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European Social Citizenship

How can Early Childhood Education and Care policies empower citizens? Recommendations for an effective EU agenda

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How can Early Childhood Education and Care policies empower citizens?¹

Recommendations for an effective EU agenda

By relieving parents from caring responsibilities and by investing in human capabilities at the very earliest stages of life, early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies have great potential to help future adults and parents prepare for and to face social risks. The first few years of a child's life can be key in shaping both their development and their parents' (especially the mother's) reintegration into the labour market. But is this the case in reality?

Awareness about the importance of ECEC, especially for children under three, has grown in recent years, both in the social and medical sciences as well as in political circles. The recent adoption by the EU Council of the [Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care](#)² is a clear example.

In the EU, the provision of ECEC services, their take up and quality are vastly different across Member States. And so are the expected outcomes. The Recommendation should be positively welcomed. But more can and should be done to translate the ambition of this Recommendation into concrete policies. This Policy Brief provides some concrete recommendations to policymakers on how they can implement lasting improvements to ensure that the ECEC offerings benefit and support all children and their families.

Key policy recommendations

1. The EU framework to monitor and benchmark ECEC availability, affordability, accessibility, and quality should be strengthened to make the provisions of the 2022 Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets effective.
2. The introduction of an intersectional approach into the EU monitoring framework could further enhance the capacity to identify positive interaction between ECEC, traditional anti-poverty policies and labour market policies.
3. Funds distributed through the EU budget should be linked to the preparation of a national action plan in line with the 2022 Recommendation; and to the appointment of a dedicated national coordinator.

¹ This policy brief and its recommendations build on the research, evidence and policy analysis conducted in WP3 of the EuSocialCit project (<https://www.eusocialcit.eu/>), especially on the following deliverables: [EU social investment agenda: what does it mean for citizens' social rights?](#), [Empowering children: childcare services in a rights-based comparative perspective](#), [Understanding participation in early childhood education and care: rights, policies and socio-economic conditions \(forthcoming\)](#), [The Recovery and Resilience Facility as marble cake to strengthen European social citizenship? The case of childcare policies](#).

² The revision was first announced in the [2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy](#), the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\) Action Plan](#). It was tabled alongside the European Commission's [European Care Strategy](#) on 7 September 2022 and finally adopted on 8 December 2022. The Recommendation invites Member States to consider the time-intensity of children's participation in ECEC, the inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs, the quality of the services, their physical distribution, affordability and accessibility, awareness over rights as well as staff working conditions and skills.

Institutional design as a critical element...

Four main factors determine ECEC take up and its associated outcomes – availability, accessibility, affordability, and quality (AAAQ).³

The existence of a legal entitlement for children to access ECEC services is typically associated with higher accessibility and thus higher take up of childcare services. Yet a key distinction is the age threshold. In almost all EU Member States, entitlement exists for children aged three and upwards (pre-primary school), however for younger children this is not the case. The more extensive the legal entitlement is, the greater the expected take up. Accessibility is also affected by the existence of provisions addressing the specific needs of parents, especially single ones, and of effective (administrative) support and appropriate information and communication for parents for enrolment.

But the entitlement does not necessarily mean that the relevant services are available and affordable. Availability depends on the territorial distribution of the service, across urban and rural areas, affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods and regions, taking into consideration specific features of areas such as the density of the child population, the distribution of children by age, and the commuting times, in particular by public transport. Affordability instead depends on how childcare is provided. ECEC services can be offered by private suppliers (market provision), by public structures (state provision) or by a mixture of the two (mixed provision), whereby childcare is provided through private (often) not-for-profit organisations with public support. When services are privately provided, the attendance of children from poorer backgrounds is often penalized, as fees are ultimately driven by the abundance of supply and may be a barrier to access. When services are public and financed directly by the government, with fixed or capped fees in most cases that are sometimes based on a sliding-fee scale, with discounts (or free access) for vulnerable social groups, net costs become more sustainable and thus more affordable for families.

The quality of ECEC services also crucially affects outcomes. Quality refers both to ECEC structures (e.g. maximum group size, child-to-staff ratios and childcare staff's educational level) and their functioning (e.g. the play and learning environment, child-teacher and child-child interaction, and interaction with parents). As the benefit of ECEC on children's cognitive outcomes is high, and even more so for children from disadvantaged households, high-quality childcare provision is key. Teachers' qualifications, child ratios, group sizes, inclusive curricula and teaching/education practices can hugely benefit future adults but also society as a whole and reduce inequalities. On the flip side, low-quality services may even lead to detrimental outcomes in terms of child development relative to homecare.

... money matters, but it is not enough

While access to ECEC services crucially depends on the institutional design of policies, government budgetary efforts still play a key role. Public funds are a precondition not only for the widespread availability of the services, but they directly affect their affordability, accessibility, and quality.

³ See [Weshoff et al. \(2022\)](#)

However, higher spending is not a guarantee for higher attendance.⁴ It is rather a combination of sufficient financial resources and an appropriate institutional design of policies that makes the difference. Furthermore, policies around parental leave⁵ play also a role. Remarkably, the design of parental leave policies can lead to both virtuous and contradictory incentives for parents to enrol their children in ECEC.⁶

What is the EU doing to support ECEC policies?

Since the end of the 1990s, the EU has been advocating for a progressive recalibration of European welfare states towards more social investment policies. Elements of family servicing, reconciling work and family, an active labour market policy, education, training, lifelong learning, and active ageing have increasingly and progressively permeated the EU social agenda.

Despite its advocacy for social investment, the EU has limited competences in this policy domain, and those it does have are mostly related to non-discrimination legislation. This notwithstanding, the EU offers a broad, coherent and rich framework for ECEC principles. Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality and the right to protection from poverty.

