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# Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

*Analytical report*



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# **Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic**

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## Executive summary

This report explores the different ways in which European Union (EU) Member States (MS) have attempted to ensure high-quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) for children and families in the era of COVID-19. The rationale for the report builds on the Conclusions of the European Council concerning the fight against COVID-19 in education and training, which stipulate that Member States should share information and best practices and continue exchanging information about possible ways to adapt to this new situation at the level of education and training (Council of the European Union, 2020).

All children, and particularly those who are most societally disadvantaged, risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020; Muroga et al, 2020) due to both the socio-economic impact of the crisis on their families, and the consequences of the measures taken to contain the virus, which affect their learning and wellbeing (United Nations, 2020). By interconnecting its functions – educational (investing in children’s wellbeing, learning, participation); social (supporting families in the upbringing of their children); and economic (helping parents in combining work and household responsibilities) – ECEC can play a key role in supporting all children and families to face the crisis, and especially those at risk of social exclusion. ECEC can greatly contribute to breaking the cycles of poverty and discrimination, as already stated in many EU documents (European Commission, 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018; European Commission, 2021a; 2021b). The COVID-19 situation may, therefore, represent an opportunity for the ECEC sector to revisit its identity and evaluate the lessons learned, both in terms of its daily practice after the emergency, and as a possible preparation for future crises.

The central aim of this study is to examine what measures have been taken by selected EU member states – two countries (Sweden and Croatia), as well as three regions (Flanders in Belgium, Berlin in Germany and Emilia-Romagna in Italy) – to deal with the COVID-19 crisis during the first year of the pandemic (March-December 2020), in order to ensure quality ECEC for children and families. It is expected that this analysis of coping strategies and lessons learned will be relevant to other EU Member States and regions.

The European Quality Framework (EQF) on ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) has been used as a lens with which to explore aspects including accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, finance and governance. After an introductory first chapter, Chapter 2 analyses the effects of the pandemic on children and families, to explore what role ECEC can play in addressing their needs in times of crisis. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the societal functions of ECEC. Chapter 4 explores in greater depth the various aspects of quality that may have been affected during this crisis, while Chapter 5 reports on the relevant lessons learned and policy guidelines.

The data analysed show that ECEC played a crucial role in countering the negative effects of the pandemic on children, families and communities. However, compared with other levels of education, ECEC appears to have been one of the sectors most vulnerable<sup>1</sup> to the policy decisions taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the findings of other research (Gromada, Richardson and Rees, 2020). This highlights the need to raise the profile of ECEC within the field of education/care sector policies. In addition, the importance of ECEC must be recognised as part of emergency response strategies, in order to urgently accelerate efforts to address gaps in access, as underlined in the last Unicef-Innocenti Working Paper (Muroga et al., 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> By 'vulnerable' we mainly refer to the fact that priority has generally been given to other levels of education when it comes to accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring, governance and finance.

## Key findings

Taking into account the areas of the European Quality Framework (EQF) (Council of the European Union, 2019), the report underlines the following key findings<sup>2</sup>:

**Accessibility:** at present, complete statistics regarding accessibility of ECEC during the Covid-19 crisis are still unavailable. However, it has been widely reported that the pandemic has had a particularly negative effect on ECEC attendance among societally disadvantaged children and families, whose participation has been constrained by a large number of factors. Some countries/regions employed policy measures to support access to ECEC among societally vulnerable groups in society. Priority access was in some cases adopted to achieve this aim. In both Germany (Berlin) and Belgium (Flanders), societally disadvantaged families were assigned priority status for ECEC services during both the lockdown and reopening phases. Croatian authorities implemented large-scale temporary fee reductions, with the aim of ensuring affordable ECEC options for all key workers and two-earner households without alternative childcare arrangements. Outreach initiatives were also put in place in certain contexts. In Italy, governmental guidelines emphasised the pedagogical importance of carefully planned transitions 'back' into ECEC, to make the process of 're-familiarization' between families, children and staff as welcoming and inclusive as possible. However, guaranteeing wide access to ECEC on a structural level remains in general a challenge.

**Workforce:** the COVID-19 emergency has highlighted more explicitly how the quality of ECEC depends in large measure on the level of support received by its workforce. Nonetheless, the recognition and support accorded to ECEC staff have varied between contexts. In Sweden and Germany (Berlin), ECEC professionals received widespread accolades for their crucial contribution to the public good during the most challenging months of lockdown. However, even in these cases, their voices were not always taken into account when designing recommendations and measures concerning ECEC. In Belgium (Flanders) and Italy – both countries with a 'split' ECEC system<sup>3</sup> – childcare workers in particular (working with children aged 0-3 years) reported feeling unacknowledged. ECEC staff in Croatia also reported feeling undervalued. In terms of support, pedagogical coaching frameworks and continuous professional development (CPD) schemes became crucial for ECEC staff throughout the crisis. In Croatia, CPD programmes were rapidly converted into online activities, which had the two-fold consequences of, on the one hand, a lack of face-to-face contact, and on the other, an increase in staff attendance compared with pre-COVID periods (due to easier access to online training for participants from remote areas). In Belgium (Flanders), in-person pedagogical coaching within small ECEC centres was discontinued, while preschool staff reported an overall increase in the provision of guidance programmes in comparison with previous years. In Italy, ECEC centres for the under-3s could rely on traditional in-house coaching by pedagogical coordinators. This displayed a certain degree of efficacy in realigning pedagogical practices with frequently changing health protocols. State-maintained preschool settings, on the other hand, suffered a near-total suspension of in-service training programmes and coaching schemes. In general, the more access ECEC centres had to leaders or coaches who combined pedagogical vision with steering capacity, the better they were able to deal with the unpredictable nature of the crisis. With regard to protective materials, there was a general

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<sup>2</sup> Due to significant variation between ECEC systems in different European countries/regions, we suggest the reader consult the country/regional fact sheets in Annex 1 to better understand the key findings - Country/regional Fact Sheets.

<sup>3</sup> ECEC systems may be integrated or split: in the former case, centres for children aged 0-6 years are managed in an integrated way under the auspices of the same ministry (as in Sweden, Croatia and Berlin); in the latter case, an institutional split exists between centres for children aged 0-3 and 3-6 years, which are managed by different ministries (as in Belgium and Italy, although the latter is currently in a transition phase from split to integrated). The two systems carry a number of consequences on the level of pre and in-service training for ECEC staff, working conditions, management and governance.

lack of good-quality provision to ECEC staff, which negatively influenced anxiety levels among professionals. Continuity of salary is another crucial issue to address. In some of the countries/regions examined (e.g. Sweden), ECEC staff have been paid throughout the whole period of the pandemic (including during lockdown), while in others (e.g. Croatia), staff have been paid less or were temporarily made at least partially unemployed. Greater efforts were needed on the part of some governments to plan compensation measures for ECEC centres, particularly those in the private sector. These issues are of particular importance, especially given that staffing shortages are a generalised problem, both during the pandemic and beyond.

**Curriculum:** the temporary suspension of in-person activities due to the COVID-19 emergency prompted a re-adaptation of pedagogical practices and the development of IT capabilities within ECEC organisations. One of the biggest challenges in this process appears to have been promoting children's participation and autonomy within a context in which (for hygiene reasons) certain materials can no longer be used, groups cannot be mixed, etc. In fact, these challenges provide opportunities to rethink materials and activities based on goals and vision. For example, many professionals (e.g. in Berlin, Italy, Belgium (Flanders)) have found that working in 'bubbles' with continuity of staff members has provided an opportunity to offer a warmer and more holistic pedagogy to young children, giving staff more time to observe and work in a child-centred way. Professionals also faced challenges in their relationships with families, since face-to-face contacts were limited or non-existent. While ECEC centres have developed alternative ways to involve and connect with parents, the lack of in-person contact has been very challenging. Meanwhile, the accelerated digitalisation of ECEC settings, dictated by the need to improve cooperative communication between staff and families, has led to a significant leap in digital competences among ECEC staff. In Croatia, the development of IT infrastructure is reported to have improved the transparency of ECEC centres in the eyes of families, particularly in terms of communication opportunities and channels for exchange.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** the data show that 'supportive' elements of monitoring processes (as opposed to 'controlling' ones) have been appreciated by ECEC staff during the crisis. For example in Belgium (Flanders), the preschool sector (between 2.5 and 6 years old) witnessed a shift from external controlling audits by the inspectorate to visits with a supportive role. In Germany (Berlin), established self-assessment procedures continued to be carried out at centre level throughout the emergency, in accordance with regional guidelines. In Italy, in the absence of national measures specifically targeting ECEC evaluation across the whole sector, quality management at municipal ECEC centres continued to be carried out internally by pedagogical coordinators within a collegial framework.

**Governance and funding:** responding to the crisis demanded both rapid decision making and comprehensive collaboration – thus, institutional fragmentation emerged as a major challenge in governance across all of the countries/regions analysed. Countries/regions such as Sweden and Germany (Berlin) (both with integrated ECEC systems), which were well organised and financed as integrated systems, appeared able to face the crisis without the need for extreme measures to ensure the viability of the ECEC sector. In Belgium (Flanders) and in Italy, on the other hand, more energies and resources were needed to align the different levels of the split and fragmented ECEC system. In Belgium (Flanders), municipalities faced significant challenges in laying down protocols governing cooperation between childcare and preschool personnel. In Italy, the implications of institutional splits and the inadequacy of current provision became the focus of considerable debate during the crisis, leading to a strengthening of calls to allocate larger budget lines for ECEC as part of Italy's recovery and resilience plan. Cooperation between ECEC structures and health authorities has also presented challenges. Positive experiences were reported in both Germany (Berlin) and Croatia, where existing modes and frameworks for trans-institutional collaboration appear to have improved as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. In addition, the data reveal that clear and unambiguous communication with the ECEC sector and with the families turned out to be crucial in order to manage the crisis.

## **Lessons learned and policy guidelines**

EU countries have implemented a variety of policy responses to the COVID-19 emergency. These were informed by different sets of ideas, interests, and existing organisational constraints. Choices have been made at different levels within systems, according to the governance structure in each context. In this respect, the multi-layered structure of national ECEC systems, characterised by the presence of various layers of governance, requires that interventions should be tailored to the specific administrative level in question. The following policy guidelines (see Chapter 5 for a full text) are conceptualised at a general level, so as to be adaptable to the various EU contexts and different levels of governance within national ECEC systems. The guidelines are presented in accordance with the five ECEC quality pillars identified by the EQF (Council of the European Union, 2019).

### **Accessibility**

Ensuring the continuity of educational relationships with children and families is paramount, especially during the period of the pandemic, which has been characterised by discontinuities in attendance at ECEC centres. This is particularly important for children and families in societally disadvantaged positions. Ensuring access to ECEC during the pandemic therefore helps to safeguard children's rights to wellbeing, learning, play, socialisation, and equality of opportunities.

#### ***Policy guidelines***

- 1.1. Access to high-quality ECEC is important for all children, as a child right emanating from UNCRC (1989) and EU policies (European pillar of social rights, 2017; Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC system, 2019). Particularly in times of crisis, ensuring access to high-quality ECEC provision guarantees that children's rights to education, wellbeing, socialisation and play are taken into account.
- 1.2. Striving for inclusiveness of provision should remain a key target, even where policies are designed to ensure uptake of ECEC among priority groups. Efforts should be made towards ensuring that ECEC remains available, accessible and affordable for vulnerable groups and for those families most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crisis.
- 1.3. National, regional and local authorities should devise comprehensive joint strategies to continuously reach out to the most vulnerable groups in society, in collaboration with ECEC providers and social welfare organisations.
- 1.4. Adequate digital equipment and in-person home visits are crucial tools for maintaining regular communication with children and families who are not attending ECEC centres.
- 1.5. Ensuring warm and welcoming transitions from home to the ECEC centre is crucial, not only for newly enrolled children and families, but also for those who have been absent from ECEC for a while.

### **Workforce**

Providing job security and adequate compensation to ensure the motivation and retention of staff is key to the sustainability of high-quality ECEC in times of crisis and beyond. Although the crisis has highlighted the importance of ECEC centres, the overall social recognition of ECEC professionals remains low. Meanwhile, the pedagogical and policy-making capacity of ECEC leaders has proved crucial in supporting ECEC professionals to deal effectively with the COVID-19 crisis. Accordingly, both the working conditions of ECEC staff and the pedagogical and policy capacity of ECEC leaders should be strengthened.

#### ***Policy guidelines***

- 2.1. Structural measures should be considered to address shortages in the ECEC workforce, in order to avoid overworking the existing staff, which would negatively affect the quality of education and care practice.
- 2.2. Given the importance of maintaining contacts with children and families during prolonged periods of closure of ECEC settings, continuity of salary for ECEC staff should be guaranteed.
- 2.3. Pedagogical coaching, collegial reflectivity and planning should not be discontinued during the crisis and beyond.
- 2.4. Staff conditions and concerns should be acknowledged and taken seriously into account through the provision of pedagogical guidance and professional development opportunities. In addition, because ECEC workers are exposed to close contacts with children and parents as part of their daily work, consideration should be given to the possibility of including them among priority groups for vaccination.
- 2.5. ECEC leaders play a key role in providing organisational, pedagogical and emotional support to their educational teams. It is crucial that adequate decision-making infrastructure, operating in accordance with the principles of distributed leadership, is in place at the level of each institution.
- 2.6. ECEC leaders should be granted the opportunity to systematically engage in peer-learning initiatives and advocacy processes within locally established professional networks, umbrella organisations or trade unions.
- 2.7. The procurement and supply of protective equipment to staff should not be delegated to individual ECEC centres, nor to ECEC staff.
- 2.8. Investments should be made towards improving ICT infrastructure, as ECEC staff have been highly appreciative of the opportunities offered by digital tools to document children's experiences, carry out meetings and conduct exchanges with parents.

### **Curriculum**

In the process of striking a balance between the implementation of safety/hygiene measures and the pedagogical vision of ECEC, priority should be given to nurturing children's well-being, participation and learning, as well as fostering meaningful and respectful relationships with families. Raising awareness of such dilemmas – and supporting teams of ECEC professionals in adopting innovative approaches/practices – could represent an opportunity for ECEC centres to revisit their pedagogical identities from a perspective that places equal value on the educational and the social functions of ECEC.

### ***Policy guidelines***

- 3.1. Given that young children have been highly affected by the negative consequences of lockdowns and restrictions during the pandemic, the educational and care practices adopted within ECEC centres should guarantee that children's rights to socialisation, play and learning are foregrounded.
- 3.2. In times of crisis, ECEC centres can become places of resilience, where children can share their lived experiences and emotions with adults and peers through interaction and play. This role of ECEC becomes even more salient when considering the increase in difficult home situations (such as domestic violence) during lockdown.
- 3.3. Compliance with safety/hygiene protocols should not hinder children's agency and participation, nor should it limit their communication and expressions through play, body language and movement.
- 3.4. Specific initiatives should be put in place to sustain the development of relationships of trust between parents and professionals.

- 3.5. Alternative methods, including online communication, should be explored to involve families in the everyday life of ECEC centres.
- 3.6. When ECEC centres are closed or children/families are in self-isolation, digital tools can also be used to ensure the continuity of educational relationships.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

While quality monitoring and evaluation processes can be undertaken through a combination of top-down 'controlling' approaches and bottom-up 'supportive' approaches, the evidence analysed for this report indicates that supportive elements of monitoring proved to be particularly useful for sustaining teams in reviewing their practice during the pandemic crisis. In addition, data regarding ECEC attendance should be collected and monitored as a means of identifying those groups who are less well catered for by existing provisions, and to design initiatives to ensure that ECEC remains accessible to those families who were most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crises.

### **Policy guidelines**

- 4.1. Investing in a monitoring infrastructure that systemically supports ECEC centres and teams in the process of pedagogical planning, evaluation and the review of educational practices is paramount, and is preferable to external processes of control during times of crisis.
- 4.2. The systematic collection of reliable data in relation to ECEC attendance is necessary to continuously monitor the accessibility of provision during times of crisis, and to design appropriate *ad hoc* measures to ensure equitable access.

### **Governance and funding**

The study reveals that concerns such as children's rights, early learning, parental support and the reconciliation of work and family life were assessed and weighed differently between countries during the pandemic. In countries where ECEC has been framed since its inception with a strong focus on children's rights, ECEC systems tend to be regulated and funded within a coherent public governance framework that recognises the educational and social value of ECEC. In those countries where the educational, social and economic functions of ECEC have traditionally been split into separate domains – i.e. childcare and early education – governance tends to be weaker and more brittle, leading to greater fragmentation of initiatives and discontinuity in public funding. Analysis of the data shows that fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems require a greater number of means and measures to be activated in times of crisis. Stable ECEC systems that are coherently organised and financed were significantly better prepared to deal with this crisis, and required fewer *ad hoc* measures to ensure the viability of the sector. It can be inferred that an integrated system of governance is better suited to facing the multiple challenges arising from the pandemic crisis.

### **Policy guidelines**

- 5.1. A clear flow of communication between national, regional and local authorities, via existing umbrella and statutory bodies, can facilitate decision-making processes when swift decisions are required, as well as assisting in the smooth implementation of policy measures.
- 5.2. During the pandemic, a need has emerged within systems of ECEC governance to improve the balance between centralised processes of policy and regulatory design, and decentralised implementation.
- 5.3. Clear and unambiguous crisis communication is vastly important, both with families directly and with the ECEC sector.
- 5.4. Integrated measures are needed that combine ECEC with family financial support schemes, to allow more flexible responses to the ever-changing scenarios created by the pandemic.

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- 5.5. Inter-institutional communication protocols between ECEC, health care and welfare services should be more widely promoted, as these could provide a basis upon which to create platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration in the future.
  - 5.6. Fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems have required higher levels of support during the pandemic. In contexts where the ECEC sector largely relies on private for-profit organisations rather than publicly subsidised provision, emergency financial assistance has become the only viable approach to avoid the closure of centres and ensure the continuity of salaries for staff.
  - 5.7. To advance and mainstream the lessons learned during this crisis, greater financial resources are required at statutory level: now is the time to honour the responsibilities undertaken by EU Member States in ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 spread quickly from China to other countries. The outbreak was classified as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020 (Friendly et al., 2020). Many countries experienced complete and/or partial lockdown(s) that also involved the educational sector, including ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care), followed by a re-opening phase guided by a number of hygiene/safety measures.

This report examines the way in which several European Union (EU) countries have attempted to ensure a high-quality approach to ECEC for children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic, following the Conclusions of the European Council concerning the fight against COVID-19 in education and training, which stipulate that Member States should *'share information, experiences, best practices [...], and keep exchanging about the ways in which education and training can adapt to the situation [...].'* According to the Conclusions, this should be achieved by focusing on *'guaranteeing equality of opportunities, stimulating the wellbeing of children/students and professionals, and providing psychological support'* (Council of the European Union, 2020).

As the policy brief of the United Nations underlines (United Nations, 2020), children risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic, for various reasons. In all countries, children are being affected by the socio-economic impact of the crisis on their families, and by the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus. Potential long-term effects may delay the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, the harmful effects of the pandemic are not distributed equally, with the greatest damage being caused to children and families in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, as well as among those already in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

The Apart Together survey, carried out recently by the World Health Organization (2020), also addresses the inequalities experienced on many levels by refugee families and families with migrant backgrounds, as well as the increase in perceived discrimination against them after the COVID-19 outbreak. With regard to this matter, the pandemic is making a bad situation worse, given that the economic crisis increased the gap between societally disadvantaged families and those who are better off. In addition, some families did not send their children back to ECEC centres after they re-opened (Muroga et al., 2020). The last Unicef-Innocenti Working Paper (Muroga et al., 2020) underlines the need to raise the profile of ECEC within policies in the education sector and within emergency response plans, and to urgently accelerate efforts to address gaps in access.

From this perspective, the role of ECEC centres is particularly important in supporting young children, families and local communities. The COVID-19 situation has obliged ECEC staff to quickly readapt their practices by trying to connect the new regulations with their socio-pedagogical framework. Indeed, this crisis could represent an opportunity for the ECEC sector to revisit its identity and evaluate the lessons learned both in terms of its daily practice after the emergency, and as a possible preparation for future crises.

### 1.1. Why this report? Aims, methodology and structure

All EU countries have faced challenging times due to COVID-19. Depending on its context, each country has searched for answers to the consequences the pandemic has obliged them to face. The choices made by each country show both similar and distinct priorities encompassing policy and practice, and adapted to the different levels of the ECEC system.

Several interesting questions arise in relation to each country's policy responses to COVID-19: for example, have ECEC centres been closed or not? And in case of ECEC closures, which age cohorts of children were the first to return to ECEC? What rationales were used in relation to this choice, and what does this tell us about the societal function of the ECEC

sector? Is there a difference in the way countries with split or integrated systems<sup>4</sup> responded to the situation? Moreover, according to the Council Recommendation for High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems and its European Quality Framework (Council of the European Union, 2019), quality ECEC should integrate care for and learning by young children, and should invest in close and trusting relationships with families, especially those in vulnerable situations. But how have different countries and regions ensured this high-quality approach to children and families in the context of COVID-19, while guaranteeing sufficient health precautions in a physical distanced societal climate?

This sudden crisis in global health poses unprecedented leadership challenges to the ECEC sector. Far-reaching decisions have needed to be taken, and quick solutions have had to be found for new issues that have arisen at each level of the ECEC system. It is a matter of urgency to analyse and share among the EU Member States what types of ECEC arrangements at the various levels of the system have been most efficient in facing these challenges.

Answering the questions above is not merely an important exercise for now, during the pandemic situation, and for possible future pandemic scenarios. In a wider context, the answers to these questions reveal some general insights into the strengths and weaknesses of ECEC policies in EU countries. They provide a unique opportunity to raise awareness at the levels of policy, research and practice, which could lead to improvements across the whole ECEC system. The COVID-19 experience can offer new insights and opportunities to advocate for change in the ECEC system, both now and in the future. This report is intended as a step in this direction.

### 1.1.1. Aims of the study

The central aim of this study is to examine how two EU Member States and three regions have dealt with the COVID-19 crisis during the first year of the pandemic (March-December 2020), in order to ensure quality ECEC for children and families. Our analysis seeks to identify lessons learned and policy pointers that may also be relevant for other EU member States and regions.

This core aim is expressed through the following research questions:

- What were the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and children in 2020?
- What are the rationales behind the COVID-19 measures (e.g. partial closure and reopening of ECEC centres) that were taken during the first year of the crisis (March-December 2020)? What do these rationales tell us about the societal functions of the ECEC sector?
- What opportunities and threats exist in relation to quality ECEC as a result of COVID-19 measures?

To formulate specific thematic areas for analysis, the European Quality Framework on ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) has been used as a lens with which to explore the following aspects:

- *Accessibility*: How can the availability and affordability of ECEC for all families be ensured during the time of COVID-19?
- *Workforce*: How is the crisis affecting ECEC staff and their working conditions?
- *Curriculum*: How can ECEC centres ensure an integrated concept of care and learning in collaboration with families?

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<sup>4</sup> ECEC systems can be 'integrated', meaning that centres for children aged 0-6 years are managed in an integrated way under the auspices of the same ministry; or they can be 'split systems' based on an institutional split between provisions for children aged 0-3 and those who are 3-6 (or 2,5-6) years old.

- *Monitoring and evaluation:* How are ECEC centres and policies keeping track of the quality of ECEC?
- *Finance and governance:* What opportunities and threats exist in relation to the financing and governance of ECEC in the time of COVID? How can governments overall provide support to the ECEC sector?

### 1.1.2. Rationale and methodology

This report provides an overview of ECEC policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across the five cases examined (two EU Member States and three regions). Furthermore, the implications of such policy choices on ECEC practice – as well as their effects on young children and families – are analysed qualitatively through an inductive research approach. The study was conducted using an exploratory design (Stebbins, 2001) that relies on the qualitative analysis of both primary data (policy documents, transcripts of focus groups and interviews conducted with ECEC stakeholders at each site), and secondary data sources (available literature in the five relevant country languages). Primary and secondary data in the original languages were gathered by local experts, then translated and analysed in the form of five data reports, each of which mapped the state of affairs in the two EU Member States (Sweden and Croatia) and three regions (Flanders in Belgium, Berlin in Germany, and Emilia-Romagna in Italy) studied.

The first lessons learned that are presented in this study derive from the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of ECEC policy responses and the initiatives undertaken in the five countries/regions to address the challenges posed by the pandemic crisis. Policy guidelines were therefore elaborated by synthesising and reviewing existing evidence from research, policy and practice through a recursive-inductive process involving both the core research team and local experts. In this sense, the analysis carried out in this exploratory study builds upon a consultative methodological approach that has proven successful in several research policy forums triggering reflection on real policy challenges (Milotay, 2016; Peeters and Vandekerckhove, 2015)

The five countries/regions were selected in order to achieve: 1) a geographically balanced sample; 2) a mix between 'split' and 'integrated' ECEC systems<sup>5</sup>, since these different ways of governing and managing ECEC centres could lead to diverging choices and effects at the level of policy and practice; and 3) a diverse range of approaches to facing the pandemic (e.g. Italy choose the full closure of ECEC centres at the beginning, while in Sweden ECEC remained open), in order to have a variety of possible scenarios that could potentially be adapted to different contexts.

As the pandemic is still ongoing, the available data that have been collected relate to the early period of the health crisis, from March to December 2020. Nevertheless, the first lessons learned and the policy guidelines that have been developed can be applied to any stage in the current and possible future health crisis.

As ECEC systems can vary significantly between different European countries/regions, we suggest the reader first consult the country/regional fact sheets in Annex 1.

➤ [Country/regional Fact Sheets.](#)

To develop the country/regional data reports, the local key experts made use of the following sources.

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<sup>5</sup> We refer to systems in which centres for children aged 0-6 years are managed in an integrated way (as in Sweden, Croatia and Berlin), and systems in which there is a split between provisions for children aged 0-3 and those aged 3-6 (or 2,5-6) years (as in Belgium and Italy – although the latter is undergoing a transition from split to integrated). To gain a better understanding of the ECEC system in each country/region, please see Annex 1 – [Country/Regional Fact Sheets](#).

