



# Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights

## CHILDCARE

Childcare services provide significant benefits for children, especially from disadvantaged households, by supporting their cognitive and social development, enhancing their learning outcomes, preventing later in life early school-leaving and enhancing labour market prospects. These services are central to supporting work-life balance for parents, especially women, thereby facilitating their participation in the labour market. Childcare also helps to reduce child poverty and its effects by enabling parents to accept paid work and when combined with other services such as parent counselling, warm meals and regular health check-ups.

### Challenges

A key challenge for many Member States is to increase access to childcare, while ensuring the quality of the services. In 2013, only 27% of children aged 0-3 and 82% of children between 3 and the mandatory school age were cared for in formal childcare across the EU. Demand for these services outstrips the supply of childcare places in many countries, especially for very young children (ages 0-3). In several Member States, children from disadvantaged backgrounds attend childcare much less than the rest, despite the fact that they are the ones most benefitting from it. The share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased from 22.9 to 25.6% in the euro area between 2007 and 2014.

Limited availability of places (lack of facilities, insufficient capacity, regional variation), problems in access (e.g. large distances; limited opening hours; strict eligibility criteria) and lack of affordability (high costs and related disincentives to take up employment) have all been shown to be major obstacles for the take-up of childcare.

Low quality childcare due to low qualification of staff, high child-staff ratios, lack of a pedagogical framework, inexistent monitoring and evaluation systems can hinder children's development and educational outcomes. It can also discourage the use of formal childcare.

### Situation at EU level

The Charter of Fundamental Rights sets out in Art 24 that children shall have a right to such protection and care as necessary for their wellbeing.

In 2002 the European Council set 'the Barcelona Targets' to ensure coverage of formal childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years by 2010. The target however does not specify whether the care is to be provided on a full- or part-time basis.

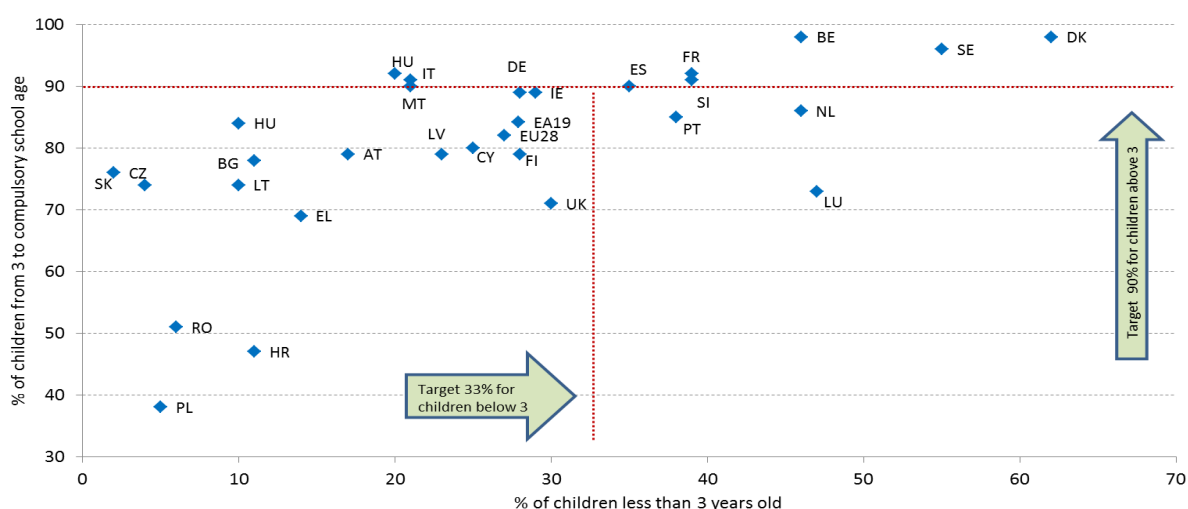
Moreover, the 2013 Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children called on Member States to step up affordable, quality early childhood education and care services, as part of a package of policy measures to

improve children's outcomes and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. The Employment Guidelines emphasise the role of affordable, accessible and quality services such as childcare in reconciliation of work and family life.<sup>1</sup>

## Situation in the Member States

Despite some progress, the majority of Member States have still not achieved the Barcelona targets to improve coverage of childcare services, and there are signs that attendance is decreasing in some countries. In 2014, 19 Member States were below the Barcelona target for children below the age of 3 and for children between 3 and the mandatory school age.

**Figure: Member States' achievement of the Barcelona targets, 2013**



Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC.

Moreover, in many Member States, much of the childcare that is provided is only on a part-time basis (between 1 and 29 hours per week), does not allow full-time working hours for parents. In many Member States a childcare entitlement exists (i.e. a child is entitled to a place after reaching a certain age). However in most countries, this entitlement begins at age 3, 4 or even 5, which can create a large gap between the end of paid maternity/parental leave and the start of entitlement, hindering parents' return to the labour market, particularly in cases when availability and affordability are problematic. Supply and demand for childcare places match only in those countries that provide a childcare place guarantee very early on (for example, straight after the end of maternity/parental leave), and currently this is the case in only 5 Member States (Denmark, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden).

Some Member States have however made efforts to expand the provision and quality of these services in recent years. For example, in 2014 Malta introduced free universal childcare for all parents who are in employment, in education, or seeking employment. Finland introduced compulsory pre-primary education in 2015.

## International dimension

The ILO Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities (C156) sets out: "All measures compatible with national conditions and possibilities shall further be taken to develop or promote community services, public or

<sup>1</sup> Council Decision 2015/1848 of 5 October 2015 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States for 2015.

private, such as child-care and family services and facilities."<sup>2</sup> Several related recommendations in the area of childcare are laid down in the accompanying ILO Recommendation N°165 on Workers with Family responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> It stipulates that the services should be organised free of charge or at a reasonable charge in accordance with workers' ability to pay, be developed along flexible lines and meet the needs of children of different ages.

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<sup>2</sup> ILO Convention (C156) on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

<sup>3</sup> ILO Recommendation N°165 on Workers with Family Responsibilities.