POLICY POSITION

Eurochild’s recommendations for EU action on early childhood education & care

February 2011

SUMMARY OF EUROCHILD’S KEY MESSAGES

Eurochild welcomes the recent Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care. We believe it provides a positive framework for future work in support of member states efforts to increase both access to, and quality of, early childhood education and care services. In the below policy position, Eurochild outlines its own views related to early childhood policies in general and early education and care services in particular. Our messages can be summarised as follows.

It is important to underpin early childhood policies with a recognition of children as rights-holders, as required by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We view childhood as an important life-phase in its own right, not solely as a transition to adulthood. In this context, we recognise that education and care must aim towards children’s ‘holistic’ development and realisation of their full potential.

We believe policies to develop early childhood education and care (ECEC) services should be set within a broader policy framework linking labour market policies, family-related leave, family support policies and formal education systems. Furthermore we support fully integrated education and care systems with no divide between children under three and children between three and compulsory school age.

We support the view that universal access to high quality ECEC services is more beneficial than interventions specifically targeted at vulnerable groups. Nonetheless it is important to ensure services reach out to more vulnerable groups in order to promote diversity, reduce social inequalities and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

In the Commission’s efforts to support exchange of good policies and practice, we believe it would be useful to develop and adopt common quality criteria for early years’ services thereby encouraging data collection, comparative analysis and benchmarking across EU member states.

We strongly welcome the emphasis on professionalization of staff working in ECEC services. It is important to value the early years’ workforce by investing in better remuneration, qualifications, career development perspectives, and attracting more men into the profession.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD & INTEGRATED POLICY

Social change over the past half-century has impacted profoundly on the way in which Europe’s youngest children are brought up. Parents’ career aspirations and/or financial pressure, gender equality, lack of extended family support, are just some of the factors that have contributed to a transformation in the care and education afforded to young children.
UNICEF’s 2008 report\(^1\) on the child care transition stated “whether today’s children benefit or suffer from changes in society leading to massive out of home child care will come down to the availability of parental leave and to the availability, affordability and quality of early childhood services.”

Eurochild strongly welcomes the adoption of the latest Communication on early childhood education and care (ECEC)\(^2\) from DG Education and Culture, with its evident attention on the contribution of early childhood services to children’s emotional, social and cognitive development. Nonetheless Eurochild urges the EU to adopt a more integrated approach to early childhood by situating policies on services provision within a broader policy framework that also addresses employment and social welfare policies from the perspective of the best interest of the child. The length and remuneration of parental leave, parents’ access to pre- and post-natal support, the existence of community networks and family-friendly public spaces, amongst other factors, will affect parents’ ability to care for and nurture their children. The attention on early childhood services is essential, but not sufficient in itself. Support for families and provision of out-of-home care for young children are not mutually exclusive; indeed they must reinforce each other to ensure children receive the best quality of care, particularly in the first most formative months and years of their lives.

A growing body of neuroscience research points to the impact of children’s experiences from the ages of 0-3 (including before birth) on their long-term psycho-social and emotional development. In an increasingly competitive, knowledge-based, globalised economy, the most prized skills include the ability to think creatively and laterally, to build positive relationships, to communicate effectively, to empathise, to adapt to new situations, to be able to learn new skills, to cope well in stressful situations. It is now widely acknowledged that the foundations for these skills are laid in early childhood. Children experiencing strong, positive and secure relationships in their first months and years tend to have better coping mechanisms in adulthood. Likewise children whose caregivers are insensitive to their needs, neglectful or abusive are more likely to have emotional or social disorders as adults.

Women have a legitimate claim for economic independence and equal rights in the labour market. But as a result, infants are increasingly placed in out-of-home care or with child-minders for extended periods as soon as paid maternity leave ends – as young as 3 months in some cases\(^3\). Until recently the main policy drive has been to dramatically increase provision of crèche and child-minding services to meet the growing demand. In many countries, provision falls short of demand, leaving mothers to organise informal childcare arrangements or ‘make-do’ with second-best choices in child-care.

Eurochild believes it is wrong and potential damaging to children to promote increased child-care services simply as an enabling mechanism for women’s participation labour market. To do so is to ignore the enormous, lasting impact of the care setting and care relationships on children’s development. We believe high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive early childhood education and care should be conceived as an entitlement for all children (coupled with family support and adequate leave). We favour a more integrated approach to ‘education’ and ‘care’ for all children from 0 to school age as opposed to the traditional split approach which has resulted in distinct programmes for 0-3 years-old and for 3s to compulsory school age, with the increasing focus on school readiness as children approach primary school\(^4\). To be consistent with the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child\(^5\), it is essential that a ‘whole child’ approach is adopted throughout the education cycle, which gives balanced attention to the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual and social development of each child.

