**Austrian Input to OHCHR Questionnaire: Covid-19, children’s rights and SDGs**

**Based on input by: Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection; Federal Chancellery (Women and Integration)**

1. **How are the rights of the child being upheld as a priority in your country in the face of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?**

Austria is fully committed to the compliance and enforcement of the rights of the child in all our areas of life. This is not just an ethic imperative for a free, democratic and pluralistic society. Scientific evidence is showing us that no other policy measures have such a high economic return as instruments to improve the living conditions of children at risk of poverty and exclusion.

As we are convinced that the earliest possible policy interventions in the first years of a child's life - or even before - can lay the basis for a successful and satisfied life, Austria is particularly implementing policy measures that prevent poverty in adulthood and promote social mobility over the life cycle.

By increasing the socio-economic opportunities of children and their families through a wide range of policy actions (i.e. health, education, labour market, and gender equality) we are not only contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but also establishing resilience to cope with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Austria implemented a first lock down that has brought massive restrictions for the entire population, particularly affecting children.

Children's rights were restricted in many ways, e.g. the right to education (schools and kindergartens were closed: home-schooling has not worked everywhere and especially not for all children), the right to the highest attainable standard of health (e.g. limited access to medical assistance and health-care, partly due to reduced availability of health-care facilities; partly due to patients’ fear of contagion, fewer check-ups, less support for chronically ill children, challenging conditions for birth an post-natal care), the right to a non-violent upbringing (little insight into the families and little control) etc.

Furthermore, as many people lost their jobs, received reduced payments or could not work as much due to restricted access to childcare, some families (especially single parent families) increasingly became at risk of poverty.

The effects soon became visible, organizations and institutions have made themselves heard about children´s health and awareness has increased. All medical services are open. Access to health care and check-ups is being promoted. Austria has included the vaccination against influenza in the free immunisation programme, available for all children.

Following the review of Austria’s state report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (January 2020), a joint meeting of the Austrian Children's Rights Board took place on July 10, 2020, together with representatives of the ministries. The Concluding Observations were discussed, and the competent ministries confirmed to diligently deal with the recommendations when it comes to implementing the current government program relevant to children's rights.

1. **Particularly noteworthy examples of good practice towards realizing the rights of the child in your country, in relation to sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the goals under review - including specific laws, policies and actions to advance the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

In addition to a well-established welfare state system, Austria is fully aware of challenging living conditions for specific groups in society due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Austria has therefore taken various measures that relieve children and their families. All of those measures are continuously being monitored, evaluated and adapted where necessary.

One important component is the family hardship fund (Familienhärtefonds), providing financial support to families who are affected by unemployment, short-time work or who receive social assistance (Sozialhilfe). This fund has recently been increased and extended.

In 2020, the Fund`s resources were also used to provide additional financial support to parents with children who receive or have received social assistance benefits. In order to counteract the significant impact of the pandemic on low-income households, additional funds will also be available in 2021 to continue these support measures. To this end, new national legislation – the “COVID-19-Act against Poverty” – has been drafted. In addition to the above-mentioned benefits for children, it also provides for subsidies to households receiving social assistance to cope with rising energy costs.

Furthermore, a legal claim to extraordinary care leave (Sonderbetreuungszeit) was introduced: It enables working parents to take leave from work in order to care for their children for up to 4 weeks (in addition to regular care leave) if schools/classes are closed.

With regard to schools, measures have been taken to support children at risk of poverty and social exclusion by providing adequate IT equipment for distance-learning and home schooling.

In addition, the ‘child bonus’ (Kinderbonus), a crisis-related one-off payment for children of € 360 paid in September 2020, was introduced.

The school start package program (Schulstartpaket), which was already introduced before the ongoing pandemic, was widely made use of this year. It provides pupils from households receiving social assistance with high-quality school materials, both giving them the possibility to participate adequately at school and counteracting social stigmatization.

Furthermore, children living with adults receiving social assistance benefit from numerous administrative simplifications with regard to the receipt of social assistance, introduced due to the pandemic.

Children living with adults receiving unemployment benefits (Arbeitslosengeld) or unemployment assistance (Notstandshilfe) also benefit from pandemic-related support measures: unemployed persons receive a one-off payment of € 450; the amount of unemployment assistance was adjusted to unemployment benefits due to the pandemic.

Various social services benefitting children and their families were further increased during the pandemic, new forms of virtual counselling and support services have been introduced (i.e. psychosocial counselling, preventing domestic violence etc.).

As the fight against poverty is one of its central concerns, the Austrian Federal Government has set itself the goal to elaborate a comprehensive National strategy for the prevention of poverty with a special focus on combating child poverty, based on recent scientific evidence with regard to social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With regard to children´s health, the inclusion of the influenza vaccination in the free immunisation programme for children as well as the compulsory wearing of masks only for children aged 6 years or older could also be regarded as good practice examples.

With regards to children’s right to education, measures to enable children with migration background to keep improving their German language skills: The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) provides extensive online learning content, in particular learning clips for practicing German for 5 to 7 year olds or interactive online learning units for 8 to 14 year olds, available to accompany German courses or language support activities in school and kindergarten. Those measures existed before the Covid-19 pandemic, and were upheld with the aim to provide continuous support to children with migration background.