European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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Executive summary

This publication is the second report of the current Working Group (WG) on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which was established in 2021 as part of a new generation of WGs under the Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (EEA communication, 30 September 2020)[1], as well as the Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (Resolution, 18 February 2021).[2].

The objective of the WG on ECEC is to:

- facilitate mutual learning among representatives from national authorities in charge of ECEC, stakeholders and international organisations, provide advice and expertise to the European Commission,
- and offer guidance to participating countries in implementing the 2019 Council Recommendation for High-Quality ECEC systems and the European Quality Framework for ECEC.[3]

The WG is also foreseen to produce concrete outputs in support of participating countries' national reforms, including this present report.

Under the current mandate, the main focus of the ECEC WG is on **the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of quality in ECEC**. The research findings, shared definitions and key questions upon which the ECEC WG's current work is based are laid out in detail in the Background Note, which further explains that the WG's main activities are structured around the following three topics:

1. **Purposes, values and principles** – examining the values that should underpin the design of M&E processes, as well as the purposes that M&E of ECEC quality should aim to fulfil; (see 1st WG report)
2. **Coordinating efforts across levels** – considering how best to ensure that M&E processes are streamlined across the local, regional, and national level, as well as being coordinated across ECEC centres;
3. **Involvement of stakeholders** – exploring the benefits of involving children, parents, ECEC staff and stakeholder representatives in M&E processes, as well as the most effective ways to do so.

This second report presents the results of the WG's discussions on Topic 2 (**coordinating monitoring and evaluation processes across levels**), and more specifically on the following key questions:

- **How can we ensure that M&E processes and results are effectively and efficiently used to improve ECEC policies and the quality of ECEC provision across all level of the system and horizontally across split systems?**

[1] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625&from=EN

[2] Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48584/st06289-re01-en21.pdf

[3] Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&from=EN

- **How to coordinate M&E processes and tools across all levels of the system (centre, local, regional and national), including in split systems?**

To answer these key questions, this main content of the report is structured into five chapters which explore:

- the potential **benefits to investing in coordinated approaches to the M&E of quality** in ECEC provision
- the **policy challenges experienced by European countries** in coordinating M&E functions, processes & tools across levels
- an **overview of the situation of European countries in relation to coordinating M&E efforts across levels,** drawing on the Eurydice 2019 report *"Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe"*
- the **strategies developed by EU Members States to overcome their experienced challenges** in coordinating M&E processes, and **examples of inspiring practices** which have been collected through case studies
- **pointers for policy developments,** drawing on the lessons learnt from the cross-national analysis of case studies.

Investing in coordinated approaches to the M&E of quality in ECEC provision: potential benefits

Research has demonstrated that **structural quality** (staff-to-child ratios, group sizes, minimum staff qualifications, safety of buildings, etc.) **alone is not sufficient to yield benefits for children**. **What is most impactful for children's development is** the quality of the daily interactions that children experience with each other, staff, teachers, materials and activities, which is together known as **process quality**.

To improve the ECEC system as a whole, both the structural quality and the process quality of ECEC services need to be made visible and interpretable to all stakeholders involved. Setting up robust data systems can generate information on the strengths and weaknesses of the sector, support coherency, and strengthen infrastructure for research on ECEC. **Developing coordinated monitoring and evaluation processes can better promote improvements in ECEC, especially if tools are aligned and feedback loops exist across all levels**, data from individual ECEC settings are analysed at broader levels, and the **roles of different stakeholders in M&E across ECEC levels are clearly defined**.

The advantages of streamlined and coherent M&E systems in ECEC are the following:

- *Enabling a shared vision of quality pedagogy (especially process quality), to inform each individual ECEC setting*
- *Ensuring that this shared vision of quality permeates across all types of ECEC provision*
- *Enabling authorities at higher levels to be aware of, and responsive to, needs identified at the more granular level (especially at high-need districts or centres)*
- *Creating feedback loops in which individual-level findings can be aggregated and converted into changes at higher levels of policy-making, while new policy changes or approaches at higher levels of the ECEC system can feed into the practices of individual ECEC centres.*

Challenges in coordinating M&E functions, processes and tools

Most European countries face a number of challenges in coordinating M&E for quality ECEC across all levels of responsibilities.

- *A main challenge is related to aligning M&E processes in complex governance arrangements*[4] *according to which ECEC provision is regulated, funded and managed in each country. This can lead to a fragmented data architecture which has a negative impact on the usability of data for developing comprehensive quality improvement initiatives.*
    - In centralised systems, the challenge is that while data collection and analysis might be easier at central level, it might be more difficult to develop quality improvement initiatives that are tailored to localised needs.
    - In decentralised systems, the situation is inverted, with data collection, aggregation, and analysis across the different responsibilities of regional and local authorities being more difficult, while local needs are more easily heard.
    - In integrated systems, where a single ministry coordinates ECEC provision, M&E processes are usually carried out within a unitary approach for services attended by children aged 0 till compulsory primary school age, thus facilitating coherent quality development initiatives for the whole ECEC sector. However, the responsibilities for implementing M&E might be split across different agencies, inspectorates, or regional and local authorities. Also, the quality frameworks defined at central level for M&E can be very broad, and therefore the actual tools and indicators used for M&E may differ dramatically across regions.
    - In split systems, where the responsibilities for M&E and the quality of ECEC provision are divided between different ministries, and different regional and local authorities, there are risks of increased fragmentation in M&E initiatives.
- *A lack of coordination across bodies responsible for M&E might not only produce inconsistencies in data collection, but also create gaps between quality assurance and improvement mechanisms*. In this sense, policy makers might struggle to design M&E systems that encourage better quality, as it is easier to focus on ensuring that ECEC providers simply comply with minimum standards.

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[4] **Governance arrangements** refer to the way in which responsibilities for regulation, funding and monitoring of ECEC provision are shared across different **levels of government** as well as across **different authorities** at the relevant level of jurisdiction.

Levels of government:

- **Central:** refers to the authorities responsible for ECEC at the highest level of governance in a country. Depending on the governance structure of the country, these authorities may or may not exert the key power of decision over ECEC policies and implementation. Also referred to as the national government.
- **Regional or sub-regional**: refers to decentralised level of governance. It is located at state or province level in the vast majority of countries, and may be referred to as communities, Länder, etc. Regional authorities in federal countries are often responsible for ECEC in their particular region.
- **Local**: refers to the government responsible for the local jurisdiction, located at city/town level in the vast majority of countries, e.g. municipality, district, commune, etc. In some countries, the municipalities take the main responsibility for ECEC settings.

Integrated system: Refers to a system in which the responsibilities for ECEC provision are under one (leading) authority (at the national and/or regional level), e.g. the education ministry, ministry of social welfare or another authority. Those responsibilities may stretch from curriculum development to standard-setting, monitoring or financing.

Split system: Refers to a system in which the responsibilities for ECEC services are split across different authorities (at the national and/or regional level), where only the settings for older children are under the responsibility of an educational authority, while those for younger children are under a different authority.

- *Aligning external and internal evaluation* [5] *processes and tools for quality enhancement is another challenge*. Data collected only through self-evaluation processes raises the issue of reliability; while even when data is collected through external evaluation, usually it is not systematically aggregated across levels in such a way to inform the improvement of ECEC quality at whole system level.
- Finally, *in contexts of multi-layered and decentralised governance where coordinating M&E efforts across levels succeeds in striking a balance among all the tensions reported above, M&E is a substantial task with potentially high costs*.

A European mapping as a starting point

M&E systems in Europe are very diverse: the actors involved, their mission and the freedom they have to fulfil their tasks varies substantially between countries.

It appears that the *M&E of ECEC settings primarily focuses on structural quality for the ECEC of younger children, and more often extends to process quality for settings dedicated to older children*.

- When M&E is implemented under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education or related inspectorates, attention is usually paid to process quality dimensions,
- When M&E is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare (health, labour,...), attention is usually focused only on structural quality dimensions related to compliance with regulation and standards. There are exceptions to this in some MS, which suggests that in contexts of split systems, simultaneous attention to structural and process quality of 0-3 provision could be paid if the educational value of services for younger children is explicitly recognised within a pedagogical quality framework.

The findings of the Eurydice report (2019) show that *in most European countries, M&E processes are decentralised at the level of ECEC service providers or local authorities, especially in the case of integrated systems*. In these systems, M&E processes connected to quality in individual ECEC settings might be more easily realised under the responsibility of Local Authorities. M&E processes connected to quality assurance at system level might be coordinated through aligned vertical governance mechanisms or by established national bodies specialising in evaluating education quality.

Internal evaluation processes carried out by ECEC staff members can be very effective in fulfilling the purpose of quality improvement. Across Europe, there are various regulations and recommendations on the internal evaluation of ECEC settings. Some countries do not have any national regulations for services attended by children under 3. However, in the majority of ECEC systems, national requirements for internal evaluation can be considered as 'strong' with regards to the 3 to 6 age segment. *While it is generally acknowledged that combining internal evaluation processes with external evaluation can be an effective way to fulfil the purpose of quality assurance along with quality improvement*, *external and internal evaluation processes tend to be carried out in parallel rather than feeding into a reciprocal dialogue (even in contexts where national-level requirements exist for both internal and external monitoring)*. In many countries, aggregating the results from the

[5] **Internal evaluation** refers to the process in which an ECEC setting reflects on their own performance regarding the accomplishment of certain goals, or a process in which staff members reflect on their own practice as a way to monitor progress, attain goals and foster improvement. Internal evaluation is conducted by staff members of the setting by using self-evaluation tools, and it can also be part of a larger monitoring procedure conducted by an external institution.

External evaluation refers to the process in which on the quality of ECEC provision is reported to a local, regional or top-level education authority which is not directly involved in the activities of the setting being evaluated. Generally, external evaluation processes are carried out with a two-fold purpose linking quality control (monitoring the performance of the setting in relation to pre-defined indicators) and quality improvement (suggesting ways to improve practice).

external evaluation of individual ECEC settings at local, regional or national level is a widespread method to monitor ECEC quality system-wide. However, the way in which M&E processes contribute to quality improvement of ECEC provision at system level is still unclear.

Strategies to overcome challenges: examples of inspiring practices

In recent years, several reforms and initiatives were put in place in Member States to strengthen M&E policies and practices with a view to improve the quality of ECEC provision, which have been discussed within the working group. Several conclusions can be drawn from looking at these reforms:

- *Establishing a shared pedagogical vision and understanding which is agreed upon by all the actors who are in involved in the processes of M&E of ECEC is the first step toward ensuring that data collection and analysis are coherently designed to help improve services*. Defining a clear legislative framework – quality or curricular framework – is an essential precondition to develop a comprehensive M&E infrastructure.
- To ensure that the data collection has a clear purpose, *it may be helpful to consult the end-users – such as ECEC providers, local administrators and policy-makers – during the design of M&E approaches, to understand which data would be most useful for them*. For the staff working in ECEC settings to trust external evaluators, it is essential to give them a clear and transparent understanding of why the data is being collected and how it is going to be used. *Data should only be collected if it can be analysed for the benefit of users; it should be collected systematically over time, and from multiple sources* (including children, parents and professionals) in a complementary way. Moreover, *a well-balanced combination of data related to both structural and process quality should be collected*.
- *Designing M&E systems which foster a democratic culture of quality improvement based on dialogue and open discussion can counteract the risk that evaluation activities are perceived as a merely bureaucratic accomplishment*. When developing a national M&E system and providing the field with a large number of tools, it must be kept in mind that evaluation should not become an end in itself but should have a formative purpose.
- *Adequate IT infrastructure and services are indispensable for the collection, storage, and processing of data on the scale required for M&E of an ECEC system*. Data systems can be instrumental in meeting demands for public accountability, while at the same time generating relevant information. IT systems should be secure enough to guard against breaches and hackers, safeguarding that sensitive data is seen only by those persons who have the right to access such information. Furthermore, IT systems across health, care, education, and social sectors should also be coordinated to allow inter-operability.
- *M&E systems can significantly contribute to ensuring the improvement of ECEC policies and practices only if a culture of quality development is shared – and constantly nurtured – by all the actors who are involved in M&E processes*. All the actors involved in M&E processes need to have a clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- *Building capacity to improve the quality of ECEC provision requires investment in human resources, methodological support for self- and external evaluation, in-service training and continuing professional development, and coordination platforms or networks for peer-learning*. It is crucial that M&E processes are coordinated by experienced professionals, with a sound knowledge of ECEC

policies, practices and research. This ensures that the assessment of pedagogical practices is carried out in a context-sensitive and developmentally oriented way.

- *Closer consideration should be given to follow-up actions to be taken in cases where M&E highlights a low quality of provision*.

Pointers for policy developments

The mere existence of an M&E process for assessing ECEC quality is not enough on its own to promote quality improvement of ECEC provision and policies. M&E systems are better positioned to enhance the pedagogical quality of services for children and families if they are designed to be coherent, coordinated, and optimised across vertical and horizontal levels of an ECEC system.

This can be achieved by, for example:

- Establishing a shared understanding of ECEC quality as starting point
- Consulting with end-users to understand which data would be most useful to support quality improvement
- Collecting data around quality dimensions that allow children's, parent's and staff's perspectives to emerge
- Developing data collection tools combining structural and process quality dimensions in a complementary way
- Developing an IT infrastructure to support systematic data collection and analysis.

