

MEMBERS EXCHANGE SEMINAR REPORT EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND CARE

29TH SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER 2010, TALLINN, ESTONIA.

ENSURING QUALITY: THE PATH FOR EARLY YEARS IN EUROPE AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been prepared by Margaret Kernan from the International Child Development Initiatives institute(ICDI). She was also responsible for drafting the background paper to the two-day seminar on early years together with Nico van Oudenhoven. ICDI is an international non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands. In co-operation with partner organizations, ICDI works to improve the care and education of children – especially those most vulnerable – in developing countries. Areas of expertise are: policy formulation, programme management, capacity building and action research in topics such as early childhood education and care, child protection, child and youth participation and newly emerging needs of children.

The seminar was hosted by the Estonian Union for Child Welfare in Tallinn. Eurochild thanks Alar Tam and Ene Tomberg for their hospitality and support in organising the seminar and study visits to early childhood centres.

The event and report were managed by Mafalda Leal, Policy Officer and coordinator of the thematic working group on early years education and care. Jana Hainsworth, Secretary General provided overall supervision. Marie Dubit, membership officer, was responsible for design and layout of the report.

This publication is supported under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-Generale for Employment, social affairs and equal opportunities of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Eurochild's fourth Members Exchange Seminar took place in Tallinn, Estonia from 30th September to 1st October 2010, hosted by the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, one of the founding members of Eurochild. The focus was the role of community based services and quality in early years services. Thirty-four participants from 14 countries attended representing Eurochild members from NGOs, research and training bodies, trade unions, child and family focused networks as well as national and municipal policy organizations.

Members' Exchange Seminars (MES) aim to provide the opportunity for members to gain a greater understanding of one another's ways of working through exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas on specific aspects of fighting child poverty and social exclusion. Recommendations from seminars also feed into Eurochild's advocacy work to influence policy at European and national levels.

This MES focused on community-based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for two main reasons: firstly, the involvement of parents and the wider community has been often pointed out as a crucial factor for ensuring quality in ECEC provision. This is one of Eurochild's key goals for consideration by EU institutions (Eurochild, Discussion paper, 2009). Secondly, in recent years Eurochild members have been asking for support and information on community-based ECEC initiatives and were keen to have an opportunity to exchange practice and share their experiences.

At the same time, the qualitative perspective was also brought in, not solely with regard to community-based but to the broader range of ECEC services, to feed-in to current EU level discussions on a quality framework for social services of general interest.

The seminar was designed to foster discussions on three key questions of concern: 1) what is understood by *community-based* ECEC? 2) How can different actors join efforts to put in place a policy framework that promotes community development and the delivery of quality ECEC? 3) How the EU can contribute to this?

The Seminar combined policy contributions from actors at national and EU level and practice presentations from a range of Eurochild members, study visits to early years centres in Tallinn and plenty of time for discussion. A background paper prepared in advance of the seminar highlights the key issues with regard to community-based ECEC services and the early years education and care policy framework at EU level (Annex III).

This report provides a synthesis of the presentations and discussions. The seminar programme, a list of participants and the background paper are contained in annex. All the PowerPoint presentations are available on Eurochild's website¹.

¹[http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews\[pS\]=1292947135&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=393&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=287&cHash=2f3947cad041b1266478676f3464601b](http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews[pS]=1292947135&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=393&tx_ttnews[backPid]=287&cHash=2f3947cad041b1266478676f3464601b)

2. SEMINAR INTRODUCTION & OVERALL FRAMEWORK (SESSION 1)

2.1. OPENING WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Member Exchange Seminar was opened by **Katrin Saks, President of the Estonian Union for Child Welfare**, who offered a warm welcome to participants. She remarked on the growing attention being given to ECEC by policy makers in Estonia. Whilst the focus three years ago had been on labour-market issues and increasing the number of childcare places, now attention has shifted to the recognition of ECEC as providing a good start in life and the importance of ensuring quality in ECEC.

In her introduction to the first session of the MES, **Bronwen Cohen, Children in Scotland Chief Executive and Chair of the Eurochild Thematic Working Group on Early Years Education and Care** talked about the multiple benefits of ECEC to young children and their families - education, learning and development, health, rights and social justice issues. Given the multiplicity of benefits, many government departments and stakeholders are typically involved. In that respect the focus on Community Based ECEC specifically was timely. Bronwen referred to two recent and promising developments, which indicate that ECEC is being given more attention in EU policy: firstly, the prominent position afforded to ECEC at the EU Belgian Presidency conference in Gent (28 – 29 September), the theme of which was Breaking the cycle of disadvantage – social inclusion in and through education². Secondly, the development of a European Commission Communication on ECEC by DG Education and Culture expected early 2011.

2.2. BACKGROUND TO THE POLICY CONTEXT

Mafalda Leal, Eurochild Policy Officer, provided a synthesis of EU policies in respect to early years and a summary of Eurochild's views and key advocacy messages. To date, the overall EU focus has been on employment policies and re-integration of women in the labour market, and more recently on improving educational outcomes, to upgrade skills and employability. But with the new Lisbon Treaty, which for the first time includes the promotion and protection of children's rights amongst the EU's objectives, and the forthcoming Communication on a EU strategy on the rights of the child, it is hoped the approach to early years shifts to focusing on the needs and rights of the children, their development and well-being.

She also noted that while EU funding had been made available to investment on early years, notably under the European Social Fund, resources have been primarily directed to the building of infrastructure, rather than to training of the work force or to other quality issues. What has been missing in EU policy in relation to ECEC, according to Eurochild, is a focus on children's well-being and development and a multi-dimensional approach to ECEC that links with the children's rights and poverty agendas.

Mafalda concluded her presentation with Eurochild's three advocacy messages for ECEC:

- 1) increase the provision of ECEC;
- 2) set EU criteria for quality services;
- 3) raise professional standards, training, and remuneration of the early years workforce.

² <http://www.education2010.be/en/calendar/social-inclusion/program/>

2.3. PRESENTATION OF THE BACKGROUND PAPER

The background paper of the MES, “Community-Based Early Years Services: The Golden Triangle of Informal, Non-formal and Formal Approaches” was presented by **Margaret Kernan, from the International Child Development Initiatives**, who developed the paper together with Nico Van Oudenhoven. A central argument presented was that children’s learning and development takes place wherever they are: at home in the interaction between parents and children and amongst siblings; in spontaneous encounters between children and the physical and social environments in the neighbourhood ; in playgroups, parent and toddler groups and family daycare ; and in more formal settings such as kindergartens and pre-school programmes . She highlighted the importance of valuing all forms of ECEC provision: informal, non-formal and formal. By doing so a ‘golden triangle’ of ECEC provision is created. The strength of the golden triangle is the relationship between each form – how one leads to another and can support and sustain each other and how synergies can be created. In the presentation this was illustrated with reference to a community-based ECEC initiative in Dublin which over time has integrated a home-visiting programme, a centre-based ECEC service that offers learning and development for children and self-development opportunities for mothers and fathers. Characteristics of Community-Based ECEC highlighted were: building up from neighbourhoods; nurturing local collective action; respectful partnering with parents and flexibility. Approaches to creating community-based ECEC momentums i.e. facilitating positive change for young children at a local level were also discussed. A practical participatory tool to identify dimensions and sub-components of quality in community based ECEC was described.

2.4 DISCUSSION POINTS

Additional points of interest regarding EU policy were added by **Jana Hainsworth, Eurochild Secretary General** who drew attention to the role of ECEC in flagship themes of the EU 2020 Strategy, which was adopted by the European Council in June 2010, including the agreed targets to reduce the number of early school leavers to 10 per cent and to lift 20 million people out of poverty by 2020.

John Bennett, early years independent expert, noted the distinction between viewing parents and children as consumers of ECEC services on the one hand, and the need and rights of parents and children to have a voice in the organization of those services and to be viewed as active participants in ECEC on the other hand.

The principal topic of discussion in response to the background paper related to determining and measuring quality of Community-based ECEC. **Toby Wolfe, from Start Strong, Ireland**, raised the issue whether it was preferable to have a ‘top down’ common European dimensions of quality in ECEC, or, as focused on in the background paper, a participatory local level bottom-up stakeholder led initiative working with quality at a local level. In response, **Margaret Kernan** indicated that both were necessary and desirable. It was important to have leadership and consensus at EU and national levels in relation to broad quality criteria in ECEC. However, it was equally important that quality criteria were relevant and meaningful at the micro-local level. It was acknowledged that combining both approaches was complex but necessary and worthwhile.

Ene Tomberg, from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, welcomed the attention to home-visiting ECEC programmes in the presentation, as it resonated with a practice which had traditionally been part of ECEC systems in Estonia. Margaret highlighted the potential that home-visiting programmes can have with respect to hard-to-reach families with young children, offering a bridge between home and more formal ECEC provision. They also may have different aims. Home-visiting programmes can offer broad family support to families under stress, and/or stimulate responsive parent-child interaction, early literacy, and play in the home; and/or prevent violence against children.

Bronwen Cohen raised the point of the variety of understandings inherent in the terms education and care as applied in ECEC and argued against the views of many to whom care is primarily associated with the notion of ‘places for children when mothers were working’.

3. THE ESTONIAN EXPERIENCE OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND CARE: POLICY, PROVISION, PRACTICE, TRAINING AND RESEARCH (SESSIONS 1 &2)

An important part of the first day of the MES was the opportunity to learn more about ECEC policy, practice, training and research in Estonia. Presentations were made by: **Anniki Tikerpuu, Department of Children and Families, Ministry of Social Affairs; Tiina Peterson, General Education Department, Ministry of Education and Research;** and **Professor Marika Veisson, Tallinn University.** Further information and opportunities for discussion was provided in the study visits to two contrasting kindergarten settings in Tallinn: the **Tallinn Mahtra Kindergarten and Tallinn Kelmikula Kindergarten**, where participants were welcomed with hospitality. Here there was additional input from **Tiia Oun, Kerstin Koop and Kristina Nugin**, all researchers at Tallinn University.

The Mahtra Kindergarten is situated in one of the most densely populated outer suburbs of Tallinn and surrounded by many blocks of flats. This pre-school (18 months to seven years) opened in 1984 offers alternative language groups, Estonian, Russian or Estonian immersion for Russian speaking children (nationally, a quarter of the Estonian population is non-Estonian speakers, most of whom are Russian speakers). Currently 250 children attend.

The Kelmikula Kindergarten is a smaller newly renovated and refurbished pre-school (18 months to seven years), located nearer the city centre. Both kindergartens were surrounded by large areas of outdoor play space.

Key points of information and discussion regarding ECEC in Estonia are organized in the six subsections below: access and provision; financing ECEC; curriculum, pedagogy and daily routine; assessment, monitoring and evaluation; training and professional development; research opportunities.

ACCESS AND PROVISION

Pre-school education in Estonia for children aged 1.7 to 7 years is considered part of the Education System. Compulsory school starting age is 7 years, but many 6 year olds are already in school. All parents in Estonia are entitled to paid parental leave period since birth until the child is 18 months-old. There are also legal provisions to allow parents to stay at home for the first three years of the babies' life, with guarantees that their job will be waiting for them on return to work. These factors, combined with a still strong traditional view, that babies and toddlers are best cared for at home, explain the rather low percentage of 0-3 year old children attending kindergarten (16 per cent) and non-formal child minding arrangements (28 per cent).

In addition to increasing ECEC provision, the Department of Children and Families also aims to increase the participation of men in family life. Actions taken or planned include media awareness campaigns with the participation of well-known public figures as role models and a conference on fatherhood.

Since 2008, with the enactment of the policy 'A Pre-school Place for Every Child', municipalities are obliged to provide a place for all children 1.5 to 7 years. This includes provision for children with disabilities and special care needs. Parents can choose to send their children either to informal child-minding services, or centre-based kindergartens (pre-school education). Since independence in 1991, attendance at a private kindergarten is also possible although only a small minority can opt for this kind of provision.

Regional diversity in costs and quality of ECEC was highlighted as one of the current challenges for ECEC in Estonia. Actual coverage varies from municipality to municipality as does the level of funding and support provided by the municipality and costs to parents.

In Tallinn, there are currently 17 pre-schools, 82 of which are Estonian medium, 32 Russian and 13 offering both Estonian and Russian. The staff representative from the Tallinn Municipality noted that in Tallinn there were currently sufficient places for 3 to 7 year-olds, but not for 1.5 to 3 year olds.

The existence of waiting lists for ECEC places was also a point of discussion. In Tallinn, parents can place their children's name on waiting lists for up to 3 places. According to the Director of Mahtra Kindergarten, there were 183 children on waiting list for the following year. This was because of special language programmes offered in this kindergarten.

FINANCING ECEC

ECEC is financed through local taxes collected at municipal level and parental contributions. The national government covers the cost of in-service training to teachers. Private provision is also funded by the municipality, although costs to parents are on average 10 times higher than State provision.

It is stipulated that the cost to parents of State pre-school education should not exceed 20 per cent of their salary. Parents pay on average a €25 fee per month plus a payment for meals. Unemployed parents receive a grant covering 80 per cent of cost. Given the variability between size and wealth of municipalities, coverage of ECEC provision and salaries of teachers also vary.

CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, DAILY ROUTINE

The National Curriculum for Preschool Institutions is in place since 2008. All pre-schools (formally referred to as kindergartens) are expected to adhere to its guidelines. Child-minders are not expected to adhere to the National Curriculum.

The introduction of this curriculum has marked a shift from a pedagogy based on separate subject lessons to a more integrated play based curriculum. The curriculum is underpinned by four principles (creativity, play, stimulating environment, Estonian culture) with specified general skills. The pedagogical practice in many services is also informed by particular ECEC programmes or approaches such as: Step-by-Step; Reggio Emilia; Discovery Learning; Montessori. Children with additional needs are supported by psychologists, physiotherapists or speech therapists.

Of interest too is the attention given to music and gymnastics in all pre-schools, for which external specialized teachers are brought in. Indeed, pride in Estonian musical heritage and patriotic songs, and 'life-long' singing together as a feature of Estonian culture was emphasized throughout the Seminar. The MES participants also had the pleasure of experiencing this when treated to the playful concert performance of the Estonian Television Young Children's Choir during the evening reception of the Seminar.

The two pre-schools visited are opened from 7 am to 7pm. This is the standard opening hours for most pre-schools. However, very few children attend the full 12 hours. The core part of the day begins at 9 am with organized activities.

The notion of the Healthy Pre-school was a topic of interest amongst the MES participants. Diane Daniels, from Children in Wales, told us that 50 per cent of the pre-school day in Wales must be spent outdoors. Core elements in the daily routine in Estonian pre-schools are the twice daily outside time and a two-hour sleep after lunch. Also, eating healthy food is currently a big issue in Estonia. Breakfast, hot lunch and an afternoon snack are provided daily.

Group size ranges from 15 children to 24 children. Each group is staffed by a pre-school teacher and an assistant. Teachers work 6 hour shifts. High staff turn-over is not a problem, particularly in the current economic climate where there is a shortage of jobs.

ASSESSMENT, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Children's learning and development is assessed primarily via observation and the compilation of portfolios of children's work. Regular standardized testing of children is not part of this process. A twice-yearly

discussion with parents regarding children's learning and development is also expected. Pre-schools undergo both internal self-assessment and external evaluation processes - obligatory since 2006. External State evaluation is less frequent and typically focuses on one aspect of provision, such as qualifications of staff, during which 10 per cent of pre-school teachers nationally might be checked.

Incentives for good quality were also evident in the various prizes awarded on an annual basis such as the prize for 'The Best Kindergarten Teacher'; or 'The Best Kindergarten Kitchen'.

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Child-minders follow a 160 hour training course which includes modules on pedagogy, psychology, social work and health and safety. Although this training is not compulsory, it is a requirement for child-minders to get a license. It is possible to operate as a child-minder in Estonia without a license, although parents are encouraged to select licensed child-minders. **Ene Tomberg** noted that this amount of training was not sufficient and her organization is lobbying for more in-service training for child-minders.

Qualified practitioners working in pre-schools are referred to as teachers. The minimum qualification for pre-school teachers is a 3-year bachelor level degree. Practice placements and special education are an integral part of training. From 2011, all pre-school directors will be required to have a master's degree. Attendance at in-service training (Continuing Professional Development) every five years is obligatory for all teachers.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The Tallinn Pedagogical Institute from the Tallinn University has offered training and research opportunities in preschool pedagogy and psychology since the late 1960s. Today courses are available at Bachelors, Masters and PhD levels. **Professor Marika Veisson** provided an overview of the national and cross-national research projects the Institute has been involved in. Recent research topics include: influences of daycare and home environment on pre-school children's development; intergenerational relationships; parent-teacher co-operation and pre-school teachers and professionalism.

CHAIR'S REFLECTIONS AND SUM-UP

In summing up the first work session of the Seminar, **Bronwen Cohen** highlighted the following points as meriting further discussion:

- the need to unpack what it means to work closely with parents;
- care not only about meeting the needs of working parents. Advocating a view of care as nurture and centrality of relationships in ECEC;
- the need to connect ECEC to children's micro worlds including strong connections with families. This is an added value element of ECEC and should also be reflected in EU ECEC policies;
- the importance to think about family support services available to parents during the time when parents are on leave to care for children;
- life-long learning beginning at birth – learning as holistic, integrated and multi-disciplinary;
- disparity and sometimes inequities in ECEC provision across the EU particularly for 0-3s.

4. EXCHANGING AND DISCUSSING GOOD PRACTICE EXPERIENCES (SESSION 3)

Four examples of good practice in relation to Community Based ECEC were presented. The session was chaired by Danilo Lekovic from the Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, ISSA -the International Step by Step Association.

4.1. RENATA SZREDZINSKA FROM THE NOBODY'S CHILDREN FOUNDATION, POLAND

Ms Szredzinska presented their Good Parent - Good Start Programme. It focuses on the early prevention of child abuse and neglect and the promotion of positive parenting in Warsaw. The programme is free of charge and targets expectant parents and parents of children under 3 years and particularly those most at risk. Critically, it also involves the range of professionals and services in the community who come into contact with young children and their parents: local authorities; local welfare centres; health centres; police; probation officers; local psychological consultation points and day nurseries. Common quality standards for prevention of abuse and neglect have also been developed. Parents, children and professionals are offered practical support and information, and more specialized support when needed.

4.2. SHIRLEY HAWKES AND MARGARET ALTON FROM THE EARLY YEARS ORGANISATION, NORTHERN IRELAND

Ms Hawkes and Ms Alton opened their presentation by noting that the work of *Early Years* (formally, NIPPA), had been shaped by the civil conflict in Northern Ireland over a thirty-year period. From the outset, grass-roots community development approaches had an important role in strengthening communities and bringing about positive change for young children and their families. They made a strong case for the development of ECEC services based on community development principles: it ensures effective use of existing resources; develops and sustains additional services; promotes and supports a partnership approach; empowers and engages with parents.

Two case studies, one urban, one rural, were presented to illustrate the power of community action in ECEC in practice. Other points of interest in their presentation were the critical, but sometimes vulnerable role of parent led management committees; the benefits of parent and toddler groups for new immigrants; and the role of home-visiting in reaching most deprived and isolated families.

