EU Policy Reflections on the Intersections Between Digital and Social Policies Supporting Children as Digital Citizens

Holly Shorey

Introduction

It is clear that the impacts of digitalisation take place within and across children and young people's social environments: school, home, and other civic spaces. Policy in the early 2010s, stemming from the Better Internet for Kids Strategy (European Commission, 2011), focused primarily on safety concerns and questioning how children fit into a digital reality designed for adults (Facer, 2012). These safety concerns have not disappeared, but policymakers are now forced to acknowledge that it is no longer a question of *whether* children are using digital technologies but *how*. If digital is embedded throughout children's social realities, then policy responses must be too. This chapter analyses EU policy documents from two fields: policies related to children's interactions with the digital environment mainly fostered by the European Commission's Directorate

H. Shorey (✉)
COFACE Families Europe, Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: hshorey@coface-eu.org

General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT) and policies focusing on children's rights and social inequalities mainly led by the European Commission's Directorate Generals for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). At the start of the 2010s, both policy areas produced their starting points, namely the Better Internet for Kids Strategy (European Commission, 2012) in the digital realm and the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2011) in the child rights and social inequalities area. Through participating in shaping and implementing these policies as Project and Advocacy Officer on COFACE Families Europe's digital citizenship agenda, increased merging between these policy areas could be observed since the start of this decade, showing what may be perceived as the impact of digitalisation. In this chapter, *digitalisation* refers to the 'integration of digital technologies and digitised data across the economy and society' (Eurofound, 2023a, no page number). Complete digitalisation would mean that the digital perspective is embedded into social and rights-based policies to transform society and that social thinking is embedded into digital policies to maintain them socially just and human rights friendly.

In order to assess this observation, firstly, this chapter analyses to what extent social thinking is embedded in digital policy documents starting with the first Better Internet for Kids Strategy up to the recently adopted revision in 2022 (European Commission, 2012, 2022a). Then the analysis turns to evaluate how digital thinking is embedded in children's rights and social policy documents starting with the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child across to the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017) and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021c; Council of the European Union, 2021). Additional policy documents were selected on their primacy to these core documents, focusing on contextualising how this area evolved between the early 2010s and 2020s (see Tables 1 and 2 for policy document overview). Within digital policy documents, attention was paid to the inclusion or absence of measures to

Table 1 EU policies focusing on children's interactions with the digital environment

Policy	Year of adoption	Policy area (relevant key focuses)
A Digital Agenda for Europe	2010	• Digital single market • Digital connectivity • Digital literacy, skills, and inclusion (not specific to children)
Council conclusions on the protection of children in the digital world	2011	• Child safety online
European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children	2012	• Child safety online • Digital single market
European Digital Education Action Plan	2020	• Digital education
2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade	2021	• Digitalisation
A Digital Decade for children and youth: a new European strategy for a better Internet for kids (BIK+)	2022	• Children's rights in the digital environment: online harms, skills, and active participation • Addressing digital divides
European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles	2023	• Rights in the digital environment • Digitalisation for social good

tackle social inequalities and address how digital technologies can realise the rights of the child. Social policy and children's rights documents focused on the inclusion or absence of digital measures to ensure the realisation of children's rights and mitigate social inequalities. Social inequalities describe the unequal distribution of access to services and livelihood across the population (Eurofound, 2023b). An ecological systems conceptual approach (see chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People?") complements this analysis by helping to see how digital technologies are being integrated into children's everyday lives and where policy efforts must go to adequately support children and those around them in navigating this digital era.

Table 2 Policies focusing on social inequalities and children's rights

Policy	Year of adoption	Policy area (key focuses)
EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child	2011	• Children's rights
European Commission recommendation on investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage	2013	• Child poverty and social exclusion
European Pillar of Social Rights and European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan	2017 and 2021	• Social rights: digital for social good
European Child Guarantee	2021	• Access to basic rights and services for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion
EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	2021	• Children's rights

