

**Towards inclusive service markets through social investment in the EU
The case of early childhood education and care**

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Towards inclusive service markets through social investment in the EU

The case of early childhood education and care

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Executive summary

This report provides an overview of social investment for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Europe in general and in eight of the RE-InVEST partner countries in particular - Belgium, England, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Scotland - employing a review of the literature, European-wide statistical analyses and two country case studies. Especially when it is high quality, ECEC has a great effect on the learning potential of all children. It is especially effective as a preventive (rather than curative) measure for disadvantaged children who risk getting stuck within the vicious cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and lower SES. It also enables paid work to be combined with parenthood and helps working mothers prevent career breaks.

ECEC is one of the fundamental pillars for the goals of social investment since it focuses on the future opportunities of citizens instead of assisting to the needy in the present. However, as the RE-InVEST team, we believe that the social investment approach in ECEC should also employ a ‘children’s rights perspective’, and consider children as ‘beings’ here and now instead of future employees or ‘becomings’. Moreover, governments should take additional measures for disadvantaged children in order to bring them to the same level of learning and school readiness.

The findings indicate that European countries do make an effort to attain the goals set by the European Union in terms of increasing participation through improved accessibility, availability, affordability and quality of ECEC services. While some countries need to make a much bigger effort than others to get to the desired level of accessibility and participation, all countries need to work hard on the accessibility of childcare for younger children (0-3 year-olds). However, ‘more investment’ cannot solve all problems by itself. Pure universalism may end up producing Matthew effects. Hence, the investment should be smart, especially if governments want to achieve the maximum benefit at the lowest possible cost in a short period of time.

Our recommendation is adopting ‘progressive universalism’ where the ECEC system is ‘universal when possible, targeted when necessary’. In other words, public ECEC services should be universal and egalitarian in principle: all children should be able to access and benefit from the system equally, ideally, in a segregation-free setting. However, children who need intervention the most, should also receive priority and special treatment; because these are the children who have problems with the access to quality services in the first place, and leaving them behind would be more detrimental to their future educational and professional trajectory than their non-disadvantaged peers. It is also in disadvantaged populations that public investment in ECEC produces the highest net impact, as it does not substitute for the families’ own investment.

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Introduction

RE-InVEST

This report was prepared within the framework of the Horizon 2020 research project ‘Rebuilding an inclusive, value based Europe of solidarity and trust through social investments’ (RE-InVEST). The RE-InVEST project aims to contribute to a more solidary and trustworthy Europe, through an inclusive, powerful and effective social investment strategy at the EU level. Moreover, the project itself adopts a participative approach that lends a voice to vulnerable groups and civil society organisations. The RE-InVEST consortium consists of members of the informal network ‘the Alliances to fight Poverty’, a network of civil society organisations, trade unions, policy makers and academics co-ordinated by the Flemish Christian labour movement ‘beweging.net’, and committed to a more inclusive Europe. The consortium covers a broad range of European countries, both geographically (12 countries, 13 regions) and in terms of representation of different welfare and labour market traditions. The analyses are carried out by the local partners, who consist of NGOs and/or researchers.

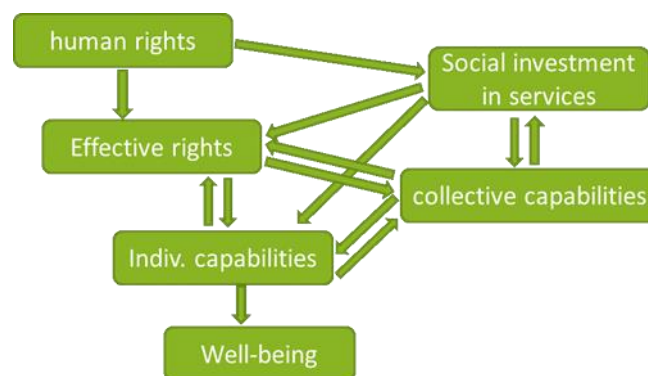
In particular, this report is one of the five sectoral reports in the context of Work Package 6 of the RE-InVEST project that examine the operation of *basic service sectors* from a social investment perspective. Each of the sectoral reports consists of both the European-level analysis of the sector and several particular national social investment policies. This report details social investment in Europe for early childhood education and care (ECEC). Below, we summarise the theoretical framework that guides the work we do in the RE-InVEST project. Then, we provide more details on how this general framework can be translated to the field of ECEC. In the following sections, we give an overview of the European policy framework for ECEC as well as a comparative analysis of ECEC policies across Europe. These results are supported with eight case studies (Belgium, England, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Scotland). The Portuguese and Romanian cases are elaborated upon in detail. The report is concluded with recommendations with a potential to help European countries to achieve a more accessible, affordable and higher quality ECEC system.

Theoretical framework of RE-InVEST

Our model builds on *human rights and capabilities* as building blocks for the social inclusion/wellbeing of individuals. Formal human rights (e.g. right to a minimum living standard, right to health care) are values, social norms which do not automatically result in improved wellbeing. For the implementation of such rights (mainly in the field of economic, social and cultural rights), different types of policy measures need to be implemented: legislation, organisation of (public) services, subsidies, social transfers, inspection, judicial enforcement, etc. Although some legal measures may establish effective rights (e.g. a guaranteed access to water, guaranteed places for children in childcare), most policies necessitate additional ‘social investment’ in individual and collective agency through public or subsidised service provision (e.g. ECEC, health care, ...) and the transfer of power and resources – either directly to individuals/households (e.g. through free-of-charge minimum packages or social tariffs), or to companies and civil society organisations (e.g. subsidies to housing companies, water distribution, ECEC providers). These ‘collectives’ in turn interact with households and may invest in their capabilities.¹

¹ Individuals in turn can invest in collective agency through contributions and/or voluntary action. All capabilities are actually combined capabilities, i.e. a mix of individual and collective action. In other words, there is no such thing as capability without the joint action of individuals and collectives.

Figure 1 From human rights and capabilities to individual wellbeing



Bonvin and Laruffa (2017) reconsider the capabilities of a (vulnerable) individual from a different angle, distinguishing between three roles: *receiver*, *doer* and *judge*. The first role reflects his/her need for adequate support (in terms of resources or services); the second role refers to his/her agency in transforming resources into valuable activities (including work, leisure, domestic activities, social participation, etc.); finally, the role of ‘judge’ reflects his/her freedom to make choices and his/her voice in various ‘collectives’ to which s/he belongs.

In this context, *social investment*-related measures may affect individual capabilities in many ways: by investing in (tangible or intangible) assets, by transferring financial resources that allow households to invest in themselves, by strengthening their rights and freedoms through regulations, or indirectly, by strengthening the agency of collectives that interact with vulnerable people.

Participatory action research

RE-InVEST aims at giving vulnerable people a voice through participatory action research that can be used in policy recommendations and advocacy at local, national and EU level. Participatory action research views participants as co-researchers who have special knowledge about their own situation. Rather than being just interviewed about their experiences or views, vulnerable people are enabled to take part in examining, interpreting, and reflecting on their own social world, shaping their sense of identity, and getting a voice in public deliberation (another key dimension of capabilities).

This necessitates an iterative process of knowledge generation that includes several steps of mutual trust building, knowledge production and sharing, empowerment, newly generated knowledge and action that builds upon this knowledge. Crucial for this kind of knowledge generation is the ‘merging of knowledge’ (ATD Fourth World, 2007) that comes from three parts: academic knowledge developed by researchers; experiential knowledge acquired by vulnerable people throughout their lives; and the knowledge of professionals and civil society organisations that work with them (Figure 2). Every research team at local level includes members from these three different backgrounds.

Figure 2 Merging of knowledge



This methodology was applied for producing the national reports on the five sectors in focus (ECEC, water, financial services, housing, health care). The RE-Invest team joined forces with pre-existing dialogue processes at grassroots level, produced the national reports covering all sectors. We thank all parties for their active contribution to this report. The work done on ECEC is compiled in this report with extra sections regarding the European policies.

1. Theoretical Framework

ECEC encompasses all types of care and education provided for small children before primary education, which usually starts at 6 years of age in Europe. While the care aspect is more pronounced for younger children below the age of 3, education is more in focus for children of 3 years or older. ‘Care’ is provided both formally (crèches, nurseries, kindergartens, etc.) and informally (childminders, nannies, grandparents, etc.), while ‘education’ is usually in the realm of formal entities. Care and early education historically developed in a detached manner. In this report we refer to the combination of them using the term ECEC, which is defined as ‘all educational and care arrangements for children from birth to compulsory schooling, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content’ (Naumann, McLean, Koslowski, Tisdall, & Lloyd, 2013).

1.1 ECEC as Social Investment

ECEC, especially when it is high quality, has a great effect on the learning potential of all children, but especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Burger, 2010; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006; Heckman, 2006; Leseman, 2009; Leseman & Slot, 2014; Nusche, 2009). It enables paid work to be combined with parenthood and helps women to prevent career breaks (Hemerijck, 2015; van Huizen, Dumhs, & Plantenga, 2016).

The Spanish ECEC reform that was carried out in the 1990s - called Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo (LOGSE) - lowered the age of free universal access to preschool from 4 to 3 years of age and introduced improved structural quality standards regulating educational content, group size and the educational requirements of the staff. As a result, preschool participation rate increased from less than 10% to 44% in high-intensity regions, while it increased from 7.4% to 15.3% in low-intensity regions (Felfe, Nollenberger, & Rodríguez-Planas, 2015). It also contributed to child development, because the children who attended ECEC have higher reading scores in PISA – albeit no difference in math scores (Felfe et al., 2015). Furthermore, for every ten additional 3-year-olds in pre-school, approximately two mothers took up employment (Nollenberger & Rodríguez-Planas, 2015). Thus, the universalisation of ECEC was shown to have contributed to increased female employment.

The benefit-to-cost ratio of the LOGSE reform was found to be 4 for the society, which means for every euro spent per child from a low SES background, the society gains 4 euros back (van Huizen et al., 2016). Note that this high benefit-to-cost ratio in bringing disadvantaged children to the same learning level with their non-disadvantaged peers is only the case when ECEC is of high quality. Many studies have come to the conclusion that the prerequisite for ECEC services to contribute to child development and upcoming years in education is the services being of high quality (Melhuish et al., 2015). If ECEC is of poor quality, it may even have negative effects on child development.

A cost-benefit analysis of universalised ECEC was carried out in Canada: if universal ECEC would be provided for 2- to 5-year-olds in Canada, regardless of their mothers’ employment status, the additional benefit of the service would be double the cost – given the parents contribute to the total cost by 20% on a sliding scale (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). Around the same time, in the late 1990s, Quebec introduced an ECEC reform. Full-time, universal and low-cost (max. \$5/day per child, less for low-income families) ECEC for all children over 3 (Prentice, 2007). Availability of universal ECEC led to substantial increase in labour market participation of mothers (Baker, Gruber, & Milligan, 2006). However, only 40% of the cost

of the universal ECEC was covered by the income and taxes on the extra employment caused by the universal ECEC. This means that the net cost of the initiative was quite high. Another downside of the initiative was the unpreparedness of the local authorities to meet the demand from users. Since there were not enough places in ECEC facilities, Quebec had to allow commercial ECEC providers to enter the scene. This led to an increase in daily fees and a drop in quality because of the shortage of qualified staff (cf. Prentice, 2007).

Note that all of these studies reported modest outcomes with regard to mothers' take-up of economic activity and the revenue generated by the widespread use of ECEC. Still, ECEC is shown to be very effective as a preventive (rather than curative) measure for disadvantaged children that get stuck within the vicious cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and lower SES. However, one should be aware of the Matthew effect of social policies that target the most disadvantaged: Policies that aim to help alleviate disadvantages often end up helping the better off more (Cantillon, 2011), and this is also the case for ECEC policies (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012). Yet, it is still debated whether ECEC should be universal or should be targeted for the worse off in terms of affordability and accessibility. The former runs the risk of creating a Matthew effect and not serving the ones in need, while the second may lead to segregated facilities where disadvantaged children are cared for and educated with their disadvantaged peers. The literature demonstrates that, disadvantaged children benefit from ECEC the most when they are in mixed groups with their non-disadvantaged peers, through which they interact with peers with various socio-economic backgrounds (Melhuish et al., 2015).

1.2 Enriching the social investment perspective with the children's rights perspective and capabilities approach

Social investment aims for improved human capital development (e.g. ECEC, lifelong learning), efficient use of human capital (e.g. supporting women's, mothers' and lone parents' employment), greater social inclusion, gender equality at work and at home. ECEC is one of the fundamental pillars for the goals of social investment since it focuses on the future opportunities of citizens instead of assisting to the needy in the present. In other words, social investment puts more focus on 'preparing' rather than 'repairing' (Bundy, 2012; Conley, 2010; Morel et al., 2012). As a result, while the neo-liberal welfare state aims to minimise state involvement in the economy, the social investment state aims to prepare citizens for their future productive role in the labour market (Bundy, 2012).

Still, this approach remains narrow, because it sees children as future workers or 'becomings', and aims to achieve the best economic returns on investment. In fact, the 'social investment' perspective is criticised because of such an approach. In their work, Bonvin and Laruffa (2017) propose a new terminology - 'capacitating welfare state' - correcting for such shortcomings. Social investment sees children as future contributors to economy and they are deemed worthy of investment merely based on their potential to generate revenues in the future. However, 'ECEC as a right' approach, as proposed by RE-InVEST, sees children as individual beings who have particular needs and desires that deserve to be fulfilled at that moment regardless of future returns. Moreover, especially in the case of disadvantaged people, social investment aims at strengthening individuals and eliminating their vulnerabilities. Instead, we should acknowledge that vulnerability is a 'fundamental human characteristics' and work on improving solidarity in the society. Along the same lines, social investment tends to see individuals as 'receivers' of services, overlooking the capacity of individuals as 'doers' except for their role in the labour market (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2017). This perspective feeds into the idea of 'children as becomings', ignoring the capacity of 'children as doers'. Therefore, the significance of ECEC should be reargued as something more than merely social investment: a human and children's right (Cockerill, 2014). This necessitates the accessibility, availability, affordability and high quality of ECEC services for all children and their families, including the most disadvantaged; because especially disadvantaged families have limited access to provisions.