4.3. ATINA TASEVSKA, FECI STEP BY STEP MACEDONIA

Ms Tasevska gave an overview of the work of the ISSA network members active in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS). Amongst the challenges that locally based ISSA members are working with is the absence of an understanding of what quality services look like and the need to work to improve families' and communities' understanding of quality so that they will be better advocates for their children. Atina described two particular community-based programmes Getting Ready for School (2005) and Parenting with Confidence (2005). These have been adapted to local needs and situations in a range of different countries in the region. She also drew attention to ISSA's definition of quality pedagogy which is outlined in the ISSA publication: 'Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy'. The planned development of a Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Community/Home-based Programs will be based on the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy.

4.4. SELENA BAJRAKTAREVIC'S FROM BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA (BiH), REPRESENTING THE UNICEF CEE/CIS REGIONAL OFFICE

Selena Bajraktarevic's focused on the *Integrated Parent Child Centre (IPCC)* model. This model has been developed by UNICEF in partnership with 5 communities in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH). It is hoped that it will be eventually rolled out in all 146 municipalities. Important contextual issues highlighted by Selena are the complex political structure in BiH; very high levels of poverty (41%) and unemployment (31%); prevalence of social exclusion and discrimination amongst minority groups and displaced populations; the gaps and weaknesses in delivery of social services; and the very low attendance at pre-school services (6%).

The IPCC model forms the foundation for the social protection and inclusion system of BiH. Although intended for all children, it is particularly focused on socially excluded families with children aged 0-3 years. In essence, the IPCC provides **access to an array of services** encompassing pre-school education, early intervention, social protection and inclusive services, health and nutrition education, child safety and injury prevention and sanitation and hygiene.

4.5. DISCUSSION POINTS

The first topic of discussion related to the **strategies used to reach most marginalized families and children**, those who may most benefit from community-based and home-visiting programmes.

Atina Tasevska told us about the key role that social workers and midwives play in linking families to home-based ECEC services. This view was also supported by **Ene Tomberg** when she referred to the benefits of one-to-one work, and large degree of co-operation between medical staff, welfare staff and ECEC staff in the ISSA projects in Tartu, Estonia. **Ms Tasevska** also noted that the family visit was a key strategy of reaching children from the Roma community and introducing families to ECEC.

The challenges involved in **reaching the most 'problematic' or at risk of violence families** in the Warsaw 'Good Parent – Good Start' Programme and keeping them in dialogue was also a topic of interest. Three strategies mentioned by **Renata Szredzinska** were the encouragement given to parents to be involved; giving parents attractive materials upon registration in the programme; and the opportunity to attend play groups. She also noted that in the most difficult cases, where there is already violence in the family, there might be an obligation on families to attend. In the case where confidentiality has had to be broken, and trust may have broken down with the Centre, families might be directed to support services outside the Centre.

Shirley Hawkes noted that just as much of the so called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland had come about because of civil conflict, the solutions had come about through civil action. This involved regeneration of communities, celebrating successes, and willingness within local communities "to stand up and make a positive difference". **Margaret Alton** added that additional pragmatic factors may be that disadvantage can result in necessary innovation and it may be easier to find volunteers as more people have more time on their hands.

Working with families with very poor literacy skills was also a topic of discussion. **Atina Tasevska** highlighted play as a means for engaging with parents. *'Our job is not to teach parents to read and write, but to teach them how they can play with their children'*.

Ene Tomberg drew attention to the importance of collaborative work between health professionals and social workers in identifying families most in need and linking them in to appropriate support. In comparison to the Bosnia context, unemployment in Estonia is lower. However, parenting skills are severely compromised in situations of alcohol and drug abuse, which is a big problem. It is also challenging to detect families in difficulties when parents are too proud to seek help.

Monitoring and evaluation of Community Based ECEC services was a second theme of discussion.

Selena informed that in BiH there is an elaborate working manual for internal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) procedures: the Integrated Parent Child Centre Model, being used in the five existing centres. The information gathered would form the basis for an external evaluation. New forms of M&E were being introduced which staff was required to work with. She added that a workshop planned for the following week aimed to “nail down” the M&E systems in the centres.

The third main theme of discussion concerned **sustainability of community-based programmes and services, and political responsibility and accountability.**

Bronwen Cohen speculated whether Community-Based ECEC services are, or have they been, understood primarily about responding to local needs and fulfilling the rights for every child to ECEC, thus meriting local and national Government support, or whether Community-Based ECEC services are being viewed as substituting for “what’s not there” - and thus letting Governments off the hook?

Selena Bajraktarevic stressed the importance of involving national and sectorial government in the planning of the Integrated Parent Child Centres in BiH from the outset. The Education, Social Welfare and Public Health government departments in all the 3 administrative divisions that make up BiH are explicitly encouraged to recognize their collective responsibilities in this initiative. Here she emphasised that the intention is not to replace existing services but support the Government to fulfill their responsibilities to children and families, including their responsibility to ensure that those who are excluded have access to services. Government representatives need to visit the field to see the actual working services.

In parallel, new courses (Canadian origin) are being introduced in BiH on topics such as Peace education, Right to Play and Pre-school Education at university level to ensure that there are sufficient qualified practitioners to work in the Centres.

Renata Szredzinska remarked that the ***Nobody Children’s Foundation*** has often had the feeling that they are doing the work that “somebody else should be doing”. However, an important positive effect of the **Good Parent – Good Start project** is that early family support is now being incorporated into the Warsaw Municipality Strategy for Families 2010-2020. She also mentioned the opportunities the European Social Fund offers to EU member states, in terms of advocating towards municipalities on the need to address these issues.

Jana Hainsworth brought into focus parents’ role. Given the origins of community-based ECEC services in grass-roots movements it is important to capitalize on the notion of parents as strong advocates for their children and active participants and beneficiaries of community-based ECEC, rather than purely as consumers. The mutual engagement of parents and community services enhances sustainability. In community-based ECEC, parents, as well as children, have the opportunity to develop new skills, to benefit from a range of social, educational, health and welfare support. Once parents themselves experience the value in the services, they will be in a better position to pay for a portion of the costs.

A Community-based ECEC momentum, first raised in the presentation of the background paper, was also revisited in this discussion. Selena noted that once the word spread about the Integrated Parent Child Centres other communities began to ask their municipalities for a similar centre. At the same time, the local UNICEF personnel were in place to provide arguments for the Centres directly to the Government.

John Bennett brought a comparative policy perspective to the discussion. As one example, he drew on Northern Ireland, where community-based ECEC is framed and centrally financed by the Government. The system is supported by Government advisors and a well-developed inspectorate. An alternative model is a municipality-based model, which can also be very professional and is very in touch with the community. This may not necessarily be classified as formal centre-based ECEC (as is the case in France). Importantly, municipal led and supported ECEC has become a political issue given that municipal governments are voted in by local citizens based on their programme.

It was also noted that ECEC systems in post-conflict countries such as Northern Ireland and BiH had benefited from additional substantial funding and support from private foundations. UNICEF and the American Chamber of Commerce, and the governments of Norway and the UK had all contributed to financing IPCC. **Lisa Jordan, from the Bernard van Leer Foundation** also remarked that experts present at a workshop session on quality ECEC at the **UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education** in Moscow stated that there was a proven direct relationship between how much money was spent on ECEC and the quality of that provision. However, in the discussion at the Moscow workshop, community-based ECEC was perceived both as cheaper and “as not as good”.

The fourth main theme of discussion concerned capitalizing on current European policy when lobbying for Community-Based ECEC.

Mafalda Leal and Jana Hainsworth urged all participants to draw on the information and support offered by Eurochild when lobbying at municipal, national, and regional levels. Attention was drawn to the upcoming joint Declaration by Ministers responsible for childhood policies at the forthcoming Europe de l’Enfance meeting in November (see Section 4.3.).

It was stressed by **Ms Bajraktarevic** that good knowledge of EU policy was also relevant for EU accession countries in the Balkans. **Danilo Lekovic** also drew attention to the existing knowledge resources within the comprehensive ISSA network in the Balkans in this regard.

4.6. CHAIR’S REFLECTIONS AND SUM-UP

In **summing-up the third work session** of the MES, **Danilo Lekovic** reiterated some of the features of community-based ECEC illustrated in the initiatives discussed:

- stakeholders joining efforts – relevant at local/community, national and regional levels;
- the possibilities for innovation open to new organizations, in the absence of a legal framework (*Poland*);
- the power of mothers’ collective efforts in transforming unused spaces from wastelands to safe and nurturing ECEC spaces (*Northern Ireland*);
- the need for comprehensive and extensive training programmes;
- the potential for informal ECEC in the absence of centre-based formal ECEC (*Macedonia*);
- ‘Think out of the box’ in particularly challenging situations. Overcoming sectarianism (Northern Ireland) and ethnical differences (Bosnia-Herzegovina) through dialogue.

5. FEEDING INTO THE REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN AGENDAS (SESSION 4)

The final work session of the seminar provided the opportunity for participants to hear about current initiatives in relation to ECEC at an EU policy level.