Furthering the Social Dimension of the Digital Policy Agenda

This section unpacks how EU policy starting from the early 2010s focused on safety initiatives related to children's use of digital technologies and participation in digital spaces but then developed to take a more holistic understanding of children as digital citizens. During this period, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child interpreted children's rights as a reality where they should be supported in realising their rights across their digital and non-digital social environments (UNCRC, 2021). Understanding how crucial digital is for children's rights, especially social rights such as the right to education, received particular political attention as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Eickelmann et al., 2021). The public health crisis was also a stark wake-up call for underlying social rights crises, manifested in one sense through bringing digital divides back onto the political agenda. The confinement strategies employed by governments across Europe made the digital environment the medium to access services beyond the home whilst at home: education, leisure, and health. Ayllón et al. (2021) contribute to exposing how

these digital divides relate to children, especially those from low-income families. The socio-economic situations of families are not uniform across Europe. Therefore, work must be done to ensure that Member States with more children in vulnerable situations are adequately supported. Digital policy can no longer afford to remain siloed from discussions on how it relates to the expression of social rights, including the role of social inequalities. As our digital and non-digital realities become intertwined, so must policy approaches.

A European Approach to Children's Interactions with the Digital Environment: The Evolution of the Better Internet for Kids Agenda

In 2012, the European Commission published its initial roadmap for ensuring a better Internet for children. The first Better Internet for Kids Strategy focused on four pillars (European Commission, 2012, p. 2):

1. Stimulating quality content online for young people
2. Stepping up awareness and empowerment
3. Creating a safe environment for children online
4. Fighting against child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

At this point, children were increasingly consumers of digital services, products, and content. Thus, a coordinated EU approach was needed to ensure that all children could access quality digital services in a safe and skilled setting. This Strategy was embedded in a political context that focused mainly on safety concerns, particularly regarding protecting children from harmful, illegal, or age-inappropriate content (Council of the European Union, 2011). Member States responded to these concerns differently by imposing protection measures such as age restrictions or advising parental controls (European Commission, 2012). Without a standardised approach to these safety measures, there would be fragmentation across the EU. The BIK Strategy aimed to support the alignment

of these approaches to ensure that some children were not more protected than others depending on what country they lived in and that companies could invest in quality digital services, products, and content without negotiating a sea of different safety obligations across the market.

Children, in general, were the concern group, with the Strategy aiming to understand how minors could interact with the digital environment. The Commission clarified that 'children have specific needs and vulnerabilities, and their difference has to be recognised' (European Commission, 2012, p. 3). At this point, attention was not given to diving deeper into any further vulnerabilities within this group and the role of social inequalities (and the broader ecosystems of children) in determining how different children interact with the digital environment. Whilst digital inequalities were not yet explicitly on the children's digitalisation agenda, they were acknowledged for certain groups of the adult population through the Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2010, p. 24). The Agenda identifies older people and those facing unemployment, low income, or low education as the core points of the digital division. Ten years later, the European Commission realigned Europe's digital priorities in its *2030 Digital Compass: the European Way for the Digital Decade* (European Commission, 2021d). This text highlighted how COVID-19 exposed digitalisation's role in maintaining and extenuating social inequalities and divides. The digital was helping enable opportunities for Europeans to access their rights during a public health emergency. However, for those without basic access and skills, the pandemic accelerated their existing vulnerabilities. The pandemic played a particular role in highlighting how digital divides also affect children across Europe.

The updated BIK+ Strategy responded to this context by bringing a newfound social inequalities lens to the children's digital agenda, highlighting several identities and situations to which efforts must be directed: children with disabilities or those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. In 2011, the EU was still grappling with children as a whole's inclusion in the digital environment, now efforts must be focused on those who are being left behind. The European Commission states, 'Children and youth are not a single, homogenous group, they differ by age, gender, evolving capacities and social and economic background'

(European Commission, 2022a, p. 1). For example, the original BIK Strategy included no reference to how gender, disability, or minority backgrounds may affect children's experiences online. The updated Strategy connects digital matters to existing EU equalities frameworks such as the EU Gender Equality Strategy (European Commission, 2020a) and the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation (European Commission, 2020c). These Strategies are in the hands of the Directorate-General of Justice and Consumers, showing how a greater ecosystems approach to digital matters allows for a more human rights and equalities approach to digital policymaking.

There is also an explicit focus on digital divides 'not all children have equal, effective, safe and inclusive access to digital technology' (European Commission, 2022a, p. 8). Ayllón et al. (2021) indicate that, on average, 5.3 percent of children across Europe are experiencing digital deprivation. This figure is rising to 23.1 percent in Romania, making a clear call for intervention to moderate these inequalities. However, more work is needed to more precisely understand and respond to the extent of Europe's digital divides. BIK+ calls for targeted interventions to combat digital deprivation, notably through pushing the European Child Guarantee, which lists access to digital services and skills as an essential resource for vulnerable children (Council of the European Union, 2021). The European Commission Directorate-General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) is responsible for the Child Guarantee, and the BIK+ Strategy is under the responsibility of the Directorate-General of Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT). Thus, highlighting a coming together of social and digital policymaking arenas.

