		na	1.3%	na	NSSI: 33%
Children aged 0-2 ^a	1.9%	2.1%	2.1%	na	

As of 31st December

NSSI: National Strategy of Social Integration 2005-2010.

Source: Concise Statistical Yearbook 2006, tables 17 (149) and 9 (159); 2008 Statistical Yearbook: tables 18(150) and 9(158), CSO, www.stat.gov.pl „Education and upbringing 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 CSO, table 3(26) and 1(26); Demographic Yearbook 2006, 2007 table 17, www.stat.gov.pl, National Strategy of Social Integration 2005-2010.

The current weakness of policy is the lack of an effective response to the high risk of poverty among children in jobless households, noted above. The strong economic growth in the years 2005-2008 resulted in a growing demand for labour and a reduction in unemployment, in effect contributing to the reduction in child poverty. Nonetheless, a large percentage of the long-term unemployed were still deprived of a chance to re-integrate into the labour market. There are no activation programmes targeted at, and specifically tailored to, the needs of children with jobless parents. The programmes attempting to increase employment among the long-term unemployed are very limited¹⁰.

In general, programmes to encourage employment of those excluded from the labour market are poorly designed to meet their needs. Support based on a holistic approach is provided only by very few narrowly specialised agencies. On top of this, negative selection, often reflecting negative bias, compounds the

⁹ State budget finances only the costs of obligatory pre-school education for children aged 6.

¹⁰ It is expected that in 2008 these will result in jobs for 18,000 unemployed and inactive, including parents raising small children.

difficulties of ensuring the effectiveness of labour market programmes aimed at helping the long-term unemployed and those with low skills (Golinowska 2007, Report Polska 2030).

Ensuring adequate income from work

Even though the phenomenon of in-work poverty is relatively common in Poland, there is no comprehensive strategy directed at ensuring adequate income from work. The policy of setting the minimum wage is constantly under pressure from many conflicting factors (conflicting expectations of trade unions and employers, fears of extending illegal employment and unemployment). Since 2007, a policy of lowering the contribution rates for social insurance by 7 percentage points has been pursued. Unfortunately, as it reduces contributions by the same amount for all, it has resulted in a marked increase in the salaries of the higher paid, but has had a negligible effect on the net amounts payable by those on low wages¹¹. Micro simulation shows that the impact of this measure in reducing poverty is very limited (Simpl 2008). Positive changes in this respect took place in 2007 with the introduction of child deductions from income tax, though this has been criticised for the failure to target assistance on the most needy (as noted above).

2.4 Access to other enabling services

Education and housing seem to be the most important challenges for improving the wellbeing of children. The quality of the Polish education system is still very varied across the country. The housing situation of people, especially of low income families, is very difficult and access to decent housing limited.

Education

The Polish educational system is characterised by very marked disparities in quality. Comparison of the results of the OECD PISA study in 2006 and 2000 indicate a general improvement in the quality of education in Poland. It also shows that the problem of segregation resulting in substantial disparities in the quality of education still exists and the social and economic status of parents has a marked effect on results, more so than in most other countries (OECD PISA 2006).

The governmental strategy of ensuring equal educational opportunity is a partial response to this challenge (see: Strategy Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-2010). This strategy covers three integrated areas for action: lowering the age of compulsory school (from 7 to 6); income support for children from low income families and; dismantling educational barriers in rural areas. Lowering the compulsory school age will be phased in gradually over the next three years, starting with the 2009/2010 school year. This will take place concurrently with the extension of compulsory pre-school education to all 5-year olds. Both are positive measures, proposed for many years by child education experts, as a significant means of ensuring equal opportunity. Implementation of the Government Programme for Developing Education in Rural Areas in the years 2007-2013, should lead to reducing the geographical disparities in access to, and the quality of, education¹². The system of income support should effectively help those from low income families continue their education.