Another point of attention is that, for disadvantaged children, equal standards are not enough and governments should take additional measures (e.g. better equipped centres, better personnel, either free or affordable cost, priority access, etc.) in order to bring them to the same level of learning and school readiness

(Nicaise et al., 2000; OECD, 2006; Vandenbroeck, 2011). This can be done either by making the mainstream provision more available, equitable and affordable (e.g. Nordic countries), or by investing in targeted programmes (e.g. Sure Start Programme in the UK). Children from low-income families, lone parent families, or ethnic or racial minority groups are particularly in danger of getting stuck in the vicious cycle of disadvantage (Herczog, 2012; Johansson & Höjer, 2012; Magnuson & Shager, 2010; Ojala, 2010), especially when poverty is spatially clustered or segregated.

2. European policy framework for ECEC

2.1 The European policy agenda

ECEC services have been classified as ‘social services of general interest’, a label that ‘immunises’ these services from exposure to commercial competition in the internal EU market. This means that national governments can impose quality standards, regulate markets, set prices and prioritise certain target groups. The European Union has been promoting more widespread ECEC provision and take-up for more than two decades especially due to its role in facilitating maternal employment (Mahon, 2002). Later on, with the new evidence on the benefits of ECEC for children (boost in child development, positive effect in reducing early school leaving and improving later school life, etc.), over the years, the EU discourse started to focus on the need for ECEC to be high quality, holistic, integrated, intersectoral and inclusive (Herczog, 2012).

In 2002, the European Council set the ‘Barcelona objectives’ on ECEC participation, with the aim of enabling 33% of children below 3 and 90% of children between 3 and mandatory school age to receive ECEC by 2010 (European Commission, 2013a). Although the target was not met by many countries, participation rates have increased across Europe. This was also a result of the increasing adoption of the social investment approach by some countries. The European Commission has been following up the actions of the EU Member States regarding the Barcelona Objectives, and renewed its commitment to these goals in 2013.

More recently, the Commission has been issuing other communications with regard to quality standards in ECEC. Accordingly, the importance of widening access, support for research, design of efficient funding models, unification of care and education aspects, and structural quality indicators such as the development of balanced curricula and further professionalisation of ECEC staff have been emphasised (European Commission, 2011). This stand was supported by concrete recommendations, objectives, financing of childcare infrastructure across the EU Member States as well as funding scientific projects aiming to improve ECEC throughout Europe (via programmes such as FP7, Horizon 2020, etc.).

ECEC is a crucial aspect of the Commission’s Social Investment Package (SIP) introduced in 2013. In relation to the SIP, the Commission issued a Recommendation in 2013 to invest more on children on the grounds of the need for EU to ‘protect the rights of the child, combat social exclusion and discrimination, promote social justice and protection’ (European Commission, 2013b). The Recommendation relates to (a) adequate resources for families with children, (b) access to quality services (including ECEC), and (c) participation of children in culture as well as in decision-making. In relation to early childhood intervention in particular, the document recommends the following:

- provide access to high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care; ensure its affordability and adapt provision to the needs of families;
- incentivise the participation of children from a disadvantaged background (especially those below the age of 3), regardless of their parents’ labour market situation, whilst avoiding stigmatisation and segregation;
- support parents in their role as the main educators of their own children during the early years and encourage ECEC services to work closely with parents and community actors involved in the child’s upbringing (such as health and parenting support services);
- raise parents’ awareness of the benefits of participation in ECEC programmes for their children and themselves; use ECEC as an early-warning system to identify family or school-related physical or psychological problems, special needs or abuse.

Simultaneously, the European Commission had been working on a proposal for the European Quality Framework on ECEC, in order to define more clearly what ‘high-quality ECEC’ means. Five key dimensions of quality were defined (Milotay, 2015):

- *accessibility*: available and affordable for all, encourages participation, strengthens inclusion and embraces diversity;
- *workforce*: professional, well-qualified, strong leadership, supportive working conditions;
- *curriculum*: holistic, flexible, collaborative, regularly revised and improved;
- *monitoring and evaluation*: regular, transparent, effective for policy development, in the best interest of the child;
- *governance and funding*: coordinated legislation and funding, clear responsibilities, collaborative, aiming for universal legal entitlement.

Naturally, these recommendations of the European Commission are backed up by research, some of which are funded by the EU to study particularly the challenges the EU Member States face in relation to achieving accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC. CARE (2014-2016) was one of the collaborative projects funded by the EU that addressed issues related to the quality, inclusiveness, and individual, social, and economic benefits of ECEC in Europe. Another one is ISOTIS (2017-2019) that aims to contribute to effective policy and practice development at different levels in order to effectively combat early arising and persisting educational inequalities starting from the early years.

Moreover, since the beginning of the millennium, the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also contributes immensely to the strengthening of the position of ECEC as a key social investment. The OECD has published already four reports in the series ‘Starting Strong’, that synthesise the research done in the field providing workable definitions and recommendations for policy-makers, researchers and practitioners. The first two reports have set the scene by positioning ECEC within the education system, and listing guidelines and good practices regarding financing and institutional setting of ECEC (OECD, 2001, 2006), and the next two have focused specifically on quality (OECD, 2012, 2015). The importance of the partnership between the European Commission and the OECD in the field of ECEC cannot be over-stated.

ECEC also found its way into the European Pillar of Social Rights introduced in 2017. While it is the main focus of the Principle 11 under ‘social protection and inclusion’, it is also closely related to the principles 1 on education, training and life-long learning and 3 on equal opportunities under ‘equal opportunities and access to the labour market’, as well as Principle 9 on work-life balance under ‘fair working conditions’.²

Finally, it is important to mention that ‘free childcare’ and ‘free education’ have also been mentioned as crucial elements of the Child Guarantee Scheme along with other essential public services such as free healthcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition (Eurochild, 2016). Based on the European Commission’s (2013b) Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage, the Child Guarantee Scheme aims at providing free access to such public services to every child in Europe who is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which constitute one fourth of all children in Europe, in order to fight child poverty and improve child wellbeing. Currently, the European Commission is following up on a preparatory action to establish the Child Guarantee in Europe, and to this end, it has recently launched a call for tenders to tackle the feasibility of the initiative for vulnerable children.

2.2 Diversity in the ECEC policies of welfare states

On the basis of the welfare state classification by Esping-Andersen (1990), liberal welfare states (e.g. US, Canada, Australia) tend to favour market-driven child care services and subsidise mainly targeted services

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en#chapter-i-equal-opportunities-and-access-to-the-labour-market

for low-income families. Corporatist welfare states (e.g. Austria, France, Germany, Italy) provide generous parental leave schemes while limiting public child care provision as they support the traditional ideal of family based on the male breadwinner model. Finally, social-democratic welfare states (e.g. Scandinavian countries) promote extensive public ECEC provision, combined with parental leave schemes for both parents.

Inspired by Esping-Andersen's work, typologies in other fields proliferated (Castles & Obinger, 2008). Among these, Mahon's (2002) typology consisting of the neofamilialist (Finland, France), 'third way' (Netherlands, United Kingdom) and egalitarian (Denmark, Sweden) countries is worth mentioning with regard to addressing the organisation of ECEC in Europe. Among these, the neofamilialist countries diverged from their egalitarian ideals in the 1980s and 1990s due to economic setbacks, resulting in the encouragement of child care provided at home rather than by child minders in order to lower ECEC costs. This system is characterised by the 'temporary homemaker' status being made more attractive for women, with the possibility of long periods of parental leave (up to 36 months) and a certain amount of child care allowance paid to the parent who stays at home. Besides making it more difficult for women to come back to work after the extended leave, both measures also reinforced employers' view of women having a high risk of taking long parental leaves – which resulted in lower wages for women as well as a lower preference for women as employees (Mahon, 2002). The same problem for women employees has also existed in some post-communist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, where employers started to request medical certificates proving the candidate is not pregnant, or clauses in employment contracts specifying the duration during which the female employee cannot have a child (Heinen & Wator, 2006).

The 'third way' countries, on the other hand, are the ones that did not invest much in ECEC until the 1990s. This type of countries especially support the 'one-and-a-half earner model' with women having part-time jobs as most ECEC services are offered on a part-time basis where parents pay a substantial share of costs (Mahon, 2002). Finally, the egalitarian model is characterised by a well-paid (almost income replacement) parental leave for approximately 13 months which is immediately followed by affordable and universally accessible ECEC. Note that Mahon's typology resembles Esping-Andersen's where the third way replaces liberal, neofamilialist replaces corporatist, and egalitarian replaces social-democratic. Nevertheless, it is a valuable attempt as it provides examples of new ideal-types of welfare states focusing on women's employment and ECEC provision.

Post-socialist CEE countries are worth mentioning as a separate group since they inherited an extensive system of social protection shaped after the Soviet model, where social policy was based on cash benefits directly paid to individuals (pensions, child benefits, etc.) while the paternalistic state took care of all the basic needs of the population. As a result of the family policy aimed at raising employment as well as fertility, traditionally feminised tasks were institutionalised (kindergartens and nurseries for children, care homes for elderly, etc.) so that women could take up full-time employment. Moreover, maternity and parental benefits as well as child and family allowances (albeit means tested) were quite generous (Fenger, 2007; Noelke, 2008).

Since employment was guaranteed under socialism (except in Slovenia), employment and workplace became central to access services such as kindergartens, nurseries, health clinics, subsidised food, housing or vacation homes, as well as income replacement during maternity, parental and sick leave (Noelke, 2008). With the transition to capitalism and privatisation of enterprises, the employers were free to decide to continue providing such benefits or not. Moreover, the protective laws of the old regime were among the first to be questioned, such as special entitlements for mothers with young children (child care, parental leave, and leave to care for a sick child) and single mothers (priority access to child care and preschool for toddlers, and twice the standard family or child care benefits) (Heinen & Wator, 2006). As a result of the changing employment, social security and labour policies, poverty and the number of disadvantaged people rose. Cash benefits were restricted to the poorest segment of the society while publicly provided ECEC services deteriorated in terms of both quality and quantity (Heinen & Wator, 2006).

3. Comparative analysis of ECEC across EU

3.1 EU-wide comparative analysis

Accessibility of ECEC in Europe has been studied by Ünver, Bircan and Nicaise (2016). We investigated the relationship between several ECEC policy measures and two dependent variables - the take-up of ECEC (using the EU-SILC data) and the perceived accessibility of ECEC (using the European Quality of Life Survey data) - making use of multilevel modelling.

ECEC policy measures were grouped into three categories: provision, regulation, and financing (McLean, 2014). The pillar of provision is about the actors in ECEC, and the question ‘who receives what and from whom?’ In terms of provision, key indicators are the start of legal entitlement to ECEC, the start of free provision, whether ECEC is provided publicly or by private providers, whether profit making is allowed when it comes to childcare, etc.

Regulation is about the way ECEC services are regulated by the government (e.g. human resources, fees, professional standards, wages) (White & Friendly, 2012). Some of these are structural quality measures such as group size, ratio of children per staff, minimum education or training requirements for staff, staff wages, and safety standards of the institution. Finally, whether the ECEC system is split or integrated/unitary is also a question of regulation. In split systems, children are usually divided into two groups based on age (0-3 year olds and 3-6 year olds), receiving ECEC in different institutions (day care centres vs. pre-schools), under different conditions and curriculum guidelines. Moreover, in split systems ECEC for younger and older children is under the responsibility of different ministries. In contrast, in unitary systems, there is harmony and complete continuity between these two.

The pillar of financing deals with the level of financial investment in ECEC such as the allocation of public funds, private contributions, parental co-payments, etc. Moreover, whether the public funds are transferred to the families directly (demand-based, benefits in cash) or allocated to the schools and facilities only (supply-based, benefits in kind) is also a question of the financing.

Based on this conceptual framework, nine hypotheses were tested for both take-up and perceived accessibility of ECEC (Ünver, Bircan, & Nicaise, 2016):

PROVISION	REGULATION	FINANCING
H1: In countries that have private ECEC provision, take-up and perceived accessibility is lower.	H4: Take-up and perceived accessibility is higher with integrated systems and lower in countries with split systems.	H7: The higher the public spending per child, the higher the take-up and perceived accessibility.
H2: The earlier legal entitlement to ECEC starts, the higher the take-up and perceived accessibility.	H5: The higher the minimum qualification of ECEC staff, the higher the take-up and perceived accessibility.	H8: The higher the proportion of funding from private sources, the lower the take-up and perceived accessibility.
H3: The earlier children are entitled to free provision, the higher the take-up and perceived accessibility.	H6: The higher the staff wages, the higher the take-up and perceived accessibility.	H9: The higher the proportion of funding from households, the lower the take-up and perceived accessibility.