Continuing quality development of ECEC provision relies on the commitment and responsibilities shared among individuals, professional teams, institutions, local/regional/national authorities and agencies working together for creating the conditions that enable **all children – and their families – to benefit of the best possible educational opportunities to thrive within the communities they are living in**. Member States therefore could make efforts enabling that:

- All the actors involved in M&E processes have clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities
- Professionals employed at central M&E agencies have the right blend of expertise necessary for fulfilling their role/s (sound knowledge of ECEC policies, research and practice) and to effectively coordinate inputs, roles and responsibilities across different levels of governance
- Collaboration between the agencies responsible for quality assurance and quality development is strengthened
- A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of practice by investing in pedagogical leadership, staff continuing professional development and ongoing guidance
- A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of policies through shared responsibilities, strategic planning and coordinated governance.

Introduction

At the European level, there has been increasing awareness not only of the many benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision for individuals and society, but also of the need to achieve an adequately high quality of provision for such benefits to be realised. In 2014, the European Commission's Working Group on ECEC published their *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*, in which they stated that high quality ECEC is 'an essential foundation for all children's successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability',[6] and put forward a range of Quality Statements and recommendations to 'support policy makers and encourage all Member States to go further in their development of excellence in all ECEC settings for the benefit of individual children and society.'[7]

The European Council followed this proposal with the 2019 *Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems* (2019/C 189/02), which recalled the 11th Principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights that 'all children have the right to affordable ECEC of good quality', stressed that 'evidence shows that only high-quality ECEC services deliver benefits,'[8] and put forward an EU Quality Framework (EQF) for ECEC to establish a shared understanding of good quality across EU Member States.

Because efforts to safeguard and improve quality in ECEC systems are hinged upon the ability to make existing levels of quality *visible* to the relevant stakeholders in ECEC policy and practice, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) feature strongly in discussions of ECEC quality enforcement and enhancement. In the ECEC Working Group's 2014 *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC*, for example, it was noted that 'systematic monitoring of ECEC allows for the generation of appropriate information and feedback at the relevant local, regional, or national level' which can 'support open exchange, coherent planning, review, evaluation, and the development of ECEC in the pursuit of high quality at all levels in the system'.[9] Based on this, the 2019 Council Recommendation advised that Member States 'promote transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluation of [ECEC] services at the appropriate levels with a view to policy development and implementation', and mentioned M&E in the EQF for ECEC under two Quality Statements.

Box A: M&E in the European Quality Framework for ECEC

Quality Statement #7: Monitoring and Evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional, and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.

Quality Statement #8: Monitoring and Evaluation which is in the best interest for the child

2019 Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC Systems

[6] ECEC Working Group (2014). *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care: Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission*. Directorate-General for Education and Culture, European Commission, Brussels.

[7] ECEC Working Group (2014), p. 7.

[8] European Council (2019): *Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems* (2019/C 189/02).

[9] ECEC Working Group (2014), p. 11.

However, it has long been recognised that while M&E of ECEC has the *potential* to be associated with positive impacts on ECEC quality and practices, such as supporting professional development for staff at the centre level and evidence-informed policy initiatives at the regional or national level, **the mere existence of an M&E process for assessing ECEC quality is not enough on its own to promote quality improvement in ECEC services, policies and systems**[10].

There are a range of conditions under which M&E processes can be linked to quality improvement, many of which are explored in the ECEC Working Group's 2022 publication *"Monitoring and Evaluating Quality in ECEC: Background Note".* Notably, **efficient coordination and alignment of the M&E processes used at various levels of the ECEC system (i.e. the centre or setting level; the regional/local level; and the national level) was underlined as an important condition for quality improvement, in addition to ensuring that the tools and results of M&E processes are relevant, understandable and useable for all stakeholders** involved in ECEC policy and service provision. As explained in the background note:

- *'**Monitoring practices that are used at different levels - national, regional and municipal or centre level – need to be consistently aligned**. If purposes and practices are not coherently aligned across different levels of governance, the procedures and methods used in relation to varied purposes can generate inconsistencies between controlling compliance mechanisms and quality evaluation processes implemented at different levels of the ECEC system (vertical governance), as well as gaps between sub-systems (horizontal governance). Thus, the challenge is to design a coherent approach within which vertical alignment of M&E processes is combined with the use of complementary methods/tools for data collection and interpretation;[11] this aspect proves to be highly complicated in practice, especially in federal and decentralised systems.'*
- *'**Monitoring and evaluation practices need to have practical relevance for the different stakeholders involved**. Monitoring processes should generate usable knowledge, so that policy-makers, administrators, pedagogical leaders/coordinators and practitioners are able to link the results of evaluation to practical initiatives aimed to strengthen the quality of ECEC provision.[12] In this sense, it seems critical to identify the benefit of the data collected in M&E processes for the different stakeholders involved and their areas of responsibility, by clarifying which data and information are useful for which stakeholders. If data obtained through M&E are not of direct use to the work of the various stakeholders involved in the process (policy-makers, administrators, pedagogical leaders/coordinators and practitioners), they might perceive M&E practices as an additional bureaucratic and time-consuming burden. This, in turn, could hinder the sustainability and effectiveness of monitoring systems.[13]'*

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[10] OECD (2015) *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.* OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en

[11] OECD (2015) *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.* OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en

[12] Children in Europe (2016) 'Principle 7—Evaluation: Evaluation: participatory, democratic and transparent'. In: Moss, P. (Ed.) *Young children and their services: developing a European approach. A Children in Europe Policy paper.* https://www.lefuret.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/EDE/Principe7.pdf?_t=1585665834

[13] Klinkhammer, N., Schäfer, B., Harring, D., Gwinner, A. (2017) *Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Approaches and experiences from selected countries.* Munich: German Youth Institute.

- *'Research highlights that **M&E practices that are linked to ongoing professional development or coaching initiatives can have a positive impact on sustaining the quality of ECEC provision** over long periods of time[14]. Several studies indicate that staff self-evaluation can be an effective tool for professional development as it enhances practitioners' reflectivity and collegial work.[15] Along the same line, research findings seem to indicate that curriculum monitoring initiatives are particularly beneficial when combined with staff training or coaching support.[16]'*

The importance of ensuring that M&E processes and results are coherent, understandable, and useable for all levels of an ECEC system (from national and regional policies to ECEC settings) is highlighted in the 2018 publication of the European Commission *Monitoring the Quality of ECEC – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework with Indicators*. Indicators 16,17 and 19 (see box B) place significant **importance on whether or not M&E results on the quality of the ECEC system are publicly available and used as the basis for improvement at both system and centre level**. This publication also states that '*to ensure continuing improvements in quality, it is essential that there is a well-functioning quality assurance process which is based on planning high quality provision; implementing these plans; monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these plans; and making changes to provision. These 'feedback loops' provide the basis for developing a quality management system*.'

Box B: M&E indicators in the ECEC Quality Framework

Indicator #16: Information on the quality of the ECEC System is used as the basis for improvement.

Indicator #17: Information on the quality of the ECEC system is publicly available.

Indicator #19: The percentage of ECEC settings which use administrative and pedagogic data to improve the quality of their provision

Monitoring the Quality of ECEC – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework with Indicators (EC Working Group on ECEC, 2018)

Streamlining and optimising M&E processes not only contribute to improve the quality of ECEC provision in line with intended purposes, but also ensure that the time, resources and labour that go into M&E activities are productive.

- This report will therefore proceed firstly with an exploration of the benefits of coordinating M&E across levels, including the stronger links it can facilitate between M&E processes and quality improvement.
- It will then explore challenges faced by governments in coordinating M&E processes both vertically and horizontally across multi-level ECEC systems. In the third section, an overview of the situation of European countries in relation to coordinating M&E efforts across levels is provided by drawing on the Eurydice 2019 report "*Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe*"[17].

[14] Eurofound (2015) *Early childhood care: Working conditions, training and quality of services: A systematic review.* Dulbin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions.

[15] Sheridan, S., Williams, P. and Sandberg, A. (2013) Systematic quality-work in preschool, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 45 (1), 123–150.

[16] Bleach, J. (2013) Using action research to support quality early years practice. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(3), 370–379.

[17] European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice (2019), *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe*, 2019, Publications Office, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/813000

- On the basis of such mapping, a balanced sample of case studies representing ECEC systems with different governance arrangements were selected in order to gather in-depth knowledge of the strategies developed in different countries to overcome their challenges in coordinating M&E efforts across levels.
- In the fourth section examples of inspiring practices which have been collected through case studies are described and reviewed.
- Finally, in the last section of this report, the lessons learnt from the cross-national analysis of case studies are condensed in policy pointers to support countries in improving the quality of ECEC provision by investing in coherent and coordinated M&E initiatives at different levels of the system.

1. Why invest in coordinated approaches to the M&E of Quality in ECEC?

Due to the growing evidence that ECEC attendance yields many benefits, not only for children but also for parents' workforce participation and society as a whole, many countries have made efforts to **improve children's access to ECEC**, typically by **expanding the availability of both public and private** (including for-profit and non-profit) **places**[18]. The 2018 OECD publication *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* reports that 'universal or quasi-universal access to at least one year of ECEC is now a reality in most countries' and 'constitutes significant progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals education targets'.[19]

However, further research has also demonstrated that **the quality of ECEC services, and in particular *process quality*, are essential in enabling children to yield the benefits of ECEC**. Furthermore, coordinated and streamlined processes for the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC quality have been identified as important tools for enforcing and improving ECEC quality in the best interests of the child.

As stronger benefits have been associated with attendance of high quality ECEC provision [20] , many European countries have recently improved their M&E approaches:

- **To sustain the ongoing improvement of the quality of ECEC provision, with an increasing emphasis on process quality components** (i.e. educational environment, implementation of pedagogical approaches/curriculum in practice, staff-child interactions, relationships with families and wider community) which are acknowledged to be more directly linked to the benefits of ECEC for children's development, learning and well-being; and
- **To monitor ECEC quality in contexts of 'mixed provision'** (public and private, for-profit or non-profit provision) to ensure that all children enrolled in early childhood services can benefit from high quality education and care regardless of the type of settings they are attending or of the geographical area in which such settings are placed (urban/rural, high or low SES neighbourhoods).

1.1. Structural and process quality

ECEC quality has historically been conceptualised in terms of **structural quality** indicators such as staff-to-child ratios, group sizes, minimum staff qualifications, and the safety of buildings, materials, and environments. Yet while these factors are essential to create the

[18] Lenaerts, K., Vandenbroeck, M., Beblavý, M. (2018) *Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them*. European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/20810

[19] OECD (2018) *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care,* Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en

[20] OECD (2021), *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris.
Melhuish, E. et al. (2015), "A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) upon child development", WP4.1 *Curriculum and Quality Analysis Impact Review*, CARE, https://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/CARE_WP4_D4__1_review_of_effects_of_ecec.pdf

framing conditions for high-quality ECEC, research has increasingly demonstrated that **structural quality alone is not sufficient to yield benefits for children**. Instead, what has emerged to be the most impactful for children's learning and development is the quality of the daily interactions that children experience with each other, staff, teachers, materials and activities in an ECEC setting, together known as **process quality.** Notably, positive child-staff interactions have been linked to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, whereas structural quality indicators such as child-staff ratios have not been shown to have a direct, independent impact on improved outcomes for children[21].

To secure the benefits of ECEC provision for individuals, families, and societies, investment in ECEC systems should therefore promote process quality and positive interactions in ECEC centres in addition to expanding places and protecting children's safety through the enforcement of mandatory structural quality standards.

1.2. The role of coordinated M&E processes in safeguarding and promoting ECEC quality

To improve the quality of practices in individual ECEC settings, and enact policy initiatives for the improvement of the ECEC system, both the structural quality and the process quality of ECEC services need to be made visible and interpretable to all stakeholders involved (including ECEC staff and practitioners, parents and communities, and policymakers and authorities at the local, regional, and national level). **Setting up robust data systems and developing coordinated monitoring and evaluation processes are therefore essential to support quality improvement throughout all the ECEC systems levels**.

It is important to **ensure that the quality of structures and practices in ECEC settings are converted into data which are made available to stakeholders. This can then facilitate the design of evidence-informed initiatives to improve the quality of ECEC provision, both at the level of practices and at the level of policies.**

As stated in the OECD Policy Paper on "*Quality assurance and improvement in the early education and care sector*" (2022), setting up data systems that are usable from different stakeholders can support ECEC quality development in many aspects[22]:

- systematic data collection and reporting can generate information on the strengths and weaknesses of specific services, and of the sector as a whole;
- a system that collects comprehensive and reliable data on quality indicators can improve coherency between quality assurance processes (implemented at system level through external evaluations) and self-evaluation processes (carried out at the level of individual ECEC settings); it provides better data to design quality improvement initiatives;
- research on ECEC can be improved by publishing large-scale data set for policy analysis and evaluation.

[21] OECD (2018) Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en

[22] OECD (2022), "Quality assurance and improvement in the early education and care sector", *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 55, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/774688bf-en

M&E systems can improve ECEC quality if they are coherent, coordinated, and optimised across vertical and horizontal levels of an ECEC system[23], in particular concerning:

- the alignment of the tools and processes used across split systems or across public/subsidised/private provision;
- the extent to which data produced by individual ECEC settings is aggregated and analysed at the local, municipal, regional and/or national level;
- the presence of feedback loops in which data from individual ECEC settings inform regional or national policy initiatives, and vice versa;
- the extent to which the roles of different institutions, organisations, stakeholders and authorities in M&E across various levels of the ECEC system are clearly defined, complementary, non-overlapping and in communication with each other.

