

## I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

## OPINIONS

## EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

## 459th PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 20 AND 21 JANUARY 2010

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Early childhood care and education'**

(own-initiative opinion)

(2010/C 339/01)

Rapporteur: **Ms HERCZOG**

On 14 July 2009, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

*Early childhood care and education.*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 December 2009.

At its 459th plenary session, held on 20 and 21 January 2010 (meeting of 20 January 2010), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 194 votes, with 3 abstentions.

**Preamble**

Member States bear the responsibility for the education and care of all children in their own country. There are different forms of education and care and their names, content and aims have changed during the past 15 years. The definition and wording used has changed for early childhood care. The education and care of children refers not only to providing a safe environment for the child, but also to the education and care that the child requires in order to thrive, develop his/her own potential by getting the emotional, physical, social and educational support it needs. Early childhood education and care consists in a set of wide-ranging services provided for newborn to pre-school children. After school care refers to all

those services provided for school-age children out of school hours, in the afternoon, at weekends, and during school holidays.

**1. Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The Committee acknowledges and supports the efforts made by the European Commission and Member States to develop and strengthen high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare, including early childhood education and care facilities. At the same time, many steps have to be taken further to ensure that services are provided to all children.

1.2 The Committee acknowledges the importance of a holistic and comprehensive approach to childcare matters, in order to have a better understanding of the inter-related procedures and secure human, social and economic development. Member States have to provide opportunities for individuals and families to make personal choices, decisions, and express their preferences for the form and duration of their children's care. In this context, policy-makers should consider different needs, competing values and interests in the following issues:

- best interest of the child <sup>(1)</sup>;
- parent support, parent education, empowerment;
- demographic issues (including low birth rate and fast growing number of pensioners);
- labour market needs;
- education and life-long learning;
- equal opportunities for men and women;
- differences in geographical distribution (cities, countryside, remote areas);
- reconciliation of working, family and private life;
- accessible, affordable and high-quality education and care for children;
- active citizenship;
- solidarity between generations;
- the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

1.3 The Committee acknowledges the differences in national family policies and as a consequence in childcare policies. However, the Barcelona targets and other relevant EU documents set fairly universal aims <sup>(2)</sup>.

1.4 The Committee stresses the need to focus on special groups of children, primarily the most vulnerable groups of children with special needs, disabled, migrant, ethnic minorities, socially excluded and those living without their parents, for

<sup>(1)</sup> In the context of the Commission's strategy Towards a Strategy on the Rights of the Child, launched on 4.7.2006 (<http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/r12555.htm>).

<sup>(2)</sup> In March 2002, the Barcelona European Council acknowledged the importance of childcare in terms of growth and equal opportunities calling on Member States to 'remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age'.

whom childcare plays an important role in preparing for school and achieving scholastic success. It also pleads for extra support for the parents of these groups of children.

1.5 The Committee, in agreement with the Social Agenda and other relevant policy documents, sees high-quality childcare as an opportunity to increase the quality of life and help reconcile working, private and family life for all members of the family, in addition to strengthening the labour market participation of women and generating a higher income for the family.

1.6 The Committee welcomes the fact that different forms of care and services for children are available for different age groups, not only for children who have not yet reached school age but also after-school, leisure and non-formal education activities. Accessible, affordable, high-quality services for all children should be provided.

1.7 The childcare sector is growing fast. However, the qualification and recognition of this, gender balance, prestige and payment of the labour force employed in the formal and even more in the informal provision of childcare services needs further improvement and support to provide a more diverse set of services in accordance with the diverse needs. While the aim is to provide education and care to all children, it must also be recalled that a flexible, sustainable and sensitive approach is needed in order to provide a wide range of services to meet the rights and needs of different groups of children.

1.8 The needs of families and children living in disadvantaged, remote areas and regions should be addressed better and in a more complex way, including community involvement and public support. The different forms of services – integrated, home based, parent support etc. – can respond to differences in the needs of children and their families.

1.9 The Committee strongly supports the recognition for the responsibility of the Member States, and the social partners' growing commitment to contributing to the improvement of universal, flexible education and care opportunities for all children and their use of all possible ways to contribute to its availability and success. Employers can provide childcare themselves or support it financially, while unions and civil society organisations can help raise awareness about its importance as well as supporting ongoing assessment and evaluation. Member States can set fiscal incentives for employers that make arrangements for the provision of education and care for children.