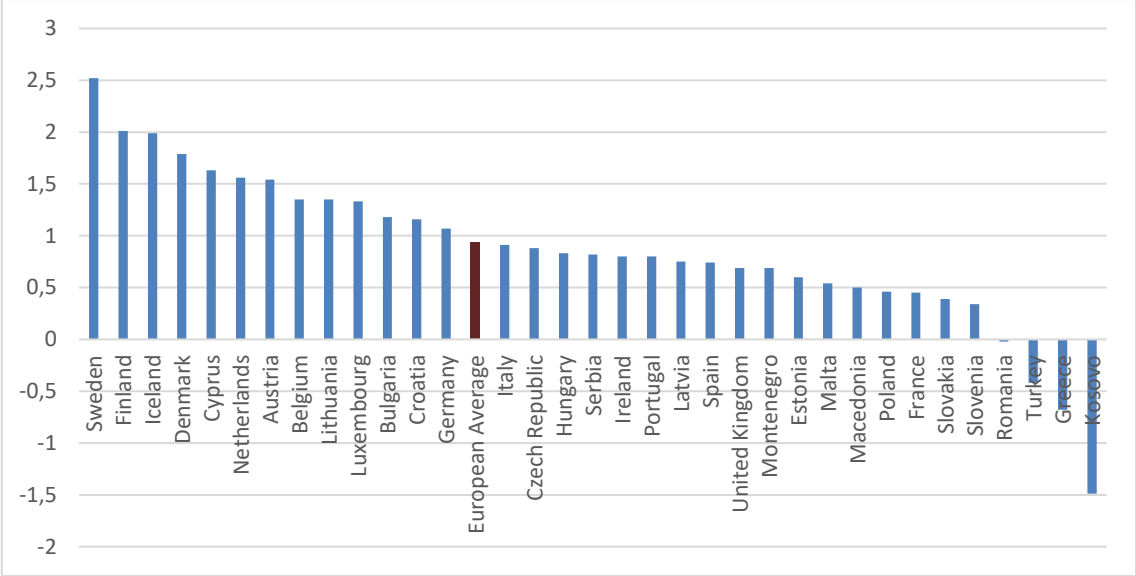
The country-level independent variables are derived from sources such as Eurydice report (2014), OECD Family Database, and Education at a Glance. The dependent variable of take-up was investigated via the cross-sectional EU-SILC data from 2014, controlling for the age of the child, number of children in the household, adult-to-child ratio in the household, degree of urbanisation of the area where the household lives, equivalised disposable income in PPP, education level of the mother, the number of hours worked by the mother per week, the immigrant status of the child’s parents and the number of weekly hours of care

by ‘grand-parents, other household members (outside parents), other relatives, friends or neighbours’ (unpaid and informal care).

The second dependent variable, perceived accessibility of childcare, was tested for using the 2011-2012 European Quality of Life Survey data, controlling for gender, age, employment status, education level, partnership status of the respondent as well as the degree of urbanisation of the area where the respondent lives, whether a child from the household attends childcare, and the self-assessed income level of the respondent. The variable ‘perceived accessibility of childcare’ was created as an index using four variables from the dataset: perceived difficulty experienced in accessing childcare because of cost, availability (e.g. waiting lists, lack of services), access (e.g. because of distance or opening hours), and quality of care.

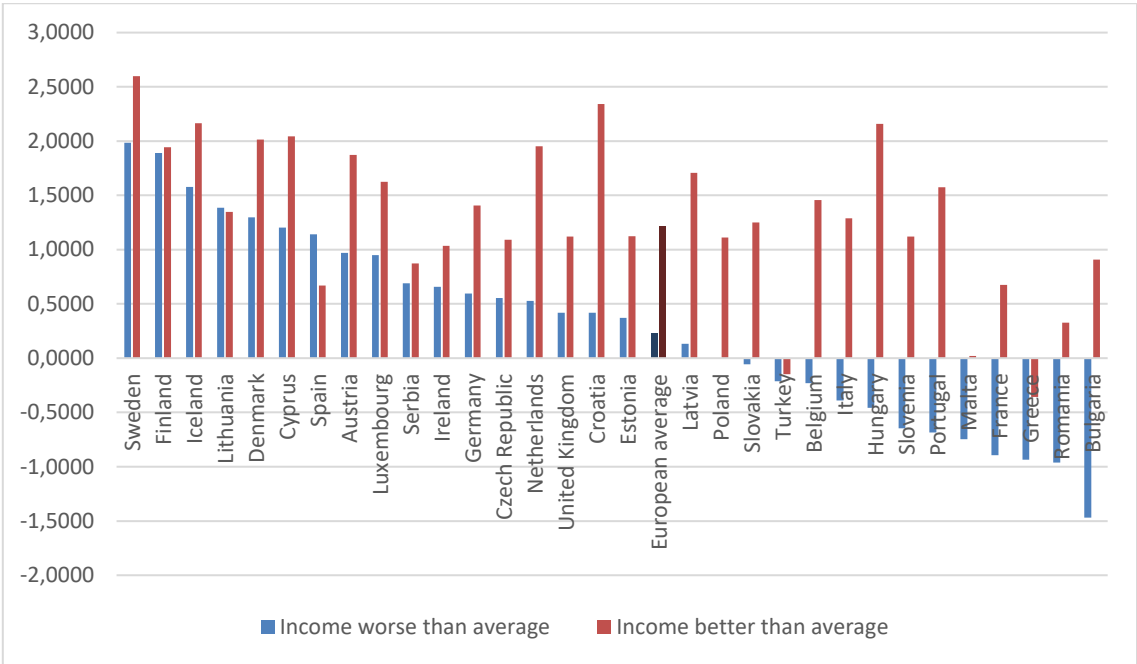
The micro-level variables yield expected results for take-up: The chance of ECEC take-up is associated with increased age of the child, higher income, less number of hours of care received from kith and kin, only one child in the household below 6, lower adult-to-child ratio, higher maternal education level (post-secondary), more hours worked by mother, and increased urbanisation. While having two parents who immigrated into the country decreases the chance of take-up significantly, having one immigrant parent does not make a significant difference. When it comes to perceived accessibility of childcare, male respondents and respondents who are older, non-employed, living in rural areas, educated in a secondary or higher level, and with self-assessed income level above average reported higher perceived accessibility. Furthermore, the respondents who use childcare services themselves report higher perceived accessibility. Marital or partnership status becomes non-significant in the presence of level-2 independent variables.

Figure 3.1 Perceived childcare accessibility index across Europe



Source EQLS 2012, weighted data

Figure 3.2 Perceived childcare accessibility index for people with an income lower and higher than average (self-proclaimed) across Europe



Source EQS 2012, weighted data

Respondents living in Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark) find childcare much more accessible compared to the European average. Interestingly though, the accessibility of childcare services changes slightly when (subjective) income is taken into account (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). Even for people with a below-average income, the Nordic countries lead the way, while Southern and CEE countries tend to score poorly. However, there are striking outliers in terms of inequality: the scores of the low-income group drop far below the European average for countries like Belgium and Bulgaria, where the average perceived accessibility score is relatively high. Also, in most countries, there is a huge gap between the average accessibility scores of childcare of lower income and higher income groups. Only in Finland, Lithuania, and Serbia the scores are very equal. The gap increases especially for Eastern European countries like Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

The findings with regard to ECEC policy measures can be summarised around three key questions:

- **Who provides ECEC services, and under what conditions?**
 - There is no association between the presence of private commercial ECEC and take-up; however in countries that allow for private ECEC, perceived accessibility is significantly lower.
 - The starting age of free ECEC provision is not significantly associated with increased take-up or perceived accessibility. On the other hand, we see a significant increase in ECEC take-up as well as perceived accessibility - albeit marginally significant in the latter case - in countries where the legal entitlement to ECEC starts early.
- **How is provision organised and regulated?**
 - Whether the ECEC system is split, mixed or integrated across age groups (usually 0-3 versus 3-6) is not correlated with take-up for the general population. However, mixed and integrated systems seem to be correlated with higher ECEC use (than split systems) among low-income and immigrant families. Unitary systems also have a significant positive effect on perceived accessibility.
 - As regards structural quality, higher salaries and qualifications of teachers working with 3-6 year olds are not associated with perceived accessibility. However take-up is higher in countries that have higher teacher qualifications and salaries, and the effect is stronger for disadvantaged families.

- Who pays for ECEC?

- In countries where the public spending per child (0-5-years old) in care or education is higher, both take-up and perceived accessibility are higher. However, the (average) proportion of private and household funding in ISCED 0 is correlated neither with take-up nor perceived accessibility.

The overall message is that disadvantaged groups tend to respond in the same way, but more sensitively than the general population, to public investment in ECEC services (higher public expenditure per child, higher structural quality, integrated childcare and preschool systems, guaranteed provision). Private commercial provision and parental fees do not seem to harm take-up, although the existence of private commercial provision lowers the perceived accessibility of services.

3.2 Case studies

3.2.1 Belgium

(by Özgün Ünver, Tuba Bircan and Ides Nicaise)

Belgium is one of the pioneers in Europe for providing accessible pre-schooling where the history of public pre-schools goes back to the mid-19th century, long before Belgian women's increased activity in the labour market (Willekens, 2009). Today, as of 2.5-years-old, all children are expected to attend pre-school until they turn 6 and start primary schooling. Although pre-school attendance is not compulsory in Belgium by law, attendance is very strongly encouraged by the government and parents and seen as an obligatory step in their children's education path. Pre-school is free for all except for meals and extra activities.

The three (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking) communities of Belgium have separate and split ECEC systems. Childcare facilities for the 0-3 year olds are under the responsibility of departments of child and family and the responsibility of pre-primary education passes into hands of ministries of education. The costs of the childcare services for the 0-3 year olds are mainly linked to the income of the parents as these facilities receive subsidies from the government (Eurydice, 2014). This makes childcare services in Belgium highly affordable. Nevertheless, there is still a shortage of available places in childcare facilities for 0-2.5 year olds, which causes long waiting lists (Farfan-Portet, Lorant, & Petrella, 2011). Moreover, there exist some private childcare centres where the prices are based on their own price setting.

In recent decades, the provision of ECEC developed separately in the French- and Flemish-speaking communities. While the French-speaking community emphasised care in collective settings, the Flemish ideal of care relied more on individuals or 'surrogate motherhood' (Kremer, 2006). Still, the coverage rate in the region of Brussels has been much higher than Wallonia (Farfan-Portet et al., 2011). The coverage rate of the Flemish region increased with the supply of childcare places from private providers. According to the 2015 figures, the ECEC participation rate of 2-year-olds is 82.2%, reaching to 99% for 5-year-olds in Flanders (Vlaanderen Onderwijs, 2015).

Participation in ECEC in Belgium is one of the highest in Europe, 98.1% for children three and above. The participation of younger children in day care facilities is also much higher than the European average: 54.7% for 0-2 year olds in 2014 (OECD, n.d.). However, disadvantaged children with an immigration background are underrepresented in ECEC. Moreover, segregation remains a problem for Belgium, residentially, socioeconomically, language-wise and in terms of migration background (DG EAC, 2016). The monolingualist ideology of the Belgian education system keeps alienating children with a different mother tongue (Agirdag, 2010; Ünver, Nicaise, & Bircan, forthcoming).

Farfan-Portet, et al. (2011) made a study on the effect of supply-side and demand-side funding reforms on the use of formal childcare in Belgium. The indicator they used for supply-side funding is the availability of places in informal care facilities, and the indicators for demand-side funding are two points in time where

the Belgian tax deduction with regard to childcare has changed: 1999 when the deductible ceiling increased and 2000 when the families were allowed to deduct 100% of childcare costs instead of 80%. Looking at the results from the perspective of low-income families, supply-side policies regarding the availability of places in care settings have a positive impact on the use of these services. However, demand-side initiatives of tax deduction seemed to benefit wealthier families rather than low-income ones, because wealthier families are the ones who can find childcare places more easily. As a result, demand-side measures such as tax relief are found to be enhancing the already existing inequalities (Farfan-Portet et al., 2011).

Internationally acclaimed as highly accessible, the pre-school system in Belgium is functioning well also in terms of access for disadvantaged families. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement when it comes to access to care services for younger children below 2.5 years. Note that this poses less of a problem for two-parent households and families who have access to care by other family members, while single-parent households face greater obstacles (Farfan-Portet et al., 2011).

The underrepresentation of disadvantaged children in day care facilities is addressed through various means in Belgium. Recently, in Flanders, a quota system was put in place for publicly subsidised day care facilities in order to enforce crèches to enrol more children from disadvantaged families (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). Still, the participation of disadvantaged children remains lower than the quota of 20% in some settings.

3.2.2 England

(by Rich Moth, David Neary and Michael Lavalette)

Social investment in early childhood, education and care was an important feature of the New Labour government first elected in 1997. Along with the notable commitment in 2000 to eliminate child poverty over 20 years and to halve it in a decade (Timmins, 2017), a network of Sure Start Children's Centres was developed providing health and family support along with early education available to all but with a focus on deprived areas containing larger numbers of vulnerable families (Toynbee & Walker, 2010).

There was a sustained expansion of funding and provision of childcare to enable families, particularly lone parent households, to more equitably balance paid work and family life. The level of provision expanded from 12.5 hours per week of free early education for 33 weeks per year for all four year olds in 1998 to cover all three and four year olds being entitled to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks by 2010 (Lewis & West, 2017). While collective funding increased, the variety of registered ECEC providers - registered childminders, home childcarers and childcare outside the home - remained largely through the private market with parents facing comparatively high fees (Alakeson & Hurrell, 2012).

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government formed in May 2010 was firmly committed to an economic agenda of austerity to balance the public sector deficit but their social agenda for children and families reflected this Mods versus Rockers tension. The Coalition Agreement stated that '... strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society ...' and committed to the goal of ending child poverty by 2020 while also seeking to reform the administration of tax credits to reduce fraud and overpayments and to '...take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention, increases its focus on the neediest families, and better involve organisations with a track record of supporting families (Coalition Agreement, 2010, p. 19). These tensions produced continuity and change as well as conflicts and contradictions in policies for early childhood, education and childcare. The Department for Children, Schools and Families was abolished and its responsibilities shared between other government departments.