The research review conducted for informing the discussion on Topic 2 "*Coordinating monitoring and evaluation processes across levels*" within the ECEC Working Group pointed out that **streamlined and coherent M&E systems come with a range of advantages, which are conducive to improving quality of educational experiences for all children attending and to increasing equity of ECEC provision**. These include:

- Implementing a shared vision of quality pedagogy (at national, regional or local level) in each ECEC setting.
    - In M&E systems that are well-coordinated, M&E activities are based on a shared and established definition of quality and use M&E tools that fairly and accurately report on the extent to which ECEC settings are implementing such vision in pedagogical practices.
    - This is particularly critical considering the importance of *process quality* for children's wellbeing, learning and development. As process quality concerns the most granular characteristics of ECEC, such as day-to-day activities and interactions amongst children and between children and staff, it is essential to ensure that the principles described in quality or pedagogical frameworks are concretely implemented in ECEC setting's daily practices.
- Implementing the shared vision of quality pedagogy (determined at national, regional or local level) across all types of ECEC provision, including public, subsidised and private settings, centre-based and home-based settings, and across all ages from 0-6.
    - In M&E systems that are well-coordinated, M&E tools and activities are adapted for use across the full range of ECEC services and provision, while being designed to produce comparable data for aggregation and analysis at the central level.
    - This ensure that the principles enshrined in quality or pedagogical frameworks are orienting settings' daily practices consistently even in contexts of highly heterogeneous ECEC provision, thus securing equity of educational opportunities for all children.
- Enabling high-level authorities to be aware of, and responsive to, needs identified at the more granular level – for example the level of specific high-need municipalities, neighbourhoods, or individual centres – through established linkages between M&E results and established quality improvement procedures.

[23] OECD (2015) *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.* OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en

    - Producing data from individual centres that is interpretable by higher-level authorities (at the municipal, regional or national level), makes possible a full appraisal of the quality of services across the ECEC sector as a whole.
    - Data of this breadth and quality provides a clear picture of any regional or socioeconomic inequalities that may persist in the system. Such information makes policy responses more effective, for instance through the funnelling of resources and support to areas that need them most, and through the organisation of tailored training or assistance for individual ECEC centres that are at risk of falling short.
- Creating feedback loops in which centre-level findings can effect changes to policy at higher levels (local, regional, or national), while new policy changes or approaches at higher levels of the ECEC system can feed into the practices of individual ECEC centres.
    - In well-coordinated and organised ECEC systems, findings from individual ECEC centres can be aggregated and converted into actionable information for improving policies and shifting perspectives at higher levels of the ECEC system, thus contributing to evidence-informed policymaking.
    - Similarly, changes in shared definitions of quality or good practices at higher levels of the ECEC system (for example through updates to local, regional or national pedagogical frameworks) can be smoothly integrated into the daily practices of ECEC centres through regularly reviewed M&E mechanisms, thus ensuring that ECEC practices remain relevant and up to date.

2. Challenges in coordinating M&E functions, processes and tools

Considering the benefits of robust and coherently designed M&E systems for improving both quality and equity of ECEC provision, ECEC quality monitoring and evaluation received an increased policy attention at international level over the last decade. Previous OECD Starting Strong reviews[24] have identified common trends in ECEC quality M&E policies and practices with specific reference to:

- increasing intensity of M&E practices;
- improvements in M&E methodologies and processes;
- increasing availability of M&E results for the general public.

While enhanced efforts to collect and aggregate data derived from M&E emerge as common element to these trends, **aligning M&E processes with quality enhancement initiatives is experienced as a major policy challenge**. In this respect, many countries experience **difficulties in building a robust data infrastructure aligned with pedagogical quality frameworks agreed upon at central level, while at the same time respecting – and valuing – the diversity of institutional and socio-cultural contexts of each ECEC setting.**

Functions, processes and tools associated to ECEC quality monitoring and evaluation vary notably across countries, reflecting the variety of ECEC systems (e.g. integrated/split systems, centralised/decentralised governance arrangements) as well as the diversity of ECEC providers (e.g. public, subsidised, private not-for-profit or for-profit providers) and settings (e.g. age-integrated unitary settings/age-segregated separate settings; centre-based / home-based settings). Starting from these premises, the challenges experienced by countries in striving toward the benefits outlined above were extensively discussed within the Working Group.

A **first policy challenge** identified by the Member States participating in the WG was related to **aligning M&E functions, processes and tools in the context of the complex governance arrangements according to which ECEC provision is regulated, funded and managed in each country**. Responsibilities for the governance of ECEC systems are often multi-layered at vertical level (national, regional and local authorities) or partly overlapping at horizontal level (coexistence of diverse ECEC programmes and providers); this leads to a fragmented data architecture which, in turn, has a negative impact on the usability of data for developing comprehensive quality improvement initiatives addressing simultaneously policies and practices.

Depending on whether the responsibilities for developing and implementing M&E systems are *centralised* or *decentralised*, the following patterns emerged:

- **in centralised systems**, the M&E of ECEC quality is typically caried out under the responsibility of national public institutions or agencies, such as respective ministries (e.g. ministry of education or ministry of welfare) or inspectorates. This might facilitate data collection, aggregation and analysis at central level but, on the other side, might hinder possibilities for developing quality improvement initiatives that are tailored to local needs;

[24] OECD (2015) *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.* OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en

- **in decentralised systems**, ECEC quality monitoring and evaluation is typically carried out under the responsibility of regional and local authorities. This might render data collection, aggregation and analysis at central level more difficult but, on the other side, might enhance possibilities for developing quality improvement initiatives which are tailored to local needs.

Depending on whether M&E systems are operating in the context of an *integrated* or *split* governance of the ECEC sector, the following patterns emerged:

- **in integrated systems**, M&E processes are usually carried out within a unitary approach for services attended by children aged 0 till compulsory primary school age, thus facilitating coherent quality development initiatives for the whole ECEC sector. However, the responsibilities for implementing M&E and quality enhancement initiatives might be split across different agencies and inspectorates at central level, or might lie with different regional and local authorities.
- **in split systems**, the responsibilities for monitoring and evaluating the quality of ECEC provision are divided between the ministry of welfare, health, labour... (which are usually responsible for services attended by younger children) and the ministry of education (which is usually responsible for services attended by older children) and/or related inspectorates. The fact that responsibilities for implementing M&E processes might lie with regional and local authorities in cases where the governance of ECEC systems is decentralised might add an additional layer of complexity, thus increasing the fragmentation of M&E initiatives.

Within such complex governance arrangements, **over-arching initiatives addressing M&E of quality across the entire ECEC sector are hindered by**:

- **institutional splits**, leading to a lack of a shared pedagogical framework across 0-3 and 3-6 sector;
- **fragmentation of roles and responsibilities across different bodies/agencies performing activities connected to different functions of M&E**, such as regulation and funding of ECEC provision (i.e. checking structural quality compliance for accreditation), quality assurance (i.e. standards setting and inspections), quality steering (i.e. monitoring ECEC curriculum implementation, evaluating staff professional practice and supporting improvement).

Even in the contexts where the governance of the ECEC system is integrated – thus facilitating the elaboration of a shared pedagogical vision across the 0-3 and 3-6 sector – the **quality frameworks defined at central level for monitoring and evaluating the quality of ECEC provision tend to be very broad**, thus leaving a lot of room for interpretation and responsibility for implementation in the hands of regional and local authorities. This might imply that the tools and indicators used to monitor and evaluate the quality of ECEC settings at regional and/or local level may differ dramatically across regions and/or municipalities, thus **making it difficult to get a national system-level picture of the quality of ECEC provision**.

In contexts of multi-layered and decentralised governance, coordinating and rationalising M&E efforts across levels requires a comprehensive M&E system that strikes a balance among all the tensions reported above, which is a substantial task with potentially high costs. If adequate investments in terms of time and resources are not considered, there is a risk to focus excessively on structural quality at the expenses of process quality.

Several challenges were identified by WG members also in relation to the **effective use of data collected through M&E processes for developing ECEC quality improvement initiatives, both at the level of policies and at the level of practices**. It was highlighted that **the lack of coordination across bodies responsible for regulation, quality assurance and quality steering functions** might:

- produce inconsistencies in M&E processes and tools used for data collection (fragmented data architecture)
- create gaps between quality assurance and improvement mechanisms.

Policy makers are therefore confronted with the major challenge of **designing M&E systems that encourage ECEC providers to strive for better quality**, rather than only inviting them to comply with minimum standards. While it is acknowledged that **the systematic implementation of self-evaluation processes play an important role in sustaining a shared culture of quality improvement at the level of ECEC settings**, **aligning external and internal evaluation processes and tools for quality enhancement at system level is often perceived as a challenge** (even in the context of unitary systems). Ensuring that good quality external support is available system-wide is particularly important, but also challenging, especially in the context of ECEC systems characterized by a large share of private provision.

Finally, **the existence of data gaps – or lack of reliable data – concerning the monitoring and evaluation of *process* quality poses several challenges** in many countries:

- given the complexity of capturing process quality dimensions of ECEC provision through external evaluation (i.e. inspections), in most cases data on processes quality are collected only through self-evaluation processes, thus raising the issue of reliability;
- even when data on process quality are collected through external evaluation, they might not be aggregated systematically at local/regional/national level, which makes it difficult to implement policy initiatives aimed at improving quality of the whole system.

3. A European mapping as a starting point

As reported in the Eurydice report *"Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe"* (2019), M&E systems in Europe are very diverse in the sense that the actors involved, their mission and the freedom they have to fulfil their tasks varies substantially between countries. **This section aims to shed light on the processes and procedures used in ECEC monitoring and evaluation systems across Europe with a particular focus on how the issues of coordination across different levels are tackled, by taking into consideration related aspects of governance.**

The challenges reported in the previous section, will be further explored with specific reference to the features of M&E systems in place in EU Member States. Starting from the mapping of how coordination of M&E processes across levels has been dealt with in a variety of countries – in relation to diverse ECEC governance arrangements[25] – a matrix for the sampling of case studies related to "inspiring practices" has been elaborated as presented in the concluding part of this section.

3.1. Structural and process quality dimensions in M&E processes

In line with the challenges presented above, the report *"Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe"* (Eurydice, 2019) shows that **the scope of M&E of centre-based ECEC provision primarily focuses on structural quality for settings dedicated to younger children, and more often extends to process quality for settings dedicated to older children**.

These patterns seem to be closely connected to the governance of ECEC systems, and in particular to the Ministries – or related agencies – held responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of provision:

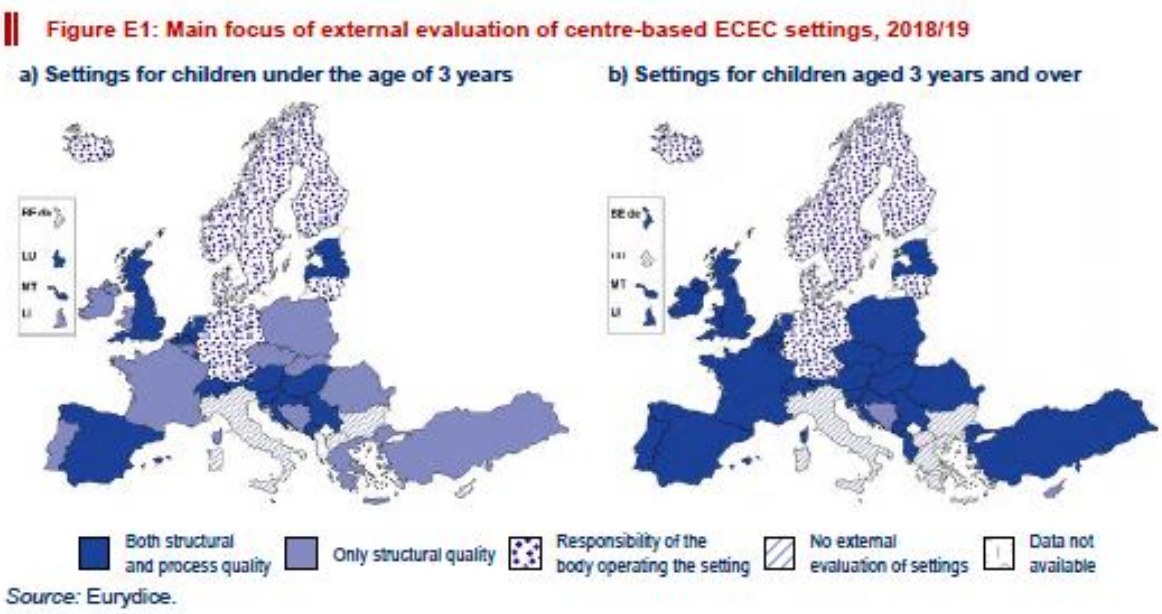
- when M&E of ECEC settings is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (MoE) or related inspectorates, attention is usually paid to process quality dimensions related to the implementation of curricular frameworks in place;
- when M&E is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare (MoW), attention is usually focused only on structural quality dimensions related to the compliance with regulation and standards.

[25] **European countries can be placed on a continuum from integrated to split systems** according to four criteria according to the Eurydice report (2019, pp. 17-18): authorities responsible for the governance of the ECEC system at the relevant level of jurisdiction (single or dual), organisation of provision (unitary or separate settings), educational guidelines applying to settings, staff qualification requirements. Following Eurydice's classification:
- the countries where coordinated and consistent policies throughout the entire ECEC phase exists are considered as displaying **integrated** governance arrangements (i.e. Lithuania, Slovenia, Denmark, Finland),
- the countries where a single ministry is responsible and education guidelines apply across the entire phase of ECEC - but separate settings exists and staff operating within such setting are qualified at different levels - are considered as displaying **mid-way** governance arrangements (i.e Spain, Ireland and Italy),
- the countries where a split between childcare and early education is apparent in all areas - different ministries responsible for services for younger and older children, age-separated settings, higher qualification requirements for core practitioners in pre-primary education than in childcare settings for younger children, and no educational guidelines for younger children - are considered as displaying **split** governance arrangements (i.e Bulgaria, Portugal and Cyprus).

Notably, in five education systems (see figure E1), despite M&E of the settings for younger children being carried out under the responsibilities of MoW or associated inspectorates, there is a focus on process quality.

