

## **Eurodiaconia input to the Commission consultation on Early Childhood Education and Care**

**29 March 2022**

Eurodiaconia is a network of 55 organisations founded in the Christian faith, operating in 32 European Countries, providing care and social services and advocating for social justice. Many of our members provide a wide range of inclusive child-related services such as day care centres, families support centres, after-school programmes, counselling and many other social services impacting children and families. Based on our members' long-standing experience, we call on the European Commission to incorporate the following considerations in the upcoming Council Recommendation addressing the revision of the Barcelona targets for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC):

- 1. Children at the centre:** In the revision of the Barcelona targets, the Commission must be driven by a child-centred approach. While increasing women's labour market participation and improving work-life balance for working parents are important objectives, we believe that the primary aim of enhanced access to ECEC should be to improve societal outcomes for children themselves, in areas such as health, education, and wellbeing. Children's rights and best interest should always be at the centre of initiatives addressing their needs, particularly of ECEC policies and practices.
- 2. ECEC for all children:** ECEC has a marked effect on children's later life outcomes. For children from disadvantaged families, the positive impact is twice as high as for those from more advantaged backgrounds. However, low-income families may not be able to afford childcare expenses with a risk of perpetuating child poverty or informal caregiving. As foreseen by the Child Guarantee, Member States must ensure that all children and families have a legal entitlement to ECEC and equal access to it, regardless of the employment status of the parents, socioeconomic background, their country of birth, residence status, or ethnic background. NGOs providing inclusive ECEC services for children, especially those working with disadvantaged population groups, should be further supported.
- 3. Inclusive, high-quality ECEC:** Besides equal access to ECEC, the inclusiveness and quality of these services are also essential to tackle social exclusion and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. According to our members, segregation in ECEC services is still common in many countries, usually producing a differing quality of services depending on children's socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. On the contrary, inclusive ECEC services allow for all children to enjoy high-quality services, they foster feelings of belonging and can promote social competencies of children, avoiding the development of prejudice and stereotypes. It is crucial to promote inclusive ECEC services by sensitising staff and equipping them with the competencies to manage diverse groups and respond to the individual needs of children from different backgrounds.
- 4. Holistic, integrated support:** Many of our members run centres where they provide low-threshold holistic, integrated services and support for families and children, such as day care, counselling, mediation, or psychosocial support. This helps them to build trust with families and to encourage them to make use of childcare services. Thus, better cooperation and integration among services for families and children, and community-based approaches to programmes and day care centres increase the accessibility and take-up of ECEC services, offering a welcoming environment.
- 5. Roma children & children with a migrant background:** Our members report that children with a migrant background are particularly at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Equally, Roma children are the most deprived group in Europe, with more than 90% of Roma children living at risk of poverty. Therefore, it is incredibly important that Roma children and children with a migrant background are particularly targeted to allow them to access inclusive, high-quality ECEC so they are not behind when they start formal education. Barriers that hinder their access to these services must be removed. For instance, active outreach by well-trained and well-equipped staff, including intercultural and language

mediators, can build trust and encourage families to send their children to childcare and pre-school. Administrative processes and barriers, including residency requirements, should also be streamlined so families can effectively access ECEC services.

- 6. Children with disabilities:** This group of children are also prone to experiment lack of effective access to ECEC, usually due to inaccessibility, or lack of adequately trained staff. Thus, the EU and Member States must support not for profit social service providers to ensure that any child in need of physical, mental or intellectual support receives accommodation and adequate assistance to access ECEC and realise their human rights on an equal basis with other children. Equally, effective and inclusive educational programs that guarantee that children with disabilities have the same opportunities to succeed must be promoted. Finally, investment in training and employment of adequate staff to reinforce the assistance they offer to children with disabilities is crucial.
- 7. Need for equality data:** There is data that indicates that in childcare participation for children under 3, there is a 15% point gap between children from families at risk of poverty and social exclusion and children who do not come from such families (EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, 2016). However, there is no available data to monitor the ECEC access gap between, for instance, Roma children and children not coming from Roma families. Thus, disaggregated data by indicators such as country of origin, ethnicity, and disability status should be collected to monitor whether children from disadvantaged groups are adequately prioritised in policy outcomes and funding of ECEC.