5.1. JOHN BENNETT, EARLY YEARS INDEPENDENT EXPERT, CHAIR OF THE SESSION

John Bennett introduced the discussion with some initial remarks about community-based ECEC and the links to regional, national and European agendas. He noted that the strengths of community-based ECEC need to be brought upwards. Whilst non-formal or semi-formal provisions vary in quality, they generally manage to engage effectively with parents. This is in contrast to formal provision. In private, commercial, for-profit services, parent's views regarding programming are often viewed as unnecessary. This, coupled with costs to parents, has the effect of reinforcing inequality in societies. A strong case can be made for Community-based ECEC in reducing inequalities. There is evidence that national governments do become interested and are willing to finance structures. He also stressed the importance of EU support to existing ECEC initiatives of UNICEF and ISSA in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

5.2. NÓRA MILOTAY, POLICY OFFICER, DIRECTORATE GENERAL EDUCATION AND CULTURE, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

In her presentation Nóra Milotay gave an EU perspective on the quality of ECEC services and explained the 'policy osmosis' – the various means by which EU education policy impacts on national and local policy such as expert networks, Presidency events, and funded Programmes. She also noted that **ECEC was a relatively new policy focus area for the DG Education and Culture**. Importantly, ECEC has an important role within the education and training initiatives in the **new EU 2020 Strategy**. A **Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care** is due to be adopted in early 2011. The Hungarian Presidency of the EU (1st semester of 2011) has already declared ECEC will be a focus area during their Presidency and a conference will be organised to discuss and disseminate the Commission Communication in February. Council Conclusions on ECEC are expected to follow soon after.

The Communication will adopt a child-rights based approach and address:

- **the integration of care and education,**
- **accessibility:** how is ECEC organised? Is there a systemic vision of how all players look at ECEC? Are stakeholders involved? Inclusion for children with special education needs? Attention to transitions?
- **affordability:** more public investment; universal versus targeted approaches;
- **pedagogical frameworks:** standards for quality including participative approach, curricula, need for coherent vision;
- **staff issues:** professionalism; staff competencies; parenting education.

The primary focus of the Communication is to be on centre-based formal ECEC. The main rationale for this emphasis is that there is insufficient research data available on other forms of ECEC. Nóra Milotay clarified that policy decisions need to have a sound 'evidence-based'.

She also drew attention to two forthcoming research studies on ECEC, which have been commissioned by DG Education and Culture and are due to be published early 2011. One focuses on early acquisition of literary and parental support. The second study is about competence requirements of staff in early childhood education and care. Preliminary findings from these studies are being disseminated at conferences.

In a response to a query from **Bronwen Cohen** following the presentation, **Nóra Milotay** noted that whilst the Communication would raise the issue regarding the respective pros and cons of supply versus demand approaches to funding ECEC, it would be up to each Member States to decide which approach to follow.

5.3. BENOIT PARMENTIER, DIRECTOR OF OFFICE DE LA NAISSANCE ET DE L'ENFANCE, BELGIUM AND PRESIDENT OF CHILDON EUROPE, THE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF NATIONAL OBSERVATORIES ON CHILDHOOD

Benoit Parmentier informed the participants about a forthcoming **Declaration indicating EU governments political commitment to ECEC**. It aims to provide an "unambiguous and coherent political framework" for ECEC policy 2010 to 2020 across all Member States. It is an outcome of a process undertaken as part of the Belgian EU Presidency in the framework of the intergovernmental group Europe de l'Enfance which gathers twice a year to discuss childhood issues.

The Declaration, in its draft form, contains 17 items on which agreement is sought, such as: GDP allocation to ECEC, high quality supply of services, diversified and integrated services, respect for diversity, financial accessibility, training and professionalization of staff and research.

Participants were invited to give their feedback on the draft Declaration by 15th October 2010. It is due to be adopted by the Ministers responsible for childhood policies in their November meeting under the Belgian EU Presidency. There was positive response from the Seminar participants to the announcement of this Declaration - in particular its broad definition of inclusion and ECEC as a right for all children. It is hoped that there will be meaningful dovetailing with the, soon to be finalised DG EAC co-ordinated Communication on ECEC.

5.4. EMMANUELLE MEURICE, COFACE, CONFERATION OF FAMILY ORGANISATIONS IN THE EU

Emmanuelle Meurice provided an overview of the work and current policy stance of COFACE, the Conferation of Family Organisations which represent the interests of the families in the EU. COFACE has regular contact with the EU institutions. Thus a link is made between the member organisations (which number more than 50 in 20 member states) and EU policy.

COFACE advocates a policy of non-discrimination and of equal opportunities between persons and between family forms, and specifically supports policies aiming at equality between women and men.

Emmanuelle drew attention to the particular vulnerable position of women and children with regard to poverty. She highlighted a number of policy stances of COFACE which focus on this issue:

- the need to promote ECEC as a strong means against family poverty;
- the best way to fight poverty is by promoting full-time jobs, especially for women;
- the promotion of flexible working time arrangements for both men and women as critical to the well-being of children and the society, since both income poverty and 'time poverty' can harm child development³;

³ COFACE's position on reconciling family life, private life and professional life to prevent poverty and social exclusion, December 2008

- the need to increase men's role in the family.

She also noted that poor families favour informal services and are generally more suspicious of formal services. Thus outreach programmes directed at vulnerable families need support.

5.5. JANA HAINSWORTH, EUROCHILD SECRETARY GENERAL, JOINING EFFORTS FOR THE ADOPTION OF AN EU QUALITY FRAMEWORK ON EARLY YEARS. EUROCHILD ACTION

In the final presentation of the MES, Jana Hainsworth synthesized the key actions and activities of Eurochild in relation to early year's policy. Jana reiterated the leadership of the Belgian Presidency with respect to child related policies and she acknowledged the recent signing of a Declaration by the EU Presidency Trio (Spain, Belgium and Hungary) calling for stronger EU action on Child Poverty and Well-being. Eurochild is advocating for the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child well-being to be a thematic priority within the European Platform Against Poverty – one of the flagship initiatives of the new EU 2020 Strategy.

She also drew attention to changes in how European Structural Funds (ESF) will operate, which shall be defined in the upcoming financial perspectives proposal. Member States will have to demonstrate links to social inclusion, social protection and social cohesion targets. Eurochild and Eurochild members are in a good position to find good examples of how structural funds have been used on early years and early childhood services community development. This is a different focus than 'getting women back to work' which has been the emphasis in the past.

A further challenge ahead will be articulating understandings of quality ECEC at a European level. On the basis of the discussions at the MES, Jana argued that it will be important that community and grass-roots perspectives are included in any future agreements about improving quality ECEC. In this regard, **Rita Swinnen**, from the DECET network, noted that it was important to remember we were not starting from 'zero'. She reminded the participants of the recent strides that have already been made in relation to the development of quality frameworks at a trans-European level such as: the ISSA Quality Standards, the DECET Six Principles of Good Practice, Children in Europe Policy Paper Young children and their services: developing a European approach, and the recommendations in the OECD Start Strong reports.

5.6. CHAIR'S REFLECTIONS AND CLOSING COMMENTS

John Bennett drew the final work session to a close by reminding participants that knowledge is not the only goal of education. Education is also about contributing to democracy, social justice, fostering participation, including parents' participation. John concluded by drawing attention to the need to include child rights education into ECEC, both for children and the workforce, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds need to have a place within the system.

ANNEX I - PROGRAMME

WEDNESDAY, 29 SEPTEMBER

Arrival and registrations

THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION & OVERALL FRAMEWORK

Chair: **Bronwen Cohen**, Children in Scotland, Chair of the Eurochild Thematic Working Group on Early Years Education and Care

09:00 Welcome

Ene Tomberg, Estonian Union for Child Welfare

09:30 Context: *Early years in EU policies & Eurochild views* - Mafalda Leal, Eurochild Policy Officer

10:00 *Community-based services delivery and community involvement*, presentation of the seminar background paper, **Margaret Kernan**, Consultant, International Child Development Initiatives

10:45 Coffee break

11:15 *The Estonian experience on early years education and care*

Anniki Tikerpuu, Head of Department of Children and Families, **Ministry of Social Affairs**

Tiina Peterson, Chief Expert of General Education Department, **Ministry of Education and Research**

Professor Marika Veisson, Tallinn University

12:00 Discussion

12:45 Summing up & closing

13:00 Lunch

SESSION 2: STUDY VISIT – LOCAL EARLY YEARS CENTRES

Chair: **Ene Tomberg**, Estonian Union for Child Welfare

14.30 Study visit to the Tallinn Kelmiküla Kindergarten & the Tallinn Mahtra Kindergarten

On-site discussion with input of **Tiia Õun**, **Kerstin Kööp**, & **Kristina Nugin**, Tallinn University researchers

17.30 *How are early years services delivered by the community and how is the community involved in their implementation? How are the different stakeholders involved and how can all socio-economic groups benefit?*

19:30 Concert by the Estonian Television Young Children's Choir & buffet dinner; Teacher's House

FRIDAY, 1 OCTOBER

SESSION 3: DISCUSSION & GOOD PRACTICE EXCHANGE

Chair: Danilo Lekovic, Program Coordinator, Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, ISSA, International Step by Step Association

09:00 Eurochild member organisations sharing good practice

Nobody's Children Foundation: Good Parent – Good Start: early prevention of young child abuse
- Renata Szredzińska

The Early Years Organisation: Community-based approaches to the delivery of early childhood care and education in Northern Ireland – Margaret Alton & Shirley Hawkes

ISSA: Promoting access to quality community-based provisions in the early years – the experience of the ISSA Network – Atina Tasevska

10.30 Coffee break

11:00 *The involvement of the community in early childhood education and care in the CEE/CIS region*
- Selena Bajraktarevic, UNICEF CEE/CIS Regional Office (Central and Eastern Europe & the Commonwealth of Independent States), Bosnia Herzegovina

Discussion with reflection on the study visit

12:30 Lunch

SESSION 4: FEEDING INTO THE REGIONAL, NATIONAL & EUROPEAN AGENDAS

Chair: John Bennett, Early years independent expert, Eurochild associate member

14:00 Panel debate

Quality of early childhood education and care services, an EU perspective - Nóra Milotay, Directorate General Education and Culture, European Commission