The social shift of the BIK+ strategy fits into a broader political agenda that attempts to bring digitalisation closer to our social realities. In 2023, the European Union adopted a set of digital principles which would act as key guiding values for Europe's digital transition. These core principles focus on a human-centred approach to the digital and on understanding how digitalisation interacts with human rights, democracy, and social inequalities. One of the six principles is *solidarity* and *inclusion,* which ensures that digitalisation does not maintain or exacerbate social

inequalities (European Parliament, Council of the European Union, and the European Commission, 2023). This approach shows how the social lens is becoming a more natural and essential component of digital policymaking.

Beyond social inequalities, BIK+ also makes advancements regarding how digital technologies are integrated into and between children's social environments and how this places different responsibilities on different actors. The European Commission boldly state that 'digital abstinence is not an option for today's children' (European Commission, 2022a, p. 2). It is no longer about debating whether children should be online or not, it is a base reality for how they access education and leisure and develop social relationships with those around them. The BIK+ Strategy recognises how the contemporary digital era alters traditional intergenerational dynamics; children can pass knowledge to others and be guided by parents, teachers, and others. The European Commission encourages Member States to develop initiatives which allow for peer-peer and child-to-adult teaching on digital matters (European Commission, 2022a, p. 18). With children's digital social realities in and between home, school, and other civic spaces, these actors must work as a team. BIK+ acknowledges the need to ensure that all adults responsible for children are ready to guide them in their interactions with the digital environment. The burden should not fall on one actor in one environment, for example, parents at home or teachers in the school but a team effort between 'parents, carers, teachers, club and sports leaders, religious leaders, social care, healthcare, youth workers etc.' (European Commission, 2022a, p. 9). It is promising that policy frameworks increasingly reflect how digital technology works across social environments and actors rather than as a siloed area of digital skills and services, as also reflected in the chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People". This progresses from the original BIK Strategy, which focused on using the school environment for digital initiatives and placed a particular burden on parents to control their child's use and for children to develop self-protection against potential harms (European Commission, 2011, p. 8).

Children's Rights Stepping into the Digital Environment

As described, the earlier policy on children's digital experiences focused on protecting them from harm. This section unpacks how progressions in the child rights arena helped the policy discourse take a more nuanced and holistic rights-based approach by recognising what children have the right *to* in the digital environment, not just what they have the right to be protected *from*. Children's digital policy is pushed towards further embedding across the child's digital ecosystems: education, leisure, civic participation, and family life. Additionally, by acknowledging that children have participatory rights such as freedom of expression and association, children are granted greater actor-hood and agency over their digital lives. This can be encapsulated in the increasing promotion of digital citizenship as a policy objective. It recognises that children cannot and should not be kept away from the digital environment and thus must develop skills to navigate challenges they may face. For example, the Council of Europe lays out the development of media and information literacy, ethics and empathy, and privacy and security as fundamental tenets of digital citizenship (Council of Europe, 2022).

The EU's approach to children's rights was first laid out in the 2011 Agenda for the Rights of the Child after children's rights gained new prominence in the Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Commission, 2011). The Agenda acknowledges that policymakers must balance empowering children's use of the digital environment and protecting them from potential harm. However, protective measures such as age ratings for online games and standards for online content directed at children are put forward as the enabling force of this empowerment. At this time, promoting children's digital experiences was to be achieved by adults making it safe for them. In contrast, contemporary measures give new attention to supporting children to act as agentic digital citizens.

In 2021, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted a general comment on children's rights in the digital environment (UNCRC, 2021). The general comment interpreted how the UN

Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) applies in children's digital realities, stating that children's rights apply online as offline. The traditional policy discourse focused on safety concerns, identifying children as primarily passive subjects of digitalisation. Taking a rights-based approach to the digital environment helps to highlight how different aspects of digitalisation can act as a venue for children's rights and recognise children as active digital citizens. The digital environment is not a dangerous place for children to waste time, but a tool which can realise a plethora of children's rights: 'Meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realise the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights' (UNCRC, 2021, p. 1). The EU take steps to embed this holistic rights-based approach in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child with a pillar focusing on the digital and information society (European Commission, 2021c). This text moves beyond the 2011 Agenda and acts on the General Comment by taking a more nuanced approach to the opportunities and risks that the digital environment presents for children's rights. For example, measures advised from the Strategy relate to legislation to tackle online child sexual abuse and tackle digital divides and develop digital skills.