Country	Sources used
<p><b>Belgium</b> (Flanders)</p> <p><b>Local key experts:</b></p> <p><i>Liesbeth Lambert, VBJK</i></p> <p><i>Katrien Van Laere VBJK</i></p>	<p><b>Documents:</b> Reports and videos from the Corona Commissions organised by the Flemish parliament in autumn and winter 2020. These Corona Commissions evaluated the impact of COVID-19 on children and families, and on the ECEC sector. Moreover, the ECEC key experts analysed various relevant policy documents, reports and studies.</p> <p><b>Individual interviews</b> were carried out with a representative of the umbrella organisation Catholic Education Flanders (<i>Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen</i>); a representative of the Flemish welfare association (<i>Vlaams Welzijnsverbond</i>); a pedagogical coach of private childcare centres (<i>Mentes vzw- VCOK vzw</i>); an administrator at the Upbringing (<i>Opgroeien</i>) Agency; the cabinet secretary to the Minister of Education; and a cabinet employee at the Minister of Welfare.</p> <p><b>Focus groups</b> were carried out with the administrators of the interdepartmental working group on transitions (Department of Education, Agency for Educational Service – AgODi; Upbringing Agency; Agency of Integration and Welfare); with representatives of local authorities and childcare federations; with three representatives of a teacher’s trade union; with five civil society organisations representing children and families (including families living in poverty, and families with children with a disability); with three representatives of the city of Ghent; and with two representatives of the Flemish Community Commission (VGC, Welfare, Health &amp; Family) in Brussels.</p> <p><b>Media:</b> relevant (professional) journals, Facebook pages and blogs also informed the report, as well as certain newspapers featuring articles and discussions relating to COVID-19 and ECEC during 2020.</p>
<p><b>Croatia</b></p> <p><b>Local key expert:</b></p> <p><i>Sanja Brajković, OASbS</i></p>	<p><b>Documents:</b> Relevant documents and research were reviewed, primarily those from the Ministry of Science and Education (<i>Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja</i>) and the Croatian Institute of Public Health (<i>Hrvatski institute za javno zdravstvo</i>).</p> <p><b>Focus groups</b> were carried out involving the main stakeholders working in the ECEC sector: one with representatives of local authorities; one with ECEC principals; one with early ECEC professionals; and one with health workers. Five representatives of each of the groups mentioned above participated in the focus groups, except for the focus group with ECEC principals, which involved four participants. In the focus group involving local authorities, two representatives participated and three additional <b>online interviews</b> have been conducted. In each focus group, representatives came from different regions of Croatia. Representatives of both smaller and larger ECEC centres and smaller and larger local communities participated.</p> <p><b>Media:</b> Relevant (professional) journals (e.g. 'Child, Kindergarten, Family'), Facebook pages and blogs were reviewed, as well as certain newspapers featuring articles and discussions relating to COVID-19 and ECEC during the year 2020.</p>

	<p><b>Other organisations:</b> information was gathered from websites and forums, and conversations were conducted with representatives of NGOs whose main mission is to protect children and families' rights.</p>
<p><b>Germany</b> (Berlin)</p> <p><b>Local key expert:</b> <i>Henriette Heimgaertner, International Academy of Berlin</i></p>	<p><b>Documents:</b> Information was collected from regulations for the state of Berlin to curb the spread of coronavirus, issued by the Governing Major of Berlin. A steady stream of regulations and hands-on information was issued by Berlin's Ministry of Education, Youth and Family (<i>Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Familie</i>) to provider organisations. Up to December 2020, 20 such circulars were issued, in addition to information addressed to parents. All aspects relating to the handling of the crisis from an educational, organisational, health prevention and financial perspectives were dealt with in these circulars. In addition, press conferences were carried out by the Federal chancellor and Ministers responsible. The information provided in them was followed and taken into account. The German Youth Institute (GYI) (<i>Deutsches Jugendinstitut</i>), a federally funded research and policy institute, launched a nationwide survey in May 2020, providing monthly updates on the national situation. More than 10,000 centres participated in the survey out of an approximate total of 53.000 establishments. Reports released between May and December 2020 were used for this study. In addition, data from the <i>Bertelsmann Foundation Länderreport</i> were used.</p> <p><b>Interviews</b> were conducted with ECEC professionals (n=4), principals (n=1) and pedagogical coaches (n=3), in addition to parents (n=3), coordinators of umbrella organisations (n=1), and representatives of agencies undertaking external evaluation and other quality development measures (n=3).</p> <p><b>Media:</b> Relevant (professional) journals and magazines informed the report, as well as (online) newspapers featuring articles and discussions relating to COVID-19 and ECEC during 2020.</p>
<p><b>Italy</b></p> <p><b>Local key experts:</b></p> <p><i>Arianna Lazzari, University of Bologna</i></p> <p><i>Martino Serapioni, University of Bologna</i></p>	<p><b>Documents:</b> The policy section of the report is largely based on an analysis of legislative and technical documents issued by various public authorities during the early months of the pandemic. The numerous emergency decrees promulgated by the Council of Ministers (<i>Consiglio dei Ministri</i>) between the months of March and July 2020 were accessed through the dedicated webpage for COVID-19 updates, norms and rules set up by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Technical guidelines for ECEC staff, drawn up by the Expert Commission for the Integrated ECEC system (<i>Commissione per il Sistema integrato di educazione e istruzione</i>) and addressing issues as diverse as the organisation of distance learning during lockdown and pedagogical approaches/methods for the reopening phase, were accessed through the web portal of the Ministry of Education and Research, along with the School Plan 2020-2021 (<i>Piano Scuola 2020-2021</i>), which detailed a general framework for the September 2020 reopening of the whole education system. Furthermore, other crucial documents were taken into account, such as the guidance documents issued by national and regional Scientific Advisory Committees, formed of experts from different disciplinary fields (national committee) and representatives from stakeholders active in the ECEC sector (committee for the Region Emilia-Romagna). These bodies had</p>

	<p>substantial influence in developing health and safety guidelines and the regional inter-institutional protocols that shaped the reopening of ECEC centres. In addition, existing studies available on COVID-19 and ECEC in the Italian system were identified in international and national research databases and taken into account in the review. Media/press releases, websites and blogs from 'think tank' organisations and professional networks also informed the report with regard to the public debates and discourses surrounding COVID-19 and ECEC.</p> <p><b>Focus groups</b> were carried out with nine pedagogical coordinators in one large city, and with 33 coordinators (split into two groups) in one medium-sized city in the Emilia-Romagna region.</p> <p><b>Open-ended questionnaires</b> were also used, completed by early childhood educators and preschool teachers working in ECEC services of a medium-sized province in the Emilia-Romagna region (n=98 responses).</p>
<p><b>Sweden</b>  <b>Local key expert:</b>  <i>Ingrid Engdahl,</i>  <i>Stockholm</i>  <i>University</i></p>	<p><b>Documents:</b> Reports and information were collected from Swedish authorities, primarily from the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS) (<i>Folkhälsomyndigheten</i>), which has overall national responsibility for protecting the population and coordinating disease control measures during the COVID-19 outbreak. This report has been informed by all reports, recommendations and regulations released by PHAS. The National Board of Health and Welfare, National Agency for Education (<i>Socialstyrelsen</i>), Children's Ombudsman (<i>Barnombudsmannen</i>), Swedish Work Environment Authority (<i>Arbetsmiljöverket</i>) and Civil Contingencies Agency (<i>Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap</i>) also provide relevant information on their websites, and representatives of these authorities have been <b>interviewed</b>. Press conferences held almost daily with responsible Ministers were also reviewed. In addition, relevant Swedish studies (six in total) and interviews with their authors (from the education and public health/medicine sectors) have been taken into account.</p> <p><b>Interviews:</b> Eight interviews were conducted with the following organisations: Swedish municipalities and councils (<i>Sveriges kommuner och regioner, SKR</i>); Children's Rights in Society (<i>BRIS</i>); The Union for childminders/assistants (<i>Kommunal</i>); The Union for teachers (<i>Läraryrket</i>); Save the Children, Sweden (<i>Rädda barnen</i>); Digital leisure time (<i>DIGIFRITIDS</i>); and UNICEF Sweden. Ten interviews/focus groups were conducted with members of World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (<i>OMEP Sweden</i>). In addition, 25 written and oral interviews were conducted with preschool managers and teachers in the following municipalities: <i>Falun</i> (teachers); <i>Gothenburg</i> (responsible education official, teachers); <i>Järfälla</i> (head of preschools); <i>Jönköping</i> (responsible education official, teachers); <i>Malmö</i> (responsible education official); <i>Staffanstorps</i> (responsible education official, teachers); <i>Stockholm</i> (head teachers and teachers); and <i>Uddevalla</i> (responsible education official).</p> <p><b>Media:</b> relevant (professional) journals, Facebook pages and blogs also informed the report, as well as certain newspapers featuring articles and discussions relating to COVID-19 and ECEC during 2020.</p>

### 1.1.3. Phases and structure

To develop this report, we adopted the following research plan:

**1. Exploring** COVID-19 measures in ECEC in the five countries/regions:

- Following a specific grid with questions (**see Annex 2 for the full grid**), local key experts mapped local policy documents and practices concerning the management of the COVID-19 situation in the ECEC sector, resulting in the country/region data reports<sup>6</sup>; data included policy documents and interviews/focus groups with important ECEC stakeholders in each country/region.
- Semi-structured interviews were carried out by the research team with the local key experts to clarify and deepen the information provided in the country/regional data reports.

**2. Analysing** COVID-19 measures in ECEC policy and practice based on the inputs from the five EU countries/regions:

- The research team analysed the data from the five EU countries/regions (i.e. the data reports and the semi-structured interviews) and compiled a draft report. This led to a thematic analysis.
- The research team organised a digital focus group with the local key experts from each country/region to discuss this thematic analysis, with the aim of identifying systemic elements of successful governance during the crisis, leading to initial lessons learned and ultimately to the policy guidelines.

**3. Reporting**

- The research team analysed the data from the digital focus groups and integrated them into the final report.

In the following chapters, we present the thematic analysis, followed by policy guidelines based on initial lessons learned that provide a basis on which to build the quality of ECEC for the future, in times of crisis and beyond. Specifically, Chapter 2 analyses the effects of the pandemic situation on children and families, in order to explore what role ECEC can play in addressing their needs during times of crisis. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the societal functions of ECEC, underlying issues of path-dependency and change. Chapter 4 goes more into depth regarding the various aspects of quality that may be affected by the crisis. The analysis resulted in the formulation of a set of policy guidelines, which are reported in the concluding Chapter 5. Since the crisis situation is still ongoing, and numerous differences exist in the policies formulated to respond to it, we have chosen to define 'guidelines' rather than specific 'recommendations'.

## 1.2. Terminology used in this report

In this report, we use the term 'ECEC centres' to cover all the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres for children aged 0 to 6 years. These include centres for 0-3 years, 3-6 years and out-of-school care (the last of these where they are applicable).

Only where necessary, in order to provide specific explanations in relation to COVID-19 measures among 'split' ECEC systems, we will use the term 'childcare' when referring to ECEC centres for children from 0 to 3 years old; 'preschool' when referring to ECEC centres for children aged 2.5/3 to 6 years, and the term 'out-of-school care' when referring to ECEC leisure centres for children aged between 2.5 and 12 years old.

With regard to staff, we will use the term ECEC professionals or ECEC staff to refer to all professionals working within ECEC centres. Only where it is necessary to understand the

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<sup>6</sup> The country/region data reports have been used by the research team for this report, but are not published.

context we will use the expressions 'childcare' (0 to 3 years), 'out-of-school' (2.5 to 12 years), preschool (2.5/3 to 6 years) staff/workers/professionals.

Throughout the study, we use the expression 'societally disadvantaged children or families' to stress their difficult position in society and their risk of exclusion, rather than suggesting that their disadvantage lies in the families themselves.

## **2. Effects of the pandemic on young children and families**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated social and financial pressures on young children and families. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the most significant challenges and effects on households during the first months of the pandemic, in order to then connect these effects with the possible role that the ECEC system can play in times of crisis (and beyond).

### **2.1. Effects on families of the pandemic and the closure of ECEC**

The effects of the pandemic on families are manifold, and occur at different levels. In all of the five countries/regions analysed, it is clear that a tension exists between the difficult combination of paid work and family chores, and the related increase in stress/family conflicts versus the appreciation of the more 'calm time' spent within the family. Regarding this specific tension, we had more data from families with medium-to-high SES (socio-economic status), but this does not exclude similar effects for other families. For example, in Belgium (Flanders), the civil society organisations interviewed reported that at the beginning of the crisis, when ECEC centres were partially closed, they heard many concerns voiced by families in relation to the difficulty of combining family life and work, the fear of getting sick, and the financial consequences of the crisis. From the data collected through an online survey (5,245 respondents) carried out between March and April 2020 by the Centre for Family Studies of University College Odisee (2020), it appears that (compared with parents of older children) the parents of children aged between 0 and 5 years old suffered most in combining care for their children with household chores and their own employment during the first lockdown. In total, 36% of parents with babies, and 39% of parents with toddlers, reported being emotionally exhausted at the end of the day after working remotely.

In Italy, when parents were able to work from home, most of the burden connected with family-work balance fell upon women who, in some cases, could avail themselves of paid parental leave, but with the risk of losing their job in the long term (economic activities recommenced before educational centres/schools were reopened) (Del Boca et al., 2020). This situation increased family stress, with negative consequences on relational wellbeing (Nobili, 2020). Some studies (Nobili, 2020; Sansavini, Trombini and Guarini, 2020) also highlight the important role of parental support measures implemented during the COVID-19 crisis through online psychological counselling and pedagogical advice. These measures were implemented, in a number of cases, by local pedagogical coordination services. However, it must be underlined that these services were mainly used by middle-class parents whose children were already enrolled in ECEC centres, as insufficient efforts were made to ensure that these services were accessible to societally disadvantaged families too. Positive effects on family relations were found only in two Italian survey studies, carried out on large (n= 3,443) and medium-sized (n=800) samples of parents from affluent backgrounds (highly educated, both in full-time employment and characterised by good living conditions) (Gigli, 2020; Mantovani et al., 2021). These positive effects relate to the appreciation of the increased amount of time spent together as a family, better collaboration with the partner to balance remote working and childcare arrangements at home, and the increased participation of fathers in the lives of young children.

These last aspects were also mentioned in Croatia and Berlin. In Croatia, a survey conducted in April 2020 among 1,045 parents of children aged 0-6 years underlined many parents' appreciation of the extra play-time they were able to spend with their families during lockdown (Višnjić-Jevtić and Visković, 2021). In Berlin, a tension emerged between

the positive effect of having more 'family time' and stresses relating to becoming overburdened (which also increased family conflicts), often having to reconcile remote working and household chores/care of children (German Youth Institute, 2021).

When asked to examine more closely the pandemic's effects on societally disadvantaged families, the stakeholders interviewed underlined how COVID-19 has increased families' financial vulnerability and social isolation. Several NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in Italy, for example, emphasised the unequal effects of the pandemic among families of differing socio-economic status (SES). They pointed out that one in seven working parents lost their income temporarily or permanently during the crisis (Save the Children, 2020). In family resource centres operated by Save the Children in collaboration with local partner organisations (social cooperatives) across Italy<sup>7</sup>, the distribution of 'material support kits' containing essential products for children (i.e. food, basic educational supplies, etc.) increased dramatically during the lockdown to meet growing demand from families, revealing an increase in poverty. Families living in more advantaged conditions (bigger house; possibility of using outdoor space; regular income due to the possibility of working from home; availability of educational support via institutional channels) faced the strict lockdown (no possibility of going out) with greater material and personal resources (Gigli, 2020) than those living in low-income households. This was particularly true for low-income households in socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods (who experienced confinement in smaller accommodation with no possibility of using outdoor space, with reduced income and sometimes food deprivation, as well as a lack of educational support from ECEC centres due to a lack of devices and or internet connection in the household) (Save the Children, 2020).

## 2.2. Effects on children of the pandemic and the closure of ECEC

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on families are intertwined with its effects on children. In general, an increase in emotional distress was seen among children (anxiety, regressive behaviour, especially in relation to routine activities such as sleeping or eating, etc.), as well as feelings of loneliness due to a lack of social contact. In certain cases, these effects were exacerbated by economic uncertainty and/or family conflicts.

The ECEC stakeholders interviewed in every country/region, with the exception of Sweden, underlined that the needs of children were not sufficiently taken into account when determining measures during the first lockdown. When considering the right to play and have contacts with their peers, it should be noted that aside from having no access to ECEC centres, in Germany (Berlin), Belgium (Flanders), Croatia and Italy (Emilia-Romagna), public playgrounds were closed during the first lockdown, making it harder for children to meet and play outdoors, and for families to manage their daily routines. In densely populated areas, this meant that pavements served as 'play areas'/outdoor space, raising questions about the importance of creating child-friendly environments in urban areas.

In all countries/regions, an increase was identified in the worries and fears experienced by children during crisis period. For example, the ECEC professionals interviewed in Croatia stated that, especially at the beginning of the crisis, children were worried by the pandemic, which resulted in fear and anxiety in some of them. Italian studies highlight similar effects, which were particularly heavy, given the strict nature of the country's lockdown. Studies (Champeaux et al., 2020; Sansavini et al., 2020; Nobili, 2020) point out that according to their parents, the prolonged period of confinement had a negative impact on children's wellbeing and learning, in particular:

- Italian preschoolers (aged 3-6) seem to have suffered in terms of learning achievement and emotional support, compared with older children. It is estimated

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/progetti/spazio-mamme>

that 40% of preschoolers in Italy had no type of contact with their preschool teachers.

- The most common expressions of emotional distress among young children (aged 0-6) reported by their parents were: regressive behaviours (e.g. irritability), loss of autonomy and independence, and unsettled routines.
- Feelings of loneliness due to lack of socialisation and play, as young children were deprived of the opportunity to interact with their peers and with the surrounding environment.

In addition, as underlined in the previous paragraph, the gap between societally disadvantaged and advantaged families became even more evident, with some children being able to enjoy private gardens and larger spaces, while others were obliged to live in overpopulated apartments.

In Belgium, the Children's Rights Commissariat of the Flemish community conducted an online survey in May 2020 of more than 44,000 school-aged children and young people (up to 18 years old), 3,901 of whom were under the age of 8<sup>8</sup>. Similar findings to those noted above were reported (Children Rights Commissariat, 2020):

- Feelings that are linked to boredom, loneliness, anger and sadness score highest during the COVID-19 period.
- Half of the children surveyed indicated that they experienced having arguments at home during the lockdown period; some (one on 10) including physical and verbal violence. The majority of these children said that this had increased since COVID-19 due to stress, fear, financial insecurity and constantly being together. At the same time, protective factors had disappeared – such as social contacts, social control, youth support to the family, places to share the upbringing of their children such as ECEC/schools – making the situation more complex to deal with.
- ECEC and schools occupied a very important place in the lives of children and young people: 85% of the children surveyed said they would rather go back to ECEC/school.
- One in five children stated they had no one to play with, and almost one in six had no place of their own at home where they could quietly withdraw.

In Sweden, children experienced the beginning of the crisis in a different way. Because ECEC centres remained open, practitioners had the opportunity to address children's fears and worries from the outset within ECEC centres, which became crucial 'resilient' places for both children and families. Heikkilä and colleagues used an online questionnaire to ask teachers to describe what children (aged 1-5 years) expressed and reflected upon during the pandemic (Heikkilä et al., 2020). The researchers stress the importance of capturing children's ways of expressing themselves amid the ongoing crisis, as a way of recognising their participation as citizens and a means of developing resilience in crisis situations. From the study, it emerges that children's contextual understanding of the virus was generally expressed with a focus on: 1) health and hygiene; 2) anxiety and care, with a specific fear of losing family members; 3) anxiety about social restrictions and changed routines; 4) creativity, play and humour: ECEC staff reported that hospital-related symbolic games had increased among children, who integrated the virus into their games in creative ways, trying to re-elaborate worries and new adaptations. Another study from Uppsala University (Sarkadi, 2020), involving 1,000 children and young people aged between 4 and 18 years old, focused on what children perceive as the positive effects of the crisis: 26% of

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<sup>8</sup> The survey report does not specify the exact ages of children under 8, but since the survey was intended for children to fill in, it is reasonable to assume that they are primary school children. Although the survey does not cover children aged 0-6 years, it presents interesting findings that provide an insight into what kinds of effects the pandemic has had on the lives of children and families. The results reported here concern the whole sample of 44,000 children.

respondents referred to climate, such as 'less emissions due to less travelling' and 'better air'. Social and learning aspects were mentioned in 27% of the answers, with examples such as 'it is calmer', 'you spend more time with your family', 'I have spent more time outdoors', and 'you get to learn new things'.

### 2.3. Final remarks

The analysed data provide an insight into what impacts the pandemic has had on families and children, and highlight which of their needs should be taken into account when facing similar societal crises in the future.

Given the potentially damaging effects both on families and children, ECEC centres could play an essential support role in times of crisis. The various interconnected functions that characterise ECEC represent a multi-directional support net: through its educational function, ECEC helps to invest in children's learning, wellbeing and participation; through its social function, ECEC supports families in the upbringing of their children; meanwhile, its economic function helps parents in combining work and parental/household responsibilities.

Looking closely at the effects the crisis has had on the ECEC system can thus ultimately help in understanding where to invest both now and in the future, in order to better respond to the needs of children and families.

## 3. Initial ECEC policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis

Wide variation can be seen in the ways in which different countries initially responded to the COVID-19 health crisis, in relation to ECEC. In all EU member states except Sweden and Finland, ECEC centres were (partially) closed from mid-March 2020, and gradually reopened from May 2020. What interests us in these exceptional times, is identifying the rationales behind the decision-making processes that led to the closing down and reopening of ECEC centres, or to keeping ECEC centres open in different societies. What do these policy choices tell us about the ways in which the functions of ECEC are perceived and valued by societies? Did countries make decisions in line with their previous prevailing understandings of ECEC? Did they return to older perceptions about ECEC? Or did they discover new understandings of the societal functions of ECEC? Over the following pages, we examine the underlying rationales behind the policy decision-making processes that guided the closing and re-opening of ECEC during in the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis (March-December 2020)<sup>9</sup>.

At a European level, it is clear that over the last decade the meaning of ECEC has shifted from predominantly being a socio-economic instrument for assisting working parents, towards also providing an educational and social environment for children, families and local communities. Since the Council Recommendations on Childcare in 1992, ECEC has gained an increasingly prominent position on European policy agendas. Initially, the main rationale for investing in ECEC was driven by socio-economic concerns about employment, competitiveness, and gender equality (Urban et al., 2011). Over the last decade, an increased emphasis on children's rights, questions of citizenship, equality of educational opportunity, and social cohesion can be seen in EU policy documents relating to ECEC. The European Commission Communication on ECEC released in 2011 (Council of the European Union, 2011) and the European Quality Framework on ECEC developed in 2014 (Council of the European Union, 2019) are important milestones in clarifying the educational and social functions, as well as the economic function, of ECEC. The expansion of good-quality ECEC is now considered an essential foundation for every child's successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability.

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<sup>9</sup> A similar analysis could be carried out at a later stage in the crisis. For example, in 2021 the overall policy debates focus more on how to develop vaccination strategies. In these debates, the position of ECEC staff helps to provide a better understanding of what this means for the societal functions of ECEC.

From a social perspective, the benefits of high-quality ECEC are considered particularly salient for children from societally disadvantaged families. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is explicitly recognised in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union – EU Strategy on the rights of the child (European Commission, 2021a). One specific section of this document refers to 'socio-economic inclusion, health and education: an EU that fights child poverty, promotes inclusive and child-friendly societies, health and education' (European Commission, 2021a, p. 5). From a human rights and children's rights perspective, it is important that all children have the same access to high-quality provision, as ECEC can make a crucial contribution to breaking the cycles of poverty, inequality and discrimination (European Commission, 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018; European Commission, 2021b). At a European level, it is clear that ECEC is gradually being understood as not only having an important economic function, but also social and educational value to societies. However, the way in which these three different functions of ECEC are understood and 'weighted' in policy decision making differs greatly between EU Member States. In this sense, the analysis of country-specific policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis – resulting from the combination of pandemic prevention strategy and ECEC-related policy concerns (Blum and Dobrotić, 2020) – could serve as a critical lens to unravel the processes of path-dependency and change through which ECEC policy developments are embedded in each country (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009). For the purposes of our analysis, path-dependency is conceptualised as a process by which policy decision-making choices made in the past constrain the choices available in the future, which may either result in smooth policy adaptations, or in 'institutional stickiness' (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009). At the same time, acknowledging that ECEC is a constantly evolving field in which socio-economic and pedagogical concerns are simultaneously used to justify societal investment in children's education and welfare, institutional change is conceptualised as a non-linear trajectory that can be accelerated at 'critical junctures' in which paradigm shifts are brought about in regional, national and international policy debates (Collier and Collier, 1991). As illustrated in the following sections (3.1 and 3.2), the COVID-19 pandemic crisis could be viewed as one of such 'critical junctures'.

### **3.1. From a dominant public health rationale for closing ECEC, to finding a balance between public health concerns and ECEC ones**

To examine the rationales underlying ECEC policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic undertaken in the five countries/regions covered in this exploratory study, we made use of a conceptual framework recently developed by Blum and Dobrotić (2020). This framework allows us to classify variations in the design of immediate ECEC policy responses to COVID-19. The researchers state that initially, all European countries were primarily driven by goals relating to public health concerns. Their overall aim was to 'flatten the curve', protect the portions of the population vulnerable to health-related concerns (the elderly, at-risk patients, etc.), minimise mortality and enable the health care system to contain the virus. After some time, country-specific responses were progressively shaped by a combination of pandemic health prevention strategy (either focusing on targeting high-risk groups or targeting the whole population) and ECEC-related policy concerns (e.g. educational goals, combating social inequalities and/or work-family life reconciliation).

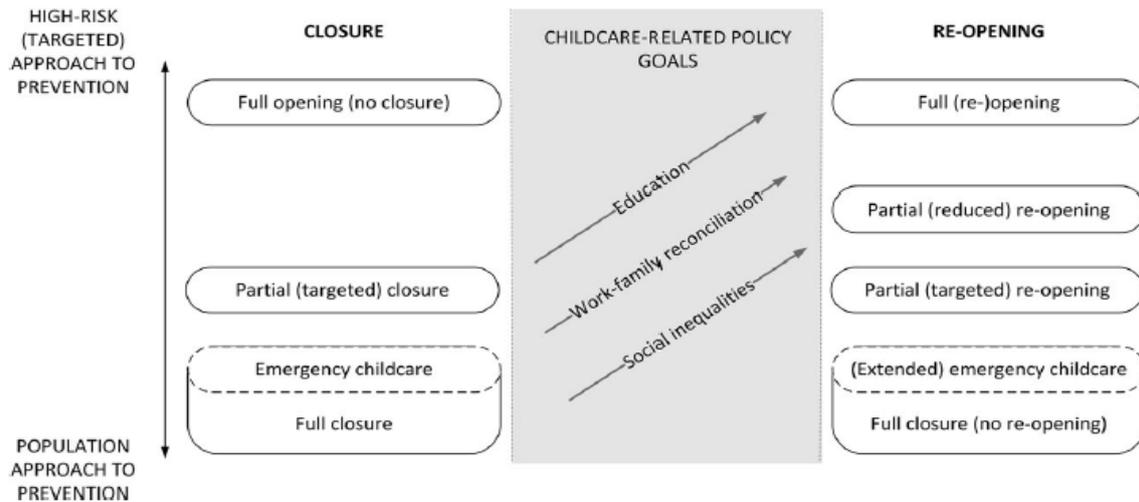


Figure 1: The pandemic ECEC policy responses (Blum and Dobrotić, 2020)

'The global closure of ECEC/schools – and therewith the restriction of (related) fundamental social rights – is unprecedented in the history of modern welfare states. Indeed, childcare policy responses in the pandemic situation transverse previous conceptualisations, because they became (primarily) driven by public health-related goals, which are usually not in their core focus. Countries chose a specific pandemic prevention strategy which prompted the initial "shock" response also in childcare/educational policies. After those initial responses, countries began to balance – in different pace and patterns – public health with other, sometimes competing goals and concerns more specific for childcare- and education-systems (work-family reconciliation and employability, equal educational opportunities, etc.)' (Blum and Dobrotić, 2020, p.3-4).

From a public health perspective, Blum and Dobrotić (2020) make a distinction between a population-wide approach to prevention and a high-risk targeted approach. A population-wide approach to prevention means that generalised interventions such as lockdowns, curfews and the closing of ECEC are applied rapidly in a health care crisis. This is considered a more precautionary strategy in which the entire population makes sacrifices to protect groups who are at higher risk from the virus (elderly, vulnerable patients, etc.). At the opposite end of the spectrum, the researchers identified a high-risk targeted approach in which specific interventions aimed at targeted groups were applied, rather than generalised interventions. This is considered a proportionate strategy in which the least disruptive measures are initiated. Such interventions focus on isolating infected individuals or groups, which also means that ECEC closures are not on the list of policy priorities. In our research sample, we included the two opposing public health approaches in dealing with the crisis. Italy adopted the population-wide approach to prevention, under which ECEC centres were closed from March until June (with the partial reopening of ECEC facilities for summer camp activities in some regions, and the full reopening of all ECEC facilities in September 2020); Sweden, meanwhile, adopted a high-risk targeted approach (in this report, we will refer to it simply as a 'targeted approach'), in which ECEC centres remained open except for children who were sick or at high risk of becoming infected<sup>10</sup>. Whereas in Italy, the public health perspective was the sole focus, in Sweden the health argument from the beginning was combined with a children's rights argument in order to keep the ECEC centres open. Besides these two opposite approaches, more mixed models can be identified in which public health and ECEC concerns are combined in different ways. Belgium (Flanders), Berlin

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that in spring 2020, the pandemic affected Italy more than Sweden and other EU countries, which also played a role in the measures and decisions taken at a policy level.

and Croatia initially began with a population-wide approach, but then gradually shifted towards a more targeted approach to prevention. ECEC centres were closed at first, but gradually reopened for certain groups and fully reopened at the end of May/June 2020. According to Blum and Dobrotić (2020), this shift occurred due to the realisation that the pandemic would remain for some time, and because the negative effects of ECEC closures were being noticed on children, families, communities, the economy and society as a whole.