Member States commitments towards more and better early years services - draft submitted by the Belgian Presidency, Benoit Parmentier, ChildOnEurope, European Network of National Observatories on childhood, Director of Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance, Belgium

Childcare services & families: preventing poverty & inequalities, Emmanuelle Meurice, COFACE – Confederation of Family Organisations in the EU

Joining efforts for the adoption of an EU quality framework on early years. Eurochild action - Jana Hainsworth, Eurochild Secretary General

15.30 Chair summing up

16.00 Closing

ANNEX II – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Margaret ALTON	Early Years	Northern Ireland - UK
Leena ANDONOV	Helsinki City Department of Education Eläintarha school	Finland
Natalija ANTIPOVA	Children's Forum of Latvia	Latvia
Aile ATONEN	Kindergarden Mürakaru	Estonia
Selena BAJRAKTAREVIC	UNICEF CEE/CIS	Bosnia & Herzegovina
John BENNETT	Independent expert – Associate Eurochild member	France
Bronwen COHEN	Children in Scotland	Scotland - UK
Diane DANIEL	Children in Wales	Wales - UK
Florence GRANDVALET	Associate member & Association Samuel Vincent –volunteer	France
Jana HAINSWORTH	Eurochild secretariat	
Shirley HAWKES	Early Years	Northern Ireland - UK
Hywel JONES	GOPA-Cartermill	Belgium
Lisa JORDAN	Bernard Van Leer Foundation	The Netherlands
Marika KALLAS	Tallinn City Government, Department of Education	Estonia
Margaret KERNAN	International Child Development Initiatives	The Netherlands
Pille KIBUR	Kindergarden Mahtra	Estonia
Kerstin KÖÖP	Tallinn University	Estonia
Riina LALL	Kindegarden Kelmiküla	Estonia
Mafalda LEAL	Eurochild secretariat	
Danilo LEKOVIC	Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step	Montenegro
Emmanuelle MEURICE	COFACE – Confederation of Family Organisations in the EU	Belgium
Nora MILOTAY	DG Education and Culture	Belgium
Kristina NUGIN	Tallinn University	Estonia
Tiia ÕUN	Tallinn University	Estonia
Toomas PALU	UNICEF	Estonia
Benoit PARMENTIER	ONE	Belgium
Ritva SEMI	Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö OAJ	Finland
Rita SWINNEN	DECET VZW	Belgium
Renata SZREDZINSKA	Nobody's Children Foundation	Poland
Alar TAMM	Estonian Union for Child Welfare	Estonia
Atina TASEVSKA	FECI Step by Step Macedonia	F.Y.R.O.Macedonia
Annikki TIKERPUU	Ministry of Social Affairs	Estonia
Ene TOMBERG	Estonian Union for Child Welfare	Estonia
Marika VEISSON	Tallinn University	Estonia
Reka VELENYI	Eurochild secretariat	
Kristi VINTER	Tallinn Pedagogical College	Estonia
Toby WOLF	Start Strong	Ireland

ANNEX III - BACKGROUND PAPER



BACKGROUND PAPER

EUROCHILD Members Exchange Seminar on Early Years Education and Care

***Ensuring quality: the path for early years in Europe
and the role of community based services***

29 September – 1 October 2010, Tallinn, Estonia.

COMMUNITY-BASED EARLY YEARS SERVICES:

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF INFORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND FORMAL APPROACHES

September 2010

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document is divided into two sections: the first section on the EU framework on early years draws from the policy briefing for members prepared by the Eurochild Secretariat; section two is dedicated to the role of community-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) and is based on a paper drafted by Margaret Kernan and Nico van Oudenhoven from the International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), Leiden, The Netherlands.

The spider-web chart and the suggested dimensions that make up good quality ECEC described in the final section are part of a tool developed by ICDI to assess quality of community-based projects.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper aims to provide a framework for the discussions at Eurochild's Members Exchange Seminar in Tallinn looking at the role of community-based services in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It also gives a short overview on how ECEC has been addressed at EU level and presents Eurochild recommendations seeking to contribute to the current debate on the quality of early years services.

The involvement of parents and the wider community has been often pointed out as a crucial factor for ensuring quality in ECEC provision and is one of Eurochild's key goals for considerations by European authorities (Eurochild, Discussion paper, 2009). The seminar will aim to foster discussions on how different actors can join efforts to put in place a policy framework that promotes community development and the delivery of quality ECEC, and how the EU can contribute to this.

The paper is organised in two main sections:

An **introductory section** presents the context, outlining what is specific to community-based services and why they are the focus of Eurochild's Members Exchange Seminar.

Section I provides a brief overview of key policy developments at the EU level, with a particular reference to quality, and Eurochild recommendations for EU action on early years.

Section II looks into the role of community-based ECEC. It suggests a new conceptual framework: the 'golden triangle' of informal, non-formal and formal approaches highlighting their inter-connectedness and mutually supportive role; and addresses how quality of community-based ECEC can be assessed providing a detailed overview of a tool to measure the quality of community ECEC provision developed by ICDI.

INTRODUCTION

A number of recent policy and discussion documents in Europe and further afield emphasise the role community-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in strengthening the capacity of families to raise their children and to enrich young children's lives, learning and development (Bennett, 2009; European Economic and Social Committee, 2010; May and Mitchell, 2009; NESSE, 2009). In particular, the potential of community-based services to be more inclusive of, and responsive to children and families from diverse backgrounds has been highlighted (Bennett, 2009; Fuller, 2007).

This background paper seeks to portray what community early years provision might look like or entail in practice and to illustrate how children and families benefit. This is done by presenting a number of scenarios and tools that can be applied to, and positively impact on many communities and

neighbourhoods in Europe. The examples will be further enriched by the experiences and case-studies presented by participants at Eurochild's Members Exchange Seminar in Tallinn in September 2010.

Before elaborating what is meant by 'community-based ECEC services', a few notes on understandings of ECEC itself. There is a diversity in understandings of functions of ECEC across the countries of Europe. However, it is also possible, and necessary to agree on some basic principles. For example, by placing to the fore children's rights and well-being in the here and now, ECEC can be broadly defined as all activities geared to promoting the wellbeing, learning and healthy development of young children⁴.

When thinking explicitly about ECEC service provision in Europe the working definition used by Eurochild provides further elaboration:

ECEC are all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content. ECEC also includes out-of-school provision for young children up to their 12th birthday. 'Education' and 'care' are combined in the phrase to underline that services for young children should combine care, developmental and learning opportunities, and that education and care should not exist apart in approaches to young children. When referring to government policy, ECEC services also encompass parental leave (with a replacement income) and family-friendly policies, as these policies have a major impact on early childhood provision, promote the involvement of parents with their children, and assist toward gender equality⁵.

What then is particular to community-based ECEC? According to the Quality Public Early Childhood Education Project "Strengthening Community-based Early Childhood in New Zealand" broad tenets of community-based provision are that:

- *the service is seen as a community asset and the children, parents, families and community benefit from it;*
- *collectivity, partnership, and participation are hallmarks of decision-making;*
- *the full funding from public resources goes into educating the children and supporting their family* (May and Mitchell, 2009:2).

The current wave of interest in community-based ECEC provision stems from a number of sources. Firstly, there are the concerns regarding large-scale market-standardisation of provision prevalent in countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Here, ECEC is viewed as a market-driven business efficiently meeting the rapid increase in demand for ECEC places. One criticism of this approach is that young children's actual experiences are decontextualised from their daily lives, families and communities and overall quality suffers. A second and related force driving the debate is the extent to which current ECEC provision in Europe respects diversity and adequately includes and serves the most vulnerable and excluded groups for example, children experiencing poverty, migrant groups and ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, children living in remote and isolated regions. Related to both of these is the vacuum in service provision in some post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the transition from centralised state provision of ECEC services to a situation where provision is left to market forces.

⁴ This understanding is based on the UNESCO definition of ECEC, which is as follows: Early Childhood Care and Education supports children's survival, growth, development and learning – including health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development – from birth to entry of primary education in formal, informal and non-formal settings.

⁵ Eurochild, Thematic Working Group on EYEC, principles & definitions, 2009.

The dominance of quantitative, often US-based research in determining ECEC policies is a further issue which also needs to be acknowledged in any discussion about community-based early years provision. Fuller argues that despite, or in spite of, the number of randomised control studies demonstrating effects of certain interventions, in actual fact the guiding frames of services for young children remain “*philosophical claims about the nature of young children, how parents wish to raise their children*”, and how societies and communities can best be organised so that young children’s well-being is enhanced and their early learning advanced⁶. This is not to say that research in this area is not necessary – on the contrary. Amongst the issues raised at the European Commission symposium on improving ECEC, *Early Matters (2009)*, was the need for more quantitative and qualitative, interdisciplinary and context sensitive European-based research in ECEC. The NESSE (Network of Experts on the Social Sciences of Education and Training) report which followed this symposium also noted that comparative approaches offered “countries an opportunity to learn from one another and broaden the range of the possible” (NESSE, 2009: p.59).

At EU level the debate on ECEC is currently moving away from a labour market perspective and the availability of child care arrangements to considering qualitative aspects of ECEC service delivery and how can they promote the child’s well-being, development and educational outcomes.

It is in this context that Eurochild organises a Members Exchange Seminar focusing on community-based early years provision. It is hoped that in the ensuing discussions “the range of the possible” regarding community-based provision will be illuminated and good practice identified.

I - EUROPEAN UNION POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Much of the debate around quality in ECEC in European policy has been around the competing demands of economic development, gender equality, women’s labour force participation, and to a lesser extent, about the provision of ECEC services which are in the best interests of children.