In addition to providing the normative principle-based framework for childcare and family policies, the EU has progressively developed a set of soft recommendations inviting Member States to put ECEC facilities into place. A first step forward was the adoption in 2013 of the [Recommendation on Investing in Children](#), which first recognised ECEC as a key service, not only to foster female employment, but also as an educational policy to support the cognitive and social development of pupils, especially the most disadvantaged ones. In 2019 the [Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems](#) was adopted. It recognises that good investments in ECEC must be inclusive, accessible, affordable and high quality in order to deliver benefits to society. Finally, the Council Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona targets provides clear policy input on how to design accessible, affordable, and high-quality ECEC, whilst also setting quantitative targets on the participation rate as well as on support to the most disadvantaged households.

The EU further supports ECEC policies by means of financial resources. While this has mostly happened in the framework of EU cohesion funds, with the launch of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) (RRF) the EU put in place creative and innovative mode of output-oriented (i.e. financial resources) enactment and the implementation of rights. ECEC policies are explicitly indicated as a priority in the RRF regulation, which explicitly refers to the Child Guarantee, one of the key objective of which is to “guarantee effective and free access to high quality childhood education and care [included] at least one healthy meal each school day” (Art 4, 2021/1004).

⁴ See Alcidi and Di Salvo (2023), Understanding participation in early childhood education and care: rights, policies and socio-economic conditions (*forthcoming*)

⁵ It includes maternity leave for the mother, paternity leave for the father, and parental leave for both parents taken at various points during the child’s early years.

⁶ See Alcidi and Di Salvo (2023)

Policy recommendations for an effective EU agenda

Considering the EU's competences in ECEC and recent policy developments, we put forward two sets of policy recommendations on how the EU can further contribute to empower citizens.

The first is on monitoring and indicators. The EU framework to monitor and benchmark ECEC AAAQ should be strengthened and linked to the monitoring of traditional anti-poverty measures and labour market policies.

While the 2022 Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona targets correctly identifies the key dimensions to design inclusive ECEC policies, it remains devoid of a monitoring framework that allows for a benchmarking at national level, and therefore for potential country-specific recommendations (in the context of the EU semester). Without a proper monitoring of the Member States compliance with the AAAQ framework, how can it be guaranteed that the Recommendation's ambitions are effectively translated in national policies?

The existing benchmarking framework developed by [the Indicator Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee](#) monitors a few aspects of the Recommendation, i.e. the participation rate for children below the age of 3, broken down by full- and part-time attendance, and the gap in attendance for children in 1st and 5th income quintiles. It does not offer, however, sufficient information about ECEC policy levers on quality, accessibility, availability and (partly) the affordability of ECEC. **For instance, additional factors that affect accessibility** (e.g. the physical location of services and transportation, opening hours), **structural quality** (e.g. on curricula for the ECEC workforce and general working conditions) **and contextual elements concerning affordability** (net childcare costs, free access to ECEC for children of different ages, the existence of universal services) **should be added.**

Additional information should also be collected for monitoring the effects of parenthood on employment. While the current framework has two relevant indicators⁷, additional information on how tax-benefit policies affect the employment of second earners, or inactivity traps that can arise because of certain features of the tax-benefit system are important aspects that should also be added. In a similar vein, **information on how work-life balance policy can impact parental employment, considering different types of parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and the linkages between the provision of ECEC and parental leave, should also be considered.**

Furthermore, as the benefits of ECEC attendance are especially high for children from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, very often households with low work intensity, a more effective policy approach is necessary that can actively contribute to reducing future inequalities. Since ECEC policies *per se*, even if correctly designed, are often not enough to reach out to the most vulnerable groups, **coordination with traditional anti-poverty and labour market measures could be monitored.**

This would imply scrutinising the effects and the outcomes of existing ECEC policies on different population groups and gaining an understanding of causality linkages. This approach can provide a

⁷ The impact of parenthood on employment (25-49), by gender and share of the population inactive or working part-time due to care responsibilities (25-49), by gender.

new lens to identify policy measures to ensure socio-economic conditions do not hamper the take up of public services – and ECEC in particular. Overall, **the introduction of an intersectional approach into the EU monitoring framework could enhance the capacity to identify positive interaction between ECEC and traditional poverty policies as well as labour market policies.**

The *second* set of policy recommendations revolves around EU funds: **EU funds should be made conditional on compliance with the EU recommendations and objectives.**

In the context of the current debate about how to ensure an effective use of EU funds, **ECEC policies can work as a key channel to achieve specific societal goals.** In this respect, while the RRF approach of linking investments to reforms is not yet fully delivering, it can still serve as blueprint.⁸ More stringent positive conditions could be applied to ECEC policy design for countries that receive EU funds. This would help to ensure that investments are relevant and effective. For this purpose, two concrete proposals would consist in i) **linking the disbursement of the EU funding to the preparation of a national action plan in line with the revision of the Barcelona targets,** and ii) **appointing a national coordinator,** like was requested for the Youth Guarantee or the Child Guarantee.

Conclusions

ECEC policies have great potential to help parents' (and especially the mother's) reintegration into the labour market, to support future adults' development and, overall, to contribute towards reducing societal inequalities.

Availability, accessibility, affordability and the quality of ECEC services are the critical factors that affect the take-up of ECEC services and the final outcomes for children and families. The EU has made an important step forward in designing an ambitious framework that prioritises such characteristics. But more can and should be done, and this policy brief advances additional recommendations on how to translate such an ambitious framework into more concrete policy proposals.

⁸ See [Corti and Ruiz \(2023\)](#)