The austerity agenda directly affected public expenditure on early education, childcare and Sure Start Centres with a reduction of approximately 25% from £ 2,508 per child under the age of five in 2009/10 to £ 1,867 per child in 2012/13 (Stewart & Obolenskava, 2015). Financial support for children in vulnerable households through means-tested tax credits was limited to annual 1% increases from 2010-11 onwards and then frozen in 2016 with third and subsequent children entirely excluded from the system (McKay & Rowlingson, 2016). Significant cuts to local government funding gradually reduced both the quantity of Sure

Start Children Centres, nearly 10% (350 centres) have closed since 2015, and the range and quality of services offered (Walker, 2017).

A single funding formula based on participation with supplements for quality and flexibility initiated in 2007 was fully implemented in 2011 and crystallised the key policy issues - the balance between rising costs with available good quality places and the focus on child development or supporting parental employment - that have been a persistent and seemingly intractable issue for policy makers. Policy responses have included deregulation such as increasing the ratio of children to trained staff and encouraging lower cost childminders (risking the dilution of quality) and limiting funding for free provision (risking the availability of supply). While three and four year olds benefitting from ECEC provision supported by government funding was 93 and 97% respectively there are greater challenges in providing care for 2-year-olds with only 58% from their 15 hours of free provision in 2015 (Lewis & West, 2017).

Given the variety of provision and variation between high cost London and other regions along with the mixture of government funded free provision of 15 hours per week for part of the year, it is difficult to accurately measure the costs of childcare for families. However, despite the complexities of provision and difficulties in accurately measuring costs there should be no doubt that childcare costs have risen more rapidly than wages over the last decade (Trades Union Congress, 2017). The Family and Childcare Trust, a respected voluntary organisation, conducts a major annual survey that presents an authoritative source and the figures below show the weekly average costs across England, Scotland and Wales for 25 hours of childcare (Harding, Wheaton, & Butler, 2017).

Table 3.1 Headline childcare costs in England, Scotland and Wales

	25 hours of care in a nursery		25 hours of care from a childminder		Care after-school for a child aged 5-11	
	For under 2s	For 2 year olds	For under 2s	For 2+ year olds	Child-minder	After-school club
Scotland	£111.37	£106.16	£105.25	£104.53	£62.22	£55.71
Wales	£101.42	£102.30	£101.03	£101.03	£55.43	£43.13
England	£117.43	£113.43	£110.68	£110.11	£68.12	£52.80
Britain	£116.25	£112.38	£109.84	£109.29	£67.11	£52.58

The combination of a commitment to austerity requiring reductions in support for childcare and favouring market-based solutions has contributed to rising costs for parents and a fall of 26% from 2012 in the number of registered providers to 42,273 (OFSTED, 2017). This is a serious issue given the Conservative government’s commitment to expanding the provision of free childcare from 15 to 30 hours per week (U.K. Government, 2017) with only a third of local authorities reporting that there will be enough childcare in their area for eligible families and 44% concerned that the relatively low level of funding will further threaten the sustainability of some providers (Harding et al., 2017).

In their most recent report, after which all of the independent members from all political parties resigned at the lack of action from the Government on social mobility, the Commission noted the stark differences in early education opportunities across the country with less than half of disadvantaged children in 94 local authorities (29%) being school ready by the age of five with large variations between the best and worst performing areas. Parenting support on child development was very limited in most local authorities and often not based on strong evidence with an estimated 80,000 disadvantaged 2-year-olds (29%) missing out on their free childcare (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

According to the 2014 figures, the ECEC participation rate in the United Kingdom is 93,7% for 3-5-year-olds and 33,6% for 0-2 year olds (OECD, n.d.). However, note that compulsory schooling starts at the age of five in the UK (except for Northern Ireland where compulsory schooling starts at the age of 4). In the case of England, all 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of ECEC per week for 38 weeks per year. This is planned to be increased to 30 hours for all working parents in order to help close the gap

between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, with piloting starting in 2016 (UK DG EAC, 2017). This includes care and education provided by all registered settings, including childminders. With the reforms made in 2013 and 2014, 40% of 2-year-olds became entitled to this provision as well (Eurydice, 2014). This expansion of provision targets especially disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Still, according to the unofficial data from the National Day Nurseries Association 2016 Survey, only 45% of nurseries were intending to increase the number of free hours offered as the cost of provision exceeded the level of funding available (UK DG EAC, 2017).

The recommendations of the Social Mobility Commission for ECEC are eminently reasonable for future social investment in England. They recommended a new parental support package at key transitions in family life, including a guarantee of help for parents if their child's 24 to 30 months check shows them falling behind and that every local authority should develop an integrated strategy for improving disadvantaged children's learning outcomes. This should include quality improvement support for early education settings, including collaborative working groups, tailored advice and comprehensive training for early years teachers driving uptake of the early education offer for disadvantaged 2-year-olds and ensuring that they do not lose places to children eligible for the 30-hour offer. It should also ensure that all parenting support programmes are evidence based and experimenting with ways to offer effective advice to more parents (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

3.2.3 Ireland

(by Mary P. Murphy and Rory Hearne)

Ireland has been implementing both targeted and universal measures in the past few decades in order to overcome disadvantage through ECEC, however this has not been a consistent, comprehensive and coordinated effort (Fallon, 2005). In Ireland, all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months are entitled to 2 free pre-school years (15 hours per week, from September to June) that can be delivered in centre- or home-based settings, and parents are expected to financially contribute to meals and any additional hours of provision (Eurydice, 2014). Compulsory schooling starts at the age of 6, which creates a gap in the provision of publicly provided ECEC, though in cultural practice, children start school between 4-5 years.

A 2006 move to integrate childcare and education was the co-location of the Childcare Directorate and the Early Years Education Policy Unit within a new Office of Minister for Children [OMC]. In 2011, the Department of Child and Youth Affairs was founded as well, in order to distinguish childcare from early education. In response to the economic crisis, the Irish Government sought reductions in the universal Child Benefit, and in 2009 abolished the universal Early Childcare Supplement of € 1,000 per 0-5 child but ring-fenced some of the savings to provide the Free Pre-school Year for all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months, a move which aligned Irish ECEC policy more closely in line with international policy development. Over 90% of eligible children have participated in FPSY each year but funding of services for children of 4 to 6 years compares poorly with primary school. FPSY service is under-resourced and staff employed are lowly paid and on seasonal contracts.

To increase childcare places rapidly from a low and poorly resourced base, Ireland strengthened its mixed model of private and community based ECEC provision and made ECEC 70% private. Over-reliance on market solutions to tackle the 'childcare problem' defers an integrated ECEC policy (O'Donoghue Hynes & Hayes, 2011). The (expensive) childcare market approach benefits rich families more than poor ones (OECD, 2013). The average fee for childcare is € 152 per child per week, amounting to almost € 16,000 per year for a two-child family. As a percentage of wages, childcare costs are higher than in any other EU country (EC, 2015:59) and second highest in the OECD. Furthermore, poor children, when they do attend, are more likely to receive poor quality care. A recent report from the Growing Up in Ireland study found that among the infant cohort studied 'the most common main form of childcare was that provided by a relative

(42%, predominantly grandparents), followed by non-relatives (31%, predominantly childminders), with centre-based care such as crèches coming third (27%)’ (McGinnity, Russell, & Murray, 2015, p. 8).

In the Irish Country Report (EC, 2015, p. 64), noted that there has been ‘no progress on improving access to affordable and full-time childcare’ where costs of ECEC in Ireland are higher than any other EU country and quality of the service ‘remains a problem’ (EC, 2015, p. 59). The direction of investment remains to increase the number of childcare places to facilitate women to access employment and absence of a strong link between the development of ECEC places and support for quality practice has contributed to the poor practices and lack of integrated policy engagement to supporting and enhancing ECEC for the purpose of facilitating children’s development and early learning. Subsidised services for the under-3’s are supported only to facilitate the employment of targeted parents, and funding supports are limited to care with no identifiable educational aim – a failure to recognise the crucial developmental importance of this period of early learning and the educative nature of care (Hayes, 2008, 2010; O’Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2011).

The participation in ECEC of 96% (from 4 years onwards) is higher than European average, but there are still shortages in full-time provision as well as problems with affordability (DG EAC, 2016). The rate is 79.3% when it comes to the participation of 3-5 year olds together, and only 35% for 0-2-year-olds, according to the 2014 figures (OECD, n.d.). The participation rate of disadvantaged children is even lower especially for the younger age group (DG EAC, 2016).

Ireland is taking additional steps forward to alleviate inequalities in access by increasing ECEC budget (30% increase in 2016 compared to 2015), extending the free pre-school period to start at 3 years of age until the start of compulsory schooling with the additional coverage of 23 more weeks of ECEC per child (from 2017 onwards), and putting in extra resources in order to provide high quality ECEC to disabled children with special education needs (Ireland DG EAC, 2017).

In the meantime, however, day care sector for younger children remains in crisis. Following a long period of underinvestment and the highest childcare costs in the OECD the Irish government would have to increase childcare investment at least ten-fold in 2019 and beyond, for Ireland to catch up with most of our EU neighbours. The average childcare service in Ireland, whether private or community, urban or rural, is operating on a breakeven basis with numerous service closures in the context of unsustainable delivery of day care services, particularly to the under 3s. In July 2018 the NWCI and ECI³ called on Government to provide additional funding through a dedicated Sustainability Fund, to support all early years providers, private and community, whose viability is under threat.

The new Irish Childcare Support Bill was introduced in 2017 and is now at Committee Stage in the Irish parliament and is expected to be enacted before the end of 2018. The main purpose of the Bill is to provide the statutory basis for the new Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS)⁴ which will replace the interim ‘More Affordable Childcare’ initiative itself only in place since 2016. This will develop a modern ECEC scheme for Ireland.

This ACS scheme will provide a more sustainable and affordable universal childcare provision for all families using registered child care. The subsidy to private and not for profit providers ranging from € 1,040 per year to all families irrespective of means, to almost full cost replacement for those in poverty and considered most vulnerable for the purposes of work and study. In 2018 families of 75,000 children under 3 (under 15 in families that need it most) were supported with up to € 145 per week. The ACS has been hampered by technical issues relating to the new IT system, data protection issues to be legislated for around the sharing of information necessary to enable parents assess eligibility. There has been significant progress in improving the information available to both providers and parents, extending funding from 48-weeks to 52-weeks, and additional Programme Support Payments to services to cover the additional cost for the management and administration of the government-funded childcare programmes. However a number of issues remain and are summarised here under affordability, access and quality with special reference to the

3 <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/preparation-budget-2019-sustainability-funding/>

4 <http://affordablechildcare.ie/>

most vulnerable. The scheme also provides for applications to increase the duration of income-related subsidy for children (where one or both parents are not engaged in formal work or study) on child welfare or child protection grounds.

In terms of access, the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) has not yet clearly defined the ‘work’ and ‘study’ statuses which will determine whether the full 40 hour subsidy is allowed. The legislation proposes this be defined by regulation and the minister has indicated a loose definition to allow maximum subsidy. However, numerous clarifications are needed, for example, as to whether voluntary, unpaid, or rehabilitative work for relatives, etc. might be accepted for the enhanced hours subsidy. Definitions of work and study need to be as inclusive as possible and recognise the importance of unpaid work and the need for childcare support, in parents’ transition into employment.

In terms of quality, in October 2016, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs DCYA had proposed to reduce the means-tested subsidy to a maximum of 15 hours of childcare per week, inclusive of time spent in school or preschool, for children where one or both parents are not engaged in work or study. This proposal has been opposed by many groups arguing that focusing on labour market activation ignores the complex reasons that keep parents, particularly woman parenting alone, distant from the labour market. In addition, the proposal does not prioritise the best interests of the child and recognises that not all children receive the same start in life. The 20 hours of childcare per week advocated by childcare lobby groups would entitle children to a minimum equivalent of weekly part-time childcare given that 40 hours is the weekly limit per child for the payment of subsidies under the ACS Policy Paper. Another issue related to quality relates to the poor pay and working conditions for the professional workforce responsible for the delivery of childcare services for children. Many of the staff members are employed on a part-time basis and 38-week contracts per year, with clear implications for retention and recruitment of qualified staff.

3.2.4 Italy

(by Alberto Rovere)

In Italy in general, ECEC policies are not well integrated. This is the result of fragmented legislation and poor coordination among institutions and funding bodies. There are a few countries (e.g. Italy, Portugal, Spain) where the experts interviewed note significant disinvestment in ECEC. In some cases, this is especially for those who are most vulnerable such as children from a migrant or ethnic minority background (especially Roma).

In Italy, the number of children younger than 3 attending formal ECEC services has declined and the lack of affordable public ECEC forces family members to play the role of safety net and social service suppliers. Moreover, the ongoing economic crisis has strengthened ‘compulsory familialism’, since households are obliged to ensure mutual aid especially towards children (but also towards the elderly).

Italy belongs to the cluster of countries whose welfare state performance have been negatively assessed, as there are serious shortcomings concerning the availability, affordability and quality of childcare. In the cases of Italy and Spain, for instance, interviewees clearly detect signs of further retrenchment due to fiscal consolidation measures. In Italy, the National Fund for Childhood and Adolescence, which plays an important role in fostering integrated child well-being projects in large metropolitan areas, has been continuously cut since 2008.

Family benefits are a crucial part of investing in children as they help to ensure that families have sufficient income to ensure that children do not lack basic necessities and grow up in a secure and healthy environment in which their development can be ensured. Several experts highlight that there have been significant cut-backs or increased conditionality and means-testing attached to family benefits or a failure to uprate benefits in line with living costs in recent years. There are recent increases in some family benefits even if these do not always make up for the devaluation at an earlier stage of the economic crisis. Expenditure devoted to family benefits increased by 53% in 2014 compared to 2010 (6% compared to 2008) and is expected to continue to increase in 2015 and 2016. However, such increase does not represent a clear move

towards social investment, since it favours cash benefits (e.g. bonuses and vouchers in case of newborn or adopted children) rather than services (e.g. those supported by a national fund for family policies decreased by 88% between 2008 and 2014).