The economic argument is in essence about increasing the number of childcare places so more mothers are available to work. The best interests of the child argument, increasingly influenced by children’s rights discourses focuses on the provision of services which support the all round development of young children. This is apparent in the vision for early childhood education presented in General Comment 7 on ‘Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood’ which notes that the goal of education “is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence and that this must be achieved in ways that are child-centred, child-friendly and reflect the inherent dignity of the child”.

There is broad agreement that firstly, ECEC services can enhance children’s subsequent school performance and development only if they are of a high quality and secondly, that poor quality ECEC may do more harm than good, especially to children from poorer backgrounds (NESSE report, 2009:31).

However, defining high quality ECEC, deciding on what should be measured, conducting cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons, agreeing on common indicators and finding the right balance between economic, pedagogical, social inclusion and rights interests is complex.

⁶ This point provides a central thesis of a book by Bruce Fuller (2007) entitled “Standardized Childhood: the Political and Cultural Struggle over Early Education”, a critical commentary on the call for universal kindergarten provision in the United States, in which he draws on some examples from Europe. Fuller proposes the creation of ‘human-scale’ ECEC institutions or organisations that advance quality and respond to the variety of child-rearing philosophies and practices held by families.

These concerns have commanded some attention at a European policy level over the past three decades. The following is a brief summary of some of the key developments.

In 1992 member states agreed on a Council Recommendation on Childcare (92/241/EEC) with the objective “to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children”. Several objectives were suggested for the development of childcare services highlighting the importance “to promote the well-being of children and families ensuring that their various needs are met”.

Four years later a report on *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* by the European Commission’s Childcare Network proposed a Ten Year Action Programme establishing criteria for assessing progress and 40 targets for attainment within ten years by publicly funded services. These recommendations were however never put into place at a EU level.

In 2002, as a part of the European Strategy for Growth and Jobs, EU member states adopted the “Barcelona targets”, setting quantitative objectives for the provision of ‘childcare’ places: 33% of children from birth to three years and 90% of 3 years to mandatory school age. A qualitative dimension was not considered and in 2008 only 5 countries surpassed the objectives for 0-3s and 8 countries the objective for the 3-mandatory school age group. (COM(2008) 638 final).

Important research conducted at European and international levels include:

- The OECD *Starting Strong* reports (2001 and 2006) highlight the key elements of a successful early education and childcare system: a systematic and integrated approach to policy, a strong and equal partnership between early childhood services and the education system, a universal approach to access, substantial public investment, a participatory approach to quality improvement, and assurance and appropriate training and working conditions for all staff.
- In 2007, the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training network (DECET) publishes *Diversity and Equity: Making Sense of Good Practice*, a discussion and action document which presents six principles of good practice based on the views of practitioners, parents and children in six European countries. These principles are: 1. Everyone feels that she/he belongs; 2. Everyone is empowered to develop the diverse aspects of her/his identity; 3. Everyone can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries; 4. Everyone can participate as active citizens; 5. Everyone actively addresses bias through open communication and willingness to grow; 6. Everyone works together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.
- UNICEF Report Card (2008) 8 used 10 benchmarks for a set of minimum standards for early years services to create a league table of ECEC in economically advanced countries including: a minimum entitlement to paid parental leave; national plan with priority for disadvantaged children; a minimum level of childcare provision for children under 3s; a minimum level of access for 4 years old; minimum levels of training and education for staff; a minimum staff to child ratio; a minimum level of public funding; a low level of child poverty; and universal outreach.
- Children in Europe (2008) *Young children and their services: developing a European approach* suggests ten principles as the basis for services to be met by member states by 2020: access: an entitlement for all children; affordability: a free service funded from taxation; a pedagogical approach (holistic and multi-purpose); participation as an essential value; a framework to support a common approach and shared conditions; diversity and choice; evaluation which is participatory, democratic and transparent; a valued workforce (a 0-6 profession with parity with school teachers); a strong and equal partnership with schools; cross-national partnership and learning.
- In 2009 the NESSE network/European Commission report calls for a wider approach than that offered by the Barcelona targets, noting the problematic nature of targeting services to poor and

vulnerable children and concluded that “inclusive, generalised provision is likely to be a more suitable option”.

The current policy challenge with respect to quality in ECEC in Europe has been synthesised as being able to “arrive at a satisfactory and culturally relevant definition of “quality” and ways to monitor it” (NESSE, 2009:32). Further elaborated, with particular attention to needs of minority groups in Europe, Leseman describes the challenge as follows: (re)build (current) systems of ECEC to meet crucial design features “to provide quality ECEC services for all children that are “integrated and attractive and affordable to all families regardless of social class or minority status”, yet sensitive to differing educational needs (Eurydice, 2009:39 cited in NESSE report, 2009:30).

Current debates are looking at widening the approach beyond the Barcelona targets and find ways to achieve higher standards of education and care in the EU. A Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education is due by the end of 2010 aiming to set an agenda for work under the Open Method of Coordination.

Eurochild aims to contribute to the discussions and is calling the EU to put child well-being at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy looking holistically at parental leave, labour market policies, family and early years’ services, and the formal education system. Within this framework, the EU should take common action to:

- Renew the EU commitment to increase provision of early childhood services: Recognising the importance of early years’ services in facilitating parents’ labour market participation, achieving greater equity in educational outcomes, and contributing to children’s overall physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, the EU should provide leadership promoting investment in early years’ services. There exist strong arguments that this investment will produce long-term savings and public spending efficiencies, all important in the current period of belt-tightening.
- Establish common EU criteria for quality early years’ services: Recognising that increasing provision alone is not in itself a means of achieving objectives related to child development and educational achievement (indeed poor quality provision can have the opposite effect and harm child development), targets on provision alone are wholly inadequate. We therefore believe that a framework of quality criteria needs to be set including: accessibility, affordability, pedagogical approach, a curricular framework, participation, evaluation, minimum environmental and staffing standards, and infrastructure. Services design must be based on a child-centred approach considering children’s rights and interests in the planning and service delivery. The work of the Childcare Network should be revisited and indicators adopted to benchmark improvements in early years education and care.
- Raise professional standards, training and remuneration in the early years’ sector: Recognising that the quality and motivation of the workforce is fundamental in delivering the objectives of child development and social equity much greater emphasis needs to be given to qualifications, remuneration and career development. The sector is currently characterised by low pay, low qualifications, and job instability, with little recognition of the growing education and social responsibilities of the profession. There is an almost complete absence of men in the profession, reinforcing the stereotype that childcare is women’s work only, and denying many children of male role models. There is an urgent need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in early year’s care and education is satisfying, respected and financially rewarded.

II – THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECEC

A new conceptual framework: the golden triangle of informal, non-formal and formal approaches

ECEC IS MORE THAN FORMAL, CENTRE BASED APPROACHES

Children’s learning and development takes place in a range of settings, including the family and the community. Efforts to improve the well-being and life chances of children concerns all segments of society and should, therefore, also draw on all these segments.

There is a myriad of child care arrangements across EU member states. ECEC as it is discussed in national and international forums, is generally restricted to formal approaches in centre-based settings and in many instances initiated by ministries of health, education or social affairs. The emphasis is on the number of children enrolled in kindergartens, pre-schools, or crèches, and to the ‘extension downwards’ by primary schools to include classes for children aged five or four years old. In recent decades this discussion has been enriched by issues such as maintaining and upgrading quality criteria, and improving the accessibility for minority groups of children and for those with mental or physical disabilities. ‘Inclusion’ and ‘respect for diversity’ are key concepts in this regard.

The resources that are available in the family or in the community are, however, largely ignored, while they could significantly enhance the quality and outreach of formal ECEC services. There is a slow reversal of this trend as support is increasingly given to a more bottom-up approach that recognises and builds on resources in the family and the community.

To fully assess the potential of community-based ECEC, we need first to recognise the value of different forms in themselves of ECEC and how they interact with each other. This makes possible the necessary flexibility and responsiveness to local needs inherent in community-based ECEC.

INFORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND FORMAL ECEC

Informal: refers to care provided in the family home or by other family or friends with no written agreements or regulations⁷.

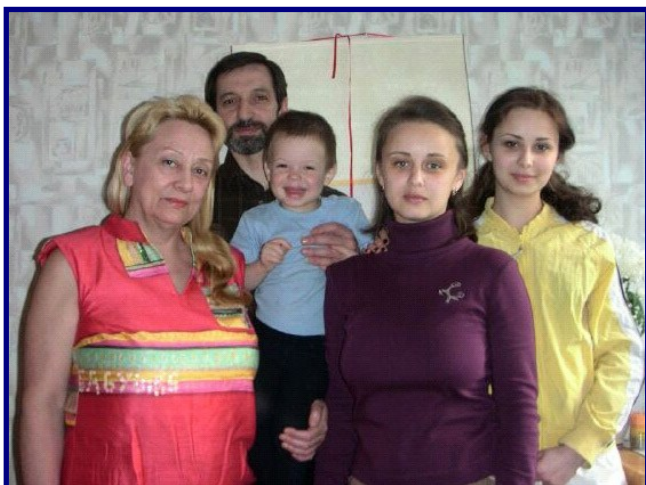
Young’s children learning and development is strongly influenced by what happens in the family, in the interaction between parents and young children, among the children, in the spontaneous encounters between people, things and the children, both inside and outside the house in the local neighbourhood and further afield. It is also influenced by messages given out by media – TV, radio, newspapers, Internet, or by

⁷ From another perspective informal services are those supplied on a non-monetary basis – generally in the child’s home, but also in the carer’s home – by other family members, relatives, family employees and friends (Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, p:229, OECD 2006).

