

Response to the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care Barcelona Targets for 2030

January 2023

On 8 December 2022, EU Member States adopted a Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030.

The Council Recommendation asks Member States to increase children's participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and follows from the Barcelona Targets adopted by the European Council in 2002.

The Council Recommendation adopted revised targets for ECEC, namely:

- at least 45% of children below the age of three participate in early childhood education and care - with specific targets for Member States that have not reached the 2002 goals
- at least 96% of children between the age of three and the starting age of compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care

We welcome the Council Recommendation's emphasis on the need for **ECEC services that are of high quality, provided in a safe, nurturing and caring environment**, based on the existing Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. This includes support for the **professionalisation of all ECEC staff**, by improving their qualifications and working conditions, ensuring their continuous professional development, and having adequate staff/child ratios. **Our thematic paper on prioritising the professionalisation of ECEC staff** includes recommendations and country examples for improving the qualifications, recruitment and retention of professional and valued ECEC staff.

We welcome the Recommendation's focus on the **need for targeted measures to increase ECEC participation of children facing poverty, social exclusion and other disadvantage**. We also welcome the Recommendation's aim to **improve access to quality ECEC for children facing particular barriers and vulnerabilities**, including children with disabilities or with special educational needs, and ensuring their access to mainstream non-segregated ECEC facilities, with professional staff and specialists who can support them.

The Council Recommendation includes many of the Commission's proposals for increasing participation in quality ECEC. While the revised Barcelona targets are not as ambitious as those proposed by the Commission, we recognise the need for an approach that considers countries' different contexts and challenges. The Recommendation asks Member States to increase ECEC participation in relation to their respective current participation rates:

- By at least 90% for Member States whose participation rate is lower than 20%
- By at least 45% for Member States whose participation rate is between 20% and 33%

We urge Member States to do all they can to reach and exceed the targets agreed in the Council Recommendation, but without compromising on quality standards in ECEC provision. We recognise that **ensuring quality standards in all ECEC services** takes time and additional investment in staff training (pre-

service and in-service), capacity, recruitment and retention, as well as in systems of quality standards, infrastructure and continuous professional development.

Member States, in their efforts to reach the revised Barcelona targets, must **ensure that participation in quality ECEC increases significantly among the most vulnerable and marginalised children**, including those under the age of three.

In line with our previous recommendations we urge Member States to:

- ⇒ **Implement ambitious national plans to increase participation in quality ECEC services for all children – especially children under three - with specific targets for ensuring the participation of children facing poverty, exclusion and disadvantage.**
- ⇒ **Increase public investment in quality ECEC that is available and accessible for *all* children, and especially children under three.**
- ⇒ **Develop national strategies to ensure quality ECEC services and to increase the professionalisation of ECEC staff through a minimum standard of qualification, continuous professional development and improved working conditions.**
- ⇒ **Expand the scope of national collection of disaggregated data on access to quality ECEC for children, especially for children under three and who experience poverty, social exclusion, marginalisation/segregation and multiple disadvantage. This requires disaggregated data on the degree of access to, and benefits of, ECEC for the most vulnerable groups, in particular children living in extreme poverty, children with disabilities, refugee and (undocumented) migrant children and children from ethnic minorities (especially Roma children as the largest ethnic minority subject to exclusion). It should include disaggregated data on children aged 0-3 and 3-6 and also on rural/urban or regional disparities.**
- ⇒ **Measure progress explicitly through a national monitoring and evaluation mechanism built on existing progress indicators, integrated in the Child Guarantee action plans, with scope to develop further progress indicators**

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