The programme would have been more comprehensive had it responded to such issues as the segregation of children within and between different types of schools. Children from poor backgrounds, with lower educational aspirations, are often placed in separate classes or have access only to schools

¹¹ It was criticized by some Polish economists, who argued for focusing on reducing the tax wedge on the lowest wages only (see: *Ekonomiści krytykują obniżkę skadki rentowej*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 17.06.2007).

¹² "Government Program of Developing Education in Rural Areas in the years 2007-2013.", Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, Warszawa, August 2007 http://bip.men.gov.pl/akty_projekty/projekt_rozwoj_educacji_na_wsi_08-2007.pdf

with a lower reputation¹³. The OECD PISA survey underlines the lack of integrity of the Polish educational system, which results in large differences in results between different types of school at post primary level (OECD PISA 2006).

The income support provided is too low to allow students from poor families to cover the costs involved in studying. Another problem that has not been addressed is that schools are under-prepared to cope with children from low income families, so increasing the extent to which they are excluded. Such children are often stigmatised and ostracised by their peers (Tarkowska 2007). A serious shortcoming is the failure to take account of the problems of children with disabilities.

Housing

The housing situation of many Polish families is very poor. As revealed by the EU-SILC 2007 survey, more than 7% of households occupy sub-standard housing, with leaking roofs, damp walls or floors, and so on and no indoor toilet or bath (3% of houses have no running water, 9% no toilet, 10% no bathroom and a similar percentage no hot water). Housing conditions, including shortage of space, of both lone parents and families with children are among the worst in the EU¹⁴ (European Foundation 2003). Regardless of the significant improvement, which has taken place since 1989, almost 30% of households in 2006 still lived in poor housing conditions¹⁵. To a large extent, the worst affected are families with 3 or more children and lone parents. In 2006, 55% of households with 4 or more children, 39% of households with three children and 38% of single-parent households lived in poor housing conditions (insufficient floor space, lack of bathroom or sub-standard accommodation) (Table 3).

Table 3 Households in poor housing conditions

Household	Percentage of households with dwelling			
	without bathroom	limited space ^(a)	Low-standard dwelling ^(b)	Presence of at least one of the three features
Total	10.8	8.3	15.5	27.6
Childless couples	8.2	1.2	13.2	19.6
with one child	5.7	5.0	15.1	22.1
with 2 children	6.4	14.6	15.1	27.2
with 3 children	8.6	25.7	17.1	38.7
with 4 or more children	14.3	46.4	17.5	54.6
Lone parents with children	14.0	9.7	27.9	37.7
Other	17.2	6.8	15.4	29.4

Notes: a: Not more than 10 square metres per person, b: Social dwellings or ones with regulated rent.

Source: Radziukiewicz 2006, Data on the basis of HBS.

¹³ Vide: Jak powstają szkolne getta? [How school ghettos come about?] Dziennik, 9th September.2008 http://www.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/article234161/Jak_powstaja_szkolne_getta.html

¹⁴ Single parents with a child up to 16 years old had an average of 2.4 rooms, a couple with one or 2 children under 16 – 2.6, a couple with 3 or more children under 16 years old – 2.9 room dwellings (European Foundation 2003)

¹⁵ When determining poor housing conditions, presence of at least one of three factors was taken into consideration: lack of bathroom, space per person - not more than 10 square metres, and living in social dwellings or ones with regulated rent.

According to another study in 2007 in nearly 7% households children did not have their own place to do homework, though this situation has for most household types improved since 2005 (Social Diagnosis 2007).

