Supporting the Expansion and Strategic Development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus

A brief on the EU TSI Project in Cyprus

Background

Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development and build a foundation for their future. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that all children have the right to affordable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of good quality. It is in the earliest years of a child's life that the foundation and capacity to learn is laid, and this is built on throughout life. Learning is an incremental process; building a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success as much as it is essential for health and the well-being of children. Participating in ECEC is beneficial for all children and especially beneficial for children of a disadvantage background. It helps by preventing the formation of early skills gaps and thus it is an essential tool to fight inequalities and educational poverty. Quality, affordable and accessible ECEC also allows for increased parental workforce participation.

Cyprus acknowledges the importance of providing affordable high-quality ECEC as a condition for promoting children's early development and their subsequent school performance. It recognizes ECEC as an area that needs improvement and therefore has high policy priority. This is highlighted in the national Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) adopted in 2021. Through its RRP, Cyprus also aims to enhance the availability of quality care and social development infrastructure for children, and thus address the shortcomings highlighted by the relevant Country Specific Recommendation of the 2019 European semester cycle[1].

The Cyprus RRP 2021-2026 identifies the main challenges in the area of ECEC as follows:

- Cyprus relies heavily on informal settings or private institutions and social protection for families and children, as a proportion of GDP. This is comparatively low at 1.3% v EU 2.5% in 2016. This low investment is linked to weak support for disadvantaged children in ECEC and undermines potential long-term benefits of quality ECEC for inclusive educational outcomes;

[1] In 2019, the Council Recommendation adopted in the context of the European Semester for Cyprus, acknowledged (recital 11) that "educational achievements remain low as does participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) which has become less affordable for households as their income during the crisis fell at a faster rate than childcare costs". The Council adopted a relevant country specific recommendation (CSR 3) specifically addressing ECEC: "Deliver on the reform of the education and training system, including teacher evaluation, and increase employers' engagement and learners' participation in vocational education and training, **and affordable childhood education and care**". The 2020 Country Report for Cyprus, published by the European Commission in the context of the European Semester (SWD (2020) 512 final), concerning the progress on above CSR on ECEC, concluded that "limited progress has been made, as supporting measures for affordable ECEC are still lagging behind. The availability of affordable and accessible childcare is an area where divergence exists and free/low cost childcare is limited, creating a disproportionate burden for families".

- Free childcare is mainly limited only to guaranteed minimum income recipients, who also receive subsidization for private childcare. Depending on the age of the child, the type and provider of services, monthly fees range from €70 to €400, creating a disproportionate burden for families;
- The ECEC enrolment gap is higher for children under the age of three: while 97% of children aged 4 to 6 were enrolled in ECEC in 2019 (EU average 95.4%), 20.7% of children under the age of three participated in ECEC, below both the EU average (35.1%) and the Barcelona target (33%). The proportion of children 0 to 3 enrolled in ECEC was seriously impacted by COVID-19 pandemic, decreasing from 31.1% in 2019;
- The total fertility rate (2019) was 1.33, which since 1995 remains below the replacement level of 2.10 and is lower that the EU average of 1.55".

Cyprus is committed to ECEC reforms and as such has a strong ECEC focus on its RRP and has requested technical support from the EU through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) to enhance the quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusiveness of ECEC for children aged 0-6. The Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare (Social Welfare Services) and the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth are committed to this project by driving this exciting intervention.

Projected intended impact and outcomes

This Project aims to support Cyprus in raising the quality, affordability, accessibility and inclusiveness of ECEC, by guiding investments and reforms in the sector as outlined in the national RRP for 2021-2026. This includes a mapping to inform the expansion of facilities, development of a quality framework, and undertaking a range of evidence generation to inform a national ECEC Strategy due to be adopted by the Council of Ministers by the end of 2024.

The specific objectives of this TSI Project will be achieved through the following outcomes:

Outcome 1: The Cypriot authorities have gained extensive knowledge of the current status of the ECEC sector through 1) a mapping of existing services including supply and demand, 2) a comprehensive analysis of status of the ECEC sub-sector, and 3) analysis of good practice from EU Member States/other European countries, and a set of recommendations, which enables them to conduct the relevant investments and reforms outlined in the national RRP.

Outcome 2: Cyprus adopts a National Quality Framework for ECEC, together with a set of related indicators reflecting the data collected and quality needs across the split system, which have been created jointly with all relevant authorities and stakeholders and validated by the Social Welfare Services of the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth.

Outcome 3: The Cypriot authorities adopt a comprehensive national strategy for ECEC and accompanying action plan, based on recommendations developed with the help of the mapping, sub-sector analysis and European good practice and the quality framework development process.

Key Project Deliverables

The project has the following key activities and outputs to achieve the above outcomes:
- A project inception report and kick-off meeting.
- A mapping of supply and demand of ECEC services to inform the new state-aid Scheme included in the RRP for the establishment of at least 27 Multifunctional Centers for Children and Childcare Centres by the end of June 2026.
- A report on European good practice in ECEC.
- A complete full ECEC sector analysis diagnosis study that identifies the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of the sector.
- An ECEC National Quality Framework for use across the two Ministries, piloted in selected municipalities/ district areas.
- Consolidated recommendations and next-steps report to inform the development of a National ECEC Strategy and broader ECEC reforms in Cyprus.
- Final project summary report and closing meeting detailing project activities and key lessons learned.

Project Management Structure

This 2-year project is funded by the European Union via the Recovery and Resilience Fund. It is implemented by UNICEF, in cooperation with the European Commission, through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI).

Technical support is provided by UNICEF Europe and Central Asia regional office's Early Childhood Development section, in co-operation with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM).

Project leadership by the Social Welfare Services of the Deputy Ministry in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth.

Additional project support supplied by the Center for the Advancement of Research and Development in Educational Technology (CARDET) as a sub-contractor.

Cyprus___tomorrow
RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN