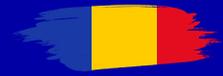


CASE *study*: ROMANIA



A Good Start in Life

Ending the era of a split early childhood education system

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This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

first years
first priority

**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

INTRODUCTION

Supported by UNICEF and the Open Society Foundation, “**A Good Start in Life**” (AGSIL) was designed by Centrul pentru Educație și Dezvoltare Profesională (CEPD) Step by Step Romania and the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport (MERYs). It aimed to provide support for communities affected by the financial crisis and to challenge the split early childhood education system in Romania.

AGSIL provided evidence on Early Childhood Development to support the 2011 law¹ which for the first time applied early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to children from birth to 6, ending a split in the system between the 0-3 and 3-6 age groups. Overall, AGSIL:

1. Helped to create community-based models by training professional staff and involving parents in their children’s education;
2. Established inter-sectoral partnerships at the county and national level;
3. Provided high quality learning experiences for children under 4 years old in disadvantaged urban communities.

Capitalising on the experience gained from the ECD *Multifunctional Centre*² project, AGSIL set out to provide high quality ECEC services to families with children aged 2-4 and supported children’s enrolment in public kindergartens in Romania.

The programme was implemented in 87 kindergartens located in 36 (out of 41) counties and provided relevant training to 4,000 parents, 200 teachers, 87 principals and 26 school inspectors. Priority for enrolment in the programme was given to children from vulnerable communities, including from the Roma population.

A GOOD START IN LIFE: ORIGINS, INTERVENTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The financial crisis prompted the Romanian government to reduce parental financial support and to provide incentives for parents to return to work³. Prior to 2011, Romania had a split ECEC system where children under 3 attended **public crèches** and children from 3-6 went to **kindergarten**. Local Authority crèches were primarily welfare services focused on providing care. The staff had minimum educational qualifications and no pedagogical training. On the other hand, kindergartens were educational institutions, and qualified kindergarten staff embraced the preschool approach with an emphasis on curriculum content, methodology and cognitive goals⁴. Additionally, there are **day care centres** providing educational support and activities for disadvantaged children⁵.

Split policies created inadequate services from birth to 3 whilst 2-3 year olds were ineligible to enroll in kindergarten. Additionally, within the preschool level (3-6), state funding could only be provided for children older than 3, and public crèches lacked trained staff, a comprehensive Early Years Pedagogy and overall regulations.

AGSIL addressed challenges within the ECEC system by:

- Promoting a holistic approach to Early Childhood Development through parental involvement, professional training, inter-sectoral partnerships at the county and national level;
- Supporting the enrolment of children under 3 years old in kindergarten; and
- Advocating for Early Childhood Education from birth to 6 to be implemented by MERYs in accordance with the Law of National Education⁶ (Officially adopted in 2011).

1 **Law of National Education**. The Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, 2011 (Available in English)

2 Anghelescu, C. (2013). **Guidelines: Multifunctional Centre**; (Access in RO) and **National Initiatives**. UNICEF Romania Website (Available in English)

3 Government Emergency Ordinance nr. 158/2005 regarding leave, social benefits and health insurance (Available in English: **Romania Maternity** - DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2018)

4 **Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care**. OECD, 2006, p.4

5 Centres function according to standards published in the Order 24 issued on 4th March 2004, (Available in Romanian: Updated in 2018, **Order 2257/22.10.2018**)

6 **Law of National Education**. The Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, 2011 (Available in English)

The programme launched a national call across all 41 counties in Romania, to develop *emergency projects* for communities directly affected by the economic crisis. The grants consisted of financial support with “seed money” for 200 high-quality ECEC services⁷. Successful county-level projects were chosen on account of several criteria, including:

1. Active involvement and participation of community representatives in the project’s activities,
2. Coherence of the emergency project proposed,
3. Relevance to the needs of the target group.

Each participant county had a formal inter-institutional agreement, stipulating contributions and responsibilities.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND INTER-SECTORAL COORDINATION

The programme was developed by the CEPD Step by Step Romania in partnership with the MERYS, the County School Inspectorates and the Local Councils (city halls). MERYS contributed with experts in evaluating project applications, supported the county inter-sectoral teams and amended national legislation on ECEC policies and training.

CEPD set up the inter-sectoral team at the national level, provided technical assistance to teams at the county level, designed the training programmes, provided resource materials for kindergartens, and supported revision of the national framework for ECEC policies and training.

The inter-sectoral team at county level was responsible for identifying the children and families to be prioritized for enrolment in the programme and the training for parental skills, according to an agreed list of priority eligibility criteria⁸. The team included representatives from UNICEF, Roma Education Fund and other NGOs.

City halls contributed to meal costs of the most disadvantaged children, working through their Directorates of Social Assistance to identify those families eligible for support services. The programmes were implemented in 87 kindergartens by a team of teachers and kindergarten’s principal, in cooperation with the county preschool inspector.

PRACTITIONER/WORKFORCE TRAINING AND ENGAGEMENT OF THE BENEFICIARIES

In 2011, CEPD set up a team of experts and developed a course on “*Early childhood education for children under 3: The first step towards future*” accredited by MERYS⁹. The course addressed the entire early childhood age range (0-6 years old) with particular emphasis on inter-professional work for children under 3 and was provided to kindergarten teachers, kindergarten principals and county preschool inspectors.

7 **200 ECEC Services** refer to 200 classrooms at the kindergarten level (3-6 years old children). The classrooms vary in size but have on average 20 students.

8 Priority was given to children who were identified to have one or more of the following elements: in foster care or with maternal assistance; with parents in prison; with parents with disabilities; single parents; families with more than 2 children; unemployed or low-income family; with alcohol or drug addicted parents; with teenage mothers; families without proper housing, etc.