The conceptual framework used by Blum and Dobrotić (2020) to classify ECEC policy responses to the health care crisis also included an overview of ECEC-related concerns that determined decision-making processes involved in the closure and (re)opening of ECEC centres. Based on the country data, we were able to adapt this classification of ECEC-related concerns/arguments for reopening or closing ECEC centres as follows:

#### **Focus on children**

1. **Education-focused:** *e.g. children in transition years (younger children in the last year of preschool or primary school), and children with disabilities/learning difficulties are allowed back to class.*
2. **Social inequality-focused:** *e.g. societally disadvantaged children gain access earlier (e.g. children living in poverty, children of asylum seekers).*
3. **Children's rights-focused:** *children's rights to learn, be cared for and play with peers are considered a priority.*
4. **Child protection-focused:** *e.g. children from families living in complex circumstances gain access earlier (e.g. children from families referred by youth welfare services).*

#### **Focus on families**

5. **Economic family support-focused:** *e.g. families who need to work and have no childcare options gained earlier access. This ensures the running of society and the economy.*
6. **Educational family support-focused:** *families (e.g. single parents) receive help in the education and upbringing of their children, irrespective of their working situation. Families and ECEC staff are co-educators of children, and help each other out.*

(Blum and Dobrotić, 2020, p. 9-10, adapted by authors)

By applying this list of arguments to the data coming from the five different countries/regions, we have developed the overview presented in the table below. For more detailed and chronological information on the initial policy responses to the pandemic in each country/region, please refer to **Annex 3 – Initial ECEC policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis**.

	<b>Belgium (Flanders)</b>	<b>Italy (Emilia Romagna)</b>	<b>Germany (Berlin)</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Croatia</b>
<b>ECEC open or closed?</b>	ECEC centres closed down except for emergency childcare. From the beginning of May 2020, ECEC centres gradually reopened for various target groups. Full reopening from the beginning of June 2020.	ECEC centres closed down until September 2020 for all. Partial reopening of ECEC facilities for summer camps from June to September.	ECEC centres closed down except for emergency childcare. From the end of April 2020, ECEC centres gradually reopened for various target groups. Full reopening from the second half of June 2020.	ECEC centres remained open for all. When children are sick or possibly sick, they cannot attend ECEC.	ECEC centres closed down except for emergency childcare. From the end of April 2020, ECEC centres gradually reopened for various target groups. Full reopening from the end of May 2020.
<b>Public health concerns to open/close ECEC</b>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention</i></p> <p>Overall aim:</p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus helped to fully reopen ECEC in June 2020. Once in a while, virological concerns have been raised when new variants of the virus appear and suspicions are raised that children are one of the motors for the infection. However, even in those situations, there is a strong consensus that ECEC should remain</p>	<p><i>Population-wide approach to prevention for a considerable amount of time → targeted approach to prevention starting from September 2020</i></p> <p>In April 2020, a scientific Advisory Committee presented a technical analysis to the Council of Ministers in which the educational sector was considered a medium-to-high risk sector for infection. Based on this analysis, the government continued its precautionary strategy and kept ECEC/schools closed until the end of the school year (June 2020).</p>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention</i></p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus, has helped to reopen and keep ECEC open. As of August 2020, there is a strong consensus that ECEC should stay open for as many categories of families as possible, and there should be as few restrictions on access as possible</p>	<p><i>Targeted approach to prevention</i></p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus has helped to keep ECEC centres open.</p>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention</i></p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus helped to reopen ECEC.</p>

	open and closure should be avoided.				
<b>ECEC-related concerns/arguments to open/close ECEC</b>	<p>A combination of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Education-focused concerns (enabling right to learning, preventing 'learning delay') (Argument 1)</li> <li>2. Concerns focusing on social inequality (equal opportunities for societally disadvantaged children) (Argument 2)</li> <li>3. Concerns focusing on child protection (protect children who live in difficult home situations) (Argument 4)</li> <li>4. Concerns focusing on economic family support (employment) (Argument 5.)</li> <li>5. Concerns focusing on educational family support (support for single parents) (Argument 6)</li> </ol>	<p>The public health argument remained dominant until education-focused concerns were raised (Argument 1).</p> <p>Because Italy was one of the first European countries to be severely hit by the virus, the public health perspective was very dominant in order to contain the spread of the virus. Gradually, criticism arose that children and families tended to be forgotten in the policy choices that were being made, which were seemingly based on fear of the virus. Thus, education-focused concerns were raised that children's wellbeing, education and care should be prioritised. Social inequality-focused concerns (Argument 2) were also raised, particularly by NGOs operating in the more disadvantaged areas of the country (e.g. Save</p>	<p>A combination of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Education-focused concerns (enabling development and learning) (Argument 1)</li> <li>2. Child protection-focused concerns (priority access for children from youth welfare and protection of societally vulnerable children) (Argument 4)</li> <li>3. Concerns focusing on economic family support (employment for workers who ensure the operation of the city of Berlin) (Argument 5)</li> <li>4. Educational family support concerns (single parents) (Argument 6).</li> </ol>	<p>Specific to Sweden was the prevalence of the children's rights perspective (Argument 3) from early on in the crisis. According to this, public health concerns needed to be carefully balanced with the UNRC. Children have rights (to education, care, play, participation), and also need to be protected. Therefore, in addition to concerns over children's rights, concerns also focusing on child protection (Argument 4) were also taken into account.</p>	<p>From early on, economic family support concerns (Argument 5) were taken into account in relation to the workers who ensure the operation of the country.</p> <p>Concerns regarding economic family support remained the sole important argument during the lockdown due the pandemic, as well as the subsequent reopening. This was one of the main reasons, from a policy perspective, why ECEC has remained open since it reopened.</p> <p>Overall, there is a lack of concern for social inequality with regard to children from vulnerable groups and children with special needs.</p>



	<p>From early on, concerns over social inequality were taken into account, except for children with special needs and children from special youth services. For more information, see subsection 4.1.1.</p>	<p>the Children) and by advocacy groups (e.g. think-tank '<i>Alleanza per l'infanzia</i>').</p>			
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### 3.2. ECEC policy responses to COVID-19: patterns of path dependency and change

The above table provides an overview of public health and ECEC-related rationales in the five countries/regions studied. It should be noted how different these policy responses (and the ideas that underpin them) are. On the basis of the analysis of ECEC policy responses enacted within the five countries/regions that are the subjects of this exploratory study, we argue that the pandemic crisis:

- a) in some cases, generated path-dependent policy responses consisting of the smooth adaptation of the existing ECEC system to the new situation;
- b) in some cases, the pandemic acted as a turning point, bringing social inequalities and child protection concerns to the fore in policy and public debates;
- c) in some cases, the pandemic brought to the surface controversial patterns of 'institutional stickiness' connected with a concept of 'familistic welfare', which relegated ECEC to a residual function of economic and social assistance.

In each of the analysed countries/regions, we can see different combinations of three tendencies.

#### Path-dependent policy responses as a smooth adaptation to the pandemic crisis

Since the beginning of the crisis in Sweden, a proportionate health strategy (keeping ECEC open) has been merged with a traditional understanding of ECEC, grounded in a rationale of children's rights (see point 3 in the framework adapted from Blum and Dobrotić, 2020). In fact, the decision to keep ECEC open was based on a child rights impact assessment, and on the best interest of the child – which is in line with the historical development of the Swedish ECEC system. As ECEC centres are considered very important for young children's development, health and well-being, a balance was sought between children's need for ECEC, and health-related emergency actions to contain the spread of the virus. In relation to some of the measures taken to address the COVID-19 situation, the Swedish Ombudsman for Children was pleased to note the effect of incorporating the UNCRC into government thinking:

*'The decision by the government to keep preschools and primary schools open was based on a child rights perspective, where the right of the child to education and protection as well as the best interest of the child has been in focus. The government has, for example, expressed that the preschools and schools are very important in particular for children in societally disadvantaged situations, since this can be their safe haven as well as offering reliable adult contact outside of their home.'* (Ombudsman for Children, 2020, p. 3).

As described in the quotation above, enabling children's rights also requires that children should be protected. Following the logic of child protection, ECEC cannot be closed when there are no alternative safe public spaces for children. In Sweden, the importance of ECEC actually increased during the crisis, with all ministers from the government affirming their appreciation of well-functioning ECEC:

*'Children's care, well-being, social and cognitive learning and development are what good ECEC contributes to, and it is important for children to be able to keep their preschool every day - not least at a time when there is probably a crisis in many families due to the consequences of COVID-19. And all ECEC staff should know that*

*you are the mainstay of society – something that has proven itself globally in the light of the pandemic.*<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Berlin, child protection was also an important rationale for keeping ECEC centres open for 'at risk' children (see point 3 framework adapted from Blum and Dobrotić, 2020). The rationale behind policies in March 2020 was at first to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to keep public infrastructure and services in Berlin running – basically, a policy to safeguard the running of the entire city's infrastructure. General support for families with young children was a lesser goal, as policies referred only to children of 'essential workers' (health and care, food, transport sectors. etc.). From the outset, child protection was an issue, as access to ECEC always remained possible for children from families referred by youth welfare services. Soon, however, (by April-May 2020) arguments were put forward that placed child protection within a wider context that not only referred to children already known to child protection services. Within a couple of weeks of the closure, the group that were considered 'essential workers' was gradually enlarged, in recognition of how crucial ECEC was in supporting families, and again to protect children. During the autumn, ECEC was also considered vital from the perspective of education-focused concerns, in the sense that ECEC enables the development and learning of young children, while concerns focusing on work-family conciliation, co-education and child protection remained important.

### **The pandemic crisis as a turning point...**

Although during the first wave of the pandemic, attention focused less on younger children, countries/regions such as Croatia, Belgium (Flanders) and Germany (Berlin) soon re-considered their decisions to close ECEC centres, and began to become more aware of the important value of ECEC to children, families and society/the economy.

For example, the Croatian Minister of Science and Education recognised, during the second wave of COVID-19 (from October 2020), that ECEC and school closures negatively affected the social and mental health of children<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, in the case of Berlin, educational, family support and child protection concerns acted as powerful drivers for reopening ECEC centres. As centres were kept open unless there were positive cases among their staff, children or families, ECEC was equal status with schools in terms of its importance to the functioning of 21st-century societies. The 'credo' during the second wave of COVID-19 was even stronger: *'We do everything (i.e. close restaurants, cultural institutions, clubs, sports activities, shops etc.) in order to keep schools and ECEC open.'*<sup>13</sup> This was the utmost priority for the whole country. Children's interests and needs took the lead in many public statements by decision makers. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD Director of Education, and Jutta Allmendinger, Director of the Science Centre Berlin, were prominent advocates of the argument that ECEC and schools should be the last to be closed, only after all other measures failed<sup>14</sup>. In Belgium (Flanders), decision-making processes were initially informed more by a precautionary health strategy (closing preschools for children aged 2.56 years, with the option of emergency childcare for essential workers). However, a mixture of ECEC-related concerns arose on reopening. A dominant perspective regarding preschools and primary schools (from 2.5 to 12 years old) was educational, with a focus on the fact that all children should be guaranteed the right to learn. Another major concern was the prevention of 'learning delays', especially among more societally disadvantaged

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<sup>11</sup> Government's press conference on children, 13 May 2020

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/u-borbi-protiv-korone-zatvorili-cijelegrane-gospodarstva-ali-fuchsa-se-to-ne-tice-pod-velikim-smo-pritiskom-ali-skole-ostaju-otvorene---630249.html>

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see: National press conference with Angela Merkel, 16 November 2020 – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j0yyN\\_XBn4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j0yyN_XBn4); national press conference, 16 October 2020: Franziska Giffey, Federal Minister for Family, the Elderly, Women and Youth, and Jens Spahn, Federal Health Minister – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXKClhHmB90>

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see: <https://blog.oecd-berlin.de/kinder-brauchen-schule>

children. The latter almost qualifies as a parallel concern over social inequality: on the one hand, people saw that learning delays were more damaging to societally disadvantaged children; on the other hand, they wanted to protect children who were exposed to difficult home situations (greater risk of violence, less mobility). Another reason for reopening preschools (for children aged 2.5-6 years) was economic: when preschools are closed, the economy is adversely affected, as parents cannot work when they have to take care of their own children. This last rationale was, however, the subject of criticism. Among the preschool stakeholders interviewed (which included ECEC teachers, preschools and trade union representatives), some considered as dismissive of their professionalism the fact that preschools were regarded as an instrument for work-family reconciliation and employability. According to these stakeholders, this economic function should be assigned to out-of-school care facilities and emergency care. They emphasised that the function of preschools is primarily educational and (to some extent) social (i.e. learning for societally disadvantaged children). For other stakeholders, such as ECEC staff, parents and local municipalities, it suddenly became clear during the crisis that preschools simultaneously play important educational, social and economic functions in society. This tension reflects the engrained split ECEC system in Belgium (Flanders), in which a traditional division exists between childcare as means to reconcile family-work responsibilities, and preschool education as a solely educational environment. According to the Upbringing Agency (childcare administration), since the beginning of the crisis, childcare for children aged 0-3 years was only accessible when it was strictly necessary. Although economic family support, educational, educational family support and social inequality-focused concerns were taken into account, the childcare stakeholders interviewed perceived the dominant narrative during the first lockdown as being an economic rationale in combination with a public health rationale. They underlined, however, that during the second lockdown in autumn 2020, the educational and social importance of ECEC for both children and families was more widely recognised, in addition to the economic rationale. At the same time, when discussing the reopening of schools in Belgium (Flanders), priority was given to the first, second and sixth grades in primary school, all of which are considered pivotal moments in a child's school career at which to prevent learning delays. Although local research showed that the families of the youngest children experienced most difficulty during the crisis in combining family-work responsibilities<sup>15</sup>, and although the majority of preschool/elementary schools themselves wanted to give priority to preschool children (89% of such schools wanted to reopen the third grade of preschool, and 40% wanted to first reopen the first and second grades of preschool)<sup>16</sup>, policy makers initially did not give priority to preschool-aged children (2.5-6 years) in the reopening of preschool/elementary schools. However, this was quickly rectified. A week after schools were reopened for a selected group of primary school children, a decision was taken to reopen preschools at the beginning of June for all children, even before the other primary school children (from the third, fourth and fifth grades) could go back to school.

### ...or a backward slide?

In Italy (one of the countries that had to respond to the health crisis earliest in Europe) a precautionary health strategy – closing ECEC to all – exacerbated by mass fear of the virus, resulted in a failure to give adequate attention to the role of ECEC in the lives of young children and families. Criticism came in the form of education-focused concerns. Prevention and containment were the main *foci* of policy thinking during the strict lockdown of the spring months (from March until May 2020). The weight of public health concerns was

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<sup>15</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/vooral-ouders-met-kleuters-uitgeput-door-combinatie-werk-kinderen~b004fa4c/>, <https://www.kcgezinswetenschappen.be/nl/corona-impact-op-gezinnen>

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/200520%20RAPPORT%20BELRONDE%20GBO%20HERSTART.pdf>

reflected by the early decision to enforce the nationwide closure of all education (including ECEC) institutions (4 March 2020), and the later decision not to resume face-to-face education, even after the country had entered a phase of gradual easing of restrictions (17 May 2020). The latter decision in particular was informed by a technical analysis by the Scientific Advisory Committee on COVID-19 prevention measures. The conclusions of this analysis were presented to the Council of Ministers in April 2020. From a public health perspective, the analysis classified education as medium-to-high risk sector, due to its significant 'gathering risk'. On the basis of this outlook, the Italian government also opted for a very cautious approach to the reopening of ECEC and schools. Against this backdrop, the policy discourse in the initial lockdown phase was dominated by health care concerns. The government-mandated closure of ECEC centres was widely regarded as a regrettable, yet unavoidable, corollary of the overriding imperative to lower the risk of contagion and to bring soaring infection rates under control.

In the case of Croatia, the economic importance of ECEC appears to be the sole rationale underpinning the government's decision to gradually reopen ECEC centres. The ECEC professionals interviewed stated, however, their will to reopen ECEC centres in order to enable and stimulate the development and learning of children. On 13 March 2020, the Croatian government passed a decision to suspend teaching in universities, secondary and primary schools, as well as the 'regular operation of ECEC institutions', and to launch distance learning. From 23 April 2020, ECEC centres were opened up to certain groups of children, mostly those whose parents were medical workers or worked in shops supplying food, as well as single parents who still had to go to work during the period of lockdown, etc. Since such economic activities were resumed after 23 April, and parents were expected to start working outside their homes again, public opinion supported the ideas that it was necessary to reopen ECEC accordingly. Thus, the reasons for reopening ECEC centres were mostly based around work-family reconciliation concerns, in order to keep the economy running.

### 3.3. Final remarks

During periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, underlying rationales for investing in ECEC can become more apparent and be discussed. This makes crisis moments a privileged vantage point from which to analyse how path-dependency<sup>17</sup> and processes of change can shape policy responses. In this chapter, we first illustrated how the five countries/regions that are the focus of this report responded to the health crisis. We then analysed how the societal role of ECEC was understood in the policy responses that were enacted in the case of each location studied.

- 1) *Based on the data from each of the countries/regions, it is clear that very young children and their families were initially not always addressed in policy debates or documents, when compared with older children who attend schools. The only exception to this was Sweden.*

In Belgium (Flanders), the rationale of educational concerns was important in reopening preschools (for children aged 2.5-6 years) and primary schools (which are in most cases organised under one roof, with a single director). However, in the initial reopening strategy, priority was given to the first, second and sixth grades of elementary school, and younger children (2,5-6 years) were not given priority – although this was then quickly rectified.

In Croatia, where ECEC reopened on 25 May 2020, ECEC staff resumed their regular work in line with the Recommendations for working with early and preschool children in kindergartens, developed by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2020). However, before this start date, no recommendations

were available for working with young children in ECEC in comparison to older children, or were vague and available only at a local level.

In Italy, the prominent place in the guidelines of public health concerns was further demonstrated by the omission of childcare for children aged 0-3 years from the initial list of summertime socio-educational services that regions and local authorities were allowed to reopen (Conference of Italian Regions and Autonomous Provinces, 2020).

- 2) *It is worth noting that while the public health perspective was initially dominant in shaping ECEC policy responses across all five locations, country and regional variations gradually started to emerge. In this sense, the policy choices and public debates surrounding discussions on the (re)opening of ECEC centres revealed how public health concerns were progressively combined with arguments relating to children's rights and protection, education, social inclusion and family support, as well as with economic arguments relating to work-family reconciliation.*

Whereas the research evidence reviewed in the previous chapter on the effects of COVID-19 on young children and their families suggests the important role ECEC could play in relation to the social and educational support of children – as well as in relation to family support and work-life reconciliation – the analysis of ECEC policy responses in this chapter reveals that these diverse functions of ECEC were weighed differently in each of the five countries/regions examined.

The work-family reconciliation function of ECEC acted as an important driver for re-opening provision in all countries/regions where lockdowns were imposed (Croatia, Belgium (Flanders), Berlin), with the exception of Italy, where parental leave schemes and baby-sitting vouchers were extensively applied to compensate for the prolonged closure of centres. Children's rights rationales played an important role in justifying policy choices aimed at minimising the impact of lockdown on ECEC services (Sweden, Berlin), while in parallel the social function of ECEC was stressed when choices were made in relation to priority access (Belgium (Flanders), Berlin). Overall, it can be said that the pandemic crisis contributed to generating awareness – both among policy-makers and in the public debate – as to how these three functions of ECEC are inextricably linked. It is noteworthy that, in cases where such a realisation clashed with traditional views of ECEC (path-dependency), this process produced unexpected tensions (Belgium (Flanders), Berlin). On the other hand, it should also be noted that the more these arguments were viewed as reciprocally interrelated in policy decision-making processes, the more the ECEC sector gained a prominent position within the public debate, generating awareness of the importance of ECEC for children, families and society as a whole.

- 3) *Although there was less focus on younger children during the initial phase of the pandemic, this led to concerns in public debates and during the second wave of the pandemic. Countries/regions such as Croatia, Germany and Belgium (Flanders) became more aware of the important value of ECEC to children, families and society/the economy.*

As mentioned above, from October 2020, the Croatian Minister of Science and Education recognised that ECEC closure negatively affected children<sup>18</sup>. A similar awareness arose in Germany (Berlin) and in Belgium (Flanders). During the second wave, everything has been done to keep ECEC open. In the same way, in Sweden the importance of ECEC actually increased during the pandemic.

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<sup>18</sup> For more information, see: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/u-borbi-protiv-korone-zatvorili-cijele-grane-gospodarstva-ali-fuchsa-se-to-ne-tice-pod-velikim-smo-pritiskom-ali-skole-ostaju-otvorene---630249.html>

## 4. Impact of COVID-19 on quality ECEC

To formulate specific thematic areas for analysis, the European Quality Framework on ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) has been used as a lens to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the accessibility of ECEC, the ECEC workforce, the curriculum, the evaluation and monitoring of quality, and the governance/funding of ECEC.

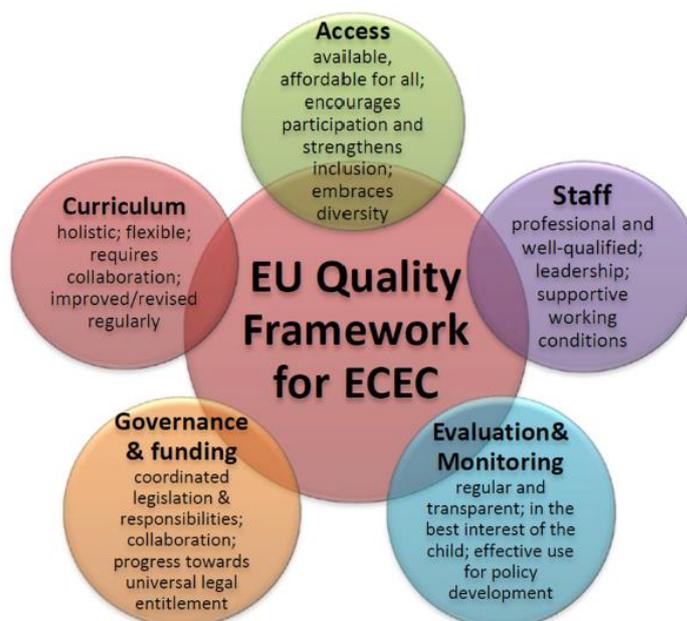


Figure 2 European Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 11)

### 4.1. Accessibility

*'Access to quality early childhood education and care services for all children contributes to their healthy development and educational success, helps in reducing social inequalities and narrows the competence gap between children with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Equitable access is also essential to ensure that parents, especially women, have flexibility to (re)integrate in the labour market'* (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 8).

In this section, we will report on the data available regarding the accessibility of ECEC during the COVID-19 outbreak: what was the general level of uptake during 2020, with a specific focus on societally disadvantaged groups? Furthermore, we address how different countries/regions have attempted to increase accessibility: by making ECEC more affordable; by granting priority access to societally disadvantaged groups; by engaging in proactive outreach; and by paying particular attention to the importance of warm and welcoming transitions.

#### 4.1.1. Access and uptake

In the regions of Flanders in Belgium and Berlin in Germany, general statistics are available concerning uptake of ECEC during the first phase of the crisis. In Croatia, Italy and Sweden, meanwhile, no national statistics on uptake are available. However, some municipalities did monitor uptake and attendance rates in 2020.

Belgium (Flanders)	<p>The attendance rate for childcare (0-3 years old) was very low at the beginning of lockdown, and fluctuated between 20 and 30% on the total inscribed children (which is low compared to 2019), but increased steadily in May-June 2020. In October 2020, the figure fluctuated around 75%, which is almost the same as in October 2019. The attendance rate for out-of-school care (between 2.5 and 12 years old) in April 2020 fluctuated at around 11%, and increased steadily in June and September. In December 2020, attendance numbers fluctuated around 86%, which is lower than the year before, due to technical unemployment and remote working, according to ECEC stakeholders (Upbringing Agency, 2020a). Between 5 and 12% of school-aged children attended emergency care organised by schools and/or municipalities. After the opening of preschool education for all children (2.5-6 years old) in June 2020, soon 75 % of the subscribed children were present every half-day. More absences were seen in Brussels, the capital city characterised by a diverse population (approx. 180 nationalities) and significantly higher poverty and unemployment rates compared with the rest of Belgium.</p>
Croatia	<p>At the beginning of lockdown in spring 2020, very few children attended ECEC. Although there are no national attendance/enrolment data available for ECEC after reopening, from focus groups with representatives of local authorities and principals we can conclude that after reopening, numbers went back to normal. Only a very small number of children did not attend ECEC because of illness.</p>
Germany (Berlin)	<p>At the very beginning of the first lockdown, only 1-3% of children attended ECEC. This gradually increased to between 50 and 80% by the end of June 2020. In December 2020, 84% of ECEC places nationally and 87% in Berlin were occupied, meaning that centres were running at nearly full capacity. This changed drastically on 16 December 2020, when ECEC was closed again, to re-open gradually again for certain groups during the second week of January 2021.</p>
Italy	<p>Most ECEC centres were closed from the end of February until the end of June 2020 for all children. Reliable attendance rates for the 2020-21 school year are not yet available for analysis, as national data collection efforts are currently ongoing with regard to education statistics.</p>
Sweden	<p>Although no national attendance statistics are available for the COVID-19 period, many municipalities decided to monitor the children's presence and absence daily or weekly in March/April 2020. The two large cities, Gothenburg and Malmö, reported a sharp drop in child attendance at ECEC centres during the first weeks of the pandemic. Another city reported that in spring 2021 only 40% of children were present. Since autumn 2020, average attendance rates have been around 75-80 % (due to the rule that sick children, or children with sick family members, should stay at home). In Sweden, an average of 85% of children aged 1-5 years and 95% of 3-5-year-olds are enrolled in preschools.</p> <p>Attendance percentages may differ from area to area. Sweden today has segregated housing, and in suburbs around cities there are large areas with the lowest socio-economic standards, high percentages of unemployment, migrants, asylum seeking and newly arrived families.</p>

In all countries/regions, no clear statistics are available in order to comprehend the extent to which ECEC has been accessible for children from societally disadvantaged groups (e.g. children with special needs, children living in poverty, children of asylum seekers or refugees, children with migration backgrounds). However, the stakeholders interviewed, especially those in Belgium (Flanders), Berlin and Sweden, indicated some trends concerning societally disadvantaged groups:

**Children with special needs** were more likely to stay at home, due to the fact that many belong to a health risk group. Another reported reason for absence was that parents feared their children would be infected with COVID-19, as often these children also belong to a health risk group. Institutional barriers may also be in place. In Belgium (Flanders), children with special needs stayed at home without much support for their families. The specialised preschools (2.5-6 years old), that are historically separated from the mainstream education system, closed for a long period without emergency childcare options. Conversely, in Berlin, children with special needs and children referred to by youth welfare services were given priority access to emergency ECEC right from the start of the lockdown. Decisions regarding access to centres by external specialists (speech therapists, physiotherapists, paediatricians etc.) were left to the ECEC providers, depending on contextual circumstances (circular information, May 2020). However, many children with special needs were considered members of an at-risk group by doctors, requiring them to stay at home. The re-admission to ECEC of children with special needs was decided on a case-by-case basis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that during the summer months, some children with special needs and belonging to a high health risk group could attend the outdoor playgrounds of ECEC centres. If children with special needs did not belong to an at-risk group, they attended ECEC regularly, as their parents needed the support.

Belgian (Flanders) stakeholders stated that **children from refugee families, newly arriving immigrants and asylum seekers** appear to have been negatively affected in terms of access to ECEC during the coronavirus outbreak. It is unclear whether they disappeared from the radar. In Sweden and Germany (Berlin), anecdotal evidence suggests that **children with migration backgrounds** stayed at home to a greater extent, particularly when one of their parents was not in employment. In Italy (Emilia-Romagna) there was anecdotal evidence that children from refugee and low-income families encountered more difficulties in maintaining contact with ECEC professionals, as communication was mostly mediated by institutional digital platforms (rather than personal contacts through phone/chat), with such communication being carried out only in Italian (no home visits, no language mediation).

Reports in Sweden and Belgium (Flanders) reveal how **children living in poverty** have been at special risk of not attending ECEC. Many already lived in overcrowded apartments, and for those doing schoolwork at home, it has become more difficult, for example, if parents and siblings are at home at the same time. For those children with parents who have lost their work / become unemployed due to COVID-19, or have been ill / stayed at home with sick children, their already bad financial situation became even worse. In the east of Gothenburg city, an area characterised by low SES, only 26% of scheduled children were present in ECEC during the period March-April 2020, in comparison to the national average of 43 %. After the summer, most children returned to ECEC<sup>19</sup>. In Belgium (Flanders), children living in poverty were less likely to return to childcare centres (0-3 years old, paid service), according to a survey carried out by the Upbringing Agency (2020b) on 330 respondents. The

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<sup>19</sup> Preliminary Statistics from Gothenburg, received by mail 6 December 2020

barriers reported were fear of infection, financial capacity, and changed work/educational situation.

#### **4.1.2. Granting priority access to societally disadvantaged groups**

In the Flemish community of Belgium and in Germany (Berlin), from early on in the crisis, children from societally disadvantaged families, irrespective of their parents' working conditions, were given priority access to (emergency) ECEC. This was considered an important governmental measure to ensure the accessibility of ECEC for the most vulnerable families. It is, however, not sufficiently clear whether these families actually attended ECEC. According to the stakeholders interviewed, a lot of work still needed to be done by ECEC centres and networks to ensure that families were aware of this priority rule and actually made use of it. Families required reassurance that they were indeed welcome in ECEC, despite the conflicting messages that were spread in the media ('keep your children at home').

In a few situations, the opposite happened. In Sweden, ECEC centres remained open from a children's right perspective. Nevertheless, some Swedish municipalities initially asked (or even told) unemployed parents to help ECEC centres during the crisis by keeping their children at home. The Swedish National Agency for Education quickly pointed out that this was not a legal recommendation, and access to ECEC should be considered a right for all children, irrespective of their background.

#### **4.1.3. Making ECEC more affordable in the time of COVID-19**

Another focus for some policy makers was to make ECEC more affordable during the time of COVID-19, particularly when it concerned a paid service. In Croatia, many local authorities decided to reduce fees for key workers and working parents who had no other childcare option available during the period of lockdown (March/April 2020). For example, in March 2020 the City of Velika Gorica reduced the parental fee for ECEC by 50% for these parents<sup>20</sup>. In Belgium, the Flemish government provided a 25% reduction on the income-based rate (= the 'corona rate'), for families whose collective monthly income had been reduced by at least 10%<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, according to childcare stakeholders, some municipalities lowered parental fees<sup>22</sup>. In Italy, while ECEC was still closed, summer camps could be organised. However, because these summer activities (as opposed to ECEC) required the payment of fairly high fees and offered only a limited number of places (due to the maximum 'bubble' size of five children per group), only a minority of parents decided to avail themselves of such option. The national government and the regional government of Emilia-Romagna, along with some local municipalities, therefore targeted resources towards lowering the cost of summer camps and ECEC programmes for families. Anecdotal evidence from Italy (Emilia-Romagna) shows that this measure did not really increase accessibility. Moreover, summer educational programmes were not implemented equally across the country, but were mainly in large cities and in the most economically advantaged areas. Those children most at risk therefore had generally no access to any alternative to ECEC during lockdown. In Belgium (Flanders), measures to make ECEC or summer camp alternatives more affordable also turned out to be unsuccessful. Only 1,100 families, out of a total of 150.000 families that were eligible, made use of the reduced 'corona rate' in Belgium (Flanders)<sup>23</sup>. Local authorities and childcare federations also

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<sup>20</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.gorica.hr/2020/03/cijene-vrtica-i-produzenog-boravka-umanjene-za-ozujak/>

<sup>21</sup> For more information, see: <https://beslissingenvlaamseregering.vlaanderen.be/document-view/5F7713C40379AD0008000283> + <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/covid-tarief.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/snelinfo-procedure-compensatie-coronavirus-2020-algemeen.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Unpublished results, Upbringing Agency (2020).

pointed out that despite many creative efforts made to keep in contact with families, some groups did not return, mainly because of changes in their economic situation. This raised the question of whether or not measures such as these were a quick, temporary solution that had actually been masking a more fundamental problem: without legal ECEC entitlement and affordability, changes in families' economic situations due to the crisis hindered the return of children and families to ECEC centres, in spite of the social and pedagogical importance of ECEC. It appears that efforts to improve affordability and accessibility needs to be made irrespective of a crisis, and not during a crisis. In June 2020, nine important Italian civil society networks signed a manifesto entitled 'Five Steps for Combating Educational Poverty and Promoting Children's Rights', calling for immediate action in five priority areas of education. Among these, the one most relevant to the ECEC sector is the rolling out of unitary childcare settings across the country, starting with the most deprived areas, along with an entitlement to free early education for socially disadvantaged families (Alleanza per l'Infanzia et al., 2020).

Even in countries where ECEC is free of charge, concerns were still raised regarding the absence of societally disadvantaged children. In Sweden, for example, the ongoing political debate about making ECEC compulsory was further strengthened by the COVID-19 crisis (SOU, 2020). As stated in the new toolkit for inclusive ECEC from the European Commission (2020a), one may ask whether making ECEC compulsory is the first solution before investing in proactive outreach and inclusive ECEC, as is described in the following section (European Commission, 2020a).

#### **4.1.4. Proactive outreach to children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Accessibility – especially among more societally disadvantaged children – has come under even greater threat during the crisis. Accordingly, organising proactive outreach to families has become an important task for ECEC centres as well as local, regional and national authorities. By proactive outreach we mean 'going to children and families' (both physically and metaphorically), listening to their actual needs, and providing appropriate responses (concrete examples of outreach include calling and/or visiting door-to-door; asking what families need and finding ways to address those needs, etc.). Overall, it should be noted that ECEC centres that previously had good contacts with parents and local communities, performed better in terms of outreach. ECEC centres that were better at collaborating with other social welfare, community-based organisations and local municipalities were also better at outreach, encouraging families to come back to ECEC after a period of closure or self-isolation.

In the case of the city of Berlin, outreach is an inherent part of the curriculum (Berlin early years programme, Bridging Diversity) (Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family, Berlin, 2019). ECEC centres were assumed to continue this task, and to continue their cooperation with social, therapeutic and health services and the youth welfare office. In the other countries, due to a lack of national/regional strategies, the extent to which ECEC centres and local municipalities engaged in proactive outreach was a matter of individual responsibility and the good will of ECEC centres. Some authorities therefore made extra efforts to raise awareness of the importance of outreach. In Belgium (Flanders), regional and local authorities, childcare federations, the education inspectorate, pedagogical support services and centres for pupil guidance stimulated and raised awareness among individual ECEC centres to engage in proactive outreach. In Sweden, a governmental report prepared at the end of 2019 assigned clear responsibility to the municipalities for organising more outreach activities, as well as opening more preschools and family centres (SOU, 2020).

At the level of individual ECEC settings, outreach meant that ECEC staff remained actively in contact with families who had not brought their children to ECEC during the pandemic. In Sweden, for example, ECEC staff communicated with parents and guardians the

measures that were being taken to reduce the spread of infection, such as a lot of outdoor activities and stricter hygiene rules, and tried to provide a nuanced picture of the fact that there was an active spread of infection in preschool. As these Swedish ECEC professionals testified:

*'When we called parents who chose to keep their children at home because of corona, we were told about their fears but also received a thank you, just because we cared and contacted them. This will be of significance in the continued relationship.'* (Teacher 1 in Jönköping, 1 December 2020).

*'Children with guardians of foreign origin are more absent from the ECEC centre. We have felt a great deal of concern about the children who have not come to us, and we have previously reported concerns about several of these. We have called their guardians and asked them to let the children come to the ECEC centre and play outside. Many times, these conversations helped and the children returned.'* (Teacher 2 in Jönköping, 1 December 2020).

In Belgium (Flanders), outreach meant making regular contact with children and families via telephone calls, WhatsApp or door-to-door visits, as this professional clarified:

*'We regularly call parents of vulnerable families. All parents appreciate that chat. Continuing to call also gives parents the signal that we continue to think about them, that we are there for them. If a parent tells us that everything is going well, we still call them two days later, because then they may have a question or concern.'* (VBJK, 2020a).

Many ECEC professionals in Belgium (Flanders) took the initiative themselves, or were sometimes supported by 'bridge figures' (*brugfiguren*): staff members who act as a 'bridge' between preschools and families, with a focus on outreach to societally disadvantaged families<sup>24</sup>.

#### **4.1.5. Importance of warm and welcoming transitions from home to ECEC**

Over the past 10 years or so, more attention has been given to acknowledging that transitions from one educational environment to another (e.g. from home to ECEC) mark significant changes in the life of children and their families and communities (Balduzzi et al., 2019). Moreover, an international consensus exists that positive experiences of transition can be a critical factor in children's wellbeing and for their future success and development, while negative transitional experiences can give rise to lasting challenges that lead to poorer educational performance, especially for socially disadvantaged children (Dumčius et al., 2014). In most countries, children experienced a period of lockdown, during which they could not attend ECEC. This resulted in a drastic change in their habits, witnessing the fear and anxiety of their families, and having to readapt to new societal rules (VBJK, 2020b). Returning to ECEC centres raises several questions in relation to how children and families are welcomed back after a long period of absence, and in accordance with new safety rules.

Investing in good familiarisation trajectories appears to be of the utmost importance – not only for newly enrolled children, but also children who are returning to ECEC after a period of absence. In Italy, for example, the guidelines document issued by the Ministry of Education for the re-opening of early childhood services and preschools explicitly states (for the first time in a national policy document) the importance, from a pedagogical point

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<sup>24</sup> *Brugfiguren* are an established staff member figure in Belgian (Flanders) schools, besides the pandemic. This already established professional role helped in maintaining and creating contact with families also during the pandemic period.

of view, of carefully planning familiarisation practices aimed at welcoming children and parents back to ECEC centres. The guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2020c) underline the importance of:

- Listening to parents by providing opportunities for individual parent-teacher meetings before a child begins to attend the service (devoting special attention to parents of newly enrolled children);
- Allowing parents into the ECEC setting during the child's settling-in period (*ambientamento*), by arranging small groups and preferably using outdoor spaces (e.g. gardens);
- Rearranging time and space for the purposes of welcoming children and parents into ECEC settings, making it possible for one parent to be together with the child during the settling-in period ('co-presence');
- Specific attention needs to be dedicated to supporting children through the process of gradual familiarisation with new hygiene rules and safety regulations.

However, actual implementation of these guidelines depended on the context. In engaged regions with recognised quality of ECEC, the guidelines were adopted more successfully than in other areas, sometimes leading to large differences even between centres in the same municipality. Where the guidelines were implemented successfully, the perceived difficulties in building a relationship of trust with children (e.g. fear of contagion, scepticism regarding sanitation protocols adopted by the ECEC centre) could be progressively overcome, following the positive outcome of the familiarisation period.

Given that parents could not enter ECEC spaces in many countries, the familiarisation trajectories needed to be re-arranged (especially for newly enrolled children, but also for the previously enrolled ones needing to re-familiarise themselves). This included using outdoor spaces (e.g. looking through the window), organising activities indoors but in small groups, further emphasising a key-workers approach<sup>25</sup> or setting up familiarisation walks with parents and children around the neighbourhood. In the city of Berlin (Germany), for example, parents of newly enrolled children were allowed into ECEC centres during the familiarisation process, which lasted between two and four weeks, depending on the child's progress. Settling in was staggered throughout the day, so that no more than two parents were present in a group at the same time.

In Belgium (Flanders), many ECEC centres (particularly preschools) cancelled familiarisation trajectories for newly enrolled children, which made families question the transition (Vlaams Parlement, 2020). Interviewees from civil society organisations representing families signalled that some parents therefore tended to postpone their child's start in ECEC. Other ECEC centres, meanwhile, tried to readapt their familiarisation paths by combining them with new safety rules (for example, by meeting parents outside, organising video calls, etc.).

Another big challenge faced by the ECEC sector is the fact that daily rituals of entering and picking up could not be carried on, as parents had to remain outside ECEC settings. This could have a negative impact on building relationships of trust between professionals and families. In some Italian ECEC centres, 'welcoming' and 'goodbye' routines were rearranged in order to allow (brief) daily exchanges between professionals and parents. As parents could no longer physically enter the setting, often a child's entrance to their group was organised through the garden door of each classroom. At the same time, parents were asked to collaborate in respecting the time slots allocated for 'arrival in the morning' and

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<sup>25</sup> With key-worker approach we mean creating a privileged relationship between one professional and a small group of children and families, in order to facilitate the familiarization process.

'picking up in the afternoon', so that ECEC staff could have a quick word with every parent. Digital communication with parents also became increasingly important. For example, some ECEC centres regularly shared photo/video documentation of children's experiences and daily activities with parents (via DVD, during online meetings).

Important questions to raise are to what extent there is an awareness at policy level of the fact that working in ECEC involves addressing both children and their families (not just the child); and what level of importance is given to parental involvement when designing safety guidelines. Staff Being unable to meet parents face to face has several effects on the wellbeing of children (and families). In particular, it impacts the accessibility and participation of more societally disadvantaged groups. With this awareness in mind, and knowing that investing in relationships with families has a direct effect on the quality of children's experiences within ECEC, it is important to find strategies to support professionals in maintaining these relationships and in continuing to facilitate face-to-face contacts with parents during times of crisis. For this reason, it appears important to consider the possibility for ECEC staff to be among the priority groups for vaccination, as advocated by stakeholders in the workforce and representatives of organizations interviewed for this study.

#### 4.1.6. Summary

Despite the fact that few statistics are available regarding the accessibility of ECEC during 2020, the stakeholders interviewed in the five countries/regions reported that the crisis might have a more severe impact on societally disadvantaged children (e.g. children with special needs, children living in poverty, children of asylum seekers or refugees, children with migration backgrounds). This is due to the fact that they may not have sufficient access or they did not attend ECEC for several reasons (fear of infection, financial capacity and changed work/ educational situation). Some ECEC policies and practices in the various countries/regions therefore attempted to increase accessibility by:

- making ECEC more affordable for families;
- granting priority access to societally disadvantaged children in policies governing the reopening of ECEC;
- engaging in proactive outreach towards children and families during and after closure;
- paying specific attention to the importance of warm and welcoming transitions every time, not only when children enter ECEC for the first time, but also when children have been absent from ECEC for a while (due to closures, illness, quarantine).

Building trust with children and families is of the utmost importance to ensuring that children will return and continue to attend ECEC. When making decisions regarding pandemic-related rules (for instance, regarding future vaccine strategies), governments need to take into account that **ECEC centres work with both children AND families**. It is not simply a child-centred profession, in which you can 'cut off' the parents/families easily to avoid contamination among adults. If ECEC centres are unable to work with families, accessibility comes under threat – particularly for the most societally vulnerable children and families.

## Examples of relevant policy practices to govern accessibility in crisis times

### **Granting priority access**

From early on in the crisis, socially disadvantaged families were considered a priority group to resume access to ECEC both in Berlin, and by the Flemish government in Belgium. In this way, policy makers tried to simultaneously combine social inequality, economic, family and education-focused concerns.

### **Affordability**

In Croatia, many local authorities decided to offer reduced fees for key workers and working parents who had no other available childcare options during the lockdown period (March/April 2020). For example, in March 2020 the City of Velika Gorica reduced parental fees for ECEC by 50%<sup>26</sup>.

### **Outreach**

To ensure that outreach extends beyond just the individual responsibility of ECEC centres, at the end of 2019 the Swedish national government launched a report requesting that all municipalities invest in outreach activities, as well as opening preschools and family centres (SOU, 2020).

Childcare centres (0-3 years old) in Belgium (Flanders) remained open at the beginning only for the children of parents with essential jobs, as well as socially disadvantaged children. During the first lockdown, local authorities and childcare federations called upon childcare centres and welfare organisations to actively communicate to families that everyone in need was welcome. Tools were developed to support this. The local government in Brussels gave welfare organisations a financial incentive to engage in outreach work and encourage as many people as possible back to childcare centres. The Flemish Association for Cities and Municipalities drew up a step-by-step plan to support childcare centres to guide societally disadvantaged families back to childcare (VVSG, 2020).

### **Warm, welcoming and inclusive transitions**

In Italy, the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education for the re-opening of early childhood centres and preschools explicitly notes the importance, from a pedagogical point of view, of carefully planning familiarisation practices aimed at welcoming children and parents into ECEC centres (Ministry of Education, 2020c).

## 4.2. Workforce

*'STAFF is the most significant factor for children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore, staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality'* (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 9).

Before the crisis, there was a clear consensus internationally that good ECEC quality ultimately depends on a well-supported ECEC workforce. The crisis has revealed still further how important the ECEC workforce is, not only in terms of supporting young children and their families, but also ensuring a strong economy (Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, 2020). In this section, we report on the impact of COVID-19 on the ECEC workforce. We examine how ECEC workers were perceived, both in public debates and in overall policies. As frontline workers, staff members in all countries/regions have experienced a great deal

<sup>26</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.gorica.hr/2020/03/cijene-vrtica-i-produzenog-boravka-umanjene-za-ozujak/>

of stress, tiredness and anxiety. We address the various ways in which support for ECEC workforce has been organised. Lastly, a common theme among most countries/regions appears to be a structural shortage of ECEC staff that is threatening the daily operation of ECEC centres, particularly in the time of COVID.

#### **4.2.1. ECEC staff as (in)visible heroes?**

The data collected in the five countries/regions show differences and commonalities in the extent to which ECEC staff have been (under)appreciated by children, families, civil society organisations, governments, and society in general (in the media and in other public debates).

In countries/regions such as Italy, Croatia and Belgium (Flanders), ECEC staff, particularly those working in childcare centres (0-3 years old), have received little appreciation for their role during the crisis, despite the advocacy efforts of civil society organisations and ECEC stakeholders themselves. They felt like invisible heroes, as they were working with young children and families who themselves felt a lot of pressure during the crisis, in comparison to families with older children. ECEC staff in Sweden and Germany (Berlin) have received recognition for the essential role they play in society – for being 'heroes' – both by governments and by the wider public. But this verbal recognition does not necessarily mean that ECEC staff always feel they have been listened to. Nor does it mean they have received concrete support measures in order to do their 'essential job'.

In Sweden, ECEC staff have been called heroes by governments and in the public debate. In most cases, they have been enormously proud of the job they are doing. As one ECEC professional describes:

*'We discuss a lot about that now our great social responsibility is to be the usual safe place for the children, but also for their guardians (and staff). We have noted the increased pride of Swedish preschool teachers of being the part that, together with schools, is highlighted as particularly important from a public health perspective.'* (Teacher in Staffanstorp, 18 November 2020).

Nevertheless, ECEC professionals experienced the fear of possible infection as centres remained open, and in this sense felt less recognised and supported. ECEC staff were not consulted in the development of the necessary adaptations of the Swedish general guidelines and recommendations, leading to a tense situation between staff and families. These guidelines, especially from September 2020 onwards, loosened up the measures governing when sick children should remain at home and when they should not. The Swedish Public Health Agency justified the decision by saying that young children do not appear to spread the infection to any great extent, and that the benefits of having children in preschool therefore outweighed the costs. This upset many ECEC professionals, who were afraid of getting sick and did not feel adequately protected by this rule. Ultimately, the situation led to conflicts with families. In December, the rule was changed again so that children with siblings or other family members who are ill with COVID-19 are also required to stay home from preschool.

In Berlin, ECEC staff were also seen as heroes and essential to the functioning of society. For example, ECEC workers suffered no reduction in salaries regardless of whether they were in active service or not. Yet, for the first six weeks, ECEC staff were not themselves considered 'essential workers', and their children had no access to emergency ECEC while their parents had to work.

In Belgium (Flanders), a country characterised by a double<sup>27</sup> split ECEC system, childcare workers (0-3 years old) in particular, as well as workers in out-of-school care (2.5-12 years old) felt less recognised by society, public opinion and the authorities, in comparison with preschool teachers (2.5-6 years old). For example, the decision of the Minister of Education to offer teachers an extra week of autumn holidays to unburden them upset many childcare workers and out-of-school care workers, since they were also working hard, and suddenly had to organise out of school care when preschools closed (children would attend out of school care instead of preschool). It should be noted that this difference in the appreciation of different types of ECEC staff with diverse professional statuses was not the case in Sweden and Germany, both countries characterised by an integrated ECEC system.

#### 4.2.2. ECEC as workers on the frontline

In all five countries/regions studied, ECEC staff, as frontline workers interacting closely with children and families, experienced fear of the virus, stress, and anxiety while centres were open. Over time, signs of fatigue were also reported among ECEC workers. In Germany (Berlin), staff with prior health conditions, and who belonged to at-risk groups, were exempted from active duty at the beginning of the crisis, but had to return after the summer holidays, as the number of children attending the centres increased. Fear of becoming infected in the workplace then increased, and led to a petition with 20,000 signatures to recognise the specific workplace hazards of ECEC staff<sup>28</sup>. By November 2020, a number of umbrella organisations representing providers stated that ECEC staff were showing signs of having reached extreme levels of burden, and were in danger of being unable to guarantee daily service to all parents<sup>29</sup>. They therefore demanded a reduction in opening hours (in general, most ECEC centres are open 10 hours a day), but received no reaction to this request from the Regional Ministry. In Croatia, many ECEC professionals had to work overtime (due to staff shortages, self-isolation, new health protocols, etc.) without being paid extra. Stress and fear of becoming infected, combined in some cases with cuts in salary, resulted in a decrease in motivation, as well as apathy among ECEC professionals. The ECEC professionals interviewed stated that they felt the tension between safety and guaranteeing quality education as a weight on their shoulders. They also felt that when the number of infections increased in the ECEC centres in which they worked, this would be perceived as their 'fault'. The trade union representing ECEC staff therefore sent an open letter to the Minister of Science and Education, inviting him to address the founders and directors of ECEC centres with clear messages regarding the organisation of work. The latter had to follow the measures and recommendations to enable safe use of ECEC centres and preserve the physical and mental health of their workers during a period of increased number of infections in November-December 2020<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> In Belgium (Flanders), there is an institutional split between the different levels of education (childcare, preschool, primary school), but also within each level. We refer especially to the fact that in preschool (for children aged 2.5-6 years), teachers and childcare workers (out-of-school care workers) work with the same children and families, but depend on different Ministries, have different working conditions, few opportunities to meet and reflect together on practice.

<sup>28</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.nifbe.de/infoservice/aktuelles/1646-petition-paedagogisch-fachkraefte-brauchen-schutz>

<sup>29</sup> For more information, see:

[https://www.pariextra.de/uploads/media/LIGA\\_Positionspapier\\_Bek%C3%A4mpfung\\_SARS-CoV-2-Pandemie\\_Sicherstellung\\_Sozialer\\_Arbeit\\_30102020.pdf](https://www.pariextra.de/uploads/media/LIGA_Positionspapier_Bek%C3%A4mpfung_SARS-CoV-2-Pandemie_Sicherstellung_Sozialer_Arbeit_30102020.pdf);

[https://www.daks-berlin.de/system/files/media/files/stellungnahme\\_daks\\_201116\\_final.pdf](https://www.daks-berlin.de/system/files/media/files/stellungnahme_daks_201116_final.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.sssh.hr/hr/vise/granski-sindikati-74/somk-vertici-rade-bez-ikakvih-ogranicenja-unatoc-stozim-mjerama-ministre-zasto-sutite-4632?fbclid=IwAR05Df01LG1z8aYUyxGkzpLQqFnybA5-LRT5L5uJx79zvq6tiktzTdRC60k>

[https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/postoje-li-mjesta-gdje-covid-ne-postoji-gotovo-je-sve-zatvoreno-no-tu-gotovo-da-i-nema-mjera-poslan-hitni-apel-stozeru-i-vladi-foto-20201219?fbclid=IwAR3jJmDNXOLOOX7ARyvo8\\_M44IFVp5qe\\_bDqQAy36i\\_7Fkr2Sp3aMO3xJU8](https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/postoje-li-mjesta-gdje-covid-ne-postoji-gotovo-je-sve-zatvoreno-no-tu-gotovo-da-i-nema-mjera-poslan-hitni-apel-stozeru-i-vladi-foto-20201219?fbclid=IwAR3jJmDNXOLOOX7ARyvo8_M44IFVp5qe_bDqQAy36i_7Fkr2Sp3aMO3xJU8)

### **4.2.3. How ECEC staff are supported**

As underlined above, the COVID-19 crisis has placed pressure on ECEC professionals and required ECEC settings to rapidly rethink and reorganise to a new way of working. This has required strong support for staff at a financial, organisational, pedagogical and emotional level.

#### **Organisational, pedagogical and emotional support from ECEC leaders**

During the COVID-19 crisis, ECEC directors/leaders have played an essential role in supporting ECEC professionals in the readaptation of their practice. In order to do so, ECEC directors have required knowledge about the pandemic guidelines and had to help the staff re-think daily activities to maintain a balance between safety and pedagogical vision.

In Berlin, the need for a flexible and stress-resistant leadership in times of crisis has been underlined. Providers received regular updates and felt well-informed, in addition to availing themselves of consultation services from umbrella organisations. Likewise, ECEC workers felt well-informed by providers as the system became more used to the COVID-19 measures. On the other hand, time pressures have applied in the implementation of the guidelines, since they were often issued at very short notice and providers had little time to adapt centres to new regulations. This placed a great deal of stress on the shoulders of ECEC directors. In Belgium (Flanders), flexibility has also been recognised as an important competence for ECEC directors. Childcare federations, educational umbrella organisations and local authorities emphasised in interviews that the workload was very heavy for everyone, but especially for ECEC directors because they were in charge of implementing new measures, maintaining the support of the team, and for the accessible flow of communication with parents. The more support directors were provided within their network regarding how to translate the safety measures and set up their own risk analyses, the better they were able to focus on reassuring staff and parents. In general, all ECEC stakeholders strongly agreed that the steering role of ECEC directors was crucial. In the case of Belgium (Flanders), however, this represents a structural challenge, as directors do not really have extra staff to form a layer of middle management.

#### **Organisational, pedagogical and emotional support through continuous professional development (CPD) pathways**

The new situation of the ECEC sector also involved the way in which continuous professional development (CPD) pathways could take place.

CPD is crucial to supporting ECEC staff in contributing enhancements to the pedagogical quality of services for young children, as also underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019), and by the report of the ET2020 Working Group on ECEC (2020) entitled How to recruit, train and motivate well qualified staff. The latter states that 'the quality of ECEC provision is highly dependent on the professionalism, competence and commitment of staff working in the sector – and it is therefore increasingly important that there is continued support for staff training and development' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 5). In line with this, a systematic review conducted for Eurofound (Peeters et al., 2015, ii) points out that 'long-term CPD interventions integrated into practice, such as pedagogical guidance and coaching in reflection groups, have been proved effective in very different contexts. [...] By enhancing practitioners' reflectivity both at individual and at team level, CPD activities allow ECEC professionals to strengthen their capacities and address areas for improvement in everyday practices.' This makes CPD paths crucial during the pandemic and beyond. In times of crisis, supporting professionals via CPD activities appears fundamental precisely because of the very quick and demanding adaptations required at the level of practice. ECEC staff therefore require quality support in order to find ways to implement safety measures into their everyday practice without losing sight of the pedagogical framework orienting their work with children and families.

Our data indicate that not only did all countries/regions register a decline in face-to-face meetings, and had to make a transition towards using online tools, but that in some cases the content of training also changed to some extent, for example by focusing on the new measures in different ways. In order to re-organise ECEC settings, many practical/organisational aspects had to be taken into account. For this reason, in all countries, a lot of the time usually spent on team reflection/planning initially had to be used for 'crisis management'.

In the cases of Sweden and Germany (Berlin), ECEC staff explicitly reported that time intended for planning and preparation was often cancelled, as the heads of ECEC centres decided not to bring in substitutes (Sweden), and because staff from different groups were not allowed to mingle (Germany, Berlin), in an attempt to minimise the spread of the virus. ECEC teams did, however, have access to pedagogical coaches who worked alongside the principals to help re-organise practices in line with changing COVID-19 guidelines.