It is recognised that *‘the dividing line between formal and informal care arrangements maybe rather fluid and differ between countries. Formal care arrangements are defined as pre-school or equivalent, compulsory education, centre-based services outside school hours, crèche or day-centre, including family day care organised/controlled by a public or private structure. Other arrangements are defined as childcare by a professional minder at the child’s home or at the child minder’s house and care by family members, friends or neighbours’.* (The provision of childcare services. A comparative review of 30 European countries. EGGE – European Commission expert group on gender and employment issues, 2009).

the municipality, medical centres or the commercial sector. The broader social and political context of the region is also important.

What measures exist to support children’s rights and to support families in their child-rearing responsibilities? Is the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child widely promoted? Are there explicit child-friendly policies? To what extent is the reconciliation of work and family life supported by employers and government? What measures exist for those most disadvantaged and marginalised in the society?



This picture shows a grandmother, two parents and their baby and a younger sister of the mother. All the grown-ups have explicit meaning for the little boy. They will protect, play, stimulate him and introduce him to a specific value system. Both grandmother and sister are around when the parents go out or need support.



This picture shows a casual, unregulated encounter among young boys and girls. A great deal that is of importance to their well-being and future development is going on. They socialise, develop their language, investigate, make fun, and experiment, among other things. The way they have parked their bicycles also forces adults to pay attention to them. An important issue here is that, although this interaction is in all likelihood a spontaneous one, parents and communities can create the conditions for this sort of events to happen. It is safe and unsupervised play.

Non-formal. These are arrangements that are generally governed by written agreements or regulations which define rules of behaviour or of membership. They are, however, often set up by volunteers without or little public interference, although they should function within the framework of the law. Examples are parents’ groups, parent and toddler groups, play groups, family day-care/childminding, or home-visiting programmes and out-of-school or free-time provision. Their degree of non-formality can vary from rather

loosely to strictly organized. Also, the degree of public regulation and professionalism of these types of ECEC varies from country to country.

Formal. These are statutory forms of provision that are framed by statutory laws introduced and monitored by the central or local authorities⁸. ECEC is here part of the established system and is characterised by such things as formally-trained teachers, an officially-backed up curriculum and standards, external monitoring and inspection, and ongoing financial inputs. Kindergartens or pre-school programmes and ‘downward-extended’ classes of primary schools form prime examples.

The services offered by these providers are part of a formally recognized system with official rules regarding the staffing, implementation, financing and monitoring. Formal ECEC practice in Europe draws on a rich, diverse and long tradition of ECEC pedagogical practice underpinned by the ideas and philosophies of pedagogues such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Malaguzzi amongst others.



A formal ECEC setting

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

It is evident that all forms of ECEC have a role to play in the lives of young children and their families and that all of them have the potential to contribute to their health and development. It is therefore essential that informal and non-formal approaches are given the status they deserve and are supported through a variety of means. This entails, as is the case in many countries, that ministries of education and social affairs, normally in charge of ECEC matters, have to acknowledge the participation of other ministries and partners in the debate and practice of ECEC and validate their work, or if this responsibility has been delegated to the local level, that the municipalities take on this assignment.

⁸ Again from another perspective formal services are services supplied on a paying basis by unlicensed or licensed persons or centres (Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, p:229, OECD 2006)

Additional research into the various forms of ECEC - non-formal, informal and formal - and how they relate to each other, how one can lead to another, and can support and sustain each other would help to find out how synergies can be created and how can the policy framework enhance the delivery of ECEC and inhibit or promote community development. Here, these questions are answered in a tentative manner and by way of an illustration.

The following scenario illustrates how formal ECEC can evolve from informal ECEC: children in a neighbourhood often play together. Some parents may share care responsibilities (informal ECEC). They may decide to set up a play group and have turns to supervise the group (non-formal ECEC). They may decide to lobby the municipality to build a kindergarten in their neighbourhood resulting in the establishment of a formal ECEC service.

Once established, formal care provision may continue to stimulate informal and non-formal care. Through parent-teacher meetings the parents may receive information on how to improve their children's language skills. All this knowledge is being used in informal ECEC: the parents start reading with their children to expand their vocabulary and communication skills and this, in turn, leads to another *non-formal ECEC* activity: after a while the parents decide to pool their books and CDs and to make these available to all children, they are allowed to use a room in the local church to this end. Their success leads again to more formal ECEC: the municipality, in a deal with the kindergarten, opens a library there. Teachers, with the help of volunteering parents, run it.

Many more examples could be given depending on the particular local context and existing infrastructures. Kindergartens should open their doors to the community and make their resources and expertise available to individual parents, parents groups and community groups such as local music, dance or craft groups. The point is, though, that each approach, be it informal, non-formal or formal, could be a starting point to bring new life to the other and so on. They could form indeed a golden triangle. Additionally, wherever the starting point, the service or opportunity provided is viewed and experienced as a community asset, which children, families and community benefit from.

TAKING A WHOLE COMMUNITY APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Acknowledging that young children's learning and development is heavily influenced by conditions in the community and the family, this paper proposes a tool that provides criteria to ensure a favourable environment for young children at community level.

The approach suggested here is a rather simple one but may still yield interesting results. A first step is to select a certain circumscribed area where boys and girls of pre-school age live. This could be a section of a town, a neighbourhood, a block of houses or even a street. A next step is to bring together a group of 'positive' stakeholders; these are people who are keenly interested in promoting the wellbeing of children and have an understanding of what children need in order to feel well and to grow up healthy. These could be the children and parents themselves, but also teachers, non-government organisations (NGOs) or people active in the community such as volunteer traffic wardens or playgroup leaders, other family members, and child professionals. These people would then be invited to have a walking tour of the given area with the assignment to look at it through ECEC eyes. In other words, what could that particular place have to offer in terms of opportunities for adequate learning and development? Thus questions such as 'could the street be used for play?', 'could mothers with children meet here and talk to each other?', 'could children play here together?', 'Are there trusted adults around to whom children could relate to?', 'are there things that children could play with?', 'are there shops or other things that excite children's interests and could be used for cognitive stimulation?'. Other points to raise include: 'is there a library and is this accessible for young families?', 'how far is the medical centre, the police station, the bus station?'

CREATING AN INFORMAL COMMUNITY-BASED ECEC MOMENTUM

The outcomes of these investigations should then be collected. Ideally, all the ‘explorers’ should be brought together to exchange views and come to informed statements. If this is not feasible, then their individual impressions should be gathered and synthesised. This can be a challenge as it should, at a minimum, address the following questions:

- **For which group(s) could that particular location be used?**

How old should the children be? Is the place suitable for both boys and girls? Is mixing with older children possible? How many children could make use of it?

- **What are the likely contributions to ECEC?**

Are children being entertained or also stimulated? Which cognitive, social skills and physical skills are being encouraged to develop? Is the interaction between parent-child, older child-younger child, trusted adult-child, child-child being stimulated? Is it a place for integration between children of different backgrounds? Does it stimulate curiosity?

- **What are the risks, and what measures have to be put in place to make it appropriate?**

Is the place safe, and if not, what has to be done about it? Is there sufficient adult supervision, can children wander off? Are there health risks and, if so, how can they be prevented?

- **What is the role of the parents/the family?**

Could parents share responsibilities? Could older children, other family members be called on? Is there an opportunity for parents/family members to meet and exchange information?

- **What is the role of the members of the community?**

Are people without young children interested in keeping a watchful eye, are they willing to offer space so that children can play?

- **What is the role of NGOs?**

Do they play an active role in promoting ‘safe open spaces’ for children? Do they empower parents to speak out? Do they liaise with the Municipality? Do they build parents’ capacities to dialogue with local officials? Do they come up with new ideas on public equipment, provision of green areas?

- **What is the role of the Municipality?**

Could the place be made more child-friendly, could pro-child traffic measures be taken? Could certain places be cordoned off? Do they create spaces especially for younger children and supervise these? Is there an easy-accessible call-in address? Do they participate in a ‘child-friendly’ network of municipalities? Is this a place where it is comfortable and attractive and secure for adults to be with young children?

For each area these questions could be tackled. By doing so, a practical tool to initiate a discussion or even a movement to optimise these locations for early childhood development is created. In other words - a momentum for community-based ECEC action. In matrix form, this tool looks as follows:

Community-based ECEC action on play							
Opportunity	Group	Contribution to ECEC	Risks/ Requirements	Role of parents/family siblings	Role of community members	Role of NGO/ECD agency	Role of Municipality
Footpaths							
Play field							
Block of houses							
...							

This matrix could be used as a guide map, a strategy planning device or an advocacy instrument.

ASSESSING QUALITY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECEC

The challenge with community-based ECEC is that it can be expressed in so many ways; ways that differ from place to place and even from time to time. Because they are rooted in and given shape and direction within individual communities with each having their own specific characteristics, their quality is not only hard to assess but, to make matters more complicated, also not easy to compare with other initiatives. It will, therefore, be quite problematic to set standards let alone to give a reasonably objective judgment about their quality, and yet, for policy makers this is an important concern. However, there are approximations on how to solve this problem and one of these is spelt out in the tool mentioned below. This tool was initially piloted with a community group in Serbia and has been further developed within a community in Khanty-Mansiysk in Russia.

MAKING COMMUNITY ECEC QUALITY VISIBLE VIA A ‘SPIDER-WEB CHART’

Using a spider-web diagram is one way of making quality visible. The manner in which it is presented here is not entirely scientific, but comes in handy, nonetheless, as it helps to give an impression of the quality of a range of community-based ECEC activities.