In its analysis, the four general principles of the UNCRC are set out to advise policymakers on how to approach efforts to support children in the digital environment. Namely, non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interest of the child (Article 3), and the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6). Akin to the EU's digital principles, these articles place de facto a social inequalities lens on the digital transition. The Committee states that:

> The right to non-discrimination requires that state parties ensure that all children have equal and effective access to the digital environment in ways that are meaningful for them. States parties should take all measures necessary to overcome digital exclusion. That includes providing free and safe access for children in dedicated public locations and investing in policies and programmes that support all children's affordable access to and knowledgeable use of digital technologies in educational settings, communities, and homes. (UNCRC, 2021, p. 2)

This clarification reinforces that digital is not a privilege nor something to keep children away from, but a right that policymakers must act to provide for all children regardless of their status. It is stressed that children should not be treated as one homogenous group and that policymakers should consider the full diversity of children when creating policies related to their digital realities. There is also a recognition that policymakers need to support children across their social environments (home, school, community, and leisure spaces). For example, there must be a dialogue between school and home to facilitate remote learning. This means moving away from a siloed digital skills approach to a more thorough embedding across policy and practice areas (Seland et al., 2022).

A rights-based approach makes efforts to recognise children as active digital citizens capable of shaping their engagement with the digital environment. Embedding the right to be heard, as laid out in Article 12 of the Convention, aims to promote a more authentic narrative on how children are experiencing the digital era. With this comes a greater understanding of the social implications of digital policy. Children are not just potential consumers of digital services but fellow participants in co-shaping digital spaces. The original BIK Strategy stated that 'a majority of young people still "consume" online rather than create' (European Commission, 2011, p. 7). The updated Strategy acknowledges how the digital generation 'create, play and interact online from an ever-younger age, using digital technologies for education, entertainment, social contact and participation in society' (European Commission, 2022a, p. 2). BIK+ embraces this agency by defining *active participation* as one of the three core pillars of the Strategy, operationalising children's right to be heard in EU policy development. This pillar is an example of embedding a holistic child rights approach that does not solely focus on protection rights of children as passive rights receivers but takes steps to recognise their active role in shaping their social environments and digital realities.

Overall, there is an increasing focus on the social dimension within the EU policy landscape related to children's interactions with the digital

environment. The first BIK Strategy was unclear on how children, as a whole, would fit into Europe's digital future: 'children have yet to be identified as a target audience [for digital content] worth investing in' (European Commission, 2011, p. 4). The political focus was on coordinating an approach to child safety online fit for the evolving EU digital single market. Ten years later, the policy discourse was required to recognise the social realities and inequalities impacting children in the digital era. COVID-19 made it impossible to treat children as one mass group; there are distinct vulnerabilities of different groups of children for which targeted measures must be taken to ensure their participation in the digital environment. A more holistic understanding of how children's rights occur across and within digital and non-digital social environments and actors pushed digital into more rights-based social policy territories. By understanding how digital and non-digital environments interact, it is also natural to see how social inequalities seep into digital inequalities and vice-versa. Thus, it is promising to see EU policymaking content and processes becoming more intertwined between what is traditionally seen as social and digital.

Bringing Digitalisation into Social Policies

Taking the same approach in the other direction, it is clear that digitalisation is increasingly impacting the social frameworks and corresponding funding mechanisms. Initiatives to ensure that all children have access to social rights are now interpreted for the digital era, meaning that in the same way that digital policies now have a social lens embedded, social policies have the digital lens built in. The main frameworks concerned are the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Child Guarantee alongside the European Social Fund (ESF+) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) as fundamental funding mechanisms (European Commission, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2021; EU, 2021a, b).

Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights and a European Child Guarantee

The Juncker Commission took a significant step forward in establishing a more social Europe by initiating the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Pillar aimed to lay out *a new social rulebook* operating across three areas: equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2017, p. 4). In the early years of the initiative, it was unclear how increasing digitalisation would be integrated through the Pillar (Lörcher & Schömann, 2016). It was becoming more pressing to recognise how digitalisation acts not only as a siloed tool for certain activities but a determining factor to many social rights, such as digital public services such as education, health, and more (Iannazzone, 2023). As the previous section unpacks, digital access is essential for realising children's rights.