The presence of strong pedagogical coordinators/coaches capable of supporting the team was crucial for ECEC centres in all countries/regions. However, differences can be identified depending on the sector and type of providers. In Italy, particularly in some regions such as Emilia-Romagna, pedagogical coordinators have a strong tradition of sustaining collegial staff reflection and practice in municipal childcare centres (for children 0-3 years old) and preschools (3-6 years old), whereas they are quite absent in state-maintained preschools (3-6 years old). This created a huge gap between the two sectors, which became very visible during the period of COVID-19. In municipal childcare and preschool, the role of pedagogical coordinators (*coordinatori pedagogici*) – that of enabling team reflection on practice and helping staff to connect their vision and actions – has been especially crucial during the crisis period, when practice had to be transformed in the light of constantly changing health protocols, without overlooking its pedagogical value. This transformation has made some key aspects of educational routine in ECEC centres more difficult to implement (for example, communication and relationship with families). On the other hand, it has been an eye-opener for ECEC staff at certain levels, when it led to rethinking some concepts that had previously been taken for granted. In some cases, with the support of pedagogical coordinators, staff 'discovered' new, valuable ways of working, which can be maintained after the COVID-19 crisis – for example, a new perspective on the period of familiarisation /settling in (*ambientamento*), or a more intentional arrangement of indoor and outdoor spaces.

*'In order to overcome the limitations of working in 'bubbles', together we re-structured and re-organised all the common spaces in the childcare centre in such a way that all groups could use them, albeit at different times, by taking turns. Within the toddler room, we further differentiated play corners, and the garden has become an extension of our room... outdoor play has now become a stable routine, with connected rituals (i.e. singing a song to go out, wearing wellies, etc.)'* (Educator, medium-sized municipality in Emilia-Romagna).

*'Whereas at the beginning, the garden appeared to be one of the biggest challenges we had to face, as we were supposed to use a portion of the garden where no outdoor play structures were available, with time it became our greatest success. We rethought this space, starting from the observation of children's free play and by listening to their requests. Guided by their exploration and by using creativity, the garden has now become an integral part of our daily activity'* (Preschool teacher, medium-size municipality in Emilia-Romagna.)

Conversely, the situation of state-maintained preschools was particularly critical, since preschool teachers resumed work mainly without any kind of pedagogical support for rethinking their own practice. The only training they received at the beginning of the school year concerned health and safety issues connected with COVID-19. This training was

carried out online at the level of each comprehensive school institution, which meant involving pre-, primary and lower-secondary school teachers in the same training. This led to a focus on the formal application of standard hygienic protocols, rather than the rethinking of educational practice in the light of the constraints imposed by hygiene protocols. For example, in some cases children's access to outside play facilities was restricted; in others, play facilities could be used by children from the same group; in other cases, books were completely removed from classrooms.

In Belgium (Flanders), childcare federations, local authorities and in-service training organisations identified the following trends among ECEC staff in the childcare sector (0-3). At the start of the crisis, there was less room for pedagogical coaching and more emphasis on the operationalisation of safety measures. Especially among small, private facilities, support that focused on pedagogical themes was reduced for months (approximately 85% as spent on COVID-19 and 15% on pedagogical approach). The role of coaching shifted into a 'helpdesk' function. At the same time, the accessibility of coaches (via telephone, texting, WhatsApp) contributed to the establishment of a relationship of trust between coaches and centres. On the other hand, it was actually easier for pedagogical coaching to take place at larger, public facilities during the first months, due to the reduced number of children in the group. During the second lockdown, childcare federations noticed that coaching focused mainly on subjects relating to staff wellbeing. With regard to the preschool sector (2.5-6 years old) in Belgium (Flanders), mixed signals can be identified. On the one hand, stakeholders emphasised how important the pedagogical guidance centres of the different umbrella organisations had been in this crisis. In a questionnaire completed by 198 preschools and primary schools (official, subsidised education) carried out by the OVSG (Education Association of Cities and Municipalities), it emerged that respondents were more satisfied with the pedagogical guidance they received than they had been the year before<sup>31</sup>. This was related to a number of factors: that the accessibility and proximity of pedagogical guidance to schools was paramount; that the guidance was given in a sustainable, tailor-made manner through coaching; the need to digitalise preschools' way of working; and the need for schools to know how to implement interesting and innovative ideas in their daily operations (OVSG, 2020). On the flip side, some pedagogical coaches addressed the fact that many preschool teams were tired and were not focused on engaging with CPD activities. The pedagogical coaches contacted the preschools regularly and reassured them in many ways, but the online alternatives were considered not to have the same intensity and effect. As one pedagogical coach stated during a focus group: *'It seems that preschools are surviving now and their pedagogy is on the back burner.'*

In Croatia, CPD activities took place online, which had a double effect on participants: on the one hand, ECEC staff missed face-to-face contact, but on the other, especially among professionals living in more remote areas of the country (particularly the south) this way of receiving training was considered more 'equal', since they were otherwise largely excluded from training, which mainly takes place in Zagreb. In general, the ECEC staff interviewed expressed their appreciation at connecting with and being supported by colleagues who were in a similar position to them. The themes of these training sessions mainly related to pedagogical issues, and to how to rethink practice in the light of the new measures.

### **Material support**

The new situation under COVID-19 required additional expenses and materials (such as protective materials for staff), which needed to be financed. Countries/regions managed this issue in different ways. In some contexts, expenses were the individual responsibility

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<sup>31</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.ovsg.be/pers/tevredenheid-over-pedagogische-begeleiding-neemt-toe-na-corona>

of providers or even of ECEC professionals themselves. In others, additional means were allocated from the national/regional/local government or EU funds towards investments in protective materials. Leaving it up to individual responsibility in decentralised contexts resulted in the unequal use of materials depending on the economic abilities of the local municipality.

In Sweden, ECEC directors reported that they were investing in more creative materials for outdoor play. During the rainy autumn and winter of 2020-2021, there was also a need to equip preschool staff with adequate clothing for the long hours that children spend outdoors. With regard to ICT materials, the Sweden government provides funding for such equipment, although the use of it with children and families did not increase. A different situation was seen in Belgium (Flanders), where ECEC teams were eager to make the digital switch and learned a lot, but lacked good IT infrastructure (high-quality internet connections, sufficient laptops/tablets, etc.) and IT knowledge.

### **Financial support**

In Sweden, ECEC professionals received the same salary as before, even when fewer children were present. The same happened in Germany (Berlin), although salary continuity for ECEC professionals has been a controversial issue. In March 2020, consultations took place between the Berlin Ministries of Finance and the Berlin Ministry of Education, Youth and Family about salary costs during periods of limited service provision. The Ministry of Finance did not succeed in instituting a general cut in salaries by putting ECEC staff on reduced-hours contracts. Since there is a huge shortage of trained staff, ECEC providers and umbrella organisations pressed for no cuts to be made to salaries in order not to lose staff. As a result, all professional ECEC workers received full salaries, regardless of their actual hours of work or number of children in their care. In June, providers agreed to a 'symbolic' payback of EUR 70 per staff member to the Ministry of Finance, which was a lump sum for all savings providers might have enjoyed (savings came mostly from flexible-hours work contracts). Continuity of salaries has also been a controversial theme in Croatia, where national regulations were elaborated regarding the highest salaries that workers could receive in the situation of self-isolation during this crisis<sup>32</sup>. Normally, when employees are on sick leave, they receive 85% of their usual monthly salary, which is more than the salary envisioned by the national regulation during the period of self-isolation. However, each local authority can take its own decisions on this matter with regard to its employees. Some local authorities decided to pay self-isolating ECEC professionals as much as they would receive under sick leave. While some local municipalities reduced the salaries of ECEC staff by 30% for more than six months, others decided to keep giving their 100% of their salaries during lockdown, when ECEC centres were working at a decreased capacity and mainly online.

In the case of split ECEC systems as in Italy and Belgium (Flanders), professionals working in state-maintained or state-subsidised preschools (for children aged 2.5/3-6 years) and in public childcare centres (0-3 years) continued to receive their salaries during the crisis. In the private childcare sector (0-3 years), this was more problematic. Staff who were employed in private ECEC provision that was not-publicly subsidised were most at risk of losing their jobs during the pandemic<sup>33</sup>. A survey carried out in Italy by the PAN Consortium (a large nationwide social cooperative consortium) in April 2020 highlighted the risk of permanent closure of those ECEC centres that were not publicly subsidised, and which relied entirely on parental fees. Updated and reliable national figures on ECEC closures across Italy are expected to come from the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT), but are not available as of yet. A number of informal local reports have, however, addressed

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<sup>32</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.iusinfo.hr/aktualno/u-sredistu/42887>

<sup>33</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/04/20/asili-nido-quantita-settembre-non-riapriranno-piu/155094/>

the issue of inflated enrolment fees among private for-profit providers, to counterbalance rising expenses<sup>34</sup>. The same problem appeared in Belgium (Flanders): stakeholders indicated that small private childcare centres or family day carers that depend almost entirely on parental fees or other non-public means, were encountering problems that threatened their financial survival. After the Flemish government initiated financial compensation measures, approximately 90% of the public and private childcare (0-3 years) and out-of-school care centres (25-12 years) made use of this. Consequently, the salaries of ECEC staff continued to be paid, ensuring that small, private centres in particular could continue to operate.

#### 4.2.4. Staff shortages

In all the countries, with the exception of Italy, ECEC staff shortages have been a major issue during the crisis. With professionals unavailable due to sick leave, quarantine or because they belonged to a high-risk group, stakeholders reported difficulties in finding replacement staff. This resulted in various negative side-effects. In Croatia, for example, in line with instructions given by the Croatian Institute of Public Health, providers (which, in the case of the ECEC sector, are the local authorities) were theoretically asked to divide children in smaller groups in larger ECEC centres<sup>35</sup>. However, due to staff shortages, and because no extra budget was allocated to make this possible, this measure has generally not been implemented by local authorities. A similar situation occurred in Sweden. According to the guidelines of Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare, special risk assessments had to be elaborated for staff belonging to a risk group. Together with the employer, a plan for reducing the risk of infection at work and when traveling to and from work had to be prepared. This also included working from home, where possible. However, only a limited number of ECEC tasks can be performed from home. And due to staff shortage, as the pandemic continued, staff belonging to a risk group reported that they were being asked to work at the preschool again. Some solved this problem by only working outdoors. In Germany, staff belonging to a high-risk group also had to work again in ECEC centres from September/October 2020 onwards. The German Youth Institute survey reports for Berlin (July 2020) detail that in early May 2020, 25% of staff were unavailable for service (due to sick leave, quarantine, or being in a high-risk group). This percentage went down to 15% by early July, but rose again to around 20% by the end of July. Due to a substantial shortage of qualified staff even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, replacement has always been hard. This led to a point in June 2020 when the Berlin Ministry of Education allowed providers to hire 'unqualified staff' for a temporary period. These could include parents, other family members, volunteers from national volunteer programmes, students in pedagogy (and other similar studies), volunteers with prior experience working with young children in sports, church-based youth work, etc. As the circular specified that recruits had to possess prior experiences working with children, no coordinated induction training was provided for these staff. No data is available confirming whether or not this measure attracted new staff to the sector. However, as recruitment strategies are multi-faceted, we can assume that it led to some of these people considering a career in the ECEC sector.

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<sup>34</sup>For more information, see: La Repubblica newspaper (4 October 2020). [https://www.repubblica.it/economia/diritti-e-consumi/diritti-consumatori/domande-e-risposte/2020/10/04/news/il\\_nido\\_privato\\_chiede\\_il\\_30\\_della\\_retta\\_in\\_caso\\_di\\_chiusura\\_per\\_covid-269197893/](https://www.repubblica.it/economia/diritti-e-consumi/diritti-consumatori/domande-e-risposte/2020/10/04/news/il_nido_privato_chiede_il_30_della_retta_in_caso_di_chiusura_per_covid-269197893/); Il Fatto Quotidiano newspaper (18 November 2020) <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/11/18/asili-nido-privati-ora-spunta-la-clausola-covid-retta-da-pagare-anche-in-caso-di-lockdown-assonidi-chi-non-accetta-cambi-struttura/6005314/>; Altroconsumo Italian Consumers' Association (19 January 2021): <https://www.altroconsumo.it/vita-privata-famiglia/mamme-e-bimbi/news/asili-nido>

<sup>35</sup> Preporuke za rad s djecom rane i predškolske dobi (2020). Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, Zagreb.

#### 4.2.5. Summary

With regard to their position in society, ECEC professionals in Belgium (Flanders), Italy and Croatia felt undervalued and considered themselves somewhat invisible. In Sweden and Berlin, on the other hand, ECEC staff were considered heroes who played an important role in the operation of their societies.

Stress, anxiety and fatigue have been felt by staff members in all the countries/regions studied. What appears to help is to have good leadership, capable of flexibility and guidance, and the possibility of exchange with colleagues through CPD pathways.

In general, the crisis has shown that those ECEC centres which benefitted from leaders or coaches who combined pedagogical vision with steering capacity were better able to deal with the unpredictable nature of the crisis. They were thus able to act in 'crisis mode' while at the same time creating emotional stability for children, families and staff members. The more embedded ECEC centres and ECEC leaders were in networks and structures to help translate safety measures into the context of ECEC, the more time leaders had to focus on emotionally supporting children, families and ECEC staff.

The support of pedagogical coaches in CPD paths turned out to be crucial in this time of crisis. They helped teams to readapt their daily practice, balancing pedagogical vision with safety measures.

With regarding to the content and form of CPD paths, it appears that:

- In contexts in which ECEC pedagogical vision and practice were already strong and of good quality, and where the staff were already regularly supported before the crisis, CPD paths could quickly adapt to focusing on how to integrate the new measures within the pedagogical vision. In contexts whose pedagogical vision and support for professionals was already less developed, CPD paths were mainly delivered as training that focused on safety and hygiene measures, without necessarily considering how to integrate these within a pedagogical approach
- In small private facilities, CPD paths focused mainly on crisis management, implementing measures and rules. In larger facilities that were part of a network/system, CPD paths could more easily focus also on pedagogical aspects.
- New forms of online coaching opportunities have been rapidly explored. This has offered some advantages for ECEC professionals in more remote areas. Without a crisis, such a trajectory could have taken years. However, we must remain aware of the fact that a digital divide exists among ECEC staff.

Generally speaking, there has been a lack of good-quality provision of protective materials to ECEC staff. Aside from the importance of such materials to the health of the staff, this also affects the quality of their work, since ECEC professionals, as frontline workers, might feel more insecure and anxious without protective equipment.

With regard to continuity of salaries, some ECEC staff have been paid through the entire period of the pandemic (even during lockdown), while others have been paid less or were temporarily technically unemployed. Governments needed to foresee compensation measures so that ECEC centres, particularly private ones, were not forced to close down and continuity of salary could be ensured for ECEC staff.

Lastly, it should be noted that staff shortages represented a major issue in most countries/regions. In some cases, these led to the temporary closure of ECEC centres, particularly at times when many groups of children and ECEC staff were in self-isolation. Due to staff shortages, there was also a lack of time for planning and reflection.

### **Examples of relevant policy practices to govern good support for the ECEC workforce in times of crisis**

#### ***Creating perspective and stability for ECEC staff in times of crisis***

In Sweden, larger municipalities organised training around risk assessment and action plan development. Heads of preschools and leaders within the administration scaled up information channels via websites, emails and text messages. Municipal websites linked directly to national authorities' guidelines and regulations, to publicise changes quickly.

#### ***Advance provision of protective materials***

The Italian government (Ministry of Education, 2020d) and the Flemish government in Belgium<sup>36</sup> took extra financial measures so that preschools (2.5-6 years) could be supplied with the necessary protective and hygiene measures and materials. Many stakeholders considered this a good top-down governmental measure, despite the fact that childcare (0-3 years) was not included.

#### ***Ensuring salary continuity***

The Italian government and Flemish government in Belgium provided financial compensation measures so that small, private ECEC centres in particular were not forced to close down, resulting in the unemployment of ECEC staff (Flemish Government, 2020). Due to these financial compensation measures, ECEC centres were able to remain operating as usual and providing salary continuity to ECEC staff.

## **4.3. Curriculum**

*'Curriculum is a powerful tool to improve well-being, development and learning of children. A broad pedagogical framework sets out the principles for sustaining children's development and learning through educational and care practices that meet children's interests, needs and potentialities'* (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 12).

In this section, we report on the pedagogical approaches taken by ECEC centres and their effects on children. It is generally recognised that early-years pedagogy should be based on a holistic understanding of care, learning and play. It is interesting to see how ECEC centres have maintained this focus in a context in which safety and hygiene became very important too. We further address the impact such conditions have on children's autonomy, as well as on parents as co-educators in developing pedagogical practices. Lastly, we zoom in on the impact of digitalisation in the ECEC curriculum.

### **4.3.1. Children's agency and autonomy at stake**

During the crisis, ECEC centres had to readapt their pedagogical practice on many levels, responding to the difficult task of integrating the new safety measures into their pedagogical vision. One of the side-effects of focusing more on hygiene and safety measures is that children's participation in daily life tends to be negatively affected. For example, before COVID-19, children at ECEC centres in Berlin, Croatia and Sweden used to collect and put away their own plates at lunchtime. During COVID-19, ECEC professionals have done this for the children. In the interviews, Italian and Croatian ECEC professionals underlined that children had fewer choices in terms of moving around, choosing activities, deciding which friends to play with. Some considered this a reduction in the pedagogical quality of ECEC. Others looked for other ways to enhance children's

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<sup>36</sup> For more information, see: <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=15779>

agency. In Sweden, ECEC centres were not allowed to go to local libraries or use public transport, which made regular or spontaneous excursions less possible.

#### **4.3.2. Ensuring a holistic pedagogy of care, learning and play**

As the European Quality Framework on ECEC states, stimulating the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and wellbeing of children is of utmost importance, particularly during the crisis (Council of the European Union, 2019). The impact of the crisis on children's wellbeing (e.g. often being absent from ECEC centres) should not be underestimated. In some countries, such as Belgium (Flanders), this has even led to an increased awareness among educational stakeholders who are also responsible for preschool (2.5-6 years) that wellbeing is just as crucial as educational attainment. As the Belgian OECD expert Dirk Van Damme testified to the corona commission of the Flemish Parliament:

*'The adverse effects of school closures were probably greater on a non-cognitive level than on a cognitive level: the networking, social and emotional development, community-building factors of schools in the local community and friends. For vulnerable groups, the school is the most important social institution that connects them with the rest of society' (Vlaams Parlement, 2020).*

Although initially there were some concerns, it should be noted that in all studied countries, the 1.5m social distancing measure does not apply to the ECEC sector when working with children, but only among adults or, in some countries to primary and secondary school education. Policy makers did not consider this as a realistic ambition. This could underline a general awareness among policy makers of the importance of the socio-emotional and physical care needs of very young children. Based on the available data, however, we cannot confirm whether this derives from a purely pragmatic point of view, or also from a pedagogical view. Nevertheless, an important consequence of not applying this 1.5m rule is that a holistic pedagogy could be maintained. A Swedish researcher even framed this as an ethical issue in working with young children:

*'We need the authorities to develop guidelines also for ECEC. For example, that you should keep your distance, this is not possible with small children – it violates all ethics about being with children – where closeness is important!' (Pramling Samuelsson, 2020).*

In Germany, the official mandate for ECEC is conceptualised as 'care, education and upbringing'. This triad is seen as indivisible, both from an institutional and a pedagogical point of view. Physical distancing when working with young children was ruled out from the outset. Yet many ECEC centres in Berlin had to fundamentally rethink their daily arrangements, as about half of centres practised 'open-group work', as opposed to 'closed-group work', in which children belong to a fixed group of about 18 to 25 children. Those using an 'open-group work' approach often had to reduce group size to below 18, creating the risk that children would not have access to familiar ECEC worker(s). Other children ended up in different groups from their close friends and felt 'estranged', as one mother put it. This loosening of emotional ties was exacerbated by children's attendance in shifts to give as many of them as possible access to the centre. The tension between access, pandemic imperatives and children's holistic well-being entails a constant balancing act. Because young children learn 'largely unconsciously, incidentally or by chance' (Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family, Berlin, 2019) the focus within the ECEC learning environment is on creating emotionally safe spaces.

Only in Italy were masks required for ECEC professionals during contact with children. In the other countries, ECEC professionals were only obliged to wear a mask when having contact with other adults, since it is considered important for young children to be able to see the faces of caregivers. However, it should be noted that in all countries, centres

interpreted the rules in different ways, and anecdotal evidence exists that some ECEC centres for older children (2.5-6 years old) tended to apply the 1.5m distance rule between adults and children even where not required, which of course had a direct impact on ensuring a holistic pedagogical approach (e.g. Belgium (Flanders))<sup>37</sup>.

In Italy, documents issued by the government in relation to reopening indicate that specific attention should be paid to the pedagogical approach taken with young children. Guidance on the reopening of ECEC centres was provided in two national-level documents. In the first, it is explicitly stated that physical distancing among children in ECEC should be replaced by rethinking the arrangement of space/time/materials and grouping strategies, in order to guarantee separation between fixed groups ('bubbles'), rather than between individual children or between children and adults. Physical distancing was a requirement only among adults (ECEC professionals, auxiliary staff, parents). Furthermore, an entire section of the document was dedicated to the importance of developing practices that ensure integrated education and care for younger children during the pandemic (Ministry of Education, 2020b). The second governmental document further stressed the necessity to adopt sanitary protocols while paying concurrent attention to children's wellbeing and to pedagogical quality:

*'Children's right to education and socialisation can only be guaranteed in educational environments that ensure their wellbeing, which means, for children of this age group [from 0 to 6 years old], being able to express themselves through the language of body and movement, being able to explore the environment and to interact and socialise with others' (relazione e socialità) [translation by the authors] (Ministry of Education, 2020c).*

However, given the fragmented nature of the Italian system, the implementation of such guidelines depended on the level of engagement and pedagogical quality provided by centres prior the crisis.

Differences in the implementation of measures between settings occurred in all of the countries studied. Clear differences can be seen in the way safety measures were applied and balanced with a holistic pedagogy, which appears largely to have depended the reflective and relational competences of staff, on the quality of their pedagogical curriculum and practice, and on the pedagogical support they received prior the crisis. It should be noted that many of the stakeholders interviewed referred to the fact that they consistently had to work in 'contact bubbles' with the same staff, which also had positive consequences on providing a warm holistic pedagogy and better observing the children.

In terms of activities, a tendency can be identified towards increasing the amount of outdoor activities and play in ECEC centres, except in the cases of Croatia (and to some extent also Berlin), where some ECEC centres experienced the opposite effect. The recommendation not to allow children from different groups to interact with each other significantly affected the organisation of outdoor play in some ECEC centres. In those centres with many groups, schedules were developed, according to which each group was allocated a separate time and section of the playground in which they had to stay. In some cases, where not much space was available outside, the use of the playground decreased significantly. Moreover, connection with the wider outdoors, local society and world was also limited. A ban on visits to other local services (such as theatres, etc.) affected interactions between children and other adults, non-governmental organisations, and services in local communities. In addition, children lost opportunities for everyday learning from real experiences within the community.

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<sup>37</sup> For more information, see: <https://vbjk.be/nl/nieuws/2020/6/buitenschoolse-opvang-in-tijden-van-corona-een-zoektocht>

The COVID-19 situation had a direct impact on the content of children's play and the activities that ECEC professionals organised. As one Swedish ECEC professional testified:

*'In recent weeks, I have seen several examples of how preschool teachers have developed learning environments and created meeting places around medical play. This is further proof of how we adapt the education to the prevailing situation... I hear about how the children have created games called 'corona litter and 'capture the corona monster', and how groups learn together by exploring their immediate environment'* (Safety representative, Stockholm, Union for Childminders, May 2020).

In Croatia, ECEC centres also addressed very directly the subject of the virus, hygiene rules etc. – for example, using the support of books for children specifically created on these themes. However, over time, ECEC professionals concluded that this 'direct' approach might increase children's fears of instead of calming them down, since so much emphasis would be placed on this subject. This is why many facilities opted instead for a 'normalisation approach' in which the subjects of hygiene, safety etc. would be treated as transversal part of daily life, rather than with a specific focus on the pandemic situation.

In terms of materials, in Croatia, 'unshaped' materials (such as kinetic sand, clay, corn, rice etc.) could no longer be used more than once. This created problems for ECEC centres with fewer resources, since they lacked the budget to constantly re-purchase these items. Moreover, toys that could not be washed using detergent or water had to be removed from the classroom. Ultimately, all of these measures had an impact on the pedagogy offered (Ministry of Science and Education, 2020). Some of the ECEC professionals interviewed estimated that they had up to 30% less didactic materials in groups as a result of these recommendations. Interestingly, the consequences attributed to this measure are twofold: on the one hand, ECEC professionals consider this as a reduction in the quality of the pedagogy offered to children; on the other, some practitioners also noticed that the children were 'calmer', meaning that there were fewer conflicts and less noise. They assumed that the reason for this was the smaller number of children in the groups, combined with the fact that the room environment was not overloaded with didactic materials. This last point has been very much developed in other contexts, for example in Italy, where the so-called 'less can be more' approach underlines that children don't need to be overstimulated, but require a well thought-out environment that allows them to explore and discover, as well as giving them the opportunity to rest and be calm when needed (Stradi, 2000).

#### **4.3.3. Developing pedagogical practice in collaboration with parents**

One important feature of an ECEC curriculum, as proposed in the European Quality framework on ECEC, is the way in which ECEC professionals also connect and collaborate with parents to co-construct the pedagogical experiences of the children (Council of the European Union, 2019). Parents are indeed important co-educators who also inform ECEC professionals about the caring and learning needs of their children. Nevertheless, in all countries/regions, during the crisis parents were mainly not allowed to enter ECEC centres. In Belgium (Flanders), different rules applied according to the colour codes given to changing pandemic scenarios (during code yellow, parents were still allowed to enter ECEC centres). Consequently, many ECEC professionals in various countries experienced a discrepancy between the needs of parents (to be listened to, express their fears, to be reassured) and the organisational conditions under which ECEC centres had to operate (reduced time and space dedicated to daily exchanges with parents at the doorstep or gate).

ECEC staff tried different alternative ways to keep the contact with families, such as digital or outdoor chats with parents. Professionals from Italy who were interviewed noted, for example, the difficult aspect of losing face-to-face communication with parents. In some contexts, however, this also led to an increase in the practice of 'pedagogical

documentation', via which staff documented the children's day in videos, pictures etc., and showed it to families. These materials could also be used as the basis for a meeting with families.

In Belgium (Flanders), Germany (Berlin) and Croatia, a dual tendency can be identified. On the one hand, many ECEC centres asked pedagogical coaches for advice on how to maintain and improve contacts with parents; on the other, a number of the stakeholders interviewed indicated that some professionals were actually in favour of the benefits of not allowing family members to enter ECEC centres (mainly justified by the fact that children seemed 'calmer'). Some Belgian childcare federations feared that this discussion might create the risk of stepping 'backwards' to the medical approach of the 1970s, when it was still generally accepted that parents should not enter the children's playgroup (0-3 years old) – a practice which had consequences on the quality of relationships with families. A similar trend can be seen in Croatia where, during COVID-19, ECEC centres experienced a shorter than usual adaptation time for children and families, and many professionals appear to have appreciated this. This led to a controversial discussion on whether adaptation time should also be shortened under 'normal' conditions.

In general, it became clear that ECEC centres that had already invested in relationships with families prior the crisis were better able to reach, remain in contact with and involve families in their pedagogical approaches.

#### **4.3.4. The impact of digitalisation on the ECEC curriculum**

Particularly when children were unable to attend the ECEC centres, digital contact became an important form of communication (online meetings, online storytelling, webpages with proposed activities for families). In this report, we emphasise the importance of creating digital *contact* rather than establishing digital learning or teaching, as has been the focus for many older children. The experiences of the stakeholders interviewed from different countries is that digital connection with young children should not focus on learning, performance and the carrying out of homework, but rather on the opportunity for young children to 'narrate' their daily life and receive feedback from ECEC professionals. Parents are important partners in these digital contact moments. In some countries, ECEC professionals, children and parents shared pictures and videos of what they were doing at home. One Belgian ECEC professional underlined that:

*'Children have different needs: one wants a book, or likes some 'homework', the other one just a chat, or even nothing at all. I advise the parents to let it go a bit, to let the children participate in what they do at home: cooking, sorting the laundry, and talking about it with their child, in Dutch or in their native language.'*<sup>38</sup>

Connecting with what children are doing at home also relates to the fact that early learning still takes place in the home environment, starting from a different perspective from the one children experience in an ECEC centre.