1.10 In conformity with the common principles and lifecycle approach of flexicurity, the Committee believes that the proposal must be seen in the context of difficulties with the care and education needs of children under the age of 3 and over school starting age. The use of flexible working hours for parents negotiated by all partners has proven its worth in this context.

1.11 Social partners have an important role in supporting the Member States' implementation of the childhood education and care policies and a comprehensive approach.

## 2. Background

2.1 The Council Recommendation on Childcare (92/241/CEE) to establish criteria for the definition of quality in childcare services in 1992 already showed the importance of the role of childcare; however, the extent and scope of childcare has changed greatly since then. In 1996, the EC Childcare Network focused on quality targets in the services provided for young children and not on the number or proportion of children attending ECEC facilities.

2.2 In the EU 25 <sup>(3)</sup>, the number of children up to compulsory school age was estimated at around 30 million. Of those children, less than 25 % of those under 3 years of age were attending formal childcare while the figure for those between 3 years of age and school starting age was higher than 80 %. There were significant differences between Member States, depending on their national policies, maternal and parental leave systems, traditions and values. There are also major differences between the forms and quality of care, time and days spent there.

2.3 Early education and care services for children are at different stages of development in the EU Member States and continue to be one of the fastest growing markets for the provision of care in Europe. This is partly due to the Barcelona targets but a stronger commitment is needed in order to ensure that all children have the opportunity of diverse forms of care, bearing in mind the different backgrounds and needs of children and families.

2.4 The importance of providing high-quality childcare services as an essential component in achieving gender equality and increasing female labour market participation has been pinpointed by the European Council and Commission and was included among the Barcelona targets of 2002. This was also reflected in the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 and 2008. The Commission report on Implementation of the Barcelona objectives concerning childcare facilities for pre-school children analysed achievements and further duties in this field. Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010

<sup>(3)</sup> Childcare in the EU in 2006, Eurostat/08/172, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU on 1 January 2007 and were not required to collect data previously.

to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age <sup>(4)</sup>. In some countries, more efforts are required to achieve the necessary implementation measures.

2.5 The European Commission's Communication on demographic change outlines the factors that contribute to an aging Europe: low fertility rates leading to a declining labour force and increased pressure on public spending <sup>(5)</sup>. In March 2006 the European Council stressed the need for better balance between work and private life in order to achieve economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness and approved the European Pact for Gender Equality <sup>(6)</sup>. Its second communication on promoting solidarity between the generations addresses the issue of demographic and social change, including the possible difficulties in funding and supplying goods and services including childcare <sup>(7)</sup>.

2.6 Citizens and civil society representatives consulted by the Commission expressed their concern with the fact that having children has a much higher impact on women's job prospects than on men's. The employment rate of women with dependent children is only 65 % compared to 91.7 % for men. Women have to face the consequences of stereotypical assumptions about their domestic responsibilities and their aptitude to employment <sup>(8)</sup>. This can lead to fewer women returning to the labour market after having a child.

2.7 Poverty of children in Europe <sup>(9)</sup> and the aim of ensuring the EU-wide implementation of the UNCRC <sup>(10)</sup> are crucial issues, as the Commission states in its Communication that parental poverty and social exclusion seriously limit the opportunities and life chances of children; as a result it is vital to break the cycle of poverty <sup>(11)</sup>.

<sup>(4)</sup> EC Implementation of the Barcelona objectives concerning childcare facilities for pre-school aged children, COM(2008) 638 Brussels.

<sup>(5)</sup> EC, The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity, COM(2006) 571 final.

<sup>(6)</sup> See Annex II to the Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council of 23/24 March 2006 in: [http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/89013.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/89013.pdf).

<sup>(7)</sup> EC, Promoting solidarity between generations, COM(2007) 244 final.

<sup>(8)</sup> Communication from the Commission: 'Citizen's Summary – Better maternity leave provisions designed to promote reconciliation of family and working life' ([ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=611&langId=en](http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=611&langId=en)); Common position on the revision of the Council Directive 96/34/EC of 3 June 1996 on the framework agreement on parental leave by the Social Platform, January 2009.

<sup>(9)</sup> EC, Child Poverty and Well-Being in the EU – Current status and way forward, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008.

<sup>(10)</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>(11)</sup> EC, Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, COM(2006) 367 final, Brussels, 2006.

2.8 The Commission set up a cross-national group, the Child-care Network, between 1986 and 1996 to focus on three particular areas: services for children, leave for parents and men as carers. The 40 quality targets set by the network provide a framework for future policies. It means a political commitment by the EU to childcare services and its aims.