Von der Leyen's Commission responded to this lack of clarity by emphasising the digital transition politically. In the preamble of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade, the Commission state, 'The digital transformation affects every aspect of people's lives. It offers significant opportunities for a better quality of life, economic growth and sustainability' (European Commission, 2023, paragraph 2). This Commission took the digital and green policy out of their siloed policy boxes and elevated them to overarching priorities across all EU policy areas as the twin transitions that will shape the future of Europe (Muench et al., 2022). In 2021, the European Commission published its action plan to kickstart the European Pillar of Social Rights. The new push for digital from the von der Leyen Commission is clear from the introduction of the text 'as we overcome the pandemic, as we prepare necessary reforms and as we speed up the twin green and digital transitions, I believe it is time to also adapt the social rulebook' (European Commission, 2021b, p. 2). The Commission clearly states that a just and fair digital transition cannot occur without embedding social thinking and vice-versa.

As a result, digitalisation features across the Action Plan with three principles of primacy relevance to children's digital lives: Principle 1 on

education, training, and life-long learning, Principle 11(b) on support to children, and Principle 20 on access to essential services (European Commission, 2021b). Firstly, Principle 1 stresses the need to foster children's digital skills, especially since COVID-19 exposed how vulnerable children struggle to access education and training without digital access and competences. One critical policy framework referred to here is the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan which attempts to align European education and skills agendas for the digital age, again digitalising social rights (European Commission, 2020b).

Principle 11(b) focuses on measures to support vulnerable children and prevent their social exclusion. The European Child Guarantee aims to implement this Principle by supporting Member States' provision of key social rights for the most vulnerable children: free early childhood education and care, free education, free healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing (Council of the European Union, 2021). Digital access is included in these core provisions through Article 7 (g) and (h) of the Child Guarantee, which reinforces the essential role of digitalisation in promoting social rights. The focus across both provisions is on ensuring digital tools, connectivity, and skills for education. The political framing motivating this focus on digital access and competency for education arguably stems from COVID-19's role in opening our eyes to the role of digital technology in facilitating children's education in times when they cannot access the analogue classroom. Such initiatives must not only focus on the educational domain, as it is clear that digitalisation contributes to breaking down the borders between school and home, education and play, et cetera (see chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People?"). To reflect this approach, initiatives must support the development of (vulnerable) children's digital access and competences throughout these arenas. Nonetheless, this is a step forward in acknowledging digital technologies' role in child poverty policy. The European Commission's 2013 child poverty recommendation did not include any observations related to digitalisation (European Commission, 2013).

Outside of the educational domain, Principle 20 includes access to digital communications as an essential service alongside resources such as water and sanitation. As a result, Member States are advised to manage

the marketisation of these services to ensure that they are accessible to all, regardless of income. This acknowledgement recognises that digital technologies contribute to realising social rights rather than an additional optional extra.

Digitalisation of EU Social Rights Funding Frameworks: The European Social Fund (ESF+) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)

The political push for Europe's digital transition influenced the substance of social frameworks and EU funding frameworks supporting the implementation of social initiatives. Notably, the European Social Fund (ESF+) is the funding mechanism which aims to support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights by Member States, civil society, and social partners (EU, 2021b). The most recent incarnation of the fund, adopted in 2021, emphasises using social funds to support the digital transition. The European Commission clarifies the role of ESF+ funds in addressing the digital divide, primarily through actions targeted at the educational domain. The previous ESF regulation which ran from 2014 to 2020 referred to the need to focus on the development of digital skills and e-inclusion. Here, the intention was to motivate and get people online, with the regulation stating that 30 percent of Europeans have never used the Internet (Regulation (EU) 1304/2013). As the European Pillar of Social Rights was embedded with the digital perspective, the ESF aligned.