*'The learning gains of children at home during the lockdown are different from the learning they would have gained in four months of preschool or childcare; however, this does not mean that what children have learnt at home is less important than what they would have learned in ECEC settings'* (Farnè and Balduzzi, 2021, p.5).

Some of the ECEC professionals interviewed in Croatia underlined that connecting with (informal) home learning does not mean that families were expected to replace the ECEC institution or that they were now considered the teachers of their children. This should be avoided, as it would be easier for certain families with social and cultural capital to adhere

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<sup>38</sup> For more information, see: <https://vbjk.be/nl/nieuws/2020/4/hoewebwaarjeleraleerbandmetdekleutersenouders-tijdens-de-lockdown>

to the expectations of ECEC staff in terms of 'being a replacement teacher'. Focusing on parents as teacher replacements would thus increase existing social inequalities between families/children with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, in Croatia, all of the stakeholders interviewed highlighted the importance of using technology to stay in contact and build partnerships with parents, as well as staying in contact with children during possible lockdowns or periods of self-isolation. A big improvement relating to the use of technology has been made during the pandemic. In some cases, the use of technology allowed parents to be informed more often and in greater detail about the ECEC activities in which their child participated. The ECEC professionals interviewed believed that this contributed to the transparency and openness of ECEC centres and staff. In addition, family members had the opportunity to ask questions and communicate with ECEC professionals via e-mail. Educators noticed that some parents were much more active in communicating with ECEC staff using technology than they had been with previous face-to-face communication.

However, not all children and families could be reached through these digital efforts, which *de facto* excluded in particular those living in societally disadvantaged situations. Some differences can be noted in the way each country dealt with this issue. In Italy, despite the recommendation contained in the governmental document Guidelines on building Educational Ties in Remote Learning Environments (Ministry of Education, 2020a), which highlighted the possibility of reaching out to children from societally disadvantaged families through face-to-face visits (for example, by bringing a box of educational materials to the families), this was very rarely carried out in practice. We can conclude that, generally speaking, no specific measures were put in place in a structural way to reach this portion of the Italian population. (For efforts made in other countries, please see [Sections 4.1.2.](#) and [4.1.3.](#) on accessibility).

Only in the case of Germany (Berlin), was the protection of privacy in digital contacts considered a major concern, due to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issued by the EU. A number of regulations governing contact with parents already existed pre-COVID, in which it was stated that parents needed to give consent before being contacted. Most ECEC centres had such agreements with parents in place. The fact that this was not considered a concern in other countries may indeed signify that it is not regarded as such, or that there is still a lack of awareness regarding possible privacy issues caused by the increasing digitalisation of contacts between families and ECEC centres.

#### **4.3.5. Summary**

In balancing safety/hygiene measures with pedagogy, one of the biggest challenges appears to have been how ECEC can enable children's agency and autonomy in the context of COVID-19. Working consistently in 'bubbles' with the same staff was regarded by many interviewed stakeholders as an opportunity to offer warmer and more holistic pedagogy to young children. Such arrangements provided more space for individual and warm interactions between ECEC professionals and children. ECEC staff were able to observe children better and to work in a child-centred way. On the one hand, the COVID-19 context presented a challenge in terms of the materials and activities used; on the other hand, it also offered opportunities to rethink materials and activities based on goals and vision.

The fact that parents were not allowed into ECEC centres represented a challenge in maintaining relationships with families. In general, ECEC centres developed alternative ways of involving and connecting with parents to discuss and co-construct pedagogical practices (online, outdoor etc.); however, face-to-face contact was still considered lacking. This issue requires specific attention, in order to avoid taking a step backwards in terms of the progress the ECEC sector has achieved over recent decades, both in terms of quality and of collaboration with families.

Although face-to-face meetings were missed by both families and ECEC staff, experiencing the use of digital tools has been an interesting discovery for many ECEC centres, who appreciate the transparency and efficiency provided by these tools. However, technology should be used to build partnerships and to co-construct pedagogical practices, and not just to share information. Digital tools should be used to provide ECEC staff, children and families with opportunities to interact with one another and to learn from each other, to participate in decision-making within the ECEC group, for parents to be included in the monitoring of their child's well-being and development, and so on. This could be something that ECEC centres wish to maintain and integrate into their practice after the crisis, as one of the new ways they can remain connected with parents. Digital contact cannot entirely replace direct contact with families, however – especially not those families that have difficulty in accessing the internet or have less competence in ICT. It should also be noted that more research is needed on how to handle online privacy issues relating to ECEC in a more digitalised world.

#### **Examples of relevant policy practices governing the ECEC curriculum in times of crisis**

##### ***Ensuring a holistic pedagogy of care, learning and play***

In Italy, the documents issued by the government in relation to the reopening of ECEC centres pay specific attention to the pedagogical approach taken with young children (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Even during COVID-19, ECEC practices still need to ensure an integrated, holistic concept of education and care for younger children. Children's rights to education and socialisation can only be guaranteed in ECEC environments that enable children's wellbeing.

##### ***Building educational ties in remote learning environments***

In Italy, a series of working documents focusing on the pedagogical dimension of remote education were issued by the Ministry of Education. Of particular relevance to the ECEC sector were the Guidelines on building Educational Ties in Remote Learning Environments (Ministry of Education, 2020a), developed by the Expert Commission for the Integrated System and published by the Ministry to regional education authorities on 13 May 2020. These guidelines drew a clear conceptual distinction between remote teaching (*didattica a distanza*) and building educational ties in remote learning environments (*legami educativi a distanza*). The former notion primarily concerned the delivery of educational content – oriented more towards primary and secondary schools – while the latter covered more relational activities, better suited to respond to young children's need for an emotional and affective base upon which to root future learning.

#### **4.4. Monitoring and evaluation of quality**

*'Monitoring and evaluation sustain quality. By pointing out strengths and weaknesses, its processes can be important components of enhancing quality in early childhood education systems. They can provide support to stakeholders and policy makers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents and local communities'* (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 13).

In this section, we report on how ECEC quality is maintained via monitoring and evaluation. While in some countries/regions, the usual procedures and methods of quality monitoring and evaluation have continued to be used, in others, quality monitoring and evaluation processes have been adapted due to the workload experienced by ECEC centres during the crisis. It should be noted that in none of the countries/regions analysed were children

formally evaluated in a systematic way when returning to ECEC centres after lockdowns, nor was this practice considered desirable by the stakeholders interviewed (ECEC and representatives of professional organisations). In some contexts, individual ECEC centres or providers decided to observe children when they returned to centres after lockdown, in order to gain insights concerning their needs and wellbeing (see Subsection 2.2.). However, these practices were not implemented systematically in any of the countries/regions involved in this study.

#### 4.4.1. Keeping track of ECEC quality in the time of COVID-19

In Italy, Croatia and Sweden, no specific measures were put in place nationally concerning the monitoring of quality. ECEC quality monitoring was carried out in the same way as it had been previously.

In Italy, for example, quality monitoring and the ongoing improvement of practice in municipal and publicly subsidised ECEC centres is carried out continuously as a responsibility of pedagogical coordinators. In state-maintained provisions, it is connected more with self-assessment exercises carried out by ad hoc committees. In certain Italian regions (including Emilia-Romagna), the municipal system of ECEC offers an interesting example of how pedagogical coordinators or coaches could be used to supervise and accompany (support) ECEC teams – via ongoing team reflection on practice, networking with other services within the municipality, and with the municipal administration itself – thus helping centres to face the pandemic situation while continuing to monitor quality as usual.

*'Since the beginning of the first lockdown, I had the feeling that we were not 'left alone' in facing such a challenging situation, but rather that we stood together, supporting each other, to find solutions. When I say 'all together' I refer not only to the ECEC teams and pedagogical coordinators [working in the centres under the governance of municipal administration], but also to the municipal administration and ECEC department. Because we were constantly involved in meetings where we could exchange views on the solutions to be adopted in order to overcome common problems by taking into account the specificity of each situation in each individual centre. Even when a formal operational protocol for the prevention of contagion had to be developed by the municipal administration, the specific characteristics – in terms of space and facilities – of each ECEC centre were taken into account and reflected upon: because if it is important to put in place a common strategy, it is also important to develop such a strategy by taking into account each specific situation. We reflect a lot, for example on how parents could be welcomed into each setting, starting from the possibilities that are available (e.g. welcoming parents through glass doors with direct access to the garden, rearranging the layout of internal halls, etc.)'* (Pedagogical coordinator, medium-sized municipality in Emilia-Romagna).

Conversely, centres (especially state-maintained preschools for children 3-6 years old) that traditionally have not benefitted from this kind of support, experienced greater difficulties in responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic, while at the same time keeping track of pedagogical quality.

In Sweden, the monitoring and evaluation processes is set out in the Swedish National ECEC curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2018): the quality of all preschools must be regularly and systematically documented, reviewed and evaluated, and steps for further improvement developed. The Swedish National Agency for Education has the task of ensuring that municipalities and private ECEC providers comply with legislation and regulations. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has external monitoring responsibility for ECEC centres. At a local level, a self-evaluation is carried out by the local provider as well as by the ECEC head and staff regarding various aspects of quality in ECEC (i.e. its organisation, content and implementation), so that each child is given the best possible

conditions for development and learning. Sweden thus adopts a mixed approach to monitoring and assessment, combining national quality audits with appropriate local quality control. All forms of evaluation should take the perspective of the child as their starting point. Children and parents should participate in evaluations and their views should be given prominence. During the pandemic, due to restrictions, contact with parents with regard to evaluation and quality assessment was digital or online, with the help of ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, emails, or short questionnaires. ECEC professionals prepared more videos and photos and shared these digitally with parents, accompanied by explanations, to replace the ordinary parental meetings and developmental talks that are used in the evaluation process. Some principals of ECEC centres in Sweden report a higher level of participation in the evaluation process among parents when it was carried out online.

In Belgium (Flanders) and Germany (Berlin), quality monitoring was implemented as largely it had been previously, with some adjustments made for the crisis.

In Germany, no national system exists for the inspection of ECEC provisions. Any external monitoring is carried out at regional and municipal levels. In Berlin, the main responsibility for monitoring quality lies with ECEC providers, who have developed their own systems of quality management and pedagogical counselling under a quality framework issued by the regional ministry. Berlin has taken the most far-reaching steps in terms of monitoring quality on the basis of the Berlin Early Years Programme (Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family, Berlin, 2019), implementation of which is combined with prescribed evaluation procedures. The quality framework requires specific self-assessment based on the Early Years Programme and (every five years) external assessment procedures. A specialist institute – the Berlin Institute for Quality Development in Early Years (BeKi)<sup>39</sup> – is responsible for monitoring and evaluating overall assessment procedures. The findings of these evaluations contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of ECEC. ECEC providers finance these evaluations, and are informed about the results and agreed measures. They are then required to adapt their continuing professional development programmes accordingly (Schreyer and Oberhuemer, 2017). In the context of COVID-19, many internal evaluations were conducted, but no data are yet available. Regulations to organise external evaluation were put in place in April 2020, and providers were allowed to decide whether or not to have an external evaluation. Between January and June 2020, 250 centres planned an external evaluation and 65 carried them out – the rest were postponed to the second half of 2020 or to 2021<sup>40</sup>. Simultaneously, pedagogical coaches in Berlin stepped up their support, and umbrella organisations played a huge role in supporting ECEC centres as well. In addition, the inspectorate fulfilled its statutory role regarding the way centres handled access during emergency ECEC arrangements. ECEC providers were required to report the number of children/number of groups attending each week to the inspectorate. In the event that they hired non-qualified staff (as described elsewhere in this report – see 4.2.4) providers were also required to report this to the inspectorate.

In the case of Belgium (Flanders), inspectors for the childcare sector (for children aged 0-3 years and out-of-school care for those aged 2.5-12 years) are always allowed to enter childcare centres to inspect quality (even in pandemic scenarios). However, the duration of such visits is limited as much as possible. In the preschool sector (2.5-6 years old), the usual external audits by the inspectorate were cancelled from the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak. Instead, between March and June 2020, various field visits and drop-in visits were organised<sup>41</sup>. In October 2020, the inspectorate carried out some short audits of elementary schools, including preschool (2.5-6 years). These received criticism from

<sup>39</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.beki-qualitaet.de/>

<sup>40</sup> For more information, see: Unpublished internal monitoring data provided by BeKi to the country expert; <http://www.beki-qualitaet.de/>

<sup>41</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/nl/onderwijsinspectie-in-coronatijd-rapporten>

schools, as their timing was not considered appropriate, given the start of the new school year in the midst of the crisis. The inspectorate therefore decided to temporarily suspend short external audits and instead organise 'supporting visits' that played a more supportive role, rather than a controlling one. For these 'supporting visits', preschools chose a theme (supporting 'vulnerable' students, quality development or educational practice), and in the period between autumn 2020 and summer 2021, the inspectorate would come to talk to them for one day. According to one inspector who was consulted for this study, the primary aim of these visits was to stimulate reflection and awareness among preschool teams concerning the impact of the crisis on children from societally disadvantaged situations.

#### 4.4.2. Summary

The monitoring and evaluation of quality can be carried out using a top-down 'controlling' approach, or through a bottom-up 'supporting' approach. The data indicate that the supportive element of monitoring was especially necessary to help ECEC centres in this time of crisis. Moreover, the crisis demonstrated that investing in systemic support infrastructure is actually paramount to the success of external controlling processes. Examples from Italy and Berlin show how this can be achieved. External control should be regarded more as the capstone of the monitoring and evaluation process, in order to provide truly support to ECEC professionals.

#### **Examples of relevant policy practices to govern monitoring and evaluation in crisis times**

In some regions of Italy, an effective combined system has been developed in which pedagogical coordinators are responsible for supporting ECEC staff and controlling the quality in ECEC. This system has also been demonstrated to work well in during the crisis.

The state of Berlin has over the years developed an interesting system in which ECEC centres, with the support of pedagogical coaches, are themselves mainly responsible for monitoring and evaluating their own quality<sup>42</sup>. The Berlin Early Years Programme, Bridging Diversity is the overall pedagogical framework on which evaluations are based. Every five years, a compulsory external evaluation (not an audit) is conducted, but this is used more as a tool to complement internal quality processes with the views of an external expert, as part of the ongoing monitoring process. This system, in which support for ECEC centres and self-ownership of the monitoring process is key, appears to have worked very well during the crisis. Out of respect for their ownership of quality development, ECEC centres were given the opportunity to postpone compulsory external evaluations during the COVID-19 period.

#### 4.5. Governance and funding

*'Governance and funding are crucial to enable early childhood education and care provision to play its role in the personal development and learning of children and in reducing the attainment gap and fostering social cohesion. Quality results from comprehensive and coherent public policies that link early childhood education and care to other services concerned with the welfare of young children and their families'* (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 14).

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<sup>42</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.beki-qualitaet.de/>

In previous sections, we addressed the ways in which the five countries/regions governed accessibility, ECEC workforce issues, the ECEC curriculum and the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC quality. In this final section, we address other overall governance measures that were put in place to support and in some cases finance the ECEC sector during the COVID outbreak. First, we clarify the various challenges that countries have faced in terms of having fragmented systems. These demonstrate the need for more collaborative systems that are better able to govern in a swift and efficient way during crises. We explain how clear and coherent communication by governments towards parents and the ECEC sector can make a difference, and how financial support for families is paramount when ECEC centres are closed. Lastly, we address the underlying tension that more structurally fragmented and underfinanced ECEC systems actually require greater financial assistance if they are to maintain the viability of ECEC.

#### **4.5.1. Fragmented vs. collaborative systems of governance in times of crisis**

##### **The interplay between different levels of governance**

In all of the countries/regions studied, governance during the crisis required measures to be taken at various policy levels: national; regional (if applicable); and at local policy level. The interplay between these different levels was considered very important by the stakeholders interviewed, since governance in a crisis requires rapid decision-making. In the contexts of Croatia and Belgium (Flanders), this was not always regarded as having happened, with delays occurring in the formulation of adequate responses within the field of ECEC. In Sweden, better alignment and smooth collaboration between different policy levels have been key to dealing with the crisis.

In all of the countries/regions studied, local municipalities were considered an important level to take more the lead in organising /directing ECEC in a more coherent and efficient way. Local authorities with sufficient administrative power/vision took up this coordinating role and provided support to the ECEC sector. In municipalities where local authorities did not adopt this coordinating role, ECEC centres were left to deal with problems by themselves, without the help of any systemic support. This proved to be challenging.

##### **Fragmentation between the policy domains of care and education**

Systems may also be fragmented in terms of different policy domains; for example, when the care and learning of young children and families is organised by separate ministries. This is the case in Italy and Belgium (Flanders), both of which operate ECEC split systems in which childcare (0-3 years old), preschool (2.5/3-6 years old), and (where applicable) out-of-school care (2.5-12 years old) are organised under the auspices of different ministries. Each policy domain has his own logic, its own experts – and consequently, its own rules.

For example, the overall coronavirus working group in the educational sector (including preschool) in Belgium (Flanders) did not initially include stakeholders representing childcare and out-of-school care. Often, the educational sector first determined the rules and then allocated the task of organising emergency care in preschools to the out-of-school care sector. Just after some lobbying efforts, the Upbringing Agency (responsible for childcare and out-of-school care) was also given a decisive voice in the matter. The same problem occurred at a local level. In some local municipalities, collaboration between preschool and out-of-school care was understood to be a one-way dynamic. For example, educational stakeholders (responsible for preschool children aged 2.5-6 years) determine at a local level the operationalisation of measures concerning contact bubbles – without discussing this beforehand with out-of-school care centres. However, the stakeholders interviewed indicated that awareness did grow at the local political level that both preschool education and childcare/out of school care needed to better work together in the interests of the children. In some localities, this collaboration in fact turned out to be very successful.

At this level, the crisis experience had an even greater impact than what could be achieved through regular training on integrated work or on developing a more holistic concept of 'educare' for children. Consequently, many of the ECEC stakeholders interviewed underlined the importance of investing in better collaboration in the future between the childcare, out-of-school care and preschool sectors.

Although Italy was already moving from a 'split' ECEC system towards a more integrated one, the crisis further emphasised the need to combat fragmentation within the system, as well as strengthening the conviction that childcare and preschool should be better aligned for children from 0 to 6 years old. In June 2020, nine important civil society networks signed a manifesto entitled *Five Steps for Combating Educational Poverty and Promoting Children's Rights*, calling for immediate action in five priority areas of education (Alleanza per l'Infanzia et al., 2020). Among these, the one most relevant to the ECEC sector was the rolling out of unitary ECEC settings across the country, starting with the most deprived areas. In June 2020, the association *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia* (National Childcare and Childhood Organisation) went on issue a relevant position document containing a firm disavowal of any form of split between education and care for the 0-6 age group, and advocating the extension to all children of the entitlement to quality ECEC (Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia et al., 2020). At the same time, the document highlighted the crucial role played by pedagogical coordinators as key figures in sustaining the process of integration between institutions for children aged 0-3 and 3-6. In recent months, as Italy approached the submission to the European Commission of its proposal for a national recovery and resilience plan (under the Next Generation EU funding scheme), the documents above played a prominent role in shaping and supporting the advocacy campaign for investment in the ECEC sector.

### **Fragmentation between ECEC, health and social work policy domains**

A third possible form of fragmentation can occur between health, social and ECEC centres. Even in the most advantaged areas, this can hinder opportunities for such centres to adequately reach out and support families during the crisis, especially those which are more vulnerable. Italian pilot initiatives carried out by NGOs that adopted an integrated and multidimensional framework for family support, child welfare and education proved to be the most effective in successfully addressing the complex needs of children and families living in disadvantaged conditions, during lockdown and beyond (Save the Children, 2020). In Germany, collaboration between ECEC and statutory youth health services were strengthened on the basis of existing policies. Statutory youth health services were simultaneously over-burdened due to staff shortage and by austerity policies during the 2000s that shrunk staffing in a range of services – youth welfare, public health, municipal service provisions, etc. In Croatia, collaboration between ECEC, the Institute of Public Health, the Epidemiological Service and paediatricians was strengthened in relation to COVID-19. At the same time, however, ECEC principals and teachers underlined that inter-sectoral cooperation on other issues decreased, such as collaboration with paediatricians and dentists concerning the prevention of other (non COVID-19-related) diseases. According to the stakeholders interviewed, better inter-sectoral cooperation is needed, such as developing protocols of cooperation between ECEC centres and paediatricians regarding children in quarantine who are COVID-19 positive, or those in self-isolation. The aim of these protocols would not only be to preserve health, but also to maintain the quality of ECEC during the pandemic.

#### **4.5.2. Clear governmental communication makes a difference during crises**

When dealing with a crisis, governments need to be able to provide quick responses. At the same time, people need coherent and clear messages in order to deal with the unpredictability and 'messiness' of such circumstances. It is therefore essential that

governments, and the interplay between different levels of government, provide a sense of stability to children, families, the ECEC workforce and ECEC stakeholders.

In Sweden, a good communication system existed between the different levels of governance. Even though there were national guidelines, the decentralised system allowed ECEC leaders to carry the responsibility for communicating with parents and ECEC staff. Municipality websites directed all ECEC centres to the national guidelines, so that everyone received the same information. ECEC leaders reported that they had been informed by and adapted to those guidelines. To overcome conflicts and strengthen relationships with parents, ECEC leaders also shared answers to individual parents' questions with all other families. They made greater use of social media, email and SMS messages to communicate with staff and parents almost daily to clarify the situation.

In Belgium (Flanders), both the childcare sector and preschool sector developed (in May and during summer 2020) pandemic scenarios based on different colour codes<sup>43</sup>. Many stakeholders considered this an important milestone, as it provided more peace of mind to ECEC teams and providers. They could act more proactively and anticipate various scenarios. ECEC stakeholders acknowledged that for governments, it must have been a challenge to strike a good balance between steering along broader lines and working with very concrete rules. For ECEC centres with a strong policy-making capacity, good supervision, or those that were embedded in a larger network, being informed along broader lines was sufficient. Smaller ECEC centres and family day carers, meanwhile, were much more anxious about dealing smoothly with more open regulations. Many stakeholders also reported that in terms of communication, it could be confusing when ambiguous messages were already been broadcast by the media before official governmental communications had been sent to ECEC centres, providers and stakeholders.

#### **4.5.3. Supporting families financially**

When adopting more population-wide strategies for pandemic prevention (ECEC closures as part of a precautionary health strategy, in which the entire population makes sacrifices to protect groups such as the elderly or vulnerable patients who are at higher risk from the virus), the need for 'pandemic parental leave' and other benefits automatically increases (Blum, S., & Dobrotić, 2020). In Italy, for example, as far as work and family life reconciliation policies were concerned, a number of interventions were brought forward in a specific effort to help families with young children to balance the demands of work and home life. These included a special parental leave scheme (allowing up to 15 days of additional leave for each parent of children under 12, with a final salary replacement rate of 30 per cent), and a childcare voucher for home-based babysitting<sup>44</sup>. The voucher scheme was later expanded to cover summer camps and other fee-based complementary ECEC centres. In addition to these measures, the government increased pressure on companies and institutions to introduce remote working arrangements.

In Belgium (Flanders) and Germany, coronavirus parental leave was implemented, which allowed working parents to stay home, be paid and take care of their children. In Sweden,

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<sup>43</sup> For more information, see: Pandemic scenarios: childcare, <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/kleurschema-volledig-overzicht-benp.pdf>; out of school care, <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/kleurschema-volledig-overzicht-bko.pdf>; and preschool, <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/uitgangspunten-en-pandemische-niveaus-of-fasen#draaiboeken-pandemiescenario>

<sup>44</sup> The childcare voucher covered the period of March to August 2020, and could be claimed as an alternative to parental leave. During the initial phase of the pandemic (March to May 2020), vouchers were only issued for home-based babysitting, for a lump sum ranging from EUR 600 to EUR 1,000 (Arts. 23 and 25 of Law Decree 18/2020, 'Cura Italia'). During the second phase (June to August 2020), vouchers could be claimed to cover enrolment fees for summer camps, for a lump sum of up to EUR 1,200-2,000 (Art. 72 of Law Decree 34/2020, 'Rilancio'). However, those parents who availed themselves of the home-based babysitting voucher during the initial phase could only ask for a 'top-up' during the second phase up to the maximum total of EUR 1,200-2,000.

the Social Insurance Agency reimbursed parts of a person's income while on sick leave. Before the pandemic, there had been a qualifying day (*karensdag*) without pay. Due to the pandemic, the government decided that the insurance should reimburse people from the first day of sick leave. In addition, families receiving housing allowances (*bostadsbidrag*) were given additional allowances each month during 2020. These economic benefits have been important in supplementing family income.

#### **4.5.4. Fragmented and underfinanced ECEC leads to the need for additional means and measures during times of crisis**

Based on the sample of five countries/regions, clear differences emerge in the extent to which governments needed to develop extra measures and invest in additional means to manage the crisis. Despite some small tensions and some minor changes being necessary, it is remarkable how in Sweden and Berlin, fewer additional measures had to be undertaken by governments in comparison with those in the other countries. The ECEC sector has a long historical tradition, and is widely recognised in society as an important place for children, parents and local communities. Consequently, its workforce, curriculum and monitoring issues were already very well organised in a coherent, efficient way. Despite the extra stress the crisis caused for the ECEC workforce, systems were already in place to support them. ECEC staff also kept receiving their salaries. Because both of these locations have integrated ECEC systems, steps to align different policy domains (for example, between childcare and preschool) were not necessary. In the case of Croatia, also a country with an integrated ECEC system, the situation was somewhat different, as the financing of the ECEC sector is the responsibility of local municipalities – and not all municipalities have historically invested enough in ECEC centres. Greater needs and local problems with quality were therefore identified.

In Italy and Belgium (Flanders), both characterised by a split ECEC system, the stakeholders interviewed underlined that ECEC has historically been underfinanced in terms of working conditions, infrastructure, etc. In Belgium (Flanders), the childcare sector (0-3 years old) in particular is less well financed or developed into a coherent system (in comparison with the preschool sector, 2.5-6 years). Childcare is better financed when it is organised solely by a municipality that decides to allocate a considerable part of its budget to the sector. Consequently, many needs and problems were identified. Several governmental measures to support the survival of the ECEC sector had to be developed in a very short period of time. One of these was to offer a uniform framework for financial compensation for both public and private childcare (the 0-3 years sector and out-of-school sector, 2.5-12 years old). The general principle behind this was for the government to financially compensate ECEC centres for the lower number of children attending childcare. This was put in place to ensure the financial viability of the sector, particularly in the case of small private organisations. Moreover, it ensured that families would still have access to childcare, and were not obliged to pay for it when children were absent because parents did not have essential jobs. In addition, staff members would not have to be made technically unemployed if centres were compensated. Recent figures show that more than 90% of both public and private childcare centres made use of this measure. Moreover, some local authority centres (e.g. the cities of Ghent and Bruges). provided an additional financial incentive to private childcare. The idea of this was to prevent childcare places disappearing in the long term. In comparison with preschool education, this measure demonstrates how fragile and underfinanced the childcare system is. In Italy, the financial support available to ECEC centres and their staff varied greatly between public, private not-for-profit (publicly-subsidised), and private for-profit (not subsidised) providers: private centres that could not avail themselves of public subsidies were most at risk of permanent closure, although subsidised private not-for-profit centres also faced an additional financial burden, especially in contexts where ad hoc financial support from municipality/regional authorities was not available.

This tendency is also seen in other countries where the private (for-profit) sector is an important part of the ECEC field. Research from July 2020 in the UK shows that 'ECEC providers have suffered significant financial pressure, and needed to access a variety of government supports during lockdown' (Pascal et al., 2020, p. 1). The question is, how long can governments keep investing in these financial compensation measures as the crisis continues? This prompts reflection on the fundamental need for investment in ECEC, so that the sector can be prepared to deal with crisis periods (as is more the case in Sweden and Berlin). Nevertheless, even in Sweden, and to a lesser extent in Germany (Berlin), concerns were raised regarding the fear of cuts in ECEC when the economic crisis began as a result of COVID-19. The Children's Ombudsman in Sweden expressed particular concern that there would be severe cutbacks for children in terms education, support and protection:

*'We know from previous financial crises that municipalities and regions have made severe budget cuts in these systems once the economic situation has worsened. Some examples of this are that the number of children in ECEC groups and classes in schools has increased, social services are less accessible, and that waiting periods have increased to receive support for child and for youth psychiatry. As you can see in our report from February this year, there are already problems with access to social services and child and youth psychiatry. The Ombudsman fears that this will increase following the financial crisis we are facing, and that children in vulnerable situations will face more difficulties in receiving the support and protection they need, and have to which they have a right'* (Ombudsman for Children, 2020, p. 5).