9 Course Available in RO: “Educația antreprescolară – primul pas către viitor” (Ministerial Order 3905/ 18.07.2014, 90 hours, 25 transferable professional credits)

The programme was implemented via a Cascade Model (or Train the Trainers). After an initial training, local 'AGSIL implementing teams' comprising kindergarten teachers and principals, trained the entire kindergarten team, including non-teaching and administrative staff. As a result, all staff felt involved, responsible and able to work with younger children (2-4 years) and their parents. Teachers carried monthly workshops on parenting skills for at least 20 parents from socially disadvantaged families covering issues such as the importance of early education for children's development, play and learning, attachment and separation theory, and health and nutrition. All kindergartens received age-appropriate classroom equipment to help foster a high-quality learning environment.

On a monthly basis, the 'Project Team', including local CEPD trainers, kindergarten principal and county preschool inspector, provided mentoring and technical support to all kindergartens involved. Besides the cost effectiveness and rapid dissemination of knowledge, this training model empowered ECEC practitioners to improve their skills and take ownership of the programme. Since 2012, 200 kindergarten teachers have become accredited in 8 groups of 25 participants. All participants, including principal and county inspectors, received 25 professional credits per course.

In addition to influencing professional teacher training programs in many counties, CEPD's AGSIL teacher training was implemented locally by Casa Corpului Didactic (Teacher Training Centre of Bucharest) and courses such as "Socio-emotional development" and "Communication to stimulate child language development" have been provided to local teachers through training institutions.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION METHODS

The programme evaluation has relied mainly on qualitative data collected by the 'AGSIL implementing team' through monthly kindergarten visits, meetings with parents and local authorities, classroom observations, interviews with children/teachers/parents and local administration, focus groups involving teachers/parents, and questionnaires for teachers/parents/local administration.

From the teachers' perspective, the professional training helped them to develop more reflective practices and to apply concepts of child-centred education stemming from ISSA's **Principles of Quality Pedagogy**¹⁰ for children under 3. Teachers were also appreciative of the classroom equipment which facilitated child-centred and age appropriate learning.

Anecdotal evidence also points to parents appreciating the quality of classrooms material for learning activities, as well as free lunches, improved relationship with teachers, closer relationship within other parents, and most importantly, better relationship with their child.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

When face-to-face classes were suspended in March 2020 due to the pandemic distance learning for young children was able to continue in different forms. In most cases, ECEC service supported parents / families' efforts by providing resources and suggesting learning activities at home, or by organising meetings via online platforms with small groups of children. These activities depended on the infrastructure (internet connection) available; family interest and access to computers; professionals' digital skills and their creativity to empower parents to stimulate children's development through play and home learning activities; and ECEC management. However, in some other services, the communication and collaboration was only sporadic, because creches' staff (not assimilated as educational personnel) were furloughed.

10 Tankersley, D. & Ionescu, M. (2016) 'The ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy: Quality Early Childhood Education and Care through democratic processes', in Learning for Wellbeing Magazine, Issue 1, published by Universal Education Foundation.

Successful elements of AGSIL include:

- **Children 2-3 years** old were able to attend kindergarten for the first time. Priority was given to children from vulnerable families who also received a free lunch. (Nearly, 1,000 children received free lunch from 2011-2013.)
- **Children** who enrolled during the programme continued to attend regularly with county teams reporting positive long-term results on their well-being and success.
- **Teachers** developed a better understanding of Early Childhood Development and Pedagogy for children under 3 with special focus on brain development.
- **Kindergartens adopted a more inclusive educational approach** by enabling children from low-income families, daily centres, or 'special educational needs' children to attend mainstream education.
- **Parents** became more aware of their child's development and well-being and the role education plays in *breaking the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty*. Group interactions and workshops strengthened solidarity among parents and helped to create a shared vision for high-quality education.
- **Partnerships** formed during the programme at the county level, resulted in improved governance in the ECEC system and more than half of the counties have continued the collaboration.

Barriers/Obstacles to AGSIL's implementation include:

- **Budgetary constraints:** 1) Despite signing partnership agreements and participating in meetings at the national level, some **city halls did not finance the promised free lunches**. Severe poverty and lack of financial support at the county level, deterred children from vulnerable families to attend kindergarten. 2) Implemented initially in 87 kindergartens within 200 ECEC services, the programme only continued in **108 ECEC services after September 2013** due to lack of funds for free meals from city halls.
- **Local resistance** from teachers, local administration, etc. towards the programme, resulted in weak cooperation at the national, county, local and inter-sectoral level.
- **Poor-quality** services for children with disabilities, gaps within the education/healthcare/social protection system and lack of qualified ECEC practitioners became obstacles in the implementation phase.

Lessons learnt and recommendations

1. Children aged 2-3 benefit from an inclusive high-quality learning experience, irrespective of their socio-economic background. Strong partnerships at the kindergarten, county, inter-sectoral and national level are key to success. Cross-sector collaboration proved to be a key element in finding professional and financial solutions in the ECEC system.
2. Long-lasting, consistent and persistent efforts from all the relevant stakeholders including local and central authorities, participating communities, international organisations, NGOs, and business community actors are needed to place Early Childhood Education at the forefront of the national public agenda.
3. Early Childhood and Education Campaigns should focus on delivering simple messages that highlight education as an investment for the future and not as an expenditure¹¹. Fundraising campaigns can continue to promote the programme through online public donations that have a positive impact on children's lives¹².



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The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

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¹¹ Example: Investment in first 1000 days generates results for Romania for the next 100 years (title of 3rd Conference on 17 May 2018, Available in RO)

¹² Example: Nelson Mandela's quote Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world! serves as a slogan for the 'A Good Start in Life': Overview and Fundraising Campaign (Available in RO)

The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).