In 2020, the European Commission laid out its strategy to address socio-economic weaknesses caused or brought to our attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a 723.8 billion euros funding package (divided into loans and grants) for Member States (EU, 2021a). Although COVID-19 was not part of the European Commission's political agenda for this mandate, this crisis response and preparedness funding allow the Commission to give additional weight and meaning to its original objectives: to foster a just, green, and digital transition for the EU. One way of ensuring these

priorities are reflected in Member States' applications for funding is through imposing funding specificities. Member States are requested to ensure that at least 20 percent of their proposed RRF plans fund digital initiatives, with the European Commission outlining potential satisfactory digital initiatives. Member States' take-up of these targets has been strong, with Member States on average exceeding the 20 percent target for digital measures (European Commission, 2022b). Some categories explicitly relate to digital initiatives realising children's social rights, focusing on improving digital access (through improving connectivity across home, school, and other public spaces), digital skills, and ensuring digital inclusion. Outside of the digital target, the RRF supports Member States' use of funds for social initiatives focused on employment and skills, education and childcare, health and long-term care, and social policies. Thirty percent of the total funding in adopted RRF plans is on social spending, showing the importance of social investment in the digital era (European Commission, 2022b). Many of these social initiatives will relate to digitalisation, clearly showing the digitalisation of social policy related investment.

RRF is the product of the political programme, NextGenerationEU, which highlights its focus on channelling targeted investments in children and youth to ensure that the scars of COVID-19 do not cause longer term socio-economic concerns for this generation (EU, 2021a). All generations suffered during the pandemic, but children and young people paid a high price with disruptions to their education and care, especially those from families in vulnerable situations (COFACE Families Europe, 2020). Consequently, Member States are particularly encouraged to determine targeted interventions towards children, along with the previously described digital-social thinking. For instance, in Belgium, funds are being used to address long-standing problems concerning access to digital technology and connectivity in Walloon schools (European Commission, 2021f). Spain uses funds to provide 300,000 school children with digital devices and support vulnerable children in developing digital skills (European Commission, 2021e). Spain's measure aims to respond to Country Specific Recommendations passed down to Spain from the European Semester process. The European Semester maps Member States' progress on economic and social policy areas, with the

Commission offering a series of recommendations for improvements accordingly. This shows another area where digital inequalities related to children are being addressed by social instruments.

The European Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee are primarily financed through ESF+ funding, but the RRF also injects extra money to implement these frameworks. Member States must detail how their RRF plans contribute to their implementation (European Commission, 2021a). Initiatives funded through the RRF can then be included in Member States' National Action Plans (NAPs) detailing how they implement the Child Guarantee. For example, the Greek NAP details how they plan to use RRF funding to digitalise social welfare systems. This shows how Member States find synergies between policy and funding frameworks to produce a more holistic understanding of a digital transition that recognises social inequalities.

Due to its political primacy, the digital lens is now featured across EU policy areas, with social policy being no exception. The European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Child Guarantee benefit from this approach by embracing a more holistic understanding of how digital can act as an emancipatory tool for those at risk of social exclusion but also preserve and heighten social inequalities if not concretely addressed.

Moving Forward Beyond Social and Digital Policy

In conclusion, the state of play regarding policy approaches to children's everyday digital realities has shifted over the last years, with policy growing from child safety measures into a deeper embedding of digital into and across children's social environments. This embraces progressions in the child rights field which now understand how crucial digital technologies can be for realising the rights of the child, such as the right to education, family life, leisure, and freedom of expression. Making these rights a reality requires efforts across different policy areas: education, family, leisure, and civic participation and involves different actors: families, educators, and others who work with children. Digital makes the

boundaries between these policy areas and actors more porous, and as a result, the policy responses must undergo increasing merging to respond adequately to children's realities. Interventions on digital solely in the digital domain are not adequate; digital thinking must be embedded in social interventions and vice versa. In this regard, it is promising to see the evolution of the Better Internet for Kids agenda.

Furthermore, a rights-based approach alongside COVID-19 has exposed the depth and breadth of Europe's digital divide: one that children and young people do not escape from. A social inequalities approach is essential to ensure that the digital transition can benefit all children and not maintain or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, an essential component if Europe is to have a digital transition that serves society. Over the last ten years, EU policies have increasingly included this perspective through equalities frameworks and initiatives to reduce poverty and social exclusion, such as the European Child Guarantee. The funding connected to tackling Europe's digital divides through the COVID-19 recovery funds (RRF) and funds supporting the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights (ESF+) is a crucial part of ensuring that these frameworks are not just a social plaster over a rapid digital transition.

The direction of travel is clear, but more can be done to properly reflect the realities of how digital technologies are being integrated into their everyday lives by moving further out of their policy silos and seeing more between environments and actors. As digitalisation becomes more mainstream, it should become less about the social dimension of the digital and the digitalisation of the social and more about children's everyday realities in and between digital technologies.

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