A negative trend is highlighted by a number of interviewees pointing to serious deficiencies in parental leave schemes or expressing concerns about recent developments linked to the socio-economic situation. In 2012, Italy introduced a rather short paid paternal leave and vouchers to purchase baby-sitting services or ECEC to support the employment of mothers and to encourage a more balanced take-up of parental leave (by extending the total duration of the benefit when fathers apply for at least three more months). Furthermore, in 2014 the rules regarding maternal leave and the return to work for women employed with fixed-term contracts were harmonised with the rules for women with open-ended contracts.

According to 2014 figures, the ECEC enrolment rate in Italy is 95,1% for 3-5 year olds which is above the European average but remains at 24.2% for 0-2 year olds which is below the average (OECD, n.d.). The law regarding day care services in Italy states that these facilities are meant to support working mothers and that these services are provided on demand (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). As a result, ECEC for 0-3 year olds is more developed only in some regions. This also explains the low take-up of ECEC by the younger children. On the other hand, pre-schools are provided for free as a public service for children as the first step of the national school system, and they are managed by the Ministry of Education. These services are potentially for all children, however, there are no guaranteed places (Eurydice, 2014). 11,4% of children enrolled in pre-schools are foreigners (DG EAC, 2016).

Nonetheless, the distribution of the immigrant communities in Italy is quite uneven: the high concentration of foreigners in the north decreases towards the south and the islands (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). Italy has been making large-scale ECEC reforms lately. Besides improving the curricula for pre-school, Italy made pre-school compulsory for all 6-year-olds (Italy DG EAC, 2017). Moreover, legal steps are being taken towards unifying services for 0-3 and 3-6 year olds to create a single integrated system of ECEC (DG EAC, 2016). A key to the success of policies to support early childhood development is the extent to which they are delivered in an integrated way across different policy areas. One of the key weaknesses that many experts identify is the lack of an integrated approach and the tendency to a piecemeal and ad hoc or fragmented approach to the development of services. The Italian childcare system is structured in a different way for 0-3 year-olds and for the 3-6 year-olds. Preschool for 3-6 year-olds is considered an integral part of the first cycle of education and falls within the competence of the Ministry of Education, University and Research, while the provision of services for early childhood is still fragmented and regulated at the regional level with great inequalities following a North-South divide (Bettio & Gentili, 2015).

The European target of 33% of 0-3 year-olds attending ECEC still remains far away. On the other hand, Italy has been in line with the 90% target for older children (3-6 years). Therefore, the efforts seem to be concentrated in the development of services and strategies dedicated to the 0-3 year group of users. Fiscal consolidation has become the dominant theme in national policy making and it has been implemented in a way that has actually led to a reduction or freezing in investment in ECEC and to the abandonment or curtailing of some previously positive developments. Expenditure devoted to family benefits increased by 53% in 2014 compared to 2010 (6% compared to 2008) and are expected to continue to increase. However, such increase does not represent a clear move towards social investment, since it favours cash benefits (e.g. bonuses and vouchers in case of new-born or adopted children) rather than services (e.g. those supported by a national fund for family policies decreased by 88% between 2008 and 2014).⁵

⁵ ESPN (2015). Social Investment in Europe.

3.2.5 Netherlands

(by M.E.A. Haffner, M.G. Elsinga, A.A.A. Mariën)

In the Netherlands, ECEC is neither unified nor obligatory (Naumann, McLean, Koslowski, Tisdall, & Lloyd, 2013). However, 4-year-olds, are entitled to one year of full-time early education until they start compulsory school at the age of five, which is offered in primary schools. This is funded by the state. Out-of-school care is also available for the ages 4-12, when children are attending school, and parents require it. The other main types of ECEC organisations which are active are day care centres, nurseries, playgroups and registered childminders (Blommesteijn, 2015; Knijn & Lewis, 2017; Naumann et al., 2013).

Since 2000, childcare policy has no longer only been aiming to help working mothers, but also to stimulate female employment and child development, while budgets needed to be controlled (Knijn & Lewis, 2017). The latter argument has put the Netherlands (together with England) in the relatively unique position in the EU with mostly private for-profit and non-profit ECEC supply (except for the publicly-funded playgroups) (Naumann et al., 2013). Arguments of effectiveness, efficiency and more choice for parents were translated into practice by the 2005 Childcare Act, which largely deregulated childcare, with some quality regulation (guidance) re-introduced in 2011 and made legally enforceable in 2012 also in relation to safeguarding children (Knijn & Lewis, 2017; Naumann et al., 2013). The 2005 Act changed childcare to a demand-driven financing system, as parents were to acquire childcare directly from the providers who were put in direct competition with each other. A 2007 amendment to the Act prescribed primary schools to offer out-of-school care, if there was demand.

Participation in ECEC is relatively high in the Netherlands, as is part-time attendance, given the dominance of the one-and-a-half-earner model. However, the largely deregulated and demand-driven system that has been introduced with in 2005 in order to increase effectiveness, efficiency and choice for parents has caused a decrease in participation following the austerity measures in the slipstream of the global financial crisis. Such a development clearly showcases a volatile private supply of childcare services, which impacts unequally those who can no longer afford childcare, especially in poorer neighbourhoods. Some of this decline has been compensated by informal care, which quality-wise is not regulated (social disinvestment). However, income inequalities also show up more generally in the sense that the children not in any formal type of childcare are more likely to be from a low-income household, as are those who are more likely to participate in playgroups, which were regulated less than the formal type of childcare (day nurseries and childminders).

As before 2005, childcare is still financed by employers, their contribution being based on their total of gross wages paid. Parents, when employed, are to receive the national government childcare subsidy through the means-tested childcare income tax allowance (Blommesteijn, 2015; Knijn & Lewis, 2017). Spending increased since 2000. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively, budgets declined as tax allowance criteria were set more strictly than before. The public funding level for childcare brings the Netherlands to a medium position in the OECD-range (Knijn & Lewis, 2017).

Another recent reform is that, the 2010 Law on Development Chances by Quality and Education (OKE law), prescribes attention be given to ECEC for those children between the age of 2.5 and 4 with (often) a (language) disadvantage (Blommesteijn, 2015; Naumann et al., 2013; VVE Platform, 2017). The law made municipalities responsible for the very ECEC and the primary schooling for children aged 5 and 6 years. Municipalities, therefore fund playgroups and receive funds from national government for this purpose as well (Naumann et al., 2013) and the fees are means-tested (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015). In the follow-up of a critical evaluation in 2013, the national government invested in harmonising the quality of the playgroups with those of the pre-school education. The 2015 evaluation of the OKE Law found that the quality of the playgroup education has improved (VVE Platform, 2017).

With a substantial decline in the supply of childcare centres in 2014 and 2015 following the Global Financial Crisis causing austerity measures, Netherlands became a clear showcase for volatile private supply of childcare services, with an unequal impact on those who can no longer afford childcare, especially in

poorer neighbourhoods (Blommesteijn, 2015; Knijn & Lewis, 2017; Noailly & Visser, 2009). The more difficult is access to childcare allowance, the lower became the number and share of children with an allowance and ECEC hours per child per year (Blommesteijn, 2015; Knijn & Lewis, 2017). Some of this decrease is being compensated by informal care (Knijn & Lewis, 2017), and due to the lack of quality criteria in informal care, it is likely that what happened is a social disinvestment (Blommesteijn, 2015).

Despite the recent decrease in public spending on childcare, ECEC participation is high as most children participate from age 4, which is obligatory. The share of children participating in ECEC at age 4 is 97.6% in 2014, which is still lower than the share in 2011 of 99.6% (European Commission, 2016). Childcare participation is also relatively high as 55.9% of 0-2 year olds attended childcare facilities and 92% of 3-5 year olds in 2014 (OECD, n.d.). These shares are (slightly) higher than the 91%, respectively 50% in 2010 that Naumann et al. (2013) report for childcare. Given the widely accepted one-and-a-half-earner model in the Netherlands, part-time attendance (1-29 hours per week) is comparatively dominant with 44% and 76%, for 0-2 year olds and 3-5 year olds.

The above mentioned neighbourhood effect show that the childcare market is not free from exclusionary effects (European Commission, 2016; Knijn & Lewis, 2017). Income inequalities persist for 40% of 2-3 year olds in the lowest quintile that do not attend any type of formal childcare, nor a playgroup, while this share amounts to 8% in the highest quintile (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015). Furthermore, the lower the income, the higher the participation in playgroups, rather than day care or childminders (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015). Lower-income households (less-well educated) also tend to prefer informal care provided by the family (Knijn & Lewis, 2017).

In response to such outcomes, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment Opportunities has taken measures to ensure broader access and improve the quality of childcare by increasing the budget for the childcare tax allowance in from 2014 onwards and temporarily extending the period of allowance for unemployed parents (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the national government is providing extra budget in the period 2016-2021 for municipalities to develop initiatives for children whose parents are not at work and cannot use the childcare tax allowance. Last but not least, the quality criteria and the financing for playgroups and day care will be unified by 1 January 2018.

Due to the increased marketization of ECEC in the Netherlands since 2005, access to these services is very unequal among the different socio-economic segments of the society. Poorer families simply cannot afford formal childcare, which is only partly compensated by informal care that is not regulated in terms of quality. In response to these developments, the Dutch government has taken measures to ensure broader access and improve the quality of childcare, including measures for affordability for parents in employment, but also temporarily for parents not in employment. Furthermore, it provides extra budget in the period 2016-2021 for municipalities to develop initiatives for children whose parents are not in employment and cannot use the childcare tax allowance. Last, but not the least, the quality criteria and the finance for playgroups are planned to be improved and unified with those for day care facilities by 1 January 2018.

3.2.6 Scotland

(by Fiona McHardy)

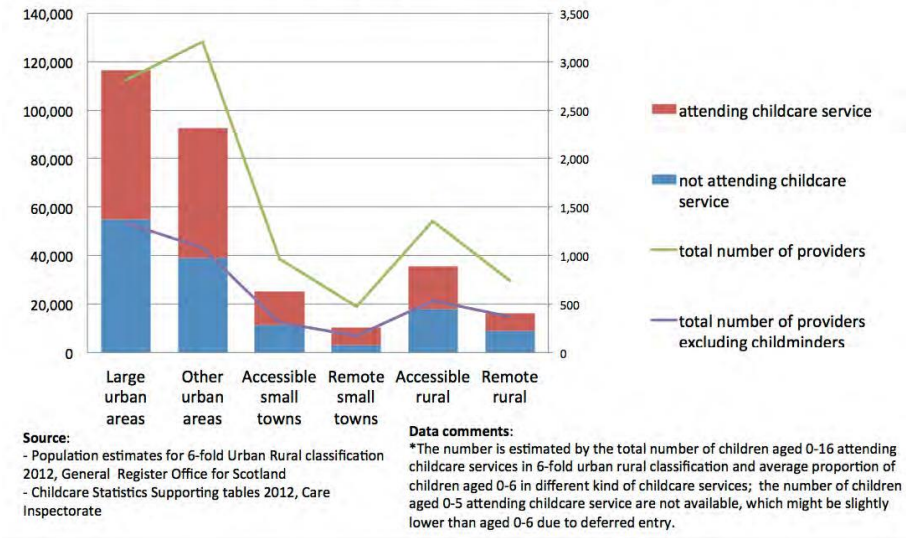
ECEC has been a focus of significant policy attention for a number of years in Scotland. An early focus of the Scottish Executive's Social Justice Strategy was the development of an integrated childcare strategy. Simulations by the Scottish government indicated that investing in early years and early interventions from pre-birth to aged 5 could lead to potential net savings of up to £ 37.4k per annum per child in severe cases and of approximately £ 5.1k per annum for a child with moderate difficulties in the first five years of life (Scottish Government, 2010). As part of the overarching Early Years framework, the Early Years Change Fund was established in 2011, which includes the stakeholders of the National Health Services, Scottish and local governments. Its task is to assist on early intervention and prevention. Over the period of 2012-2015

the Scottish Government has committed £ 44 million; the NHS has committed £ 117 million and local government £ 105 million (Scottish Government, n.d.).

At the local level, there has been the implementation of the GIRFEC practice model (Getting it Right for Every Child) to support families with their child’s wellbeing. The policy approach and resources in Scotland have certainly been far-reaching and partly reflects the approach of human rights and capabilities people require. One particular area that should be drawn out to critically reflect on is investment on childcare. This reflects the needs of families, for parents to be able to participate within the labour market, and for children to be able to access high quality early years provision. There has been increased policy commitments to this area. Since 2014, all 3- and 4-year-olds (and 27% of 2-year-olds) are entitled to 600 hours of free ECEC per year instead of 475 hours. This has been followed by a recent pledge to increase this to 1,140 hours by 2018 (DG EAC, 2016). In order to combat educational inequalities, the Scottish government also committed to have an additional qualified childcare professional in every nursery school in the most deprived areas of Scotland by 2018 (DG EAC, 2016).

Despite these policy goals, evidence illustrates that there are disparities in terms of access to childcare with some local authorities being unable to provide sufficient places. Research indicates that there is disparity in terms of provision across Scotland in terms of urban and rural and for those who are more or less deprived (see figure below) (Scottish Childcare Commission, 2015). Moreover, the extra hours and other types of provision are funded at the discretion of local authorities and by parents, supported by tax credits and vouchers. However, since claiming taxes is complicated for some families, parents often end up paying more than they should (Children in Scotland, 2011).