\(^{1}\) http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc8_eng.pdf

\(^{2}\) Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM(2011)66.

\(^{3}\) For example, maternity leaves vary from 14 weeks to 1 year. Eurochild advocates for a minimum paid maternity leave of 6 months to facilitate and encourage breast feeding for the first 6 months and maternal bonding with the infant.


\(^{5}\) Article 29\(^{1}\) CRC refers to the purpose of education as being « the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential ».
EU POLICY RELEVANCE AND RATIONALE FOR ACTION

Although early childhood policies are a member state competence there is historic cooperation on social, educational and cultural policies, recognising that challenges can be better addressed by adopting common principles, valuing the exchange of experiences and working towards common goals. EU level action therefore departs from the premise that ECEC touches upon a range of policy areas where the EU is showing clear policy direction and supporting close cooperation and exchange between member states.

In particular the EU is committed to working in the following areas of relevance to early childhood policies:

- **Promoting and protecting of children’s rights.** The Lisbon Treaty recognises the protection of children’s rights as a Union objective and the recent Communication on an EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child\(^6\) acknowledges that “giving all children access to early childhood education and care is the foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration and later employability”. It requires that all internal and external EU policy and action integrates the principles enshrined in the UNCRC. Whilst not explicitly mentioned in the Child Rights Agenda, this has important implications for the way in which the EU supports policy development and exchange on early childhood education and care.

- **Promoting social inclusion and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.**

  The Europe 2020 strategy focuses the EU’s next 10-year agenda on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, including a specific target to lift 20 million people out of poverty. The Communication on the European platform Against Poverty – the flagship initiative accompanying the inclusive growth priority – recognises the contribution of early years services in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty\(^7\). Eurochild believes that early childhood services are important among a package of policy interventions that support families and empower children to realise their full potential. In order to make a positive difference, it is crucial to address inequalities in access to quality early childhood services and ensure adequate professional training, support and remuneration for those working in the sector. We favour a universal approach with entitlement to all children, coupled with targeted support for those at risk of marginalisation, including children of minority groups, children with disabilities, children living in poverty. The contribution of ECEC for the inclusion of Roma families was recently debated during the 4\(^{th}\) European Roma Platform\(^8\) and should be a main element of the forthcoming Commission Communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

- **Improving educational achievements and raising educational levels.** The Europe 2020 framework sets a target to reduce early school leaving by 10% by 2020. The recent Communication on tackling early school leaving\(^9\) states “increasing participation in good quality early childhood education and care has been identified as one of the most effective measures to give children a good start in education and to build their resilience”. The attention on quality and access in early childhood education and care is welcome. However as highlighted above we believe a more balanced approach to education and care should be adopted throughout the education life-cycle. Furthermore education initiatives must be integrated into a broader policy agenda of inclusive labour markets, family support and social welfare reform.

- **Contributing to job creation and qualification of the workforce.** The Europe 2020 flagship initiative on new skills and new jobs\(^10\) sets the EU’s agenda to help member states reach the 75% employment rate target by 2020. Among the priorities is the need to invest in, and adapt, education

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\(^6\) An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child, COM(2011)60/4


\(^8\) Discussion paper for the 4th European Roma Platform, Preventing Social Exclusion through The Europe 2020 Strategy: Early Childhood Development and the inclusion of Roma Families, 13 December 2010


and training systems to new patterns of work organisation. As we highlight above, we believe the foundation for many of the skills required in today’s labour markets are laid in early childhood. Early education and care services coupled with family support and adequate parental leaves have a significant role to play in preparing tomorrow’s skilled workforce. But development of early childhood services also has a direct and short-term impact on job creation and growth. There is enormous potential to expand the workforce and to develop on-going training and professional development in the sector. We welcome that the Communication encourages member states to use the structural funds to invest in ECEC, in particular through support for the training of staff.