For example, in the **French Community of Belgium**, the Office for Birth and Childhood (*ONE: Office de la naissance et de l'enfance*) is responsible for the evaluation of ECEC quality in collective and family-based childcare facilities in relation to the pedagogical principles established in the quality framework '*Code de qualité de l'Accueil*'. For this purpose, ONE has appointed childcare coordinators and advisers who analyse and evaluate the appropriateness and feasibility of plans for new childcare facilities; subregional committees, which have the power to grant, refuse, withdraw and if necessary suspend a childcare facility's authorisation; educational advisers who work to improve the quality of childcare and support the professionals. Similarly, in the **Flemish community of Belgium**, the agency Opgroeien is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the process quality of 0-3 provision in relation to the dimensions outlined in the '*Pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddler*'.

Figure E1: Main focus of external evaluation of centre-based ECEC settings, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

This might suggest that – in contexts of split system – simultaneous attention to structural and process quality of 0-3 provision could be paid if the educational value of services for younger children is explicitly recognised within a pedagogical/curricular/quality framework, orienting the practices enacted in these settings as well as the tools designed for monitoring and evaluating it. **In the context of split systems, developing 0-3 and 3-6 curricular frameworks which are connected by a coherent pedagogical understanding of children's learning and development, might therefore contribute to the development of a more coordinated approach for monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality across the whole ECEC sector.**

3.2. Alignment of M&E functions and processes across different levels of governance and in relation to varying degrees of (de)centralization

The Eurydice report (2019) shows that **in most European countries, M&E processes are decentralised at the level of ECEC service providers (public and/or private) and/or local authorities (municipalities), especially in the case of integrated systems**. In these contexts, local authorities as well as service providers might have a great deal of freedom to set up the processes and tools for evaluating their own settings, thus making it **difficult to gather aggregated data on process quality at system level**.

This suggests that in countries where the governance of ECEC is **decentralised**:

- the **coordination** of M&E processes connected to **quality control** and **quality improvement in individual settings** might be more easily realised **under the responsibility of Local Authorities** (i.e. checking compliance with structural quality standards, designing local quality development plans by aggregating findings of M&E processes, implementing follow-up initiatives for improving the quality of ECEC within individual settings – for example through pedagogical coaching or in-service professional development for staff)
- M&E process connected to **quality assurance at system level** and **policy steering** (i.e. setting structural quality standards, developing & updating pedagogical/curricular frameworks, aggregating M&E results at central level) might be **coordinated** through **aligned vertical governance mechanisms** or by **established national bodies specialising in evaluating the quality of the education system as a whole, including the ECEC sector**.

For example, in **Denmark,** local authorities are responsible for monitoring and evaluating public ECEC provision. Municipalities set objectives within the top-level legal framework, as well as guidelines for evaluation, and are responsible for carrying out quality assurance processes; a report describing quality developments in the municipal ECEC system is then produced. The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) – an independent state institution operating at national level – contributes to ensure quality development of ECEC throughout the country by working to enhance the local knowledge and competences on evaluation and quality issues in day care centres and local municipalities (i.e., deliver knowledge, possibilities to act and tools for quality development tailored to the specific needs of local authorities and daycentres, co-operating with the Ministry of Children and other public authorities concerning evaluation and quality assurance).

3.3. Aggregation of data derived from internal and external evaluation processes

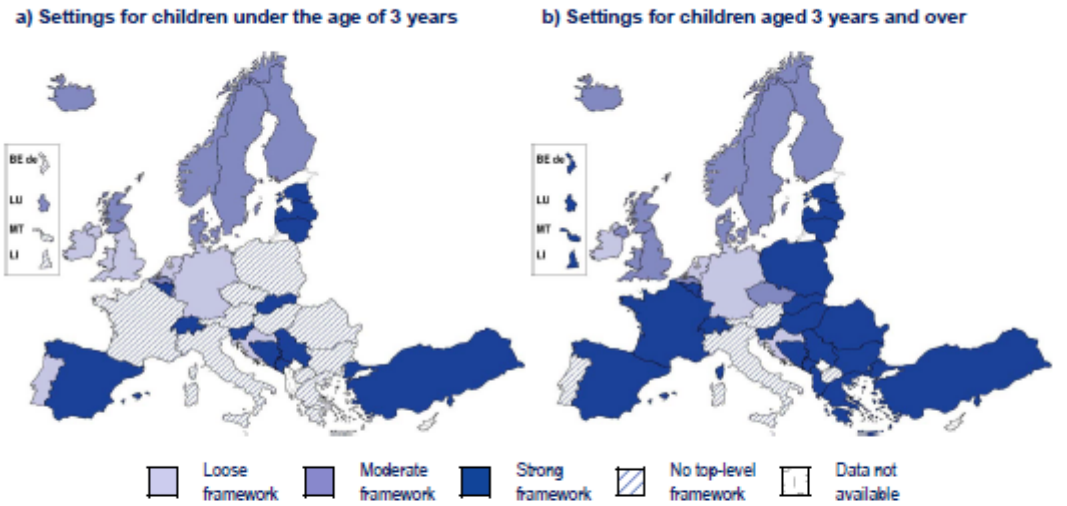
Internal evaluation can be defined as 'a quality control process which seeks to evaluate or monitor the performance of the setting, report on overall quality, and suggest ways to improve practice or provision' (Eurydice, 2019; p. 126)[26]. **Internal evaluation processes carried out by ECEC staff members can be very powerful for fulfilling the purpose of quality improvement.** The results produced by these processes include self-evaluation reports, annual activity reports, quality development plan and/or revised pedagogical plan,

[26] European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice (2019), *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe*, 2019, Publications Office, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/813000

etc. **Across Europe, regulations or recommendations on internal evaluation of ECEC settings vary widely**:

- central-level (national) recommendations or requirements for settings to carry out any internal evaluation during the whole ECEC phase do not exist only in three countries,
- a third of ECEC systems have no regulations on the internal evaluation of services attended by children under 3 (especially in countries with split systems)
- in the remaining cases, central-level (national) recommendations or requirements for internal evaluation of ECEC settings exists with varying degrees of obligation, specified frequency, and the stated expected results (as exemplified in the figure below).

Figure E3: Top-level framework for the internal evaluation of ECEC settings, 2018/19



Loose framework:	Moderate framework:	Strong framework:
– recommended – no defined frequency – no defined outcome – no requirement to develop own strategy	– compulsory – no specific frequency but must be regular or continual – requirement for settings to develop own strategy – outcomes not always defined	– compulsory – specific frequency of between one and three years – defined outcome – no requirement to develop own strategy

Source: Eurydice.

Please note: No definite correlation between the categories is inferred with respect to improvements in the quality of the setting.

In the majority of ECEC systems, central-level requirements for internal evaluation can be considered as 'strong', especially in relation to the 3 to 6 years segment:

- internal evaluation is compulsory and must be carried out at regular intervals (ranging from annually to every three years),
- the main outcome of internal evaluation (self-evaluation report, annual activity report, quality development plan and/or revision of the setting's pedagogical plan) is defined by national/regional authorities,
- a certain degree of freedom is granted to each setting in relation to the tools and methods used in self-evaluation processes.

For example, in **Slovenia** all kindergartens must carry out periodic self-evaluation since 2008. The Organisation and Financing of Education Act specifies the obligation of head

teachers to assess and assure quality with self-evaluation. Schools or kindergartens must develop annual reports on self-evaluation. The councils of relevant institutions examine and adopt the reports. The law does not specify the process of self-evaluation as such (contents, structure, etc.), so the implementation differs among institutions as to field of evaluation, indicators, method. The outcome of self-evaluation is the reference for the development of school or kindergarten and is not communicated to higher levels of authority. Schools can choose to publish the self-evaluation report online on their webpage. In the scope of annual planning, the councils of kindergartens and schools evaluate once a year or more the realisation of the annual work plan. In practice, the self-evaluation report often accompanies the report on the implementation of the annual work plan. In this way, it is possible to make reasonable association between development and evaluation processes at the institution.

While it is generally acknowledged that combining internal evaluation processes with external evaluation can be an effective way to fulfil the purpose of quality assurance along with quality improvement, external and internal evaluation processes tend to be carried out in parallel rather than feeding into a reciprocal dialogue even in those contexts where national-level requirements exist for both internal and external monitoring. Considering the complexity of aligning external and internal quality monitoring and evaluation activities in a synchronised way, **efforts toward the coordination of internal and external M&E processes might be considered more meaningful within the scope of quality improvement initiatives carried out at decentralised level**, as exemplified below.

In **Germany**, the responsibility for quality monitoring and evaluation of ECEC provision lies with the maintaining body for that centre, which undertakes the *Fachaufsicht* (academic supervision of teaching and education activity) and the *Dienstaufsicht* (supervision of educational staff and head teachers) for its employees. The maintaining bodies of day-care centres are obliged to explain how quality assurance and development are guaranteed in their concept. Several methods are used in practice: at present, binding requirements for carrying out M&E processes at system-level – within the geographic scope of the whole Land - only exists in Berlin.

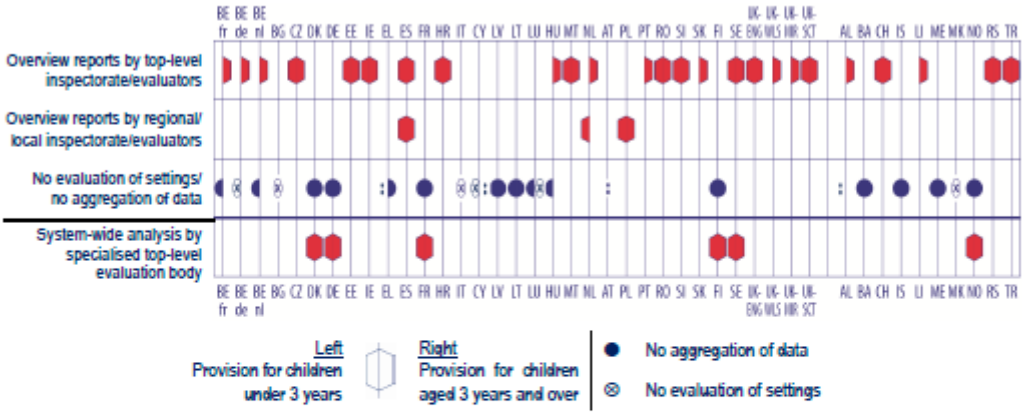
In **Berlin Land,** ECEC centres are overseen by Berlin Day Care Institute for Quality Development (*Berliner Kitainstitut für Qualitätsentwicklung* - BeKi) which coordinates the external evaluation (evaluates providers of external evaluation) and gives courses on internal and external evaluations. The Institute contributes majorly toward Berlin's Early Year programme. In addition to conducting annual self-evaluations and undergoing external assessments every five years, ECEC centres are required to agree upon quality improvement measures in response to the findings of the evaluations and adapt their development goals and continuous professional development programmes as needed. Internal and external evaluation processes are therefore highly synchronised.

In many countries, the way in which M&E processes contribute to quality improvement of ECEC provision at system level is still unclear. However, **aggregating the results from the external evaluation of individual ECEC settings at local, regional or national level is a widespread method to monitor ECEC quality system wide**. As illustrated in the

figure below, mechanisms to ensure that results from the evaluation of ECEC settings are collected and used in aggregated form are in place in almost two thirds of European countries.

- In some cases, data are aggregated by evaluation bodies to provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the ECEC system
- In others, the activities performed by inspectorate bodies are the focus of central-level reports (containing, for example, information on the number of inspections carried out in individual settings, information on infringements observed and sanctions imposed, as well as the response made to any sanctions previously imposed). Depending on the level at which the evaluation bodies/inspectorates operate, data contained in central-level reports may focus on federated or devolved authorities, or regional/local government areas.

Figure E5: Monitoring of the ECEC system: use of aggregated findings from the evaluation of centre-based settings and other system-wide analysis, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The system-wide analysis by a 'top-level specialised evaluation body' refers to a top-level, often national body, primarily dedicated to system-wide or ECEC-wide evaluation rather than to the evaluation of individual settings or staff.

Country-specific notes

Bulgaria: See country specific note to Figure E1.
Germany: A specialised top-level body only applies to the *Land* of Berlin.
Spain: Top-level reports are compiled in the Autonomous Communities of Andalucía, Illes Balears, Cataluña, Comunidad de Castilla y León, Galicia and Ciudad de Ceuta. Local reports are prepared in Illes Balears, Cataluña and the City of Melilla.
Austria: The use of results of the external evaluation of ECEC settings is up to each *Land*.
United Kingdom (ENG/WLS/NIR): For children aged 3 and over, the figure represents provision in publicly funded nursery schools and primary schools only.

Although the **internal evaluation reports** of individual settings are publicly available or sent to top-level authorities in a few countries, they **are usually not processed to produce broader reports on the ECEC system**. However, producing reports from aggregated data collected through internal and/or external evaluations is only one way of monitoring the ECEC system. **Other ways to monitor the quality of ECEC systems might include:**

- the analysis of data collected through **national statistics or surveys** to produce **ad-hoc thematic reports**;
- **commissioned research projects** may also constitute important sources of information for monitoring the quality of ECEC at system level.

3.4. From the European mapping to in-depth case studies

The mapping of the processes and procedures used in ECEC M&E systems across Europe reveals that **several strategies are adopted by countries to face the challenges pointed out in the second section of this report**.

While the design of comprehensive and well-coordinated M&E systems might be an ambitious policy goal yet to be achieved in most countries, in recent years several **reforms or ad-hoc initiatives were put in place** – either at international, national or regional level – **to strengthening M&E policies and practices with a view to improve the quality of ECEC provision**. Such reforms or ad-hoc initiatives attest the commitment of Member States toward ensuring that all children can avail of high quality and equal educational opportunities since the early years of their life.

By capitalising on the diversity and richness of M&E approaches elaborated in the context of European countries or regions, **the examples of policies and practices reviewed in the following section aim to offer to policy makers a source of inspiration for facing the challenges related to the coordination of M&E processes**.

4. Strategies to overcome challenges: examples of inspiring practices

The examples of inspiring initiatives displayed in this section were shared by members of the working group in the form of case studies, according to a pre-defined template (see Annex 1), and/or presented during various activities of the WG. The aim was to collect **information on how a culture of quality improvement could be sustained – at the level of policy and practices – by streamlining M&E processes in the context of diverse governance arrangements characterising ECEC systems in Europe**.

Particular attention has been given to achieving a balance sample of case studies in relation to ECEC systems governance arrangements (integrated/split, centralised/decentralised, public/subsidised/private share of provision), presenting the widest possible array of diversified solutions to address shared challenges related to the coordination of M&E processes across levels. The list of case studies include 11 countries and 3 regions:

Countries / Regions	*ECEC governance arrangements*
Slovenia	Integrated centralised
Denmark	Integrated decentralised
Finland	
Lithuania	
Berlin Land (Germany)	
Ireland (0-6)	Mid-way centralised
Spain (0-6)	Mid-way decentralised
Italy (0-6)	Mid-way centralised (3-6) / Decentralised (0-3)
Bulgaria (3-6)	Split centralised
Portugal (3-6)	
Cyprus (3-6)	
BELGIUM - French Community (0-3)*	** Within each community of Belgium, there is a split ECEC system: different ministries which are responsible for 0-3 and 3-6 provision in each community.
BELGIUM - Flemish Community (0-3)*	

Lessons learnt from the analysis of case studies are presented as "guiding principles" for improving the quality and equity of ECEC provision through initiatives aimed at streamlining M&E processes across different levels of the system. These guiding principles are articulated and presented around four core concepts:

- establishing a shared understanding of ECEC quality as starting point
- consulting end-users to understand which data would be most useful to support quality improvement

- developing an IT infrastructure to support systematic data collection and analysis
- building capacity at the level of policies and practices.

4.1. Establishing a shared understanding of ECEC quality as starting point

The first WG report *"Monitoring and evaluating quality of early childhood education and care in Europe"* showed that designing M&E systems according to commonly-agreed purposes, values and principles can ensure that the processes implemented for collecting and analyse data – as well as for following up on the results – are optimised to meet the intended goals.

- Establishing a **pedagogical vision** shared by all the actors who are in involved in the processes of monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality is the first step toward ensuring that the procedures and tools used to collect and analyse data at different level are coherently designed to help improve services.
- Defining a **clear legislative framework** – quality or curricular framework – is an essential precondition to develop a comprehensive M&E infrastructure where procedures, tools and data information systems are coherently aligned to improve quality of ECEC provision in accordance with such vision.
- Defining **national/regional ECEC quality frameworks** – or curricular frameworks – is also an essential precondition to develop a pedagogical language which is shared by professionals working in ECEC settings as well as by the professionals in charge of implementing monitoring and evaluation processes in such settings, thus sustaining a "culture of quality improvement" both at centre and system level. This contributes to maximise the positive effects of M&E initiatives on the quality of pedagogical practices enacted in ECEC settings, while at the same time counteracts the risk that data collections in monitoring and evaluating processes might just respond to compliance requirements.

In the **French Community of Belgium** an official law to define and enhance the quality of ECEC provision for young children (0-3) has been in place since 2003. All childcare institutions shall comply with the "Quality Code for ECEC Centres" (*Code de qualité de l'Accueil*)[27] adopted by the Government after consulting with ONE (*Office de la naissance et de l'enfance*)[28]. The pedagogical principles reported in the first version of the Quality Code were inspired by the 40 Quality Targets developed by the European Childcare Network (1996): since then, the legislative framework has been regularly adapted and updated. The latest version of the Quality Code has been inspired by the Quality Framework for ECEC developed by the Working Group under the auspices of the European Commission.

The Quality Code provides a reference framework orienting pedagogical practice in day-care settings and for evaluating process quality in such settings. The Quality Code is used by day-care centres as basis for developing their Pedagogical Plan by taking into account the needs and points of view of the staff (all the employees of the day care settings), but also the parents and other stakeholders. By law, each day care setting must

[27] Qualité de l'accueil - Office de la naissance et de l'enfance (one.be)

[28] The Office for Birth and Childhood is a public institution responsible for the authorization, accreditation and quality evaluation of centre-based and home-based childcare facilities in the French Community of Belgium: www.one.be

prepare, discuss and write a pedagogical plan which will be communicated to the parents: such pedagogical plan is evaluated internally and discussed with ONE inspectors and pedagogical counsellors during external evaluation.

The Quality Code is therefore considered a useful document for establishing a shared understanding of ECEC quality, as it nurtures the discussion between ONE and the day care settings and supports the evolution of their pedagogical practice in relation to the needs of children, parents and local communities within which settings are embedded.

In **Portugal**, the Framework Law on Preschool Education (1997) entrusts the General Inspectorate of Education and Science (IGEC) with the responsibility of monitoring the quality of pedagogical activity of preschool (3-6) and ensuring compliance with statutory regulations concerning the pedagogical and technical procedures within preschool education with a twofold aim: granting equal educational opportunities to all children and improving the quality of the national education system. Since 2013, the monitoring activity "Curriculum Management and Quality in Preschool Education" (*Gestão do Currículo e Qualidade na Educação Pré-escolar*)[29] targeting public and private publicly subsidised preschools has been developed to meet specific needs, in line with the curricular guidelines[30] and regulatory documents[31] issued by the Ministry of Education.

The aim of the initiative is to foster critical thinking among preschool teachers, improve the quality of children's learning and promote inclusive education by monitoring and evaluating the design and the implementation of the curriculum as an intentional and participatory process. Therefore, the activity "Curriculum Management and Quality in Preschool Education" focuses on how preschool teachers design and implement the curriculum with specific reference to four key areas: educational purpose; organization of the educational environment; learning areas; consistency and transitions. Quality control is also carried out focusing on organizational aspects, the resources available and their appropriateness, and preschool teachers' training attendance in each setting.

The monitoring reports highlight good practices which deserve to be disseminated, therefore nurturing a culture of ECEC quality at system level, as well as the ones to be improved, to sustain teachers' reflections on their practice at centre level.

In **Slovenia**, the foundations for a national ECEC quality development strategy were set within a comprehensive legislative framework since 2005 (*Strategija razvoja Slovenije* - Slovenia's development strategy). Considered as an integral part of the education system, preschool education (1-6) falls under the authority of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS). The government is responsible for the national policy, the legislative framework and the general programme of preschool education. Preschool education is regulated by two key Acts – the Organization and Financing of Education Act and the Preschool Institutions Act – while the curriculum contains the basic principles

[29] Initial report: /www.igec.mec.pt/upload/PUBLICACOES/JIRN/VISEU/VISEU_Resende_JIRN_AE_Resende_2018_2019_R.pdf
Follow-up report: /www.igec.mec.pt/upload/PUBLICACOES/JIRN-CONT/VISEU/VISEU_Resende_JIRN_AE_Resende_2019_2020_RContinuidade.pdf

[30] Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (*Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar*): http://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf

[31] Recommendations on the improvement of school processes (according to paragraph c), article 2, of Regulatory Decree no. 15/2012, of January 27: https://www.igec.mec.pt/upload/Legisla%C3%A7%C3%A3o/Decreto_Regulamentar_15_2012.pdf

of preschool education as well as key areas for supporting children's development. Against this background, two research projects had a significant impact on the creation of quality indicators and tools for supporting quality assurance and development of preschools.

- The "*Quality Assessment and Assurance of the Preschool Education Project*" (2000–2002) focused on the definition of quality preschool education, taking into account the systemic and curricular characteristics of preschool education in Slovenia and the development of indicators incorporated into three levels of quality (structural, indirect and process).
- The second project, *"Self-evaluation in Kindergartens: Quality Assurance"*, continued the previous one by complementing it with case studies carried out on purpose sample of preschools located in diversified contexts (large/small town, rural, independent, and school-based kindergartens). From the analysis of such case studies, non-binding guidelines for conducting self-evaluation and elaborating quality improvement plans at the level of preschool institutions were developed [32].

Recently the national framework for Quality Assessment and Assurance (QAA) developed in 2005 was updated within the project "Establishment, updating and pilot testing of the QAA model in education" co-funded by the European Social Fund (2016-2018).

Taken together, the above-mentioned initiatives contributed to create a common understanding of educational quality laying the foundation for both external and internal evaluation processes carried out by different bodies responsible for quality assurance and development (Inspectorate for Education and Sport, National Education Institute, preschools' councils), thus improving the effectiveness of M&E processes for enhancing the quality of ECEC at system and centre level.

4.2. Consulting end-users to understand which data would be most useful to support quality improvement

To ensure that the data collection has a clear purpose, it may be helpful to **consult the end-users – such as ECEC providers, local administrators and policy-makers – during the design of M&E systems and approaches**, to understand which data would be most useful for them.

For the staff working in ECEC settings to trust external evaluators (data collectors), it is essential to **give them a clear and transparent understanding of why the data is being collected and how it is going to be used**.

Data providers should be reassured that their **data will only be gathered where it is justified, and that it will be used with consideration of their privacy and in accordance with their rights**. The end-goal of the data collection should be clearly communicated, with adequate information provided on the outputs to be expected from the information they contribute (i.e. aggregation and analysis, reports, evidence-informed policy initiatives).

[32] These include self-evaluation protocols, collection of indicators and tools that help preschools conduct self-evaluation more efficiently by drawing of a common understanding of ECEC quality.

As the data collected from ECEC settings has to be accurate and truly reflective of the everyday realities of staff, children, and parents on the ground, it is necessary to **build and maintain trust between the individuals providing the data and the individuals or institutions gathering the data** (i.e. evaluators on the ground, inspectorates gathering data through electronic platforms/systems).

In **Finland** the responsibility for M&E lies at different levels of the de-centralised ECEC system. External evaluations of ECEC are carried out sample based by the Finnish National Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)[33], while national evaluations at every level of education – including ECEC – are based on the principle of enhancement-led evaluation, which emphasises trust between the evaluator and those participating in the process.

For this purpose, the system developed by FINEEC for M&E of quality of ECEC provision was designed starting from a systematic and visionary planning of the evaluation guidelines that involved several stakeholders: ECEC researchers, local ECEC actors, and other experts, such as parent association. This kind of participatory approach helped the implementation process. Since the emphasis is on self-evaluation of both the local authorities as well as the educational staff, the first step towards systematic evaluation was setting objectives for the activities carried out in ECEC. An extensive research review was needed to define a common understanding of what could be considered quality in Finnish ECEC: such research review informed the discussion with stakeholders on what should be evaluated and why.

As the results from evaluations are used by FINEEC for developing policy recommendations, it was considered ethically very important to engage all the actors involved in the implementation processes in the discussion on the premises and the values behind evaluation, and on the methods applied.

In **Bulgaria** a quality framework for ECEC was recently developed - and a related M&E system established – within a policy reform initiative undertaken by Ministry of Education and Science (MES) responsible for preschool (3-6) in cooperation with the European Commission (EC), via the Technical Support Instrument. The aim of the policy initiative was two-fold:

- supporting Bulgarian authorities to gain a better understanding of how they can improve quality in ECEC by reviewing modes of governance and provision, developing effective tools and aligning relevant policies,
- developing a National Quality Framework for ECEC, complemented by a set of related indicators and benchmarks, to be piloted in selected settings and promoted to a broad stakeholder audience.

The European Quality Framework was used as a broad reference to build a common understanding of what could be considered quality in ECEC and discussed within an extensive consultative process for tailoring M&E indicators and tools to the Bulgarian context. The consultation process was organised across a tripartite structure consisting of a Steering committee (involving MES and EC representatives), a Working Group (involving representatives from relevant directorates at MES and other public authorities/agencies), and a Stakeholder group (involving researchers, practitioners' organizations and advocacy groups). A wider community of stakeholders – including

[33] Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) - karvi.fi

practitioners, regional authorities, inspectorates and municipalities, target audience of parents and children – were engaged in the phase of piloting the indicators and tools which were developed for monitoring and evaluating quality in a selected sample of ECEC settings.

Following the results of the pilot, policy recommendations for establishing a comprehensive M&E system were developed as well as its alignment with reforms in related policy areas.

Data should only be collected if it can be analysed for the benefit of users. **Only those data that could be used – and acted upon – should be collected** to avoid over-burden, in terms of additional workload, from both the evaluators (collecting and analysing data) and the ECEC providers (providing data on a regular basis).

To facilitate the efficient use of M&E results for the improvement of policies and practices, **data should be collected**:

- **systematically over time**, thus giving account of both progresses (made by ECEC setting/systems in quality improvement) and processes (through which quality improvement was achieved)
- **from multiple sources and combined in a complementary way**, thus reflecting the experiences and voices of all the actors involved in educational process, namely **children**, **parents** and **professionals**.

Primokiz is an evidence-based program developed by the Jacobs Foundation for increasing access to quality early childhood services for young children. ISSA[34] has been using the Primokiz approach – together with the experience and results from the INTESYS project[35] - to **strengthen data collection capacity and strategic planning of local authorities for the purpose of increasing the access to high quality ECEC services for children and families in vulnerable communities.**

Through a **highly participatory process rooted in the local context**, the Primokiz approach mobilizes and connects the political commitment with the local expertise and resources, and the needs of the children and families in communities. The approach provides support to local authorities to:

- gather relevant data through existing M&E systems,
- develop effective tools for collecting (and storing) data from multiple stakeholders, including children, parents, workforce
- analyse the data collected to inform local policies or strategies to improve the quality of the overall local early childhood system including education (ECEC), health, social assistance/protection services, as well as public spaces like playgrounds, or parenting support services.

Though the data that are available/collected at the local level vary depending on the capacity of the municipalities (where such approach is implemented), **the development**

[34] International Step-by-Step Association

[35] https://www.issa.nl/intesys

of a comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategy for the quality improvement of early childhood services requires multiple data-sources, such as:

- demographic data
- geographic distribution in the municipality of families with children under 6
- legal framework for the service provision
- overview of the early childhood services and programs (for children, for children and parents, for parents, including venues for play and interaction in the community) with data on the age group, provider, funding, quality assessments, role of the municipality
- geographic distribution of the early childhood services (different sectors)
- access to services of specific vulnerable groups
- cooperation and networking among services/programs, among professionals.

Quantitative data sources are integrated with more specific qualitative data collected through surveys, questionnaires, focus groups and interviews with professionals, parents, members of the community.

Led by local governments, cross-sectoral teams work together to collect data, develop data-, vision- and needs-based local strategies and implement measures aligned with the acknowledged needs of children and families in their respective communities.

4.2.1. Developing data collection tools combining structural and process quality dimensions

M&E policies and practices vary according to the extent to which they address either or both of two distinct dimensions of quality in ECEC services: **structural quality** and **process quality**.

- Structural quality refers to framing conditions that might be important, but not sufficient, to ensure the quality of pedagogical practices (i.e. staff-child ratios, group sizes, the physical size of settings, curriculum frameworks and staff qualifications)
- Process quality includes aspects that are more closely related to the quality of ECEC as experienced by children and families (i.e. children's daily interactions with professionals and peers; implementation of curricular approaches and pedagogy; the organization of space, time, materials and activities; partnership with families and wider community).

A **well-balanced combination of data related to both structural and process quality should be collected** to improve **simultaneously:**

- the **quality of pedagogical practices at centre's level** – by supporting professional teams in analysing, reflecting on, and revising their daily work with children and families
- and at **system level** – by ensuring favourable framing conditions for ongoing quality improvement such as, for example, adequate no-contact time available to staff for engaging in team meeting and continuing professional development.

In **Cyprus**, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (MESY) is responsible for preschool education (3-6) and for ensuring that public and private preschool provision comply with mandatory requirements related to both structural and process quality. Data is collected at a central level to ensure compliance with ECEC system regulations and

guidelines and to provide important information for specific needs, actions, and measures.

- To support structural quality, the Ministry collects data on the number of children per age group (including their SES and background), child-staff ratios, staff qualifications and health and safety provision. Some of these data are collected using online data systems, the access to which is restricted to a limited number of Ministry officials due to general data protection regulations.
- To support process quality, data are collected in relation to the quality of educational environment, to teachers' pedagogical competence (every two years only for permanent staff) and to curriculum implementation.

Private settings receive annual visits from MESY officers to ensure the reliability of the data collected by the ministry (e.g. children/staff ratio, staff qualifications, health and safety issues etc.) and to assess the implementation of the curriculum. A descriptive report is prepared according to the results of the visits.

In the case of public settings, the external evaluation from MESY focuses more closely on: (a) how the curriculum is implemented to encourage children's overall development (the quality and variety of activities, learning process etc.), (b) the quality of interactions and relationships between staff and children; (c) children's interactions. With specific reference to curriculum implementation, the data collected might include children individual progress reports (compiled by teachers twice a year), descriptive records of children's achievements, audio-video documentation of children's learning and interactions (recordings, photos, videos), materials and artifacts produced by the children.

4.2.2. Collecting information which includes children's, parents' and staff's perspectives

Collecting information which includes children's, parents' and staff's perspectives ensures that quality improvements answer their needs and reflect their aspirations, thus increasing their agency in educational decision-making processes (ownership of change). This aspect will be further explored by the working group in another report, focusing on the involvement of children, families, staff and other ECEC stakeholders in evaluation processes.

However, it can already be noted that **careful consideration on how M&E procedures and tools could enhance the voice and agency of all the ECEC actors should be given since the inception.**

- Designing M&E systems which foster a democratic culture of quality improvement based on dialogue and open discussion can counteract the risk that evaluation activities are perceived as a merely bureaucratic accomplishment. When evaluation is experienced as something useful and important to ECEC professionals, it becomes embedded in everyday pedagogical work leading to continuous improvement of their practice. This encourages ECEC providers and their staff to identify strengths and development areas in their pedagogical activities by focusing on the experiences of children and families they are working with.
- When developing a national M&E system and providing the field with large number of criteria-based tools, it must be kept in mind that evaluation should not become an end. There is a threat that evaluation criteria start guiding the pedagogical practices too narrowly. As quality indicators and criteria may fail to include such aspects

whose evaluation is essential for the quality experienced by an individual child, it is necessary to develop and use diverse evaluation methods to ensure that sufficient attention is focused on the child's experience of the situation, regardless of the type of criteria used to evaluate the activities.

In **Italy**, the ISTC-CNR research group "Quality of social and educational contexts" (QUSEC) [36] developed a system where pedagogical documentation is the core of participatory evaluation activities involving both parents and professionals.

The system was piloted in several Italian sites within the framework of different ECEC quality evaluation initiatives *(Umbria Region, City of Rome, Pistoia Municipality)*. In the context of municipal ECEC provision in Italy, pedagogical documentation is widely used to make children's learning processes visible through a variety of expressive means: children's artifacts, pictures of children's interactions and involvement in the daily life of the settings, recording and transcripts of their words, narratives from professionals and parents. As a method to collect data feeding into evaluation processes, pedagogical documentation draws attention to the specific role played by:

- ECEC professionals, who are committed to documenting practices so that they may be subject to reflection and discussion by a wider audience (i.e. parents, community stakeholders, municipal managers)
- parents, who are systematically engaged in the process of co-constructing narratives about their children's and their own experiences of participation in the daily life of the centre.

Within such pilot initiatives, the ISTC-CNR research team developed a tool – called 'service Dossier'[37] – encompassing several components:

- the pedagogical project of the ECEC centre;
- the pedagogical documentation of children's and parents' experiences;
- the analysis of such documentation, which was co-constructed by involving all stakeholders (professionals, parents and municipal managers) in collective discussions.

These discussions aimed at verifying whether the children's and parents' experiences in the centre are aligned with the educational goals and objectives of the local ECEC provision as defined in Regional and Local Policy Acts. In this perspective, the service Dossier provides a detailed account of ECEC practice quality improvement by over time, by recording both progresses (what was improved) and processes (how it was improved).

Thus, using pedagogical documentation to collect data feeding into evaluation processes contributed to improve the quality of ECEC services by enhancing practitioners' reflectivity at team level, while at the same time fostering parents' participation and sustaining transformative practices in ongoing dialogue with children.

[36] https://www.istc.cnr.it/en/group/qusec

[37] Picchio, M., Di Giandomenico, I., & Musatti, T. (2014). The use of documentation in a participatory system of evaluation. *Early Years*, *34*(2), 133-145.

4.3. Developing an IT infrastructure to support systematic data collection and analysis

Adequate IT infrastructure and services are indispensable for the collection, storage, and processing of data on the scale required for M&E of an ECEC system.

The findings of the policy survey *"ECEC in a Digital World"* (OECD, 2022)[38] point out that robust data systems can support different aspects related to quality assurance and development at system level. Data systems can be instrumental in meeting demands for public accountability, while at the same time generating information on the strengths and weaknesses of individual settings and of the ECEC sector as a whole. **A M&E system that contains comprehensive and reliable data on ECEC provision at local, regional or national level is therefore important** to:

- assist evaluation bodies in collecting, analysing and reporting information about structural and process quality dimensions of ECEC provision, allowing data aggregation at multiple levels;
- supporting local authorities and ECEC providers in carrying out self-evaluation and developing quality improvement plans;
- strengthening infrastructure for large-scale research investigations with a strong potential to inform policy analysis and developments.

IT systems should be secure enough to guard against breaches and hackers, safeguarding that sensitive data is seen only by those persons who have the right to access such information. At the same time, IT systems should be designed as useable enough to facilitate aggregation and analysis, and flexible enough to accommodate a range of indicators as well as developments in new or existing indicators.

For designing such systems, professionals with legal and IT expertise are needed, as well as helpdesk resources to support data-providers (i.e. in cases where platforms exist for the digital submission of data by ECEC providers themselves).

Experts in statistical data analysis - for example social scientists and statisticians – should also be employed for supporting the process of collecting, aggregating, and analysing quantitative data. On a similar note, communication resources are needed to ensure that relevant recommendations drawn out of M&E results are widely disseminated for the benefit of policymakers and practitioners.

IT systems across health, care, education and social sectors should also be coordinated to allow inter-operability. However, the effective implementation of such integrated data systems is very complex as it requires inter-sectoral governance arrangements and legal agreements for data sharing and privacy protection, as well as adapted technology and security solutions (OECD, 2023)[39].

In **Lithuania**, a new system for the external evaluation of the quality of activities implemented in preschool institutions (for children aged 1 to 6) and pre-primary education (children aged 6 to 7) was developed by the National Education Agency and approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport (MESS) in June 2022. As part of this

[38] Empowering Young Children in the Digital Age | Starting Strong | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

[39] Empowering Young Children in the Digital Age | Starting Strong | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

initiative, an Education Management Information System (EMIS) was created to collect and analyse quantitative data related to structural quality dimensions of ECEC provision.

Data are systematically collected in relation to: (1) children's attendance and backgrounds, (2) teachers' profiles, qualifications and working conditions, (3) ECEC centres' facilities and resources. Data provided by EMIS can be disaggregated and grouped to monitor the development of the ECEC system over time and combined to other sources to prepare proposals for decision-making. Quantitative data are collected, processed and analysed to support decision-making, policy analysis and formulation, planning, monitoring and management at all levels of the education system.

EMIS contains information shared by local authorities and ECEC providers and is articulated across 3 levels:

- institution level, accessible for ECEC providers;
- municipal level, accessible for local administrators;
- national level, accessible for national administrators (National Education Agency and MESS).

At centre level, an electronic diary (e-diary) is also used by practitioners for planning daily activities, exchanging information with parents, and compiling children's achievements reports (which are shared with parents twice a year). By using e-diary, practitioners can add photos, child's paintings and artifacts which helps sharing children's progresses and developmental needs with parents. Such digital system is only accessible to ECEC institutions and to the parents, to protect children's privacy.

As a comprehensive data information system for collecting process quality information do not exist, external evaluators can gather data on ECEC centres' process quality in 3 ways: analysis of the documentation reported on institutional websites, observation of the practices in the settings, and conversation with children, parents (guardians), practitioners, other personnel, administration staff.

In **Finland**, a national quality evaluation system (VALSSI) [40] has been recently developed. The system is maintained by Finnish National Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and it is currently being piloted. VALSSI is designed to support the quality management of municipal ECEC organisers and private service providers. The system is web-based and free-of-charge for its users. A wide range of self-evaluation tools can be obtained by the system for the evaluation of both structural factors of ECEC as well as pedagogical processes. The tools can be used to collect electronic data from both management and staff of ECEC. The system produces visual evaluation reports, which support discussions and a shared understanding on how the development work should be targeted.

FINEEC is allowed to use the self-evaluation data collected on the local level and enhance it with the other data for publishing national reports on regular basis. Therefore, the digital system will generate data which FINEEC is able to use as part of its statutory national evaluations: this is both cost-efficient and useful. In addition to the self-evaluation data collected through the VALSSI system, FINEEC will continue to carry out external evaluations of ECEC and publishing reports according to its four-year evaluation plan. By drawing on its data information systems, FINEEC can publish thematic reports for the needs of the Ministry and for the support of the political decision making.

[40] More info of Valssi quality evaluation system can be found on FINEEC webpage.

Italy recently started a reform process toward the integration of the two previously split ECEC segments - the 0-3 segment (of competence of the Regions) and 3-6 segment (regulated by the State)[41].The aim is to guarantee equal education and care opportunities to children from birth up to age six and to overcome territorial, economic, ethnic and cultural inequalities. The regulation of the administrative and financial aspects of the implementation of the integrated system is entrusted to the Multiannual National Action Plan (MNAP), which is approved after agreement in the Unified Conference (the body that represents the State, Regions and Municipalities).

As part of the MNAP, the National Registry for the Integrated System is being designed to ensure data and information exchange between the ministry, regions, and local authorities in relation to 0-3 provision. M&E of 0-3 provision falls under the responsibility of regional authorities and different data collection systems currently exist in Italy's 20 regions. As a result, it is necessary to have a national information system in coordination with the regions, by adapting and aligning existing regional information systems. Discussions are currently under way with the ministry, the regions and the municipalities to define IT processes for the implementation of a National Register where data from Regional Registers of 0-3 services are transmigrated. After consultation with the Data Protection Supervisor, which will define the operational modalities of the information system, a memorandum of understanding will be approved by the Unified Conference for integrating databases at regional, local and state level.

The data information system will collect data on structural quality related to: buildings and facilities, educational offer, organization and management, staff-child ratios and group sizes, weekly opening hour, numbers of children with special needs, staff qualification, implemented interventions and use of financial resources.

The entities responsible for entering the data will be, each for the part of its competence, settings, municipalities, regions, Ministry of Education. The analysis and monitoring of the data entered (validation) will be up to the responsibility of municipalities, regions, Ministry of Education, each for the part of its competence.