Figure 3.3 Total number of children aged 0-5 attending all kinds of childcare services and the total number of providers (public, private and voluntary) in rural and urban area in 2012 in Scotland



Note that the ‘social-democratic tendencies’ of the Scottish government have been recognised in the literature (Wincott, 2005). However, scholars also mentioned the obstacles before the redistributive reforms in Scotland due to path dependencies (i.e. current policies being a consequence of many other policies adopted in the past) (Mitchell cited in Wincott 2005). In order to improve the capabilities of vulnerable households in terms of outcomes for them and their children, there is no doubt that a greater investment is needed to support the accessibility of affordable and high quality childcare provision. This will assist with interaction with other policy areas such as labour market access and help reduce other inequalities such as attainment rates when children start school.

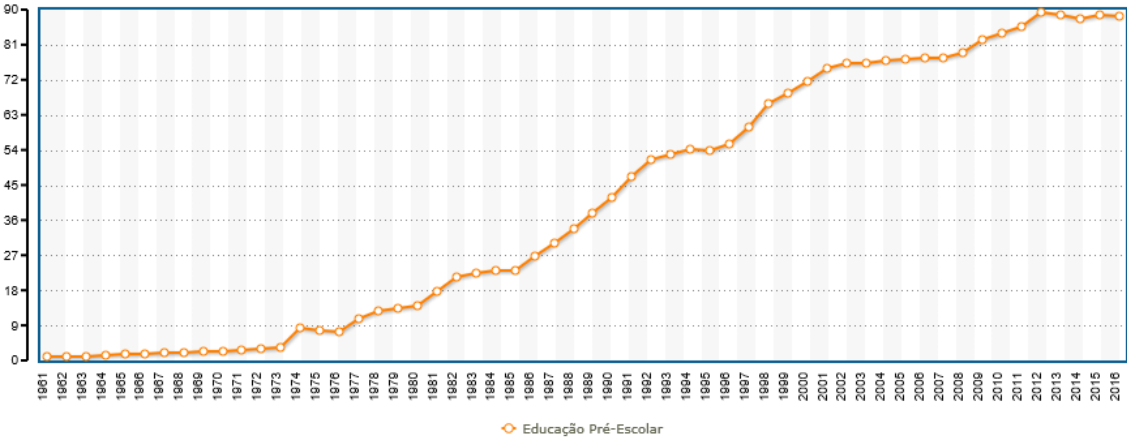
In order to improve the capabilities of vulnerable households in terms of outcomes for them and their children, a greater investment is needed on the support access to affordable and high quality childcare provision. This will assist with the interaction of ECEC with other policy areas such as access to the labour market and help reduce other inequalities such as school readiness for children when they start primary school.

3.2.7 Portugal

(by Graça Costa and Sandra Araújo)

The preschool participation rate in Portugal was very low until 1974 and the process of democratisation started a trend of significant increase until 2012. From 2012 to 2016 there has been a growing reduction.

Figure 3.4 Real rate of preschool attendance from 1961 to 2016



Source Entities: DGEEC/MED - MCTES | INE, PORDATA

Table 3.2 Total pupils enrolled in preschool education 2011-2016

YEAR	Total pupils enrolled	Gross birth rate %	Child poverty rate %
Poverty 2011	276,125	9,2	28,6
2012	272,547	8,5	
2013	266,666	7,9	
2014	265,414	7,9	
2015	264,660	8,3	
2016	259,850	8,4	

Source DGEEC/MED - MCTES – School Census

87.9% of 3-5 year olds and 47.9% of 0-2 year olds attended ECEC in Portugal in 2014 (OECD, n.d.). Participation to ECEC has increased dramatically over the last decade, but unfortunately this upward trend has been reversed since 2012 due to budget cuts (DG EAC, 2016). Due to the public provision becoming more and more limited, especially the families in urban areas have to rely on private centres for childcare for younger children (DG EAC, 2016). The new government takes measures to make ECEC more accessible and aims to have public pre-school provision for all 3-5-year-old children by 2019 (DG EAC, 2016).

The law in Portugal states that the educational component of preschool (5 hours per day) is free of charge (Eurydice, 2014) and the remaining components are financed by the state and families, depending

on their socio-economic status. The parental fees are specified, and under certain circumstances where families cannot afford to pay, it is not demanded. All children above 3 have the right to education, regardless of their legal status. For pre-school education, by law, priority is to be given to older children, children whose parents live or work in the area, children who have siblings in the same centre, and children with disabilities. Regarding the non-profit services for 0-3 year olds, priority criteria include children at risk, children from families working in the area, with single parents, and from low-income families (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). An additional priority criterion used by some centres is the employment status of parents.

ECEC in Portugal is provided within a split system, with childcare services for 0-3 year olds provided by a network of private (for-profit and not-for-profit) centres, under the supervision of the Ministry of Solidarity, Employment and Social Security; and pre-school for 3-6 year olds are provided by public and private (for-profit and not-for-profit) centres, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Preschool is universal for 5-year-olds since 2009, 4-year-olds since 2016 and 3-year-olds from 2020 onwards. Overall, public centres constitute 61.4% of the preschool education for 3-6-year-olds, private not-for-profit centres constitute with 20.8% of the system, and private for-profit centres constitute 17.8% of the network (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016).

The daily teaching component in pre-schools is five hours with at least three hours of social-educational activities including meals. Flexible operational regime and timetable is guaranteed. These establishments remain mandatorily open until 17.30 and for at least eight hours. Some kindergartens offer longer working hours, adapted to the families' needs. Classroom group size for older children is 20-25, while in the case of 3 year-olds, the number of children entrusted to each teacher cannot exceed 15. These groups cannot include more than two children with permanent special educational needs. In rural areas where, due to the insufficient number of children (less than 15), establishing a kindergarten is not possible, the kindergarten teacher goes to different places, where he or she works with a limited number of children and develops the curriculum according to curricular guidance.

To obtain a good overview regarding access to and use of ECEC in Portugal, a series of interviews were conducted with parents and professionals working in the field in the borough of Sé in Porto. According to the data from the 2011 census, among the 15 boroughs of the municipality of Porto, residents of Sé are most vulnerable: highest rate of beneficiaries of social assistance (9.2%), high rate of single-parent families (26.2%), second lowest rate of residents living off their work (34.9%), and the unemployment rate of 11.9%.

3.2.7.1 Children's rights and ECEC

Portugal adopted a Childhood Protection Act for the first time in 1911; and in the 1976 Constitution (article 69), specific rights for childhood were defined – namely, the right to protection from society and the State, with the aim of their full development, especially against all forms of abandonment, discrimination, oppression, and against the abusive exercise of authority in the family and other institutions. Portugal ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, ensuring and acknowledging children as holders of rights, and the need to guarantee material, physical and symbolic conditions for those rights to be protected. Still, children's rights were and are endangered by austerity policies such as cuts in wages and in some social subsidies directed at the most vulnerable groups of the population (e.g. unemployment allowance, family allowance, changes in income tax tiers). These measures increase social risk for children as a generational group (Tomás, Vilarinho, Homem, Sarmiento, & Folque, 2015).

Children are the generational group that is affected by poverty the most. The proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU lowers when the parents' level of education increases. Almost two thirds of children with lowly educated parents are at risk of poverty, which falls to one third in the case of parents with high school education and to one tenth in the case of parents with higher education. According to Eurostat, the rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Portugal increased from 28.7% in 2010 to 29.6% in 2015: 45.6% of children in AROP have lowly educated, 25.9% of them have middle educated, and 7.2% have highly educated parents.

The withdrawal of children from institutions due to financial reasons contributed to the weakening to children's rights:

'The problem is much greater than statistics reveal. For example, a childcare facility with agreement for 33 children, years later, has only 10 children left.'

School retention and abandonment affects mainly the social groups most in need and vulnerable families are blamed the most. Childcare as a children's right mostly serves working parents out of need:

'The child as a subject of rights, the superior interest of the child must be above any other. How does the child take part, what is their voice, cannot but be pondered. With childcare it is the interests of families that come first. In preschool education I would say that economic and mercantile interests do.'

The policies aimed at fighting social exclusion must, first of all, target those that are at a greater disadvantage and those who find it difficult to use the system effectively; hence the need to promote the knowledge and daily experience of rights, education being one of the most important factors in the fight against exclusion, promoting a fight against the civic, symbolic and social invisibility of children (Sarmento, 2007). Preschool became universal in Portugal through several legal arrangements. Despite this, new inequalities have emerged in access in recent years, due to the fact that public preschools are not free of charge and not-for-profit preschools are difficult to get admitted to. With the persisting economic crisis and increasing unemployment rates, more and more children drop out of childcare and preschool, and the number of facilities keep decreasing (Tomás et al., 2015).

3.2.7.2 Disinvestment in ECEC as a result of marketisation and privatisation

The 2017 report of Education at Glance by the OECD demonstrates that Portuguese families are among those that spend 35% more on preschool out of total attendance costs while the state covers 65% of the costs. Although the educational component is free of charge, families pay for family support activities such as meals. Public sector covering only the 65% of preschool costs puts the country in the third lowest position of OECD, followed by Australia (42%) and Japan (44%) (OECD, 2017). Still, the national investment in preschool education as a percentage of GDP is in line with the OECD average: 0.6% (Figure 4.1).

Disinvestment in preschool occurred through the privatisation of several social services such as childcare and elderly care, which were owned by the Social Security Institute and meant for the most vulnerable families. The privatization of social services was very significant in the early 1990s, when a large portion of social services were sold off. At that time Social Security was organized at regional level and functioned autonomously, and therefore had the freedom to resist the pressure imposed by the central government. Still, the majority of regional centres decided to sell social services to private entities. The territories/regional social security centres were obliged to be privatized under the guidelines of government.⁶

One of the mothers interviewed states that she could not comprehend the shutting down of these centres given the quality offered to the most disadvantaged people in terms of physical space and professionals making an effort to contribute to the development of children:

'(...) They closed the kindergarten and it was always full, with waiting lists. Children came from other places. It was a pity that they closed such a nice kindergarten with a big patio, a football field... If you go there, it is abandoned... (...) In Abrigo dos Pequenos nothing was missing. My younger sister attended it and even travelled on a plane. The teacher arranged the payments... They went to Lisbon by train and flew back. It was an adventure for children aged 5. They had swimming classes, the older ones went to the fields to plant crops. The youngest did music, checkers and judo. They closed the residence, they do not care where people go. (...) You never hear that a private school is closed. You only hear public facilities close down and certain private schools supported by the government.'

⁶ This information was collected in an informal EAPN Portugal meeting from a retired civil servant who had responsibilities as department director on Porto Regional Social security. At current stage we do not have information available to identify the proportion of public social services privatised. This issue needs further investigation.

In the crisis period, the logic of privatisation did not only affect social services, but also the childminding services. The contracts are now directly made with families, which makes childminders more free, cutting their ties to the government:

In 2011/2013 there was disinvestment and the government wanted to forebear responsibility for the monitoring and supervision and increase the provision of services, seeing childminders as services for families in a commercial/corporate logic. Portugal, at the moment, does not serve children, particularly in certain areas. The government, through the social sector, is not responding to the need for childcare in big metropolitan areas. Somehow families hire childminders at a reduced cost but the right that these children have for quality assistance is overlooked.'

'We had childminders working for Social Security, which the previous government wanted to put an end to, or at least pass on to charities, in order to dismember the logic of social action of the government. In many places it is in fact crucial that these childminders exist, because these are places where the population that we want to cover live in, with transportation and economic difficulties.'

'We have childcare from charities, but it does not solve the problem of big urban centres, in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon, Setúbal and Porto. The offer is much reduced, which makes people seek private childcare. We can say that we have 37% coverage but there are many families that have access to private for-profit childcare only, where monthly fees are very high.'

With the liberalisation of the childminding services, follow-up by Social Security was reduced and investment in training also decreased. Lack of follow-up leaves the quality of the service provided to market logic, putting accessibility at stake for the most vulnerable families. There is a trend towards privatisation based on the principle that the education of children aged 0-3 is mainly a responsibility for families and not the state.

The attitudes of professionals towards people in financial need have also changed with the crisis. Instead of counselling and guidance, they were blaming people for their poverty and asking for financial help. Although social benefits suffered cuts and requirements for access there increased, beneficiaries are still perceived to be not deserving.

The impact of the economic crisis was felt in different ways by families, especially those most in need. However, the statistics do not realistically mirror the increase in childhood poverty and withdrawal of children from the ECEC system. Privatisation of quality childcare and preschool provision caused accessibility problems: families have to pay for private services. The same happens with childminders, who are now hired by families.

'Social investment' relates to the extension of collective resources and capabilities, and with the cuts of social benefits, vulnerable families' income was significantly reduced. While ECEC expenditure stayed the same, there was no additional financing. To improve the quality of education, supplementary funding is important. Despite the efforts in order to capacitate parents with low education levels through internal training actions and activities with the community, it is crucial to invest more in the education of families and children to break the cycle of poverty.

3.2.7.3 Recommendations

The responsibility for developing ECEC policies in Portugal is shared between central government and local authorities, and this causes differences in access and quality between regions, mainly between rural areas and metropolitan zones. A systemic and more integrated approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national levels is needed, involving all the relevant stakeholders (e.g. municipalities, social organizations, families). Moreover, the application of the means-testing principle should be evaluated closely, as institutions take their liberty to implement means-testing.

ECEC for 0-3 year-olds must be integrated in the education system, as it is a fundamental children's right beyond the dimensions of childcare and well-being. Therefore pedagogical guidelines must be created and implemented for this age, which is already on the agenda of the Ministry of Education. To assure

democratic access to ECEC for vulnerable children, the public ECEC network should be extended, especially in metropolitan areas.