- **Achieving greater gender equality.** The strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015 sets out the European Commission’s work programme on gender equality, and its contribution to the Europe 2020 goals. It highlights efforts to promote reconciliation, in particular entitlements to family-related leave, but also access to child care. In fact the main driver for increasing ECEC services at EU level has been the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities in particular linked to raising children, and gender equality concerns. Several initiatives have been taken including agreement of quantitative targets for childcare placements (the 2002 Barcelona Council objectives), setting a benchmark of at least 90% of young children participation in pre-primary education, to recommendations from the European Commission Childcare Network to establishing criteria for assessing progress and targets for attainment by publicly funded services.

Despite stimulating action within member states to increase ECEC services, these initiatives have not met their objectives. On one hand, the Barcelona targets have not been met by many member states. Those who have are encouraged to consider more ambitious objectives for the decade ahead. On the other side, quality criteria have not been agreed and important aspects such as defining a policy framework for service provision, monitoring and evaluation or setting minimum staff-child ratios are lagging behind. The latest Communication goes some way to filling this gap by proposing a series of areas for policy cooperation between member states as regards the quality of ECEC.

### **THE WAY FORWARD – TOWARDS MORE (E)QUALITY IN EARLY YEARS ACROSS THE EU**

The overall policy directions now emerging from the Europe 2020 strategy will have an important impact on early childhood policies in the coming decade. There are clearly opportunities and threats therein.

With respect to future follow-up action on early childhood education and care, and welcoming the Commission Communication, we would nonetheless like to underline the need to strengthen and support policy development in the following key areas.

**Holistic and integrated policy development**

Good outcomes for children, in particular those who are at risk of marginalisation, can only be achieved if policies are coordinated. It is crucial to link policies promoting early childhood services into a broader policy framework including parental leave, labour market policies, family support, and the formal education system. At EU level policies must focus on children’s well-being and development and embrace a multi-dimensional approach to ECEC that links the child rights and poverty agendas, recognising that ECEC can support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, promote diversity and contribute to reduce social inequalities and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

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13 Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, Childcare Network, 1996.
14 Declaration of the permanent intergovernmental group “Europe de l’Enfance”, meeting on 16 November 2010.
The EU should encourage exchange and learning among member states with a view to encouraging more integrated education and care services, and overcoming the traditional split between 0-3 and 3 to school age.

**Increased provision and investment**

In a period of fiscal consolidation and austerity measures, it is crucial that commitments to early childhood education and care services are respected and where possible reinforced. Spending cuts in this crucial sector will undermine long-term social and economic objectives. It also ignores the potential of investment to stimulate short-term job creation and growth\(^\text{15}\).

Alongside ECEC services (age 0 to school age) it is also important to invest in different forms of care and services for older age groups, including after-school, leisure and non-formal education activities, as well as support services for parents\(^\text{16}\).

**Establish common EU criteria for quality early years’ services**

The quality of care and education children receive in their early years are the foundation for their success later in life. A renewed commitment to increased provision of ECEC services is necessary but must go hand in hand with the definition of quality criteria including accessibility, affordability, pedagogical approach, a curricular framework, participation, evaluation, minimum environmental and staffing standards, and infrastructure. The best interest of the child should be the primary concern on how to meet demand and services should be tailored under participatory approaches that give voice to the children, parents and staff. Eurochild recommends revisiting the work of the Childcare Network and the adoption of indicators to benchmark improvements in ECEC at EU level.

**More data collection and analysis**

OECD Starting Strong reports\(^\text{17}\) and other more recent research drew attention to the weakness of available and comparable data on ECEC. Gaps exist particularly in relation to children with special needs and children from disadvantaged or ethnic minority background. Data is also needed in a broad range of areas such as supply and distribution of early years services, enrolment levels, curricula, workforce, outcomes for children, and profiles of children disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity, income level, etc. Without adequate data it is not possible to develop sound, evidence-based policies or to monitor progress and achievements. Clearly a commitment to quality criteria and indicators needs to be accompanied by a data collection and assessment process.

**Raise professional standards, training and remuneration**

Quality and motivation of the workforce is fundamental in delivering the objectives of child development and social equity calling for greater emphasis 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 ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially rewarded.

\(^{15}\) The financial impact of early years interventions in Scotland, 15 November 2010, Scottish Government.

\(^{16}\) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on early childhood care and education, 20 January 2010.

Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals promoting the rights and welfare of children and young people in Europe. The network currently has 90 members in 32 European countries. Our work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Eurochild is supported by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, social affairs and inclusion 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.

The seven-year Programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-27, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries.

PROGRESS mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States’ commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society. To that effect, PROGRESS will be instrumental in: providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas; monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas; promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large.