2.9 Many studies, policy papers and analyses have been conducted to learn more about the needs of children and families and the available and perspective provisions <sup>(12)</sup>. Early childhood education and care has been discussed and investigated from different approaches, such as the documents issued by the European Commission and its agencies in recent years. These approaches include the child rights approach <sup>(13)</sup>, the educational issues <sup>(14)</sup>, the current situation and the future of childcare in the EU <sup>(15)</sup>, the Symposium on the need for improvement of ECEC <sup>(16)</sup>, and the social policy component of tackling poverty and social exclusion for the most vulnerable groups of children, as well as research and project evaluations <sup>(17)</sup>.

### 3. General remarks

3.1 In its communication of 2006 <sup>(18)</sup> the Commission stated that children's rights are a priority for the EU and that the Member States are bound to respect the UNCRC and its Optional Protocols, as well as the Millennium Development Goals. In March 2006, the European Council requested Member States 'to take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving

all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background' <sup>(19)</sup>. In the context of the current subject, this means giving all children the opportunity for proper early childhood and after-school education and care in accordance with their developmental needs and family circumstances, and access to accessible, flexible, high-quality and affordable education and care until at least the age of 14.

3.2 The development of childcare facilities for children gives the parents more opportunities to reconcile their working, private and family life. This applies in particular to women, who when faced with inadequate childcare options, are more likely to give up, fail to find work or be unable to benefit from appropriate work arrangements. This prevents them from fully fulfilling their potential and protecting their family from poverty. It is closely related to the demographic challenges as the lack of reconciliation leads to lower birth rates.

3.3 Europe has a legal framework which prohibits gender discrimination through a range of legislative measures. However, women often reduce their working hours or take longer leaves from work to care for their children, which leads to lower pay and lower pensions, and in-work poverty, especially in lone parent families or in families with many children. Although reductions in working time are a matter of a personal choice, they may be related, among other things, to the lack of adequate services for children.

3.4 Parents should have the flexibility to choose when they will take their parental leave and combine it where possible with adequate childcare options. However in this respect, national policies, priorities, the needs of enterprises, social pressure and the needs of the children should also be taken into consideration and the changes must be sensitive enough to provide specific measures.

3.5 Across the EU more than 6 million women aged 25-49 years say they are forced into not working or can work only part-time because of family responsibilities, and for more than quarter of them the lack of childcare facilities or its cost is the reason <sup>(20)</sup>.

<sup>(12)</sup> Starting Strong, OECD, 2001 / Childcare services in Europe, Foundation Findings, 2009 / Families and childcare services, Eurofound, 2009 / Early Childhood Education and Care key lessons from research and policy makers, NESSE, 2009 / The Provision of childcare services, Comparative review of 30 European countries, European Commission, 2009 / Child Poverty and well being in the EU, EC, 2008 / Changing Childhood in a Changing Europe, ESF, 2009 / Babies and Bosses, OECD, 2007 / Education Today, the OECD perspective, 2009 / Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities through Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe, Eurydice, 2009 / Out of school care services for school aged children, Eurofound, 2007 / Employment developments in childcare services for school-aged children, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006 / UNICEF Report Card 8, The Childcare Transition, Florence, 2008 / Early Matters, Brussels, 2008.

<sup>(13)</sup> Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, 2006.

<sup>(14)</sup> Communication from the Commission on Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems (COM(2006) 481 final).

<sup>(15)</sup> Childcare services in the EU- what future?, Eurofound.

<sup>(16)</sup> Early matters, ECEC symposium, 2008 October, Brussels.

<sup>(17)</sup> Tackling social and cultural inequalities through early childhood education and care in Europe, Eurydice, 2009, Early Childhood education and care – key lessons for policy makers, NESSE, 2009.

<sup>(18)</sup> Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (COM(2006) 367 final).

<sup>(19)</sup> See paragraph 72 of the Presidency Conclusions – 23/24 March 2006 (ref. in footnote 8 above).

<sup>(20)</sup> Childcare Services in Europe, Foundation Findings, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin, 2009, pp.9, www.eurofound.europa.eu.

3.6 Access to high-quality, affordable and accessible ECEC and after-school programmes is not only the key to ensuring that children spend their time in a decent environment suited to their development needs, it also enables parents (primarily women) to work. Quality childcare has an impact on the quality of life and future of children, parents, families and communities.

3.7 The various goals of the EU strategies on the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the Barcelona targets and beyond, but also on the demographic situation, solidarity between generations, equal opportunities for men and women and a better work-life balance can be achieved partly through childcare provisions. More efforts are required to ensure these opportunities based on the best interest of the child.