#### **4.5.5. Summary**

In this final section, we have demonstrated that collaboration is required between the different levels of governance, the policy domains of care and education, ECEC, health and social work in order to manage the crisis in an efficient and timely manner.

Clear and unambiguous communication, both with families directly and with ECEC sector, has proved helpful in managing the crisis. Its aim should be to create an atmosphere in which people can deal with uncertainty (new virus variants, possible new lockdowns, vaccination dynamics), while at the same time maintaining a sense of stability. When general guidelines are unclear or delivered too late, this generates confusion and brings extra stress to both ECEC staff and families. Guidelines need to be open and clear at the same time, providing both a clear frame of reference and an opportunity to contextualise measures.

When moving from targeted to population-wide strategies for pandemic prevention (leading, in the case of the latter, to fuller ECEC closures), governments need to take into account that the need for 'pandemic parental leave' and an increase in benefits (Blum and Dobrotić 2020).

Lastly, some governments needed to implement financial compensation measures so that ECEC centres did not have to close down and to ensure continuity of salaries for ECEC staff. Despite its good intentions, this governmental measure raises questions over financial sustainability, particularly of the private ECEC sector in split ECEC systems. It appears that the greater the fragmentation that exist within the ECEC system and/or the more historically under-financed it has been, the greater the need for additional government measures and means in times of crisis. Stable ECEC systems that are well organised and financed (as in Sweden and Berlin) were clearly better prepared to deal with the crisis without the need for extreme measures to ensure the viability of the ECEC sector.

## **Examples of relevant policy practices for general governance and finance in times of crisis**

### ***Clear, coherent government communication to families and ECEC sector***

In Sweden, a good system of communication was implemented between the various levels of governance. While guidelines exist at national level, Sweden's decentralised system allowed ECEC leaders to carry the responsibility of communicating with both parents and ECEC staff. The municipality websites directed all ECEC centres to the national guidelines, so everyone received the same information. To overcome conflicts and strengthen relationships with parents, ECEC leaders also shared their responses to parents' questions about the guidelines with all other families.

In Belgium (Flanders), the development by the government of colour-coded pandemic scenarios for different phases of the crisis helped to create greater stability for children, families, ECEC staff and other ECEC stakeholders. This helped in dealing with anxiety and stress in an unpredictable context. These scenarios were developed with the support of virologists<sup>45</sup>.

### ***Supporting families financially in the event of ECEC closures***

In Italy, Germany and Belgium (Flanders), coronavirus parental leave was implemented, enabling working parents to stay home, be paid and take care of their children. This could become an efficient emergency arrangement to invoke when children could not attend ECEC.

### ***Facilitating educational partnerships***

The Italian Ministry of Education introduced community-based educational partnerships ('*patti educativi di comunità*') with the aim of creating regulatory and administrative conditions for the development of stronger, more socially cohesive forms of school autonomy at a local level (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Legally framed as formal networks of stakeholders in education, training, culture and associated areas, the aim behind community-based partnerships is to develop them into long-term local partnerships between public authorities and non-institutional educational agents. These local alliances are regarded as the potential key to a new model of educational subsidiarity, capable of functioning as a bridge between ECEC/schools and local communities to achieve closer and more trusting collaboration, while fostering continuity and links between formal and informal learning contexts.

### ***Search for integrated ECEC approaches as a result of the crisis***

At the end of May 2020, the Flemish Government in Belgium set up the Societal Recovery Committee with a request to formulate recommendations to restore society quickly and properly (in the short term), and to develop a long-term vision in the event of new lockdowns and beyond the pandemic (Maatschappelijk Relancecomité, 2020). In the Committee's recommendations, ECEC centres are seen as necessary 'safe harbours' for children and young people in vulnerable situations. One of its recommendations was to set up pilot projects to integrate childcare and preschool education, also involving out-of-school care activities, in order to combat the fragmentation of ECEC. As a result, the Minister of Welfare, with the support of the Minister of Education, is beginning in 2021 a three-year pilot project in which providers will be able experiment with the integration of ECEC, starting from the best interests of the child (Beke, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> For more information, see: Pandemic scenarios: childcare, <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/kleurschema-volledig-overzicht-benp.pdf>; out of school care, <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/kleurschema-volledig-overzicht-bko.pdf>; and preschool, <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/uitgangspunten-en-pandemische-niveaus-of-fasen#draaiboeken-pandemiescenario's>

## 5. From lessons learned to policy guidelines: key messages for decision makers

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a profound impact on the lives of children and families throughout the world. In almost all countries, children are among the main victims of the pandemic, as they are affected both by the socio-economic impact of the crisis on their families and by the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus (United Nations, 2020). In most cases, the rights and needs of children to education, play, contacts with peers and the use of outdoor areas have not been sufficiently taken into account when determining policy measures during the pandemic, and especially during lockdowns.

While the full magnitude of the long-term damage caused by COVID-19 is not yet known, preliminary evidence suggests that the detrimental effects of the pandemic on young children's development, welfare and education have been greater in the poorest countries, and among the poorest communities and those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations (Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

ECEC appears to have a crucial role to play in countering the negative effects of the pandemic on children, families and communities, due to its interconnected functions: promoting children's learning, wellbeing and participation (educational function); sustaining families in bringing up their children (social function); and supporting parents in reconciling work and parental responsibilities (economic function). However, ECEC seems to have been one of the most vulnerable sectors, compared with other levels of education, when policy decisions have been made in response to COVID-19 outbreaks (Gromada et al., 2020).

This underlines the need to raise the profile of ECEC within plans and policies for the education/care sector, as well as in emergency response strategies, in order to urgently accelerate efforts to address gaps in access. The policy guidelines provided below are intended to support key decision makers in the process of ensuring high-quality and accessible ECEC provision in times of crisis, by capitalising on the lessons learned from the analysis of initiatives undertaken within five EU Member States – either at national or regional level – during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-December 2020). Given the multi-layered structure of national ECEC systems, which are characterised by the presence of different layers of governance, the following policy guidelines are conceptualised at a general level, so as to be adaptable to various EU contexts and to the different levels of governance within national ECEC systems.

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### 1. ACCESSIBILITY

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#### Lessons learned

Ensuring the continuity of educational relationships with children and families is paramount. This is especially true in times of pandemic crisis, which are characterised by discontinuities in attendance at ECEC centres, for multiple reasons: closure of ECEC centres due to general lockdowns; contagion containment measures targeted at individual settings/groups; quarantine periods for children and families who have contracted the virus. This is especially important for children and families in societally disadvantaged positions, as research shows that the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated the phenomenon of unequal enrolment and attendance of ECEC, with the potential risk of widening socio-economic inequalities and educational gaps in the long term (Save the Children, 2020).

Ensuring the accessibility of ECEC during the pandemic safeguards children's rights to wellbeing, learning, play, socialisation and equality of opportunities.

## Policy guidelines

- 1.1 The accessibility of high quality ECEC is important for all children, as a child right emanating from the UNCRC (1989) and from EU policies (European Pillar of Social Rights, 2017; Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC system, 2019). Particularly in times of crisis, accessibility to high-quality ECEC provision guarantees that a child's rights to education, wellbeing, socialisation and play are taken into account.**

In contexts in which ECEC provision is framed within 'the best interests of the child', and ECEC policies are coherently embedded in governance and funding mechanisms that ensure legal entitlement, the negative effects of the pandemic on children, families and communities were mitigated, as high-quality ECEC was more readily available than elsewhere.

- 1.2 Striving for inclusiveness of provision should remain a key target, even where policies are designed to ensure the use of ECEC by priority groups. Efforts should be made to ensure that ECEC remains available, accessible and affordable to vulnerable groups and families that have been most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crisis.**

Children from low-income and migrant families have also been underrepresented in the context of the emergency ECEC provided during lockdowns. Policy measures addressing the use of ECEC by priority groups should thus include within their design targeted efforts to ensure basic equity and inclusion, i.e. increasing public subsidies aimed at reducing attendance fees.

- 1.3 National, regional and local authorities should devise comprehensive joint strategies to continuously reach out to the most vulnerable groups, in collaboration with ECEC providers and social welfare organisations.**

Outreach strategies are a crucial tool at the disposal of ECEC centres and networks that may be used, in a timely and accurate manner, to complement other targeted measures aimed at inclusion. Through outreach, ECEC centres – in collaboration with social welfare organizations – can foster the participation of societally disadvantaged children and the most vulnerable families, even in the face of changing pandemic scenarios.

- 1.4 Adequate digital equipment and in-person home visits are crucial tools to maintain regular communication with children and families who are not attending ECEC centres.**

During the pandemic, children and families may have been absent from ECEC due to the temporary closure of settings, due to priority criteria that advantaged certain groups over others, due to exposure to the infection, or due to fear of becoming infected. Maintaining contact with those children and families who are not physically attending ECEC settings is crucial to ascertaining whether parents are adequately supported during a challenging period, as well as to ensure that children experience continuity in their relationships with ECEC staff. Clear guidance should thus be provided to ECEC staff on how to safely conduct online and in-person exchanges, in order to foster meaningful interactions while respecting privacy.

**1.5 Warm and welcoming transitions should be ensured between home and the ECEC centre, not only for newly enrolled children and families, but also for those who have been absent from ECEC for a while.**

Research shows that building relationships of trust with children and families is of utmost importance in ensuring continuity of children's attendance and counteracting the risk of withdrawal. If ECEC centres are not placed in a position to work with families through daily interactions, accessibility is threatened, particularly among the most societally disadvantaged groups.

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## 2. WORKFORCE

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### Lessons learned

Providing job security and adequate compensation to ensure motivation and staff retention is key to the sustainability of quality ECEC in times of crisis and beyond. Although the importance of ECEC centres has become more and more clear during this crisis, the overall social recognition of ECEC professionals remains low. Taking the voices of staff into account in decision-making processes relating to the operation of ECEC centres in times of emergency has proven particularly challenging. The pedagogical and policy-making capacity of ECEC leaders has proved crucial in supporting ECEC professionals to deal effectively with the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 crisis; therefore, both the working conditions of ECEC staff and the pedagogical and policy capacity of ECEC leaders should be strengthened.

### Policy guidelines

**2.1 Structural measures to address shortages in the ECEC workforce should be considered in order to avoid overworking the existing staff, which would negatively affect the quality of education and care practice.**

**2.2 Given the importance of maintaining contacts with children and families during prolonged periods of closure for ECEC settings, continuity of salary for ECEC staff should be guaranteed.**

This is essential, not only in terms of the retention of qualified staff, but also in order to provide continuity of relationships with children and families.

**2.3 Pedagogical coaching, collegial reflectivity and planning should not be discontinued during the crisis and beyond.**

These are key support mechanisms for ECEC teams, essential to sustaining them in the process of readapting daily practices, while striking a balance between educational and safety rationales, without losing focus on children's wellbeing and on the meaningful involvement of families and local communities.

**2.4 Staff conditions and concerns should be acknowledged and taken seriously into account by providing pedagogical guidance and professional development opportunities. In addition, because the ECEC workforce interact closely with children and parents as part of their daily work, consideration should be given to the possibility of including them among priority groups for vaccination.**

Ongoing professional development initiatives should address the emerging needs of ECEC professionals, particularly in relation to the situation in each setting. The fears and worries of ECEC staff should be addressed, in order to

reduce the negative effects such fears may have on their daily work with children and families. It is to be acknowledged that identifying strategies to support professionals in maintaining face-to-face contacts and relationships with parents on a daily basis is particularly important during a crisis. For this reason, it appears crucial to take into account the possibility of including ECEC staff among the priority groups for vaccination.

**2.5 ECEC leaders play a key role in providing organisational, pedagogical and emotional support to their educational teams. It is crucial that an adequate decision-making infrastructure, operating according to principles of distributed leadership, is in place at the level of each institution.**

The pandemic crisis has clearly shown that ECEC centres that were able to rely on high-quality leadership were better at dealing with the unpredictable nature of the situation – for example, by creating emotional stability for children, families and staff members; by ensuring the clear flow of communications both internally (among ECEC staff) and externally (with families and with local authority services).

**2.6 ECEC leaders should be granted the opportunity to systematically engage in peer-learning initiatives and advocacy processes within locally established professional networks, umbrella organisations or trade unions.**

ECEC leaders are key links connecting centre-based pedagogical planning with higher levels of government and policy implementation. They therefore should be systematically engaged – either directly or through representation – in policy consultation initiatives and expert working groups at local, regional and national level. The use of ICT and social media could also be instrumental in creating peer support groups.

**2.7 The procurement and supply of protective equipment to staff should not be delegated to individual ECEC centres, nor to ECEC staff.**

Good-quality protective equipment should be always available. Without it, staff may feel more insecure and anxious, which would inevitably affect the quality of their daily interactions with children.

**2.8 Investments should be made to improve ICT infrastructure, as ECEC staff have been highly appreciative of the opportunities offered by digital tools to document children’s experiences, carry out meetings and conduct exchanges with parents.**

Because ECEC centres tend to be under-resourced in relation to digital devices, targeted funding should be allocated, alongside adequate training where required.

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### 3. CURRICULUM

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#### Lessons learned

In the process of striking a balance between the implementation of safety/hygiene measures and pursuing education and care based on a pedagogical vision, priority should be given to nurturing children’s well-being, participation and learning as well as fostering

meaningful and respectful relationships with families. Raising awareness of such dilemmas – and supporting ECEC professional teams in the process of developing innovative approaches and practices to overcome them – might represent an opportunity for ECEC centres to revisit their pedagogical identities from a perspective that places equal value on the educational and the social functions of ECEC, without compromising the needs of children or parents.

### Policy guidelines

**3.1 Given that young children have been highly affected by the negative consequences of lockdowns and restrictions during the pandemic, the educational and care practices adopted within ECEC centres should guarantee that children’s rights to socialisation, play and learning are foregrounded.**

ECEC centres constitute part of everyday life for young children. Thus, the environment and daily programme of ECEC centres should be based on respect for children’s interests and needs, as well as being beneficial to children’s play with peers, learning and development.

**3.2 In times of crisis, ECEC centres can become places of resilience, where children can share their lived experiences and emotions with adults and peers through interaction and play. This role of ECEC becomes even more salient when considering the increase in difficult home situations (such as domestic violence) during lockdown.**

Observation of children’s play and child-initiated activities should therefore be valued as an essential methodological tool to enhance children’s participation and voice in pedagogical decision-making and planning processes. In addition, the preventive and supportive role of ECEC in addressing potentially harmful practices against children should be appreciated, as underlined by the Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021b).

**3.3. Compliance with safety/hygiene protocols should not hinder children’s agency and participation, nor should it limit their communication and expression through play, body language and movement.**

Space, time and materials should be carefully rearranged in order to sustain children’ interactions, exploration and learning within stable – and possibly smaller – groups. Lower staff: child ratios might provide more favourable opportunities for ECEC staff to focus on inclusive and warm interactions with children, i.e. more individualised attention, more focus on sustaining peer interactions within the group, more outdoor play.

**3.4. Specific initiatives should be put in place to sustain the development of relationships of trust between parents and professionals.**

Relationships based on reciprocal dialogue between families and professionals are crucial in sustaining the quality of ECEC, particularly in times of crisis. However, during the pandemic most parents have not been allowed to enter ECEC centres. Familiarisation, settling in and welcoming/goodbye practices thus needed to be rethought by drawing on the existing resources of each setting – e.g. using outdoor areas or rearranging the layouts of indoor spaces – in order to facilitate daily interactions between ECEC professionals and parents.

### **3.5. Alternative methods, including online communication, should be explored to involve families in the everyday life of ECEC centres.**

The use of digital tools to share documentation and foster reciprocal exchanges of communication with parents have been considered an interesting discovery by staff and families. Technology should be used to build partnerships, and not just to share information. Digital tools should be employed to provide ECEC staff, children and families with opportunities to meaningfully interact and learn from each other.

### **3.6. When ECEC centres are closed or children/families are in self-isolation, digital tools can also be used to enable the continuity of educational relationships.**

Given the young age of children in ECEC, remote delivery of learning activities and prolonged exposure to screens are considered neither appropriate nor desirable. Instead, educational relationships can be ensured in remote environments by sustaining parents' capacity to provide emotional support and safe spaces for their children to thrive and explore, in spite of restrictions. The reciprocity of communication exchanges (respecting the individuality of each child and family, valuing children's gains in the home environment, etc.) should therefore be prioritised over the implementation of home-based learning activities (parents should be viewed as co-educators rather than substitute teachers).

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## **4. MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

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### **Lessons learned**

While quality monitoring and evaluation processes can be undertaken using a combination of top-down 'controlling' approaches and bottom-up 'supporting' approaches, the evidence analysed for this report indicates that the supportive element of monitoring proved to be especially useful in sustaining teams' ability to review and improve their practice during the pandemic crisis. In addition, data concerning ECEC attendance should be collected and closely monitored as a way of identifying those groups who are less present in provisions, and to design initiatives to ensure that ECEC remains accessible to those families who are most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crises. (see Sections 1.2 and 1.3).

### **Policy guidelines**

- 4.1. Investing in a monitoring infrastructure that systematically supports ECEC centres and teams in the process of pedagogical planning, evaluation and the review of educational practices is paramount, and preferable to the use of external processes of control during times of crisis.**
- 4.2. The systematic collection of reliable data in relation to ECEC attendance is necessary to continuously monitor the accessibility of provision during times of crisis, and to design appropriate *ad hoc* measures to ensure equitable access.**

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## 5. GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

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### Lessons learned

The framing of the role of ECEC that has emerged from public debates over the closure and reopening of centres during the pandemic has revealed that concerns such as children's rights, early learning, parental support and the reconciliation of work and family life are assessed and weighted differently between countries. This allows patterns of path dependence to be identified (i.e. decisions being made that are dependent on previous decisions made in the past), which may have a profound impact on the current governance and financing of ECEC systems.

In countries in which ECEC has been framed since its inception with a strong focus on children's rights, ECEC systems tend to be regulated and funded within a coherent public governance framework that fully recognises the educational and social value of ECEC. Conversely, countries where the educational, social and economic functions of ECEC have traditionally been split into separate domains (i.e. childcare and early education), governance tends to be weaker and more brittle, leading to greater fragmentation of initiatives and discontinuity in public funding.

Data from the country reports reveals that fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems require more additional means and measures in times of crisis. Stable ECEC systems that are coherently organised and financed were significantly better prepared to deal with the crisis, and needed fewer ad hoc measures to ensure the viability of the sector. Considering the pitfalls highlighted above with specific reference to split systems, it may be inferred that integrated systems of governance are better suited to meeting the multiple challenges that have arisen from the pandemic crisis. Within integrated ECEC systems, critical issues such as the overlapping and fragmentation of responsibilities with regard to policy decision-making and implementation processes are tackled more efficiently.

### Policy guidelines

- 5.1. A clear flow of communication between national, regional and local authorities via existing umbrella and statutory bodies can facilitate decision-making processes when swift decisions are to be taken, as well as the smooth implementation of policy measures.**
- 5.2. During the pandemic, a need has emerged within systems of ECEC governance to improve the balance between centralised processes of policy and regulatory design, and decentralised implementation.**

The degree of autonomy left to regional and local governments – as well as the different resources at the disposal of more affluent areas compared with disadvantaged ones – has tended to reinforce existing inequalities and widen gaps even further during the crisis. Additional resources from a central level should therefore be targeted specifically towards more socio-economically disadvantaged regions and municipalities.

- 5.3. Clear and unambiguous crisis communication, both with families directly and the ECEC sector, is vastly important.**

The aim of such communication should be to create an atmosphere in which ECEC stakeholders can deal with uncertainty (new viral variants, possible new

lockdowns, vaccination dynamics), while at the same time maintaining a certain sense of stability. When general guidelines are unclear or delivered too late, this generates confusion and brings extra stress to both ECEC staff and families, and to their mutual relationship. Guidelines need to be open and at the same time clear, providing both a reference framework and the opportunity to contextualise measures. Communication with representatives of ECEC professionals is also important to facilitate the smooth adaptation of national regulations to the specific conditions under which ECEC centres operate.

**5.4. Integrated measures combining ECEC with family financial support schemes are needed in order to allow a more flexible response to the ever-changing scenarios of the pandemic.**

The negative effects of the pandemic crisis were particularly salient to families with children: among such families, those with low SES, migrant families, and societally disadvantaged families were the most affected. Housing and food allowances directed to families with young children – and especially to those experiencing disadvantage – should therefore be put in place to mitigate the impact of temporary unemployment or loss of income.

**5.5. Inter-institutional communication protocols between ECEC, healthcare and welfare services should be more widely promoted, as they could provide a basis for the creation of platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration in the future.**

In most countries, existing services provided to children and their families tend to address the various aspects of children’s development and well-being – health and nutrition, social protection, family support, child protection, education – via separate services and fragmented initiatives. The pandemic crisis starkly revealed that the needs and demands of children and families are inextricably intertwined and need to be addressed using a multi-dimensional approach that overcomes existing gaps and overlaps between initiatives, which lead to missed opportunities and higher levels of inequality.

**5.6. Fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems required greater levels of support during the pandemic. In contexts where the ECEC sector relies to a large extent on private for-profit or not-publicly-subsidised provision, emergency financial assistance has become the only viable approach to avoid centres’ closure and ensure salary continuity for staff.**

In spite of the short-term effect of these measures, the pandemic continues to pose a major threat to the financial sustainability of the ECEC sector. This is particularly true for private providers within split ECEC systems, who do not always receive governmental financial support within the existing frameworks and are therefore highly reliant on enrolment fees. Evidence gathered for this report points to the fact that stable, well-financed ECEC systems were better prepared to face the COVID-19 crisis and did not need to implement extreme measures to prevent services from financial collapse. This raises significant questions as to the actual cost-effectiveness of one-off emergency relief schemes providing financial assistance. Furthermore, evidence shows that supply side funding is much more effective in protecting services and families against the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on accessibility than demand-side funding.

**5.7. To advance and mainstream the lessons learned during this crisis, more financial resources are required at statutory level: now is the time to honour the responsibilities undertaken by EU**

### **Member States in ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

A significant increase in financial allocations will be required to provide continuity and to mainstream interesting educational solutions that have arisen during this crisis (e.g. smaller classes with consistent staff for young children, ongoing pedagogical support for ECEC staff, etc.). However, concerns have been raised that national governments, faced with multiple pressures, may opt to cut ECEC spending to minimise budget deficits. Against this backdrop, it is of the utmost importance that increased financing for ECEC remains a priority under the various EU funding instruments aimed at supporting EU Member States over the coming years.

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## Annexes

### Annex 1. Country/regional fact sheets

#### BELGIUM – with a particular focus on the Flemish Community



Belgium is a federal state with three communities (Flemish, French and German) and three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital) as well as the federal government. Policy areas such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level. In this research, we zoom in on the Flemish community of Belgium.

#### ECEC system: administrative responsibilities at regional level

Centres for children aged 0-3 (*kinderopvang*) and out-of-school care settings (*buitenschoolse opvang*, 2.5-12 years old) are the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction, and are managed by the Flemish government's Upbringing Agency (*Agentschap Opgroeien*, the new name of former Child and Family Agency). This agency is responsible for regulations, the allocation of places, funding, quality standards and quality management. The day-to-day running of childcare centres is the responsibility of the service providers (local authorities, non-profit organisations and also private for-profit providers).

Preschool settings for children aged 2.5-6 years (*kleuterschool*) are under the auspices of the Flemish Ministry of Education, Sports, Animal Welfare and the Flemish border. There are three main types of provider/provision: (1) preschool settings run and fully financed by the Flemish Community (GO!); (2) subsidised public settings organised by local authorities; and (3) subsidised private settings, including settings organised on the basis of religious confession. 61.4% of children in this age group attend a private, mostly Catholic, preschool setting; 22.4% municipal; and 16.2% state-maintained preschool settings. Within the Flemish community of Belgium, schools enjoy a high degree of autonomy ('Freedom of education' is part of the Belgian Constitution). This 'Freedom of education' gives the right to any natural or legal person to start a school. It allows each school to develop its own educational policies, including its own pedagogical plan, teaching methods, curriculum and timetables, as well as to appoint its own staff. In Flanders, there are 1,500 governing bodies or school boards (*inrichtende machten*) providing recognised education in the Flemish community. Each may be responsible for one or more schools. School boards are distributed across the three 'educational networks', and may belong to an 'umbrella organisation', which is a representative association of school boards that acts as a partner for schools in policy discussions with the Flemish government. Where there are no connected out-of-school care centres (under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare), schools foresee their own before- and after-school care (mostly free play, with little supervision).

## ECEC PROFESSIONALS

- Core practitioners: childcare workers (*kinderbegeleiders*, for children aged 0-3 years, ISCED 3B<sup>46</sup>); preschool teachers (*leerkrachten*, for children aged 2.5-6 years, ISCED 6); and out-of-school care workers (*kinderbegeleiders*, for children aged 2.5-12 years, ISCED 3B).
- Assisting staff: childcare workers (*kinderbegeleiders*, for children aged 2.5-6 years, ISCED 3B) who support the work of preschool teachers at specific moments during the day; and supervisory staff (*kinderbegeleiders*, for children aged 2.5-6 years, no qualification) for lunchbreaks or before/after school supervision.

## LEADERSHIP ROLES

- Childcare coordinators are responsible for the management of 0-3 years childcare centres or 2.5-12 years out-of-school care centres.
- School directors are usually responsible for the management of a preschool and a primary school (2.5 to 12 years old). Only a few autonomous preschools exist with a preschool director.

## ACCESS & ATTENDANCE RATES<sup>47</sup>

- Every child has the right to attend preschool education (2.5-6 years old), free of charge.
- Despite efforts to make childcare (0-3 years old) more accessible for societally disadvantaged groups, it is not a right for every child, and parents mostly pay income-related fees. In particular, single parents, parents living in poverty and parents from migrant backgrounds are less likely to have a place in childcare.
  - 0-3 childcare provision: 55% of children
  - 2.5-6 preschool provision: 97% of children

## CROATIA



Early childhood education and care in the Republic of Croatia is an integral part of the system of education and childcare. It constitutes the initial level of the education system and, except for pre-primary education programs, is not compulsory for preschool children.

## ECEC System: administrative responsibilities at a local level

Early Childhood Education and Care in Croatia is governed by the Act on Preschool Education (Official Gazette No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013) and the accompanying legislation. It includes education and care for young children, and is realised through

<sup>46</sup> Unesco Institute for Statistics (2011). ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification). Unesco.

<sup>47</sup> Upbringing Agency. Het Kind In Vlaanderen (2019). Rapport uitgegeven door Agentschap Opgroeien <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/het-kind-in-vlaanderen>

programmes of education, healthcare, nutrition and social care for children from the age of six months to school age (6 years, 5 months old).

According to the Preschool Education Act (Official Gazette no. 10/97, 107/07, 94/13 and 98/19), ECEC is financed and managed by local authorities with the participation of parents, while the Ministry of Science and Education provides central guidance, accreditation and control over educational programmes.

An ECEC centre can be established by the authorities of the Republic of Croatia, local and regional units of self-government, religious communities, and other legal and natural persons. ECEC takes place in diverse types of institutions – preschool centres, play groups, children’s libraries, children’s wards in hospitals, mobile kindergartens, orphanages, elementary schools. In 2016-2017, out of the total number of ECEC centres (N= 1,514), 26.60% were private, and were attended by 17.9% of children (Dobrotić, Matković, Menger, 2018).

The ECEC system is divided into three educational cycles, based on the ages of children: (1) from 6 months to 1 year old; (2) from 1 to 3 years old; and (3) from 3 to compulsory school age (6 years, 5 months).