Despite the challenges related to the complexity of multi-level governance involving multiple actors with different tasks/responsibilities and to the lack of homogeneity of data and collection methods, the harmonization of monitoring systems has been achieved through constant inter-institutional collaboration promoted and coordinated by the Ministry of Education. The digitalization of information flows will allow to acquire complete and updated data on the educational offer aimed at children 0-3 (for sector 3-6 it already exists) and to guide the strategic choices for the implementation of the integrated system in collaboration with all involved actors. Comparison between the objectives set by the regions themselves with the use of state resources and those actually achieved should reinforce future investment policies.

[41] https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/
www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/experts/early-childhood-education-care.htm

4.4. Building capacity at the level of policies and practices

M&E systems can significantly contribute to ensuring the improvement of ECEC policies and practices only if a culture of quality development is shared – and constantly nurtured – by all the actors who are involved in M&E processes, including:

- **ECEC staff** (practitioners and pedagogical leaders operating at the level of individual settings),
- **evaluators, pedagogical counsellors, trainers** and **researchers** (professionals employed in the agencies responsible for conducting external evaluations and professionals employed by counselling, training and research institutions that support ECEC staff continuing professional development),
- **administrators** and **policy makers**, who are responsible for regulating and/or funding ECEC provision at the level of **local** and **regional authorities** in decentralised systems,
- **policy decision-makers**, who are responsible for developing legislative and pedagogical frameworks for the ECEC sector at national level,
- **advisors working for ministry-related or independent agencies**, who are responsible for developing policy recommendations based on the results of M&E activities.

In this sense, **continuing quality development of ECEC provision relies on the commitment and responsibilities shared among individuals, professional teams, institutions, local/regional/national authorities and independent agencies** working together for creating the conditions so that all children - and their families - can benefit of the best possible educational opportunities to nurture their potential and thrive within the communities they are living in.

As stated in section 4.1, all the stakeholders involved in M&E should share a common pedagogical vision and understanding, so that quality assurance and improvement processes are geared toward shared goals, such as:

- supporting the learning and development of each and every child, ensuring equity of educational opportunities for all children;
- identifying problems and address them responsively, by taking into account their specific context,
- valuing the diversity and richness of pedagogical practices in each setting, as a resource for the development entire ECEC system,
- support policy decision-makers in providing the systemic conditions where high quality practice can flourish and be upscaled, thus ensuring ongoing quality enhancement of ECEC provision.

Such vision and shared goals can be pursued coherently only if all the actors involved in M&E processes have a clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In the European context, where configurations of governance arrangements and pedagogical traditions underlying ECEC systems differ widely, the successful implementation of M&E systems for improving the quality of ECEC policies and practices might have more to deal with strengthening capacity of the different actors involved in M&E processes rather than with the application of pre-defined models considered as “best practice”.

As the challenges related to the coordination of M&E efforts across vertical levels of governance – as well as horizontally in split systems – are mainly associated to the lack of a shared vision and sense of purpose among the different actors responsible for ECEC

quality assurance and development, **building capacity at system level becomes crucial** if such challenges are to be overcome. In this sense, the examples of inspiring initiatives described in the following sub-sections (4.4.1 and 4.4.2) show how **diversified pathways and strategies can be put in place to strengthen the capacity of all the actors responsible for ECEC quality assurance and development, by building on existing M&E structures.**

From the cross-national analysis of the case studies examined – which will be illustrated in detail in subsections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 – it emerges that building capacity at the level of policies and practices for improving the quality of ECEC provision requires investment in the following areas:

1) competence of **human resources**,
2) **methodological support available** for ECEC staff and pedagogical leaders (who are responsible for evaluating and improving the quality of pedagogical practices at centre level through **self-evaluation**) as well as for the evaluators who are responsible for monitoring and quality development of ECEC provision at system level through **external evaluation,**
3) **in-service training** and **continuing professional development** (i.e. counselling, guidance or coaching) available for ECEC professionals, evaluators and local/regional administrators with a focus on strengthening their **leadership capacities** in relation to evaluation and strategic planning,
4) **coordination platforms** and **networks** facilitating peer-learning exchanges, dissemination and upscaling of good practice.

In respect to the first area, it is acknowledged that **M&E processes should be coordinated by experienced professionals, with a sound knowledge of ECEC policies, practices and research**, i.e.:

- **distributed leadership** is needed to effectively coordinate inputs, roles and responsibilities across different agencies and levels of governance,
- **research skills** are needed to conduct data-collection exercises, ensure that the raw data is processed and analysed coherently with the purposes for which they have been collected, so that findings can be used to draw policy-relevant recommendations.

Professionals with a strong background in ECEC and relevant expertise in supervision and coaching are also needed for conducting external evaluation on the field, at the level of ECEC centres. They can ensure that the assessment of pedagogical practice during the visits are carried out in a context-sensitive and developmentally oriented way (i.e. providing constructive feedback to ECEC teams and leaders in relation to quality improvement of their own practice).

With specific reference to the second area, it is acknowledged that **methodological support for ECEC professionals – as well as for evaluators – is needed to allow them to better fulfil their roles and responsibilities in M&E processes.** For this purposes, **knowledge databases**, **tools** and **manuals** are essential aids to sustain the development of a shared culture of quality improvement across ECEC settings and the agencies responsible for their evaluation and ongoing support:

- *knowledge databases* might be referred as a combination of *research sources*, facts and figures about ECEC provision, *practitioners' magazines and online audio-video documentation* that can support reflection on *what good quality means in practices*[42],
- *tools might include a collection of self-evaluation instruments* available to ECEC staff to systematically support reflection on their pedagogical practice at team level, and *external evaluation protocols designed for supporting ECEC experts in conducting visits in the settings as well as in providing feedback for improvement*,
- *manuals* might be referred as *comprehensive guides to quality development for ECEC professionals and evaluators*, which are produced by combining pedagogical vision, research sources and a variety of internal and/or external evaluation tools in a coherent manner[43].

4.4.1. Building capacity at the level of practice: investing in staff ongoing professional development and pedagogical leadership – country examples

Finland: the VALSSI quality evaluation system for ECEC

Finland was lacking a nationally shared perspective of quality factors in ECEC and a suitable quality evaluation system (OECD 2016)[44], and needed a nation-wide initiative to strengthen the M&E of ECEC provision. To address these challenges, the Ministry of Education and Culture appointed FINEEC (*Finnish National Education Evaluation Centre)*[45] to draw up research-based quality criteria for ECEC, and to participate in the development of the national digital quality evaluation system. FINEEC started by drawing up national quality indicators for the evaluation of ECEC. Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of ECEC provision were published in 2018[46], including the evidence-based quality criteria and self-evaluation processes which guided the build-up work of the evaluation system VALSSI[47].

As trust is in many ways at the core of ECEC quality management and development in Finland, municipal organisers and private sector providers are required to self-evaluate the services they provide, but the legislation does not specify in detail what they should evaluate or how the evaluation should be carried out[48]. National evaluations conducted by FINEEC have shown that ECEC organisers and providers needed assistance in their

[42] See for example the online knowledge and dissemination database developed within the *Quality in Kindergarten (KIB)* initiative in Norway (available in EN): https://www.udir.no/in-english/Quality-in-ECEC-Schools-and-Vocationa-Education-and-training/quality-assurance-school/

[43] See for example the *Handbook for the Self-Evaluation of Early Childhood and Preschool Education Institution* developed by the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education in Croatia (available in EN): www.ncvvo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/handbook_for_the_self_evaluation.pdf

[44] https://www.oecd.org/education/school/ECECDCN-Finland.pdf

[45] https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/

[46] https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/guidelines-and-recommendations-for-evaluating-the-quality-of-early-childhood-education-and-care/

[47] https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/valssi-national-quality-evaluation-system-for-ecec/

[48] Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 24 §

self-evaluation task to meet the objectives set for ECEC[49]: therefore, support materials and tools, training initiatives and a quality evaluation network were developed within VALSSI quality evaluation system[50].

FINEEC provides online training for the management teams and staff of ECEC to use the VALSSI system. Support material is also offered to help the ECEC actors carry out self-evaluation processes, through the VALSSI "library" of self-evaluation tools. Municipal ECEC organisers and private sector service providers make the decision to use the system as part of their quality management. Demographic and background variables are derived from a national ECEC electronic database. They are responsible for drawing up long-term evaluation plans based on their own needs, and planning of the evaluation and development processes. ECEC staff evaluates the pedagogy and pedagogical activities, whereas leaders and management evaluate the structural factors. After data collection, an evaluation report can be obtained from the system. Report is then reflected upon and discussed on the different levels of organisation, from child group level to the management level. The aim is to create shared understanding of the organisation's strengths and development areas. ECEC centre leaders are responsible for drawing up the centre level evaluation summaries and development plans. The final evaluation results are gathered and published by the management level: development and follow-up plans should be supplemented with the results.

FINEEC also offers ongoing support to municipal and private ECEC service providers through the ECEC Quality Evaluation Network, which was established to facilitate sharing of information and know-how. The Evaluation Network is tasked with supporting the evaluation and development of activities at the local level by:

- providing information on the development of VALSSI and related tools
- organising training and webinars for different personnel groups
- share know-how and good practices to support the development of evaluation.

The network operates primarily in the HowSpace workspace established for this purpose, which contains the programme and materials of the network's meetings as well as a discussion section for the sharing of good practices. The network includes more than 500 representatives of municipal and private ECEC service providers.

Portugal: quality development in preschool education through Curriculum Management

The M&E initiative "Curriculum Management and Quality in Preschool Education" (*Gestão do Currículo e Qualidade na Educação Pré-escolar*) is targeting public and private publicly-subsidised preschools (for children from the ages 3 to 6) and has been developed in 2013 to meet specific needs, in line with the curricular guidelines and regulatory documents issued by the Ministry of Education. The initiative, carried out by the General Inspectorate of Education and Science (IGEC) aims to foster critical thinking among preschool teachers by monitoring the design and the implementation of the curriculum as well as by evaluating the quality of educational practice and children's learning as an intentional and participatory process. Therefore, the focus of M&E activities is on how preschool teachers design and implement the curriculum, based on the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education concerning four key areas: Educational

[49] https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/ongoing-evaluations/

[50] https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/valssi-national-quality-evaluation-system-for-ecec/

purpose; Organization of the educational environment; Learning areas – personal and social development, expression and communication, knowledge of the world; Educational consistency and transitions.

During their visits to preschool settings, inspectors observe educational practices, interact with preschool teachers and children, and interview the director, the coordinator of the preschool department, and parents, encouraging participation and democratic processes. During follow-up actions, inspectors and the school pedagogical teams discuss the improvement of pedagogical practices, as well as the implemented processes.

The findings of preschool follow-up reports have shown that both aspects connected to the implementation of the M&E activity – on-site visits observations and follow-up coaching activities – have enabled teacher's critical thinking on their educational practices and promoted the quality of the responses provided to children and their families. In this sense, the M&E activities carried out within the initiative have triggered actions to address areas for improvement in relation to the four key-dimensions of the Curriculum under analysis (Educational purpose; Organization of the educational environment; Learning areas; Educational consistency and transitions) and corrected issues that undermine the pedagogical quality of preschools. In particular, the following positive effects were identified:

- increased commitment from preschool teachers in the curriculum design, its development and evaluation, strengthening the educational purpose;
- developed collaborative work by pedagogical teams to improve the provision of educational services;
- improvements in the evaluation processes of the children's achievements and in the communication with parents;
- providing more and better-quality educational resources and increase the children's access to them, with considerable impact on the quality of the educational environment;
- improvement of mechanisms to provide parents with information related to the organization of preschools;
- increased parental engagement within the educational processes and within the dynamics of the educational setting;
- increased frequency of in-service training for capacity-building of the pedagogical teams.

Therefore, it could be concluded that the initiative "Curriculum Management and Quality in Preschool Education" has led preschool teachers to place greater pedagogical focus on the quality development of educational activities, by increasing their knowledge about curriculum guidelines and statutory documentation. Parents' knowledge of and trust in the educational system was also enhanced as they were interviewed during M&E activities, and they were kept informed of the outcomes. Making the reports available on IGEC's website ensures the further dissemination of the information and the transparency of the M&E process.

French Community of Belgium: the *"Code de qualité de l'accueil"* (Quality framework) as a tool to sustain a participatory approach to quality development in dialogue with staff, parents and stakeholders to promote child wellbeing.

In the French Community of Belgium, M&E initiatives connected to quality development of 0-3 provision are framed by the Quality Framework *"Code de qualité de l'accueil".* This

framework was developed by ONE (*Office de la naissance et de l'enfance*)[51] – the agency responsible for ECEC quality assurance and development in the 0-3 sector – and adopted by the Government in 2003.

Each day care centre is legally required to design a Pedagogical Plan by tailoring the implementation of the principles stated in the *"Code de qualité de l'accueil"* to the specific situations of children, parents and communities served by the centre. As it is acknowledged that the standardised implementation of Quality Frameworks would not succeed in improving the quality of pedagogical practice, ECEC professionals are required to constantly "reframe" and "adapt" standards to their context, through an ongoing process of redefining and evaluating their pedagogical work with children and families (Pirard 2012)[52]. For this purpose, ONE has designed a comprehensive approach to support local day care settings in this process, with ongoing pedagogical guidance and training (*Accompagnement*) in close connection with M&E activities. In this sense ONE's mission to improve quality of ECEC provision at local level – in dialogues with the staff and the parents – is accomplished by building capacity at the level of practice through *accompagnement*.