Although Portugal is considered successful in terms of preschool coverage rate, this should not be used as an indicator of success at the level of political discourse. Preschool demand and attendance started to drop after 2011, which needs to be further studied. One of the reasons could be the higher parental fees for the supporting activities. Moreover, teachers and pedagogues need to be trained for assistance and guidance to vulnerable families.

For childcare professionals, salaries need to be more equal between the public and the private sector. The group size requirements should not exceed 20 children, and there should be a greater investment in professional qualification. Efforts to highlight the value of schooling and education should be increased and parents should be encouraged to take part in pedagogic activities of their children. Finally, ECEC needs to be de-privatised and public investment in ECEC facilities should increase to safeguard access.

3.2.8 Romania

(by Patrick van den Nieuwenhof and Cristina Victoria Chert)

According to the 2014 data, only 12,4% of 0-2 year olds attend ECEC, and the number is 84.2% for 3-5 year olds which is slightly below the European average (OECD, n.d.). This rate is even lower in the rural areas (due to long distances between home and school and lack of facilities) and among Roma children (DG EAC, 2016). Despite the low attendance, Romania has been putting a lot of effort in increasing ECEC take-up within the context of its strategy to reduce early school leaving (DG EAC, 2016).

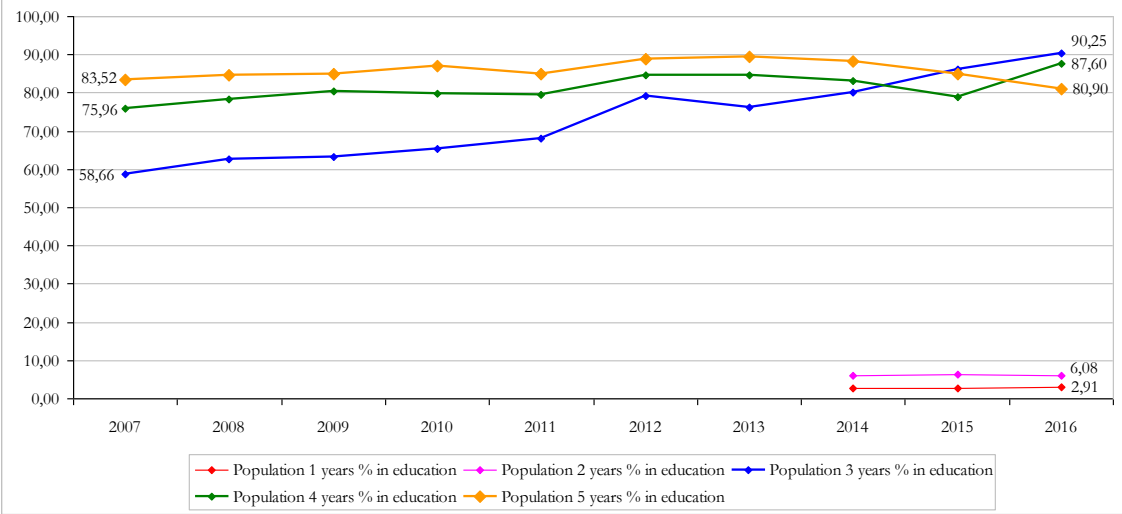
3.2.8.1 Access to ECEC

The parental leave scheme in Romania is one of the most generous and lengthy across Europe. The maternity leave adds up to 126 days (63 before and 63 days after giving birth, with 42 days being compulsory) and the indemnity is 85% of the average work income of the previous 6 months. This expenditure is supported by the social insurance fund. The child-rearing leave and indemnity, up to the age of 2 complements the maternity indemnity, and is offered to either of the two parents. The child rearing indemnity has been a significant support for working parents in the absence of a day care system. The benefit is ranging from 67% to 378% of the minimum gross wage, depending on previous income and the option chosen. In 2011 two options have been introduced: (a) a 2-year option with a lower cap, and (b) 1-year of indemnity followed by a year of insertion stimulus.

In Romania, children are entitled to free ECEC for 40 hours per week starting from they are approx. 4 months old (Eurydice, 2014). However places are not guaranteed. With the recent reform in 2014, all 5- and 6-year-olds have a legal entitlement for a place in an ECEC centre (Eurydice, 2014). Moreover, a new law was introduced in 2012 that made it compulsory to attend ECEC the year before the start of primary school. According to the Romanian Ministry of Education, this initiative already had a positive effect on the learning outcomes of children who have not attended ECEC before, and helped decrease the annual school drop-out rate in the early years of education (DG EAC, 2016).

Children start to attend preschool from the age of 3 and can stay there until they are 6- or 7-years-old. Public preschools are free, while private preschools are quite expensive for average families. Usually, children spend 3 to 4 hours a day in preschool. There are some public preschools which provide food (which must to be paid for), and after-lunch sleeping periods. Few preschools have all-day programs, if they do most of them are private institutions.

Figure 3.5 Attendance rate ECEC 1-5 year aged children



Preschool is free of charge in Romania, charging only costs related to meals. Parents with a cumulative gross income higher than a certain threshold pay 20% of the child’s food costs (10% if there are siblings), 10% if the parents’ income is lower than the threshold. Poorest families do not pay any contribution. However, there are a series of additional informal costs. Almost all preschools and elementary schools demand contributions for supplies (from hygiene products to painting and colouring supplies). Transport of students is foreseen and organised by the local authorities. Still, for some families, also depending on how many children they have, these costs will cause financial difficulties.

Day care for younger children, however, requires a contribution from parents of between 5% and 20% of the average monthly cost for a child in a public facility, depending on the parents’ income level. Tickets for crèches are granted since 2006. These are granted only to employees, and only if the employer decides to grant this type of extra-salary benefit. The benefit is received only for children between 0 and 3-years-old, who attend crèche and if the parents are not recipients of any child rearing indemnity. Systematic data on the number of crèche tickets is not available, but due to their restricted nature, their impact was limited. The 2011 education law put in place two types of benefits aimed at increasing support for low-income families for childcare: (a) the social coupon, to replace the crèche ticket, and (b) a € 500 educational coupon for newborns. But the implementation of the law with regard to these benefits was delayed.

In order to address the low take-up of ECEC in the country, Romania recently introduced a law on cash-conditional transfer. With the ‘Every Child in Preschool’ programme - which started as a pilot and turned into a nationwide programme - low-income families are provided with ‘a monthly social coupon of RON 50 (approx. EUR-11) to purchase food, clothing, school supplies and hygiene products on the condition that their children attend preschool’ (DG EAC, 2016). The objectives of the program are to reduce school drop-out and the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion. More concretely, ‘Every Child in Preschool encourages the preschool enrolment of children aged 3 to 6 who are born in families with a monthly income lower than RON 284 per family member. For the 2016-2017 period, the requests for social tickets are to be given by families to the city halls until December 20. Based on a centralisation made by the city halls and the approval of local fiscal administrations, the Government will then allot the necessary sums from the state budget to the local city hall budgets. The acquisition, distribution or return of the preschool social tickets is handled by local city halls. A network of shops is created to accept the products specific to the law: food, hygiene products, clothes and shoes, school supplies.

There is another universal programme called ‘Milk and Croissant’, that benefits low-income families more than any other cash benefits for pre-university students. This is a national program for all preschool and schoolchildren in primary and secondary school attending a form of education, and was developed as a tool for reducing social inequalities experienced by vulnerable children. The program is offering daily dairy

products (milk and milk products such as yogurt, kefir and buttermilk) and one bakery product, to all children in secondary schools and kindergartens in Romania.

The universal child allowance, the main child benefit in Romania, had by far the highest impact, especially for families with children younger than 2-years-olds. For these families, the child allowance increased four times in 2007. For children older than 2-years-olds, the benefit level remained unchanged for the last 7 years, thus its value deteriorated in real terms, and relative to the minimum wage and relative poverty threshold. Despite the depreciation, the child allowance represented the most important cash support for families with small children, especially for those not eligible for child raising indemnity (i.e. parents not in previous formal employment, mostly in rural areas or in poor households). At least 5.1% of the total number of households benefit from the allowance for children younger than 2-years-olds.

The second most important family benefit is the targeted family support allowance. The redesign of the benefit in 2010, from an administrative income-tested to a means-tested one, decreased the number of beneficiaries from 805,000 in 2010 to 325,000 in 2011. Its coverage decreased in 2013 to 3.5% of Romanian households, and to 13% of the total number of children receiving universal child allowance.

3.2.8.2 Roma and ECEC

In Romania, in the context of the population census of 2011, a number of 621,573 persons were identified as belonging to the Roma population. This is 14% more than counted in the 2002 census. Among social scientists there's a general consensus that this amount of Roma is underrepresented. Many people of Roma origin do not declare their ethnicity on account of the widespread prejudice they face in Romania. In a communication from the Commission to the European Parliament (2011) there are 1,200,000 to 2,500,000 Romi in Romania, which would correspond to 8% of the total population on average. According to a Study conducted by the Romanian Government and published in October 2015, the estimated number is a bit over 1,000,000 persons belonging to the Roma group.

In 33 areas Romi are more than 50% of the population and at least half of the Roma population lives segregated from non-Roma. As the case study of Romania, the commune Mișca was chosen close to the Hungarian border consisting of four villages. Among its 3,800 inhabitants there is no ethnic majority: Romanians (36%), Hungarians (35%) and Roma (24%). In contrast with the decreasing population in most of the Romanian towns, Mișca shows a growing population since 2000.

People with Roma background usually have much lower levels of educational attainment compared to the overall population in Romania. Unsurprisingly, the school attendance of Roma children is also low. According to the school mediators that also help with the communication between schools and families, the most widespread reasons for absenteeism for Roma children are: lack of necessities (clothes, school material), regularly going abroad with parents, not being interested in schooling, and Roma children having to go to work. Mediators claim that the best measures to prevent absenteeism would be maintaining relations between the families and the school, monitoring attendance, and counselling families regarding the role and importance of education.

3.2.8.3 Recommendations

The case study indicates that Roma are disadvantaged in numerous spheres: education, employment, health and access to social rights. The Roma still have difficulties in being accepted as full members of the community. They are often treated as social outcasts. On the other hand, the Roma are not simply an oppressed minority, since self-segregation and distrust against the institutions of mainstream society are also part of the problem. The recommendations below are closely related to the concrete implementation of the capability approach: conversions factors, agencies and the creation of a capability set are the focus point.

Recommendation 1: continuous support for mediators

Mediators are a bridge between parents, children, education and local authorities. There are many Roma children who do not know the official language of the country or region where they live, which leads to difficulties in securing a place for them in ECEC. Mediators are therefore to help them overcome these

language difficulties. Mediators also work with the families, explaining to them why it is important to send the children to education.

Concrete action steps

- Engaging mediators with a Roma background.
- Involving members of the Roma community, for example as school inspectors.

Recommendation 2: Improving the teachers' program

Teachers are, very often, not very interested in working with Roma children. One of the reasons is that they know little about Romani culture, language and traditions. There are miscommunications between parents and teachers.

Concrete action steps

- Motivating, training and qualifying teachers to work with Roma children.
- Mapping children's early learning needs.
- More attention for non-formal and informal teaching methods.
- Adapting learning materials taking into account cultural needs.

Recommendation 3: continuous support for Roma parents

Roma parents' lack of involvement in their children's education is usually due to their often-difficult financial situation and historical/community vision on education. In general, they do not seem to think that school education can help them be accepted by society or that it could help them to improve their social situation.

Concrete action steps

- Making it compulsory for Roma children to attend preparatory classes where they learn the official language of the country.
- Improving parents' motivation and involving them in their children's education.
- Devising a school curriculum for Roma children.
- Specific for travellers: creation of a personalised 'logbook' for children with administrative information, information on the different schools attended, a summary of competences, etc.
- Home visiting programmes.

Recommendation 4: improving universal access to early childhood education

It is needed to remove barriers in accessing early childhood education. These concern physical access (insufficient number of ECEC centres, remoteness), income poverty (inability to meet basic needs) and prejudice. Holistic efforts are needed as investments.

Concrete action steps

- Co-operating with local institutions in applying school education strategies.
- Going from project-based approaches and support to long term and sustainable support.
- Integrated approaches: horizontal, vertical and context related.
- Implementing incentives for early childhood education participation.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This report was based on three tiers of information: quantitative analyses for the EU as a whole, more detailed ‘sector profiles’ for eight countries/regions participating in this particular work package of the RE-Invest project, and two detailed case studies of ECEC for disadvantaged children (in Portugal and Romania, respectively).

4.1 Conclusions

ECEC is one of the fundamental pillars for the goals of social investment since it focuses on the future opportunities of citizens instead of assisting the needy in the present. It is also a ‘children’s right’ because, especially when it is high quality, ECEC has a great effect on the learning potential of all children and a high return on investment. While it enables paid work to be combined with parenthood and helps women to prevent career breaks, it is especially effective in levelling the playing field for disadvantaged children who risk getting stuck within the vicious cycle of intergenerational disadvantages. For each euro spent per child from a low SES background, it has been documented that the society gains up to 4 euros back (van Huizen et al., 2016). To enjoy from the benefits of ECEC, European governments need to increase their investment while simultaneously putting policy measures in place to improve the accessibility, availability, affordability and quality of these services.

Among the RE-InVEST partner countries, Belgium has a well-established tradition of providing highly accessible pre-schooling for children from 2.5 years onwards as well as good childcare services for younger children. However, problems of access still persist in the latter services. In the case of the United Kingdom (in particular, England and Scotland), even though the government is pouring a lot of funding into childcare, the services are still not accessible enough. In Scotland, parents are reported to end up paying more for childcare because of the difficulties in tax claim. While the UK aims to increase the childcare provision to 30 hours per week, the existing infrastructure is not ready to undertake this burden yet.