A first step is to determine the crucial dimensions that make up good quality ECEC. This could best be done by involving all the major stakeholders of a particular activity or programme. Besides the most obvious -the children and their parents- these usually include the initiators, a community-based organisation (CBO) or an NGO, child professionals, and representatives of the municipality. Depending on the sort of ECEC provision, others may be involved such as members of the community or neighbourhood,

shopkeepers, police officers, health inspectors. In consultation with them, these dimensions could be drawn up. In doing so, the organisation which is promoting the implementation of quality assessments, should also draw on its own experience and know-how.

These discussions could take place within focus groups, individual interviews, simple questionnaires, or any other low-threshold method as long as the stakeholders can explain what they understand about a particular dimension and its critical elements. What matters is that people's views are optimally incorporated. Equally important is to arrive as close as possible to a consensus.

To facilitate the discussion here, a simple, but hypothetical ECEC community-based programme is introduced; this is done in a global manner, just sufficient to make the point.

The place of action is in a section of a provincial town where many 'blue collar' workers live; they used to work in factories that now have been closed down with the result that a lot of them are un- or underemployed. The streets make a depressive impression and are in a bad state of repair and are littered with uncollected garbage. Young people hang about and are often engaged in petty crime and drugs and most of the shops sell cheap consumer goods, mainly foodstuffs, alcohol and DVDs. The majority of young mothers work outside the house, leaving their children to grandparents, siblings or to fend for themselves. A bus service connects the neighbourhood with the rest of the town.

There's a small park and it is here that a local CBO has started a play group for children 3-5 year old. Twice a week, under the supervision of a volunteer and one or two parents, some twenty children play games, sing, and do physical exercises or other group activities for about two hours. When the weather is foul, they use the reception hall of the church. The volunteer, a divorced mother of school-going children, has worked as a pre-school teacher. She receives a small stipend from the CBO.

In this hypothetical case, the following dimensions could be listed:

■ **Child friendliness**

Are the adults friendly with the children? Are children corporally punished for misbehaviour? Are children listened to? Is the group open for children with special needs or coming from ethnic minority families? Can children choose their own games? Is the group leader and her helpers open for individual wishes/complaints by the children? Do the group leader and her helpers know the families/backgrounds of the children? Is there an awareness of the Rights of the Child (CRC)? Do children enjoy themselves? Is the programme of activities in line with the needs and possibilities of children? Are the toys, materials and equipment used exciting and challenging for the children?

■ **Connectedness**

Are parents interested and involved in the play group? Does the group leader get support from the CBO? Is the play group known by the Municipality? Are other members of the community aware of the initiative? Does the group leader have access to other play group leaders? Do the group leader and her helpers have access to information on young children? Are other sectors – media, commercial, churches – aware of the play group activities? Do the play group and local kindergarten work together?

■ **Safety and Health:**

Is there glass or other dangerous materials on the ground? Can stray dogs or undesirable elements (such as drug addicts) enter? Is the equipment reliable? How can children be prevented from running away? Is there access to telephone to call the police or medical centre

in cases of emergency? Does the group leader have first-aid experience? Are there toilet facilities? Does the group leader pick up signals of discomfort?

■ **Staffing**

Does the activity leader possess the right kind of skills to be entrusted with the group? Do her helpers have the right kind of skills to deal with the group? Is there sufficient adult supervision? Does the activity leader know the neighbourhood and the families? Is the activity leader motivated to work with the children? Does the leader have the trust of the parents? Are the activities supervised, monitored by third party (CBO, parents' committee, municipality)?

■ **Sustainability**

Does the programme stick to its regular schedule? Are parents keen on having their children participate in the play group? Are parents prepared to put in voluntary work (to make toys, clean the field, repair equipment, and act as helper)? Are other groups in the community willing to donate in kind or money? Is the funding by the CBO ensured? Is the technical support by the CBO ensured? Would the Municipality be willing to contribute to the initiative?

The following step is to choose from each dimension an *equal* number of critical components that are essential to the manner by which the dimension is understood. Again, for the sake of making the point, these critical components have been selected and those which pertain to the play group have been highlighted and the total number of 'positives' indicated:

■ **Child friendliness:**

1. Children enjoy themselves
2. Leader listens to individual children
3. No corporal punishment when children misbehave
4. Group is open to 'special' children
5. Activities are in line with children's needs and potential
6. Toys and equipment are in line with children's needs and potential
7. Leader is aware of CRC

Total positives: 4

■ **Connectedness**

1. Parents are meaningfully involved
2. CBO supports group leader
3. Wider community is aware of initiative
4. Municipality is positively interested
5. Group leader has access to information
6. Group leader is in contact with kindergarten
7. Group leader is in contact with other play group leaders

Total positives: 2

■ **Safety and Health**

1. There are no hazardous matters on the play ground

2. Group leader has access to telephone for emergencies
3. Children cannot run away unnoticed
4. Group leader has first-aid kit and the skills to use it
5. There are no threatening youngsters or adults about
6. Group leader responds to signals of discomfort
7. There are toilet facilities nearby

Total positives: 3

■ Staffing

1. Group leader has the right kind of skills
2. There is sufficient adult supervision
3. Group leader enjoys the trust of the parents
4. The group leader enjoys her work
5. The group leader knows the background of the children
6. The helpers know the children well
7. The activities are monitored by third party

Total positives: 6

■ Sustainability

1. Activities adhere to schedule
2. Parents endorse initiative
3. Parents put in voluntary time and labour
4. Community puts in resources
5. CBO continues to provide technical inputs
6. CBO continues to provide financial inputs
7. Municipality is willing to fund activities

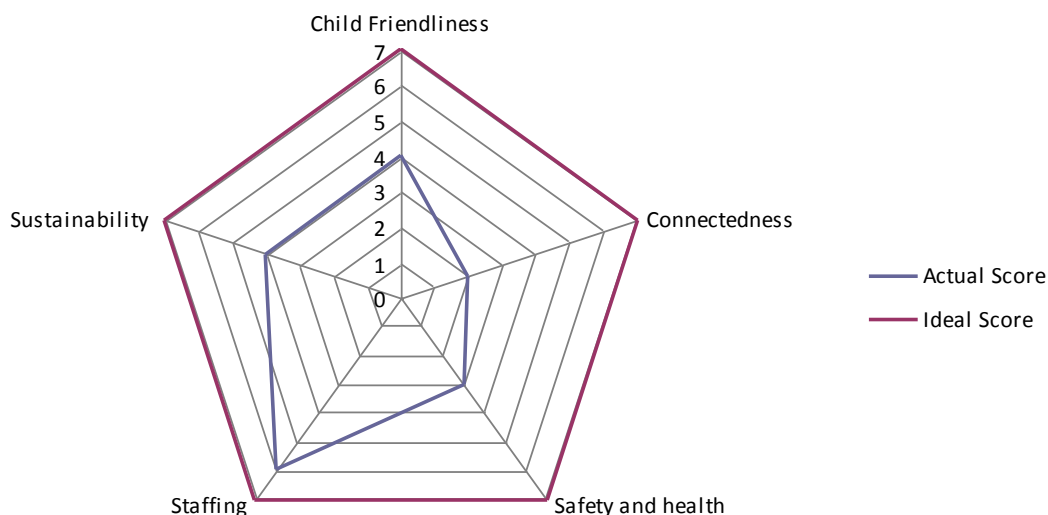
Total positives: 4

THE SPIDER-WEB CHART

The play group can now be transformed in a spider-web chart, using the table below:

Play group and its dimensions and their positives	
Dimension	Number of positives
Child friendliness	4
Connectedness	2
Safety en health	3
Staffing	6
Sustainability	4

This table, in turn, produces the desired spider-web chart:



A spider-web chart showing the rating of a playgroup

The chart allows for the issuing of a quality report card. The outer lines illustrate the ideal situation, the inner lines the state of affairs on the ground. It shows that, according to the joint opinions of the stakeholders in the community-based playgroup, that current conditions are far from ideal. Only the staffing of the activity approaches it; there is sufficient faith in the leadership of the play group. The other dimensions are weakly developed. Especially the safety and health conditions give cause for concern; the same applies for the connectedness of the play group and the other three dimensions need serious looking into. All in all, no reason to be content with this particular play group!

The spider-web chart could be enriched with another feature, that of minimum standards. In other words, which scores are absolutely unacceptable and which ones could be allowed to be neglected for some time? It is obvious that when there are dangerous objects on the playground or when the group leader beats up the children that the activities should be discontinued at once, which is not the case if the municipality does not lend its support or when the group leader is not *au fait* with the Convention of the Rights of the Child. One way of resolving this problem is to go back to the stakeholders and discuss with them which components have 'threshold values', thus which components have to be satisfied without which the activities cannot go on.



Some dimensions of the spider-web could be filled in for the picture above. The place looks clean and is nicely fenced off so that children can't easily wander off, nor can dogs for that matter enter. There is also

sufficient adult supervision and the play equipment is quite safe and sound. It is also obvious that the municipality has taken an interest in the playground.

A COMMUNITY-BASED ECEC QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOL

By introducing this particular use of the spider-web diagram a feasible helpful tool has been created to assess community-based ECEC. It is argued that the same method could be applied for any other activity, service or provision. It has also the added advantage that it permits comparisons over time as well as among play groups. It is also likely that they will retain their sensitivity to local contexts of the play groups.

It is to be expected that the dimensions and its components, when applied to more play groups, may change a little or be re-constituted. It is conceivable, for example, that a new dimension 'parental involvement' may be split off from 'connectedness' or that the overlap between 'connectedness' and 'sustainability' will become so strong that they may be better merged into one. In any event, the more this approach is applied, the more its dimensions and components will become meaningful and solid.

At some point research will be needed to see whether the dimensions are indeed as different as they are claimed to be or if in fact mutual relationships exist among them. For the time being, however, it could be a helpful tool in the hands of people who are interested in coming to grips with the question as to how to get an impression of the quality of community-based ECEC.

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