3.8 The fast growing sector of services for children is also providing a growing number of jobs for women and men <sup>(21)</sup>, as the educational and training requirements, prestige and pay are increasing.

3.9 A large proportion of Member States have developed sets of measures to promote a better reconciliation of professional, private and family life, which reflect the different national labour market needs and the diversity of traditions and cultures present in Europe. Wide ranging and flexible forms of childcare is part of a wider concept, together with a range of other instruments in this area. These include social inclusion programmes, flexible working arrangements, parental leave and other forms of leave, to serve the reconciliation of family, private and working life, child rights and through these the development of the EU countries' economic and social development.

#### 4. Specific remarks

4.1 Childcare in the EU is a fast growing and rapidly evolving industry with set minimum standards. The needs of children concerning the importance of the first years of life, the investment component of service provision such as preparation for school and success in education and later adult life, as well as the joyful years, is a relatively new concept serving primarily the best interest of the child but also the community and society as a whole <sup>(22)</sup>.

4.2 Until recently the focus of public spending on childcare has often been children between 3 years and school-starting age in order to prepare them for school. However, childcare investment must be directed towards younger children and towards those attending school until 14 years of age. It not only means better

day care provided while parents are working but also providing activities and out-of-school care and education and leisure activities for all. This is proven to be very effective in preparation for adult life, besides offering a safe and joyful time.

4.3 Socialisation and the development of a value system is an essential component of childhood family education, supplemented by formal early childhood education and care. There are other providers of non-formal education – non-governmental children's and youth organisations and children's and youth centres which contribute to acquiring skills for practical life and play a role in the process of life-long learning. 70 % of our knowledge and skills are developed through informal education. Recognition and support should be provided to all possible forms of education.

4.4 In special cases – children with disabilities, migrant children, parents with mental health problems, etc. – childcare can ensure that children have the opportunity to stay with their families rather than being placed away from them. The availability of different forms of childcare is a vital component of social and economic development, and it plays a particularly crucial role in disadvantaged areas and for disadvantaged groups and households living in otherwise good situations. The provision of childcare can help address the social, economic and health issues that such disadvantaged households face, and support the social integration of excluded groups.

4.5 Bearing in mind the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child <sup>(23)</sup>, the Commission should conduct a parallel study on the impact of the proposed measures on children. Children must be well nurtured and their personal wellbeing accounted for. The wellbeing of children and the value of childhood during this extremely important stage of life are crucial, but, at the same time, children constitute the workforce of the future and the lack of care and support in this early period of life might lead to failures in school and later integration in society.

4.6 Childcare provision is a form of employment opportunity traditionally mostly for women, but gender equality and a gender mix in employment, achieved by introducing a higher proportion of male workers, is desirable. High-quality training and vocational training, supervision and raising prestige by providing higher salaries are guaranteeing better service provision as well as enhanced gender balance in the workforce.

<sup>(21)</sup> Namely through the above-mentioned Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs.

<sup>(22)</sup> P. Reid, D. White: Eurofound, Out of school care services for children living in disadvantaged areas, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the EC, 2007.

<sup>(23)</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990, in accordance with Article 49. In: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.

4.7 The Barcelona targets aim to achieve by 2010 at least 33 % day-care placement for children under the age of 3 and 90 % for those between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, but there is no special provision for the different forms of childcare. There is an urgent need for a European platform to classify and improve them on the basis of principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability. The question remains: what happens to those who cannot be placed despite the need for childcare? Research and more appropriate data are required to debate the questions and possible answers.

4.8 As regards the quality of childcare, there is very limited information available on informal childcare services provided in the homes; many of the service providers are unqualified, are not

formally registered, and remain outside of recognised monitoring systems. These workers do not fall into formal employment structures, and thus lack proper workplace protection. Member States and local authorities should commit themselves to ensure quality care in all of its forms. These informal care arrangements endanger children as well. Social partners should plead for regulations and transparency not only in professional childcare but also in all forms of home-based and informal care by supporting and requiring professional training and supervision. Tax incentives could contribute to the setting up of more high-quality care facilities. Given the high number of women active in the care sector, improving working conditions and qualifications in this sector would also contribute to the EU overall strategy in this area <sup>(24)</sup>.

Brussels, 20 January 2010.

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*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
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<sup>(24)</sup> EESC opinion, OJ C 277, 17.11.2009, p. 102.