Ireland is also one of the countries that has upped its public expenditure on ECEC, but most of the childcare financing is left to the market solutions and it is very expensive for families to afford. Italy is another country where the provision for younger children (0-3 year-olds) is much less accessible, and this is also dependent on the region. Even though the pre-school provision is more widespread and for free, children do not have a legal entitlement to these services; thus, they can always be denied a place in a pre-school.

More than a decade ago, Netherlands has switched to a fully demand-driven system which reduced accessibility and increased fees. However, recently, some measures were taken in order to make childcare more accessible for families where parents are not at work and thus, not entitled to childcare tax allowance. Portugal is another country with the universal pre-school provision and a high rate of uptake. However, more and more disadvantaged families drop out of the system due to the fees they need to pay for the non-pedagogical hours of the pre-school. Finally, in Romania, especially the most disadvantaged families find it the most difficult to benefit from ECEC due to the parental fees that need to be paid, even though the fees are means-tested. The government tries to encourage higher participation by implementing various initiatives – universal child allowance, distribution of snacks at schools, raising awareness among segregated groups (e.g. Roma), etc.

Based on the results of the quantitative studies mentioned in section 4.1, we know that widespread public provision, early legal entitlement, unitary systems, and higher public investment per child are associated with

higher take-up and/or perceived accessibility across Europe, particularly among low-income and immigrant children. We still need an in-depth study of ECEC systems across Europe to pinpoint the different shortcomings and needs in each country.

All of the case studies presented in this report indicate that these countries do make an effort to attain the goals set by the European Union in terms of increasing participation through improved accessibility, availability, affordability and quality of ECEC services. While some countries need to make a much bigger effort than others to get to the desired level of accessibility and participation, all countries need to work hard on the accessibility of childcare for younger children (0-3 year olds). Given the different national policy dynamics and the different stages of the already established ECEC accessibility in every country, the recommendations by the European Union keep being too general. Considering the specific needs of each country, national governments are expected to prioritise their needs and figure out which policies they need to introduce on their own.

4.2 Recommendations

Our study across eight European countries points to the need for improvement in the same areas that were emphasised by the European Commission's Social Investment Package, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Quality Framework on ECEC. In this section, we contribute to those recommendations under the four main headings of legislation, funding, policies, and politics.

4.2.1 Legislation

Legislative recommendations are all about strengthening the rights of people so that they can access public services easily. Many European countries still struggle with the availability and accessibility of ECEC services. This is especially the case for the services for younger children (0-3 year-olds). Hence, there is simply a need for more supply of places in ECEC facilities. The sure-fire way to achieve this is granting legal entitlement to ECEC from a certain age onwards, and the earlier starts the entitlement, the more accessible ECEC becomes – and availability is even more important than affordability in some cases (Ünver, Bircan, & Nicaise, 2018). Moreover, there is an unequal distribution of supply across geographical areas. Hence, the lack of equal supply and availability is also related to the geographical segregation of disadvantaged families, that has a direct effect on the overall educational trajectory of children. Special attention is needed to avoid segregation - or indeed, exclusion - from the very start of children's lives.

There are official and unofficial criteria for enrolment in many countries, and almost always, two-earner families have priority over families where one of the parents does not work. However, this also leads to the vicious cycle of work-poverty, since these stay-at-home parents (mostly women) do not even get to explore their opportunities in the labour market. In many instances, the special situation of people who work in unofficial or family settings is overlooked as well. ECEC should be available and accessible to all parents irrespective of their employment status, especially because high-quality ECEC is a children's right. Moreover, children attending ECEC allow unemployed parents to invest time in training and job search.

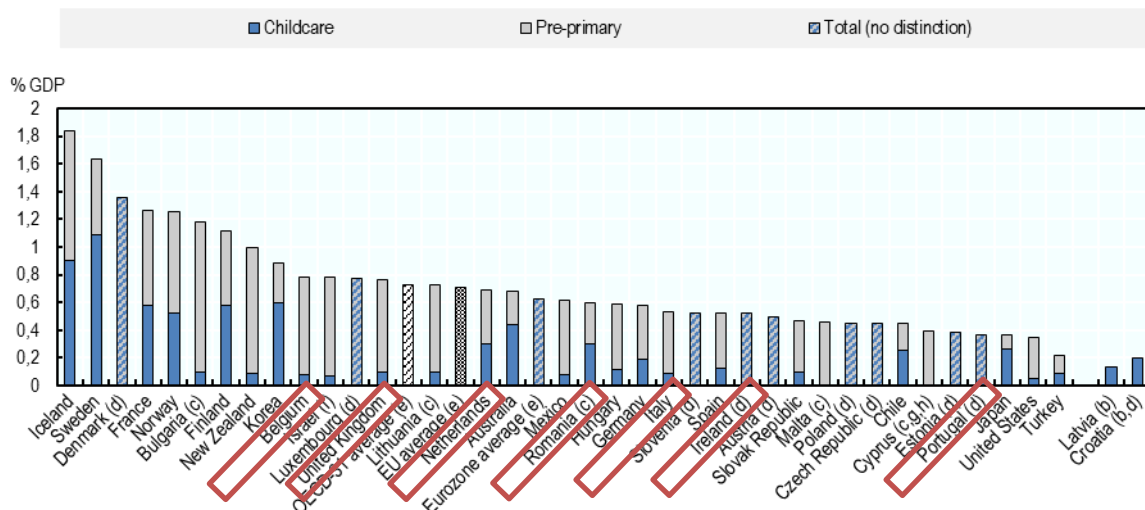
Finally, ECEC services must be high quality, since it has been proven that low quality ECEC does not produce the expected benefit for the development of the child (or even has a negative effect) (Leseman, 2014). It has been demonstrated that integrated/unitary ECEC systems where services are harmonised for all children below the school age tend to be of higher quality and perceived as more accessible. A continuous curriculum for small children is also one of the by-products of a completely integrated system. Transitioning to a unitary system is in line with the 'ECEC as a children's right' approach, as split systems often prioritise either 'education' (for 3-6 year-olds) or 'care' (even babysitting - for 0-3 year-olds).

4.2.2 Funding

Funding-related recommendations deal with public investment for ECEC, as well as the role of private financing and affordability-related issues. Affordability is a major problem for the accessibility of ECEC, especially for disadvantaged families. Even means-tested fees and tax credits may be insufficient to overcome financial barriers, and the problem is multiplied when users have to rely on private profit-making ECEC provision due to reasons such as the lack of places in public settings. Hence, greater efforts should be made to reduce the private cost of ECEC. Given the well-documented benefits of ECEC for society as a whole, free of charge provision to low-income parents is a fully justified option. Special attention should be devoted also to the additional costs of meals, extra-curricular activities, etc.

When it comes to monetary investment, it seems like the sky is the limit. However, there is indeed a need for more public investment. Back in 1996, it was recommended by the European Commission Network on Childcare that European countries allocate at least 1% of their GDP to ECEC (OECD, 2006). The same recommendation was also made by UNICEF (León, 2017). Still, according to the 2013 data, only a handful of OECD countries seem to spend more than 1%. Considering that higher public spending per child is directly correlated with both higher accessibility and higher take-up of ECEC services, we certainly recommend a higher public spending on ECEC – both per child and in total as a percentage of GDP. To start with, allocating 1% of the GDP to ECEC is a concrete recommendation with a good basis that needs to be observed for the best results.

Figure 4.1 Public spending on early childhood education and care as a % of GDP, 2013



On the other hand, ‘more investment’ cannot solve all problems by itself. Pure universalism may end up producing Matthew effects, with the better-off taking greater advantage from social policies than the ones who need them most, which is often an unintended consequence of universal policies (Bonoli, Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2017, p. 67). Matthew effects in ECEC are well-documented in Europe: Van Lancker and Ghysels (2012) found that, in Flanders (Belgium), the governmental expenditure on formal childcare benefit higher-income families more than the poor; while families with the lowest incomes would benefit from government subsidies twice as much as the higher-income ones. Bonoli et al. (2017) report that, among the European countries that are known for having high ECEC participation rates, only Denmark, Portugal and Norway stand out as countries with a modest gap in formal childcare use of the 0-2 year-olds. Monitoring and evaluation of potential Matthew effects in ECEC policies are therefore essential.

4.2.3 Policy

Policy recommendations are aimed at the specific sectoral policies that reflect where the government stands regarding that sector. In fact, all ECEC-related regulations are a result of the broader ECEC policies adopted by the government.

The training and working conditions of the ECEC staff are major indicators of structural quality (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney & Abbott–Shim, 2000; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes & Cryer, 1997). In our quantitative studies, salaries and qualifications of teachers working with 3-6 year-olds were not found to be associated with the perceived accessibility of ECEC services (Ünver et al., 2018). However, take-up is indeed higher in countries that have higher teacher qualifications and salaries, and the effect is even stronger for disadvantaged families (Ünver et al., 2016). The more the ECEC staff is trained, the better the quality of their teaching and care. Similarly, supportive working conditions draw individuals who are genuinely interested in making a positive impact on children to the profession. Hence, the ECEC workforce is one of the first areas to increase public investment.

There are already several institutions that collect data regarding the ECEC policies that governments put into place as well as their outcomes. For instance, Eurostat collects information on widely used indicators such as the ECEC participation rate, and public spending on ECEC in Europe. However, they do not collect information on more specific aspects of ECEC. Many types of information on pre-school teachers' salaries or parental fees for childcare can be found in the OECD Family Database and Education at a Glance. However, some of these indicators have lots of missing values from several countries and some indicators are not being updated on a regular basis.

A detailed report called 'Key Data on ECEC in Europe' was published by Eurydice and Eurostat in 2014, with specific information on various dimensions and types of ECEC - organisation, participation, funding, staff, teaching processes, and support mechanisms for disadvantaged children - mostly based on data from 2012/13 school year. This was a very welcome and promising initiative, yet it was not repeated. Some of the information provided is rather anecdotal (e.g. whether the supply meets the demand) or not fit for comparison across countries (e.g. monthly parental fees being presented in averages for some countries and in terms of the range of fees for others). We believe that the information presented in this report is a good start to focus on in order to monitor the changes in ECEC policies and their outcomes with an updated methodology in order to ensure comparability across countries. Such information being collected on a regular basis would enable a more in-depth evaluation of the ECEC systems across Europe.

4.2.4 Politics

Democratic participation, which includes consultation and decision-making by engaging the civil society and citizen engagement in policy making, is in the realm of 'politics' of ECEC. In order to achieve this, the first step that needs to be taken is raising the society's awareness with regard to the benefits and necessity of ECEC. There appears to be a lack of awareness about the existing services as well. Especially parents from a disadvantaged background may not be aware of the importance of education in general and ECEC in particular. Furthermore, they may not know the available financial support schemes, due to low literacy, or language or cultural barriers (Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). Active outreaching to these families is crucial in the form of home-based services or parenting support. The Roma minority is such a group of disadvantaged people where active outreaching is recommended also because of the social, cultural, and language barriers they experience.

Note that, for the most disadvantaged, certain 'positive discrimination' measures are indispensable to level the playing field for children with a disadvantaged background. This may be in the form of priority enrolment such as specific quota that are reserved for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and/or priority funding that compensates for the lower fees paid by low-income parents in means-tested systems and allows for more generous staffing and operation expenses that cater to disadvantaged families.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

The governance of ECEC relates to all the regulations around the supply and provision and ECEC. Hence, all of the recommendations mentioned above relate to the governance of ECEC: accessibility (legal entitlement, free provision, financial support to families, support to the ECEC workforce (training and salaries of the ECEC staff), curriculum, monitoring and evaluation (regularly collecting relevant data and assessing whether the policies are working as expected). Naturally, the only way to impose these regulations and follow them through is to back them up with sufficient public investment, which usually means that a higher public spending on ECEC is needed in most European countries.

Still, public investment in ECEC should be smart, especially if governments want to achieve the maximum benefit at the lowest possible cost in a short period of time. In this case, our recommendation is adopting ‘progressive universalism’ where the ECEC system is ‘universal when possible, targeted when necessary’. In other words, public ECEC services should be universal and egalitarian in principle: all children should be able to access and benefit from the system equally, ideally, in a segregation-free setting. However, children who need intervention the most, should also receive priority and special treatment; because these are the children who have problems to access quality services in the first place, and leaving them behind would be more detrimental to their future educational and professional trajectory than their non-disadvantaged peers. It is also in disadvantaged populations that public investment in ECEC produces the highest net impact, as it does not substitute for the families’ own investment.

EU institutions should continue to spur the Member States in the direction of increasing both the overall public investment in ECEC and taking the above-mentioned necessary actions in order to achieve a more accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC for all children regardless of their background (social, economic, ethnic, etc.). In the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Parliament’s proposal to establish a Child Guarantee Scheme that includes free and high-quality ECEC for vulnerable children throughout the EU is hope-giving. Thanks to this initiative, the Member States will be able to receive more specific and actionable guidance from the EU in addressing child poverty and the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

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RE-InVEST - Rebuilding an Inclusive, Value-based Europe of Solidarity and Trust through Social Investments

In 2013, as a response to rising inequalities, poverty and distrust in the EU, the Commission launched a major endeavour to rebalance economic and social policies with the Social Investment Package (SIP). RE-InVEST aims to strengthen the philosophical, institutional and empirical underpinnings of the SIP, based on social investment in human rights and capabilities. Our consortium is embedded in the 'Alliances to Fight Poverty'. We will actively involve European citizens severely affected by the crisis in the co-construction of a more powerful and effective social investment agenda with policy recommendations.

<http://www.re-invest.eu/>

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