There is a lack of far reaching programmes aimed at families living in poor conditions to obtain access to decent housing. Housing policy is dominated by the market, and for families living in poverty getting a mortgage is not possible, even if they could get access to the very limited government programme for 'semi-affluent' families. Local authorities also have very limited and poor quality provision of social housing for poor families. The acute shortage of social housing means that there is often a wait of many years¹⁶. The existing housing in many cases often does not meet even minimum standards (such as indoor bathroom and toilet) and fail to meet safety standards¹⁷. The programme of social housing launched in 2006¹⁸ is advancing very slowly. In 2007-2008, a total of 5174 council house units were commissioned, whereas the shortfall is estimated at 120,000 to 130,000 units and 20,000 overnight beds are needed for the homeless (Zaniewska 2007). The January 2009 changes in regulations governing state assistance for creating social housing stipulates that the support to local authorities from the central budget should be increased to cover between 30% and 50% of project costs (previously 20% to 40%) However, according to expert opinions, this does not seem sufficient to ensure a marked acceleration in the provision of new social housing.

Conclusions

Since 2004, alleviating child poverty has become one of the key objectives of social policy. Policy has focused on income support measures, reconciling family and work responsibilities and improving the education system. Although the strategy is a response to the most important problems it is not comprehensive and effective enough. The above analysis indicates the most important gaps and weaknesses.

The governmental approach to child poverty and well being is focused insufficiently on the problems of those children experiencing the most serious disadvantages such as children with disabilities, particularly with regard to access to day care, education, healthcare and rehabilitation.

The income support measures are not sufficient. Spending on income support for poor families is relatively low. The income criterion for family benefits has not been indexed since 2004 resulting in decreasing numbers covered by the scheme. Social assistance needs to be strengthened in order to ensure adequate minimum income for poor families with children. The positive impact of tax allowances in reducing poverty shows that much can be done by implementing a policy aimed at increasing income from employment. However, additional measures are needed to alleviate child poverty in households that do not pay income tax.

¹⁶ The wait for such housing in Poznań is four to five years; the situation is similar in the other large cities. There is a shortage of housing both for people evicted and for the poorest inhabitants of communes.

¹⁷ As a result of a special inspection carried out in 2009 by the Central Office for Building Supervision, 100 buildings were shut-down and another 41 partly shut-down for use as ruled unfit for habitation. 609 summonses were issued for immediate fixing or elimination of faults. "The most serious faults concerned those directly threatening the health and lives of inhabitants, such as disrepair of combustion gas ducts or lack of any exhaust removal installations whatsoever, lack of or clogged up ventilation ducts, leaky gas installations, damaged fire arresters, poor state of electric installations, unsecured junction boxes in public-access corridors, visible burn marks on electric wiring. Building supervision inspectors also found instances of building elements in complete disrepair, such as sagging of cracked ceilings or rotten-through roof supports. In such cases technical construction experts were called in or the building was ruled to be vacated immediately and closed down." Inspections were ordered after the blaze in spring 2009 of a social building in Kamień Pomorski, consumed by fire in a matter of minutes (Główny Urząd Nadzoru Budowlanego 2009)

¹⁸ Act dated December 8, 2006, on financial support for establishing social premises, protected housing, overnight lodging and homes for the homeless (Official Journal of 2005, № 251, item 1844).

The measures aimed at increasing access to the labour market for parents are targeted mainly at reconciling employment with family responsibilities. Efforts targeted at reducing joblessness are much less developed, which is one of the main contributing to the high risk of child poverty. The programmes targeted at the long-term unemployed are on a very limited scale and are as a rule, poorly designed to meet the needs of the people concerned. In particular, the strategy does not encompass the need to improve their access to education and vocational training.

Development of child day care is one of the most crucial challenges; to ensure both educational opportunities and making it possible for parents to work. Day care provision has been improved slightly in recent years, but there remain much to be done and the policy measures undertaken seem to be insufficient.

Wide disparities in the quality of education are one of the most important issues to be addressed. The government strategy focused on reducing these contains important measures. In Poland access to good quality housing, especially for poor families with children, is very limited and existing programmes are not sufficient.

The problem of child poverty has been newly identified as a challenge in the official document "Report Poland 2030." This opts for a balanced strategy combining income support and labour market activation measures. However, the document does not develop a comprehensive and detailed strategy, which is left to be formulated at a later stage.

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