- To ensure equal educational opportunities, all children enrolled in primary school are obliged to attend a preparatory programme, called 'little school', prior to enrolment. These programmes consist in 250 hours organised in ECEC centres or schools, and encompass 99.6 % of children<sup>48</sup>.

### **ECEC PROFESSIONALS**

There are 17,895 employees in ECEC centres, (11,036 pre-primary teachers; 912 professional support personnel such as pedagogues, psychologists and special education teachers; 289 nurses; 5,658 administrative and technical support staff).<sup>49</sup>The staff of each ECEC centre is a multi-professional one.

- Core practitioners: educators (*odgajatelji/ce*) and professional associates (*stručni suradnici/ce*) (psychologists, pedagogues, speech therapists, etc.). (0-6 years old, ISCED 6<sup>50</sup>, university study).
- Health workers (*zdravstveni voditelji/ce*) (ISCED 3B).

### **LEADERSHIP ROLES**

- Each ECEC centre is managed by a board consisting of five to seven members. At least half of the members of the board of directors are appointed by the founder; one member is elected by the parents; and one is elected from among the employees.
- The director is the professional and business manager of the centre.

### **ACCESS & ATTENDANCE RATES<sup>51</sup>**

Municipalities are required to provide ECEC and out-of-school care for children aged 6 months–6 years. All children are obliged to attend 250 hours of ECEC during the year preceding formal schooling.

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48 Source: Ministry of Science and Education: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rani-predskolski-odgoj-obrazovanje-u-brojkama?cat=244> (retrieved 4 September 2018)

49 Source: Ministry of science and education: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rani-predskolski-odgoj-obrazovanje-u-brojkama?cat=244> (retrieved 4 September 2018)

50 Unesco Institute for Statistics (2011). ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification). Unesco.

51 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019): Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Dostupno na:

Access to preschool education is not equal across all regions/counties of Croatia.

- 0-3 years old: 15.9%
- 4-6 years old: 77.7 %

## **GERMANY – with a particular focus on the state of Berlin**



Germany consists of 16 federal states, which are partly sovereign. For the purpose of this report, we have focused on Berlin.

### **ECEC system: administrative responsibilities at a regional level**

Being a city-state, responsibility for ECEC rests with the regional level in Berlin (Land Berlin). ECEC is an integrated service (Kita) for children aged 0-6 years, although very few children below the age of 1 (475 in 2019) enter the service, since combined parental leave for both parents amounts to 14 months. ECEC centres are the responsibility of the Youth Department at the Regional Ministry for Education, Youth and Family. As of 1 August 2017, ECEC services are entirely funded by Land Berlin, regardless of family income or hours of attendance per day. Seven hours of attendance are guaranteed for each child per day. Parents pay a lump sum of EUR 23/month for meals.

Since 2004 (in an updated edition since 2014), the Berlin Early Years Programme (English version: Bridging Diversity, published in 2019) is mandatory for all ECEC centres in Berlin. When it was introduced in 2004, it was the first time the city (divided into West and East Berlin until 1989) had a common curriculum.

In 2006, Berlin established an Early Years Framework on Quality (QVTAG). This requires providers and workforce to regulate internal evaluations (one to two times a year) and external evaluation (once every five years), based on Bridging Diversity.

Since 1 August 2013, all children in Germany from the age of 1 until entering primary school (6 years old) have a constitutional right to childcare, but no obligation to attend; Berlin's centre-based ECEC provisions cater for around 168,000 children.

Berlin has roughly 2,700 ECEC centres, managed by 1,200 providers. Providers range from parent-led (22%) to civil society and welfare organisations (54.4%), church-based (12.2%) and semi-municipal (11.4%). The wide range of providers is the single most important structural feature of the ECEC sector. All providers are not-for-profit entities.

## ECEC PROFESSIONALS

Early childhood educators and principals (*pädagogische Fachkräfte (Erzieher\*innen), Kita-Leitungen*) (for children aged 0-6 years, ISCED 3,4,6,7<sup>52</sup>).

## LEADERSHIP ROLES

- Principals are responsible for all managerial aspects of individual centres. Principals are supported by the -directors of provider organisations. Providers are responsible for overall guidance, mission and vision, quality development, hiring of staff, salary administration and financial management/regional funding.
- Larger provider organisations employ inhouse pedagogical coordinators to support educational practices covering all quality areas of *Bridging Diversity*. Smaller providers (around 800 providers manage only one centre) use free-lance pedagogical coordinators. Funds for pedagogical coordination are included in statutory funding, calculated per child/month.

## ACCESS & ATTENDANCE RATES

- Every child from the age of 1 until 6 years old (or primary school entry) has a constitutional right to ECEC. In Berlin, ECEC is free of charge regardless of family income. However, cities like Berlin are dealing with a shortage of places for various reasons. Due to a variety of cultural and social factors, children up to 3 years old with migration backgrounds are less likely to attend ECEC.
  - 0-3 years old: coverage was 70.5% in 2014 and dropped to 68.5% by the end of 2019.
  - 3-6 years old: coverage was 94.1% in 2014 and dropped to 92% by the end of 2019. Fall in coverage is due to higher demand (rising birth rate); population growth of around 45,000 new residents each year; constitutional right to ECEC; booming labour market. Fall in coverage, despite a rising number of places (increase of 50,500 places between 2011 and 2020) is *inter alia* due to grave shortage of trained staff.

## ITALY<sup>53</sup> – with a particular focus on the Emilia-Romagna region



Italy is a Republic comprising 20 regions.

<sup>52</sup> Unesco Institute for Statistics (2011). ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification). Unesco.

<sup>53</sup> Fact sheet data sources: data concerning Emilia-Romagna region were retrieved from SPI-ER report 'Rapporto informativo sull'offerta 0-6 in Emilia-Romagna' (2020): <https://sociale.regione.emilia-romagna.it/infanzia-adolescenza/approfondimenti/osservatorio-infanzia-e-adolescenza/i-dati-e-le-statistiche/i-bambini-e-i-servizi-educativi-per-la-prima-infanzia-fonte-spier> . Data concerning Italy were retrieved from MIPA report 'Nidi e Servizi Educativi per l'Infanzia: stato dell'arte, criticità e sviluppi del sistema educativo integrato 0-6' (2020): [https://www.consorziomipa.it/allegati/report-infanzia\\_def.pdf](https://www.consorziomipa.it/allegati/report-infanzia_def.pdf)

## **ECEC system: administrative responsibilities at national, regional and local level**

Until 2015, centres for children aged 0-3 (called *nidi*) were the responsibility of the Minister of Welfare, with decentralised responsibilities regarding regulation and the funding of provision. Regions are therefore responsible for regulating provision for children aged 0-3 (see Emilia-Romagna regional law 19/2016 for details), while municipalities are responsible for management and funding. No national curriculum exists as yet in relation to provision for children aged 0-3; instead, pedagogical guidelines are developed at local level by municipalities and providers (*progetto pedagogico*).

Settings for children aged 3-6 years (*scuola dell'infanzia*) fall under the administrative responsibility of the Ministry of Education at national level. The national curriculum for *scuola dell'infanzia* is elaborated by the Ministry of Education within a broader framework that also encompasses primary and secondary school education curricula (Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo, 2018). State funding for private provision that complies with national standards (*scuole paritarie*) is provided under Law 62/2000.

Since 2015, Italy has been moving towards the integration of ECEC provisions for children aged 0-3 and 3-6, under the Ministry of Education (Law 107/2015; Law Decree 65/2017). A Committee of Experts on the Integrated System was established under the Ministry of Education, with the aim of developing shared pedagogical guidelines across the sectors covering children aged 0-6: the Committee played a key role in developing steering documents and guidelines to support centres for 0-3s and 3-6s in the implementation of online activities during the lockdown and in the re-opening of *nidi* and *scuola dell'infanzia* after the lockdown.

### **ECEC provision in the Emilia-Romagna region**

Municipalities are responsible for the direct management (*posti pubblici diretti*) or indirect management (*posti titolare pubblico a gestione privata*) of 0-3 settings, as well as for the funding of private accredited provision (*posti privati in convenzione*). Social cooperatives are the most common form of private not-for-profit (NFP) provision publicly subsidised in the 0-3 sector, whereas centres run by private not-publicly-subsidised providers (*posti privati*) account for only a residual part of the sector. State-maintained provision (*scuole dell'infanzia statali*) accounts for the majority of publicly run *scuole dell'infanzia*, whereas in large cities municipal provision (*scuole dell'infanzia comunali*) accounts for approximately one-third of institutions for children aged 3-6. Private-NFP publicly subsidised 3-6 provision (*scuole paritarie*) is mostly run by the Federation of Catholic Preschools (FISM) and funding is received by the Ministry of Education, by Emilia-Romagna Region and by municipalities. If we consider the overall population of children attending *scuola dell'infanzia* in Emilia-Romagna, 48.5% of them are enrolled in state-maintained provision, 20% are enrolled in municipal preschools and 31.5% are enrolled in private – mostly publicly subsidised – provision.

### **ECEC PROFESSIONALS**

- 0-3 provision: early childhood educators (*educatore nei servizi per l'infanzia*, ISCED 6<sup>54</sup>).
- 3-6 provision: preschool teachers (*insegnante di scuola dell'infanzia*, ISCED 7).

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<sup>54</sup> Unesco Institute for Statistics (2011). ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification). Unesco.

## LEADERSHIP ROLES

- Pedagogical coordinators (*coordinatore pedagogico*) are responsible for providing guidance and support to educational teams in centres for children aged 0-3 and 3-6, but only within municipal and private-NFP publicly subsidised provision.
- School directors (*dirigenti scolastici*) are responsible for the management of large, comprehensive state-maintained institutions (*Istituti Comprensivi*) attended by children aged 3-14, which hence also include *scuola dell'infanzia*.

## ACCESS & ATTENDANCE RATES

- Every child has the right to attend preschool education (3-6 years old), free of charge.
- Despite efforts to make childcare (0-3 years old) more accessible for societally disadvantaged groups (lowering fees for low-income families in the light of the new law on integrated ECEC), it is not a right for every child. In particular, unemployed parents, parents living in poverty and parents from migrant backgrounds are less likely to have a place in childcare.
  - 0-3 provision: 33.1% (Emilia-Romagna) vs 23.4%\* (Italy overall)
  - 3-6 provision: 92.9% (Emilia-Romagna) vs 89.8% (Italy overall)

In the Emilia-Romagna region, children attending 0-3 centres are mostly enrolled in municipal or private-publicly subsidised provision. On the national level, only 13.5% of children are enrolled in municipal or private-publicly subsidised centres (meaning that the remaining 9.9% attend private not-publicly-subsidised provision).

## SWEDEN



Sweden is a democratic monarchy with 10.4 million inhabitants living in 21 regions and 190 municipalities.

## ECEC system: administrative responsibilities at national and local level

ECEC in Sweden is regulated in law by the Education Act (2010), along with all other forms of schools for children aged 1-19. The government has adopted National Curricula: for 1-5-year-olds, the National Curriculum for the preschool (Lpfö 2018); for children aged 6-16 years, the National Curriculum for compulsory schooling, preschool class, and school-age educare (revised 2018). The National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the whole education system, including preschools for children aged 1-5 years, preschool class for 6-year-olds, primary school (7-16 years), and school-age educare for

children aged 6-9 years. The National Agency for Education stipulates regulations in a series of Common Advice. Three other national agencies also govern ECEC in Sweden: the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, and the Swedish Institute for Educational Research.

Preschools (*förskolor*) are governed locally, with the approximately 10,000 ECEC centres in Sweden being run either by municipalities (71%) or by private providers (29%). Independent ECEC centres have a private provider but receive the same tax-financed support as municipal ECEC centres. Independent ECEC centres apply for permission to the municipality. Municipalities also appoint family childcare providers, which in 2019 received only 1.7% of children aged 1-9 years.

The National Curriculum states that the purpose of education is to ensure that children acquire and develop knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of all children, as well as a life-long desire to learn. Education should be based on a holistic approach to children's needs, in which care, development and learning form a whole, in accordance with the concept of *educare*.

All children from 12 months upwards have the right to ECEC, even if their parents are unemployed or on parental leave. ECEC centres are open 10-12 hours on weekdays, all year round. Parents can decide how many hours their children will spend in the centre. From August of the year in which a child turns 3, ECEC is free of charge for 15 hours a week, corresponding to 525 hours annually, approximately the same as the primary school year in Sweden.

Parents pay a maximum fee of 3% of their common income, up to a maximum of SEK 1,510 (around EUR 150) for a first child between 1 and 3 years, and 2% up to a maximum of SEK 1,007 (around EUR 100) for a child of 3-5 years enrolled more than 15 hours/week. For further children aged 1-9 years the ECEC fee is reduced, and ECEC for a fourth child is free of charge.

#### **ECEC PROFESSIONALS** (National Agency for Education, 2020)

- ECEC teacher (*förskollärare*), (ISCED 655), with certification and a professional degree from 3.5 years of studies at university: 39.7%.
- Assistant/child minder (*barnskötare*), (ISCED 3), with an exam from secondary school, or (ISCED 4) from a vocational post-secondary school: 18.4%.
- Additional staff with some training: 10.7%.
- Staff with no training in working with children: 31.3%.

#### **LEADERSHIP ROLES**

- Principal/head teacher (*rektor*): responsible for one or more ECEC centres. This responsibility covers both the quality of the education and care, and the management of staff.
- The principal of an ECEC centre must have a relevant education and experience, and must receive compulsory education (60 ECTS at tertiary level, ECTS 7) within a couple of years of getting the position.

#### **ACCESS & ATTENDANCE RATES**

- All children from 12 months have the right to ECEC, even if their parents are unemployed or on parental leave. From August of the year in which a child turns 3,

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<sup>55</sup> Unesco Institute for Statistics (2011). ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification). Unesco.

ECEC is free of charge for 15 hours a week, corresponding to 525 hours annually, approximately the same as the primary school year in Sweden. Municipalities are also required to provide out-of-school care for children aged 1–12 years (National Agency for Education, 2020).

- Children aged 0-1 year are at home with guardians, supported by a parental leave insurance system covering around 80% of salary.
- 1-3 years, 78,6% overall: 1-year-olds, 49.2%; 2-year-olds, 91.5%; 3-year-olds, 94.5%.
- 4-5-years-olds, 95,4% overall: 4-year-olds, 95.3%; 5-years-olds 95.6%.
- From 6 years of age, education is compulsory in Sweden: preschool class (*förskoleklass*) or one year, followed by primary school (*grundskola*) for 7 to 16-year-olds.
- School-age educare (*fritidshem*) is optional. In 2019, 83.4% of 6 to 9-year-olds attended.

## Annex 2. Grid of questions for local key experts in ECEC

### ECEC and COVID-19 in general

***What are the rationales related to the previous and the future COVID-19 measures? What does this tell us about the societal function of the ECEC sector?***

- What are/were the overall policy choices concerning ECEC in COVID-19 times from March 2020 until now? e.g. when was ECEC open and closed (not in detail)
- What were the rationales behind these choices (e.g. was it to support lifelong learning of children, policy to support families with young children, policy to support the economy, child protection, etc.?)
- Which perspective was the dominant narrative (economic, social, pedagogical, etc.)? What do these opening policies tell us about the importance of ECEC?
- What kind of public debates have been going on in society and social media on ECEC and COVID-19?
- What kind of public debate is/was held during lockdown and what arguments led to the partial (or complete) reopening of ECEC centres? Which groups of children and families are/were (not), in the public's opinion, considered a priority to have access to ECEC?
- Are there new or recurring ways to informally care for children besides ECEC?
- Did the crisis lead to collaborations/crossovers between the child health sector and ECEC? If so, what type of collaborations?

### IMPACT of COVID-19 on children and families

***How do children (0-6 years) and families experience the COVID-19 crisis in your country?***

- Are there any documents, studies, reports, press articles on the experiences of young children and families in COVID-19 times?
- If so, what trends have been reported? What are/were needs of young children and families? (e.g. in lockdown of ECEC, after lockdown, etc.)?
- Which life domains of young children and families are/were affected in a negative or a positive way?
- Which voices are (not) being heard in these perspectives?
- The COVID-19 situation indirectly underlined the importance of paying attention to 'transitions'. What are specific needs of young children and families when they are transitioning from one environment to another (e.g. from home to childcare, from childcare to preschool, etc.)

### IMPACT of COVID-19 on quality ECEC

***What are the opportunities and threats for quality ECEC due to the COVID-19 measures? Use the European Quality Framework on ECEC (European Commission) as a lens***

- **Accessibility**
  - How affordable and available is ECEC in the context of COVID-19?
  - In the closing and reopening of the ECEC centres, are there groups of children and families who have/had priority access to ECEC? (e.g. children of essential care workers, children living in disadvantaged situation, etc.)

- Who is not attending ECEC? What are the characteristics of these groups of children and families? Are there any changes in presence / absence patterns linked to COVID-19?
- The COVID-19 crisis has also influenced o the financial means of families. Is absence from ECEC, for example, linked to unemployed parents who cannot afford the rates of the ECEC centre anymore?
- How does the crisis affect children and families within ECEC differently (e.g. children with special needs, children with migrant heritage and children from refugee families)?
- How are ECEC practices trying to map and reach out to all children and families? Is there a strategy for mapping and reaching out to vulnerable children?
- How are ECEC centres trying to be accessible in the context of social physical distancing?
- How did the COVID-19 context influence the relationship between families and ECEC staff?
- What do governments / state authorities do to keep ensuring accessible ECEC?
- What about new children and families that are due to start ECEC? How are they reached?
- During times of closure, does the ECEC system provide meals for children living in extreme poverty?
- What other opportunities and threats are there for ensuring accessibility?
- **Workforce**
  - What is the public discourse on ECEC professionals in the context of COVID-19? e.g. invisible care workers, versus indispensable frontline workers who should be valued.
  - Is there a difference in perception between lower and higher-qualified staff?
  - Is there a difference in perceptions between childcare workers, out-of-school workers and preschool teachers?
  - How is the crisis affecting ECEC staff and their working conditions? Is there a difference between private and public settings?
  - Are professionals receiving sufficient material support to do their job? Is there financial support to supply protective materials?
  - Do professionals still have enough opportunities to participate in in-service training and other professionalisation trajectories? Did the form/medium and content of training change? If so, how?
  - Do workers get enough support to work with digital media, what works with children, privacy issues?
  - What kind of ECEC leadership was needed/emerged to deal with this crisis successfully?
  - Do leaders have sufficient knowledge of pandemic guidelines and competences on how to adapt to continually changing COVID-19 regulations?

- What happens to ECEC staff when they become (partially) technically unemployed? Do they receive financial compensation? (including staff working in the private sector)
- How do ECEC centres and policies cope with professionals being on sick leave, in quarantine, or belonging to a high-risk health group? Are there enough qualified and available workers on the labour market to replace them?
- Particularly in the case of split ECEC systems, how do professionals from different ECEC centres collaborate to ensure smooth transitions?
- Is there any collaboration between workers from health, social and educational sectors?
- What other opportunities and threats are there for the ECEC workforce?
- **Curriculum**
  - How can ECEC centres ensure an integrated concept of care and learning for children in the context of COVID-19?
  - In some cases, what reactions have there been to the demands of a child-centred pedagogy in a 1.5-metre climate?
  - How can centres ensure a warm pedagogy without direct contact with parents in transitional moments?
  - Did centre-based ECEC provisions reach out to the children, especially those from vulnerable families at home during possible lockdowns? In what ways?
  - How are ECEC centres ensuring pedagogical continuity during the lockdown, beyond 'screen time'. How are ECEC pedagogy and home pedagogy being connected?
  - How is COVID-19 influencing the types of activities or materials that are developed or used (e.g. corona-proof materials, more outdoor play, etc.)?
  - How are/were ECEC centres dealing with privacy and online safety concerns in online teaching for children under 6 years of age?
  - What is the place of parents / families in the ECEC's pedagogy during the period of COVID-19?
  - What other opportunities and threats are there in terms of curriculum?
- **Monitoring and evaluation**
  - How are services and policies keeping track of the quality of ECEC under COVID-19?
  - Are/were children 'evaluated' after the lockdown (wellbeing, knowledge, etc.), and what were the results? Were there national guidelines for doing so?
  - What other opportunities and threats are there in the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC?
- **Finance and governance**
  - What important measures are/were taken to support ECEC centres to work in the context of COVID-19?

- Have different types of settings (e.g. private vs. public services, rural vs. urban, large vs small provisions) played a role in dealing with COVID-19-induced challenges?
- What is the role of the public ECEC sector in tackling the crisis?
- Is there a policy to support the private ECEC sector in this crisis?
- How did policies ensure that different ECEC sectors collaborated in order to ensure smooth transitions for children (e.g. out-of-school care and preschool education in split systems, statutory youth health services)
- What level of governance turned out to be an important one in dealing with this unforeseen crisis (national, regional, local; ministries of economy, health, education)?
- What are the lessons learned for policy makers in your country?
- Which do you think is most efficient at tackling the multiple challenges of COVID-19: an integrated or a split system?
- What other opportunities and threats are there to the financing and governing of ECEC?

### Annex 3. Initial ECEC policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis

	Belgium (FI)	Italy	Germany (Berlin)	Sweden	Croatia
<b>ECEC system<sup>56</sup></b>	Split	Split (in the early stages of transformation towards an integrated system)	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
<b>ECEC centres kept open or closed?</b>  <b>Chronological Overview</b>	<p><u>16 March 2020:</u> 0-3 years old: childcare centres remain open for parents with essential jobs (health and care, food, transport sector etc.) and societally disadvantaged families</p> <p>2.5-6 years old: preschools close down; emergency childcare is organised for parents with essential jobs and for societally disadvantaged children by schools and/or local municipalities.</p> <p>out-of-school care centres remain open for children of parents with 'essential'</p>	<p><u>4 March 2020:</u> 0-3 years old: childcare centres close to all.</p> <p>2.5-6 years old: preschools close to all; parks and playgrounds close to children and parents; children and parents cannot leave their houses.</p> <p><u>From 4 May 2020:</u> parks and playgrounds reopen gradually for children and parents. Parents and children can leave the house.</p> <p><u>15 June 2020:</u> possibility for municipalities to organise summer camps for children aged 3-17 years old</p>	<p><u>17 March 2020:</u> ECEC centres close down regular service but remain open for emergency care for parents with essential jobs (medical staff, public workers, police, detention workers, state staff) and for children with special needs, children referred from youth welfare. Playgrounds close to children, but children and parents could still leave their homes for outdoor activities in parks, forests, etc.</p> <p><u>27 April 2020:</u></p>	<p><u>March-December 2020:</u> ECEC, including out-of-school care centres, remain open. When children are sick or possibly sick, they are not allowed to attend ECEC.</p> <p>Parks and playgrounds remain open to all.</p>	<p><u>16 March 2020:</u> ECEC centres close regular services, but each day a few ECEC staff are on duty in case some of parents require emergency childcare. Parents use this option very rarely.</p> <p><u>19 March 2020:</u> Children's parks and playgrounds are closed .</p> <p><u>23 April 2020:</u> ECEC reopens for key workers (medical staff, people who work in grocery stores) and working parents who have no other childcare options</p>

<sup>56</sup> ECEC systems can be 'integrated', meaning that centres for 0-6 years old children are managed in an integrated way under the auspices of the same ministry; or they can be 'split' systems characterized by an institutional split between the 0-3 and 3-6-year-old sectors.

	<p>profession and societally disadvantaged families; parks and playgrounds closed to children; children and parents could leave their houses to go for a walk</p> <p><u>4 May 2020:</u></p> <p><i>0-3 years old:</i> childcare centres re-opened for children of single parents (irrespective of their employment status) and working parents who cannot work at home and do not have other care options</p> <p><u>18 May 2020:</u></p> <p><i>0-3 years old:</i> childcare centres reopen to all</p> <p><i>2.5-6 years old:</i> preschools remain closed, primary schools (mostly same institutions) open for pupils in transition years.</p> <p><i>Out-of-school care:</i> priority given to parents working outside the home or children from vulnerable families, and priority for toddlers</p>	<p>and for children between 9 months and 36 months.</p> <p><u>From September 2020 onwards:</u> ECEC reopens for all</p>	<p>ECEC centres reopen for children of single parents (irrespective of their employment status)</p> <p><u>Mid-May 2020:</u> ECEC opens for the oldest children transitioning to school after the summer; gradually, more children of younger ages can attend.</p> <p><u>22 June 2020:</u> ECEC is fully open to all, but this coincides with the start of the holiday period (ECEC centres do not follow school holidays as such – during the summer holiday period (6 weeks for schools) some are closed for 3 weeks, some do not close at all).</p> <p><u>New lockdowns?</u></p> <p>Restaurants and cultural institutions close again as of 6 November 2020), but ECEC remains open, again for the children of essential workers. The decision in early January 2021 to leave it up to parents whether their child will</p>		<p><u>Beginning of May 2020:</u></p> <p>Children’s parks and playgrounds reopen.</p> <p><u>11 May 2020:</u></p> <p>ECEC reopens for dual earners and single employed parents</p> <p><u>25 May 2020:</u></p> <p>ECEC reopens for all.</p>
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	<p>(due to the risks involved in taking care of toddlers being much lower than for primary school children).</p> <p><u>2 June 2020:</u></p> <p><i>2.5-6 years old:</i> preschools reopen for all; emergency care ceases; parks and playgrounds reopen for children below 13 years old.</p> <p><u>New lockdowns?</u></p> <p>ECEC remains open in all pandemic scenarios. Even in a national lockdown (e.g. November 2020), ECEC remains open. Children and families are encouraged to come as regularly as possible. ECEC will only close down when too many children and staff are infected or have to stay in quarantine.</p>		<p>attend ECEC during lockdown does not work, as too many children are sent to centres. Again, by the second half of January 2021, authorities define eligible categories of families who can access ECEC; ECEC centres only close down when too many children and/or staff are tested positive.</p> <p>Parks and playgrounds remain open to children and families continuously after March/ April 2020</p>		
<b>Public health focus</b>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention.</i></p> <p><i>Overall aims:</i> flatten the curve, protect the most societally</p>	<p><i>Population-wide approach to prevention for a considerable length of time → targeted approach to prevention.</i></p> <p><i>Overall aims:</i> flatten the curve, protect the</p>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention.</i></p> <p><i>Overall aims:</i> flatten the curve, protect the most societally</p>	<p><i>Targeted approach to prevention.</i></p> <p><i>Overall aims:</i> flatten the curve, protect the most societally disadvantaged (elderly,</p>	<p><i>(Initially) a population-wide approach → targeted approach to prevention.</i></p> <p><i>Overall aims:</i> flatten the curve, protect the most societally</p>

	<p>disadvantaged (elderly, people with health risks, etc.), minimise mortality and enable the health system to contain the virus.</p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus helped to reopen ECEC in 2020. Once in a while, virological concerns are raised when new variants of the virus appear and children are suspected of being the motor of the infection. Even in these situations, there remains a strong consensus that ECEC should remain open and closure should be avoided</p> <p>The provision of emergency childcare for essential workers also stems from a public health logic, to strengthen the operation of the health system.</p>	<p>most societally disadvantaged (elderly, people with health risks, etc.), minimise mortality and enable the health system to contain the virus.</p> <p>In April 2020, a scientific advisory committee presented a technical analysis to the Council of Ministers, in which the education sector was considered a medium- to high-risk sector for infection. Based on this analysis, the government continued its precautionary strategy and kept ECEC/schools closed until September 2020.</p>	<p>disadvantaged (elderly, people with health risks, etc.), minimise mortality and enable the health system to contain the effects of COVID-19.</p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus and ECEC staff are less likely to become sick, helps to reopen ECEC and keep it open. As of August 2020, there is a strong consensus that ECEC should remain open for as many categories of families as possible, and that there should be as few restrictions on access as possible.</p> <p>The provision of emergency ECEC for essential workers also stems from a public health logic, to strengthen the operation of the health system and other vital systems of society.</p>	<p>people with health risks, etc.), minimise mortality and enable the health system to contain the virus.</p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus and ECEC staff were less likely to become sick helps to keep ECEC open.</p>	<p>disadvantaged (elderly, people with health risks, etc. ), minimise mortality and enable the health system to contain the virus.</p> <p>The argument that children are not the motor of the virus helped to reopen ECEC.</p>
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