



A FAIR START FOR EVERY CHILD IN EUROPE

First Years, First Priority is a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA.

We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe.

Revision of the Barcelona Targets March 2022

We welcome the proposal for a Council Recommendation that supports upwards convergence of participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and that addresses ways to improve accessibility, affordability and quality of ECEC for the most disadvantaged children.

The revision of the Barcelona targets may consider:

1. **Increasing the percentages** in the current targets, especially for participation in ECEC of children aged 0-3, ensuring that any increases in ECEC participation include the most vulnerable children
2. **Adding new targets on, or adding to the existing ones, indicators that capture the participation in ECEC of the most disadvantaged children, through:**
 - o Disaggregated data on the extent to which the most vulnerable groups – including children living in extreme poverty, children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children (including undocumented migrant children) and children from ethnic minorities (especially Roma children as the largest ethnic minority subject to exclusion) - access and benefit from ECEC. This should include disaggregated data on children aged 0-3 and 3-6 and also on rural/urban or regional disparities.
 - o Policies that enable access of vulnerable groups to quality ECEC services (national /sub-national)
 - o An indicator on net out-of-pocket costs of childcare for low-income households, disaggregated by children aged 0-3 and 3-6
3. **Adding a new target on quality of ECEC provision** focusing on the percentage of the ECEC workforce that has the minimum necessary qualifications required in EU Member States.

Evidence coming from the FYFP Campaign that can guide the revision of the targets or assessing the quality of their achievement

1. **The scarcity of data on children's early years – especially children under three** – across policy areas, indicates insufficient knowledge of, and attention to, early childhood development. This is despite widespread recognition that children's early years are

first years first priority

fundamental for their lifelong healthy development and wellbeing and should be a priority for governments and policymakers. **Even when data exist, they are rarely accessible to CSOs** (in some countries access to data is conditioned to payment). Tracking data on staff qualifications and their capacity to cater to specific needs of the vulnerable groups, as well as data on the availability of and access to different types of formal/non-formal services for children under three: ECEC, home daycare, play groups, is fundamental to assess real participation, effectiveness and quality of ECEC services.

- Limited or non-existent disaggregated data on the lives of young children under six – especially those under three** – who are living in poverty and social exclusion hinders efforts to improve public policy and investment for young children facing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities. In particular, specific data regarding policy measures aimed at increasing access to ECEC services for migrant and refugee children or undocumented children are not found and must be addressed. Comprehensive and comparable data is necessary, at the country and European level, to inform policy-making and public spending on early childhood, so that all children can have the best start in life.
- In many EU countries, **there is a need to guarantee universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services** – especially for children under three and those who are most in need – alongside greater support for families with young children. Despite the fact that there are policies that refer to universal provisions is a reality in most EU countries, this does not guarantee that the most vulnerable are benefitting from them nor that their needs are effectively met. An increased public investment in ECEC and parenting services accessible to all children and families is needed.
- There is a need for an integrated multi-sectoral approach to early childhood**, with leadership and coordination that addresses children's and families' needs in a comprehensive way. The European Child Guarantee is an opportunity for governments to address poverty and social exclusion from children's earliest years, with a holistic approach to ECD policies and financing, and a comprehensive coordinated system of parenting and family support, especially in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- An increased investment in ECEC services for children birth to three is needed**. The Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee, the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care and domestic policies should be used to increase availability and affordability for children birth to three, especially those experiencing one or more vulnerabilities, and/or at risk of exclusion, and through adequate parental leave policies.
- In many EU countries, **a better balance in the policy measures targeting vulnerable groups has to be reached to guarantee to all children from birth equal access to ECEC**

first years first priority

services. In ECEC systems that are split, with services for children under three years of age separated from those for children between three and five or six years of age, the policy measures targeting vulnerable groups have a greater focus on vulnerable children from the older age group. However, even where older children from vulnerable groups are prioritised Roma children have a lower rate of attendance than other children of the same age.

7. In many EU countries, **there is a strong need to take coordinated measures to reduce regional disparities and inequalities in accessing ECEC services.** Participation in ECEC services varies enormously between rural/peri-urban and urban areas and especially in what regards ECEC services for children under three years of age. Moreover, policies that address the most vulnerable young children and their families are distributed unequally across countries and they cover different vulnerable groups unevenly (mainly targeting two vulnerabilities: disability and poverty).
8. **Group size and adult-child ratio have to be considered** as major indicators of quality in ECEC services, especially those addressing children under three and the most vulnerable. A major investment in infrastructures, capacity, adequate facilities, flexible daily programs and sufficient preparation of staff working in the ECEC services to provide responsive and individualised responses is key to reach out to the most vulnerable children and effectively include them into the system.
9. The **professionalisation of staff** working in education and care, health, parenting and social protection services for children up to six years of age and their families **is a fundamental requirement to guarantee quality ECEC services** to all children from birth onward. An increased investment in staff education and continuous training and higher requirements (minimum bachelor's degree) to access ECEC professions (especially for those working with children under three) are needed.