Such initiative – carried out by ONE for over 20 years – shows the importance of supporting educational practice in order to co-construct quality in a contextualised manner – in line with the guidelines outlined in *"Code de qualité de l'accueil"* – by investing simultaneously on staff ongoing professional development, pedagogical leadership and guidance. As Pedagogical Plans are elaborated by ECEC staff in collaboration with families and local stakeholders, the coaching activities carried out through *accompaniment* by ONE advisers supported ECEC teams in the process of transforming their pedagogical practice with specific reference to:

- daily educational *activities*,
- *interactions* with children and families
- collaboration with other services in the local *community*.

In this sense, the *"Code de qualité de l'accueil"* has been used as a tool for sustaining a shared understanding of ECEC quality throughout the 0-3 sector, while *accompaniment* has been adopted as a comprehensive professional development strategy for sustaining a culture of quality improvement at centre level, by supporting evolution of pedagogical practice. Through *accompaniment,* staff are supported in critically reflecting on their practice to improve them: during external evaluation activities this process leads to the review of the Pedagogical Plan of the day care centre. Such procedures and approach mobilise not only professionals but also children's families. As professionals are encouraged to develop ways that allow families to express their views on daily educational practices, parents' voices are more responsively considered in the adjustment of pedagogical projects.

The *"Code de qualité de l'accueil"* is used at different levels to improve quality.

- At local level, discussions will take place between staff and parents, between staff and ONE evaluators: this allows to constantly adapt ONE's continuing education

[51] The Office for Birth and Childhood is a public institution responsible for the authorization, accreditation and quality evaluation of centre-based and home-based childcare facilities in the French Community of Belgium: www.one.be

[52] Pirard, F. & Barbier, J-M. (2012) Accompaniment and quality in childcare services: the emergence of a culture of professionalization, *Early Years*, 32:2, 171-182,

programmes to the needs of the day care settings, as identified in the discussions and observations of *accompagnement* process.
- At central level, the findings of observations carried out during such evaluation process, lead ONE to advocated for the creation of an Early Childhood Baccalaureate (European level 6) for ECEC directors (this baccalaureate has just been created).

From ONE's experience in implementing such a M&E approach to quality development over 20 years, the following policy lessons can be drawn:

- National/regional Quality Frameworks can be used successfully for implementing quality development initiatives at local level by building on a spiral approach, where pedagogical plans are constantly reviewed and adapted through an open dialogue and exchange between ECEC staff and ONE evaluators.
- However, as ONE evaluators are also pedagogical advisors in *accompagnement* processes, it is difficult to separate roles and functions in relation to coaching, quality control, and data collection/analysis.

Lithuania: enhancing ECEC quality through a mixed model combining internal and external evaluation

In 2022 a system of self-evaluation and external evaluation of the activities of preschool education institutions has been created, which enables timely evidence-based decisions to be made to improve the quality of ECEC provision. The purpose of designing a M&E system for pre-school and pre-primary education programs was to provide support for improvement processes by conducting a consistent analysis of educational activities implemented in such institutions, and based on evidence, to offer alternatives for its improvement. The Ministry of Education Science and Sport (MESS) appointed the National Agency of Education (NAE) with the task of establishing a working group of experts and academic researchers for designing a comprehensive model for quality evaluation and development of ECEC institutions[53].

The overarching goal of the initiative was to create a culture of quality, where evaluation is a tool to achieve that goal. There was a perceived need to move away from quality assurance as control mechanism to move towards a more open and trust-based approach. In this perspective, evaluation and the resulting data are effective tools that can help ensure quality and provide evidence of the quality of education children receive and collect information on the measures that are applied to improve the quality of education.

For this purpose, three manuals were developed based on current international recommendations[54]: one for external evaluators (observes), one for preschools engaging

[53] Such model was developed with the financial support from European Social Fund and from the state budget of the Republic of Lithuania, in implementation of EU project No. 09.2.1-ESFA-V-706-03-0001 "*Improvement and development of assessment, self-assessment of informal education of children, preschool, pre-primary and general education*".

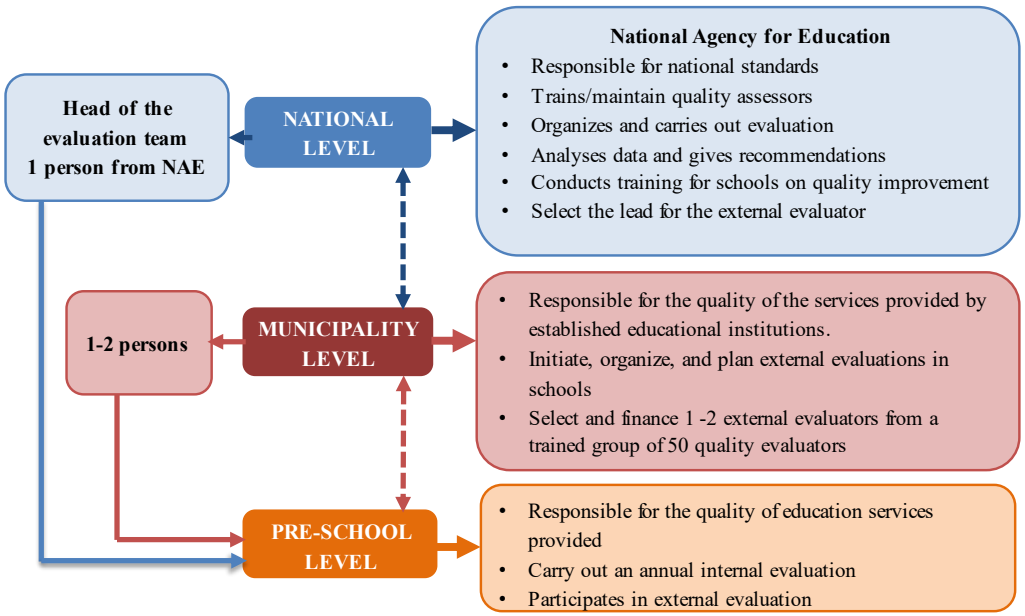
[54] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014; European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, 2019; Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2015; Starting Strong: Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; Assuring Quality in Education: Policies and Approaches to School Evaluation in Europe, 2015; Lithuanian national-level documents (Concept of a Good School (2015), Methodological Recommendations for Preschool Education (2015), Description of

in self-evaluation, and one for preschools preparing for external evaluation. The guidelines clearly stress that child's best interests should be at the centre of evaluation activities, from which a focus on educational processes (curriculum, relationships between educators and children, families, local communities) – rather than outcomes – derives. A combined model of self-evaluation and external evaluation was created, which considers M&E as a dynamic system, where methods and instruments to collect reliable data are constantly adapted to local contexts and needs. In this sense, the objectives of self-evaluation and external evaluation are considered mutually complementary as exemplified below.

Self-evaluation objectives	External evaluation objectives
to promote the discussion within the preschool community about the high quality of early childhood education and its aspiration, to foster teachers' reflection, self-analysis and cooperation as one of the main ways of improving professional activity, identify preschool's strengths, emerging challenges and provide guidelines for professional growth, to develop an evidence-based quality management system.	based on preschool's self-evaluation, promote consistent improvement of the school's activities, fostering the development of a child-centered culture of striving for quality and increasing the effectiveness of early education, develop opportunities to receive feedback on the quality of the educational process and recommendations on how to improve it, to inform interested parties how preschools meet needs, goals and expectations, provide evidence to education policy makers.

The choice of a combined model of self-evaluation and external evaluation was made with the intention of strengthening the engagement of all stakeholders who operates at the various levels of the ECEC system (national, municipal, and school level) and who are involved in evaluation processes according to a more decentralised approach. This mixed model is suitable for Lithuania as there are no specific ECEC experts in small-size municipalities, but rather experts for education in general, so the need for support and training to evaluate ECEC emerged at national level. In centralised models, the National Agency of Education would hold most of the responsibility for monitoring and evaluation (such centralized approach was adopted in the past and proved not to be successful); whereas in decentralised models, the issue of equity in achieving quality standards might emerge. Therefore, a mixed model where responsibilities for M&E are shared at national, municipal at preschool level was adopted as presented in detail below.

Achievements of Preschool Children (2015), General Program of Preschool Education (2014). Guidelines and best practices for internal and external evaluation of the quality of early childhood education developed in other countries were also examined.



In this context, the following advantages of adopting a mixed model combining self-evaluation and external evaluation have been identified:

- creates conditions for sharing responsibilities and enables the intermediate level of education (municipal level) to take responsibility for the quality of activities of schools implementing pre-school and pre-primary education programs,
- can create an adequate balance between the centralization necessary for the fulfillment of uniform quality standards and the implementation of general national educational goals, and decentralization, which enables the intermediate level of the education system to make decisions,
- creates a space for cooperation at all levels of education, promotes a culture of teamwork,
- creates conditions for sharing responsibilities and enables the intermediate level of education (municipal level) to take responsibility for the quality of activities of schools implementing pre-school and pre-primary education programs,
- monitoring of the activities of schools implementing pre-school and pre-primary education programs is carried out at all levels of education.

Berlin Land (Germany): coordinating internal and external M&E processes for sustaining ECEC quality development.

ECEC Quality development in Berlin is based since 2006 on the "*Agreement on Quality Development in Berlin day-care centres*" (QVTAG) that was established between day-care providers and the Land of Berlin. Its main goal is to implement the "Berlin's Early Years Programme for early years centres and family day-care" (BBP). The Quality Agreement includes 18 agreed measures, for example:
· day-care centres have to perform internal evaluations regularly (usually 1-2 quality aspects every year);
· day-care centres have to perform an external evaluation every 5 years;
· continued advanced training for ECEC staff as well as support (e.g. specialist advice, supervision, coaching) has to be provided.

Scientific surveys carried out over a decade among day-care centre managers showed that the effects of the external evaluation as well as the internal evaluation on the improvement of the pedagogical work were rated as high.

The *internal evaluation* is a pillar of quality development in day-care centres. It serves to reflect on the status and development needs of a day-care centre. The aim of the internal evaluation is to initiate quality development processes. According to QVTAG, regular internal evaluations are mandatory for day-care centres in Berlin. In the internal evaluation, the management and the pedagogical team of the day-care centre assess (evaluate) their own work. The educators first assess their own pedagogical work along several quality criteria according to the "Berlin's Early Years Programme" (BBP). The team then comes to a joint assessment. From this, they derive goals for the further development of the quality of their day-care centre.

According to QVTAG, every day-care centre in Berlin is obliged to be externally evaluated every 5 years. *External evaluation* has to be carried out by a provider recognized by the Senate Youth Department. The aim of the external evaluation is to give the day-care centres a professionally founded assessment of their pedagogical work from the outside. In a constructive way, the level of quality and the need for development are identified and specific recommendations are given for the further development of quality. This includes statements on direct and indirect work with the children, on working together in a team and on working in partnership with the parents. For the assessment, the provider, day-care centre management, individual teachers and parents are asked (e.g. via an interview or a questionnaire), the facility is examined in detail (how are the rooms designed? What (play) materials are available to the children?) and the interactions between educators and children are observed (which understanding of education is recognizable when dealing with the children?). After the data has been processed, the provider and day-care centre team are informed about the results of the external evaluation in a feedback meeting and receive a written evaluation report. The day-care centre team ideally develops an improvement plan and is supported in the implementation by the day-care provider.

4.4.2. Building capacity at policy level: developing a culture of shared responsibility, strategic planning and coordinated governance – country examples

Denmark: decentralized monitoring of quality in ECEC and support of local authorities

In Denmark, the state is responsible for overseeing the quality of the entire ECEC system but the monitoring of quality in ECEC settings is decentralized at municipal level and trust based. Each of of the 98 Danish municipalities are therefore responsible for monitoring the pedagogical quality of their local ECEC facilities. By 1 January 2022, the "*Danish Act on ECEC*" (*Dagtilbudsloven*)[55] stipulated new elements for municipalities to include in their monitoring. The "*Danish Act on ECEC*" was revised due to a governmental wish to strengthen the local monitoring, and yet keep a trust-based monitoring model enabling municipalities to find local solutions, using local facilities for addressing local challenges and opportunities. The wish to strengthen local monitoring was related to a new

[55] https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2022/985

legislation on minimum child-staff ratio, and a national evaluation of the quality of the learning environment indication that standards in some ECEC settings needed improvement. Under the new requirements for monitoring ECEC, local authorities must describe and publish their monitoring model, which must include the following elements:

- being based on *The Pedagogical Foundation of the Learning Framework*
- conduct announced and unannounced visits in ECEC settings
- ensure impartiality
- base monitoring on both quantitative and qualitative data, including observations in ECEC settings
- engage in dialogues with staff and manager
- report, follow up and publish monitoring reports for ECEC settings, and a common report for family day care settings, at least every 2nd year
- in 'worrying cases', the municipality must conduct a stricter monitoring of the ECEC setting
- in 'particularly worrying cases', action plans must be made, including hearing of the parental board, and a follow-up process for quality improvement must be ensured.

In addition to the above, municipality are required to:

- ensure evaluation of their local pedagogical curriculum at least every two years,
- ensure that children's perspectives are included in the evaluations of ECEC settings,
- the local political board must debate the status of their ECEC settings at least every two years.

To support municipalities in dealing with these new requirements, a national team for supporting monitoring of quality in ECEC facility services was established. The team is based at the National Agency for Education and Quality, under the Ministry of Children and Education. The national team must offer supervision and guidance to the local municipalities; it offers knowledge on monitoring, on legislation and provides practical examples about monitoring practices, and the participants discuss dilemmas of monitoring. The support is offered as either individual support and advice (coaching), networks on common challenges, or webinars on identified challenges related to monitoring of quality.

The national team for supporting monitoring of quality in ECEC has also carried out a mapping on the 98 municipalities' models of monitoring quality as published on their websites. The analysis led to a categorization of municipalities that do not meet the new legislative requirements of the legislation to municipalities having developed monitoring models of promising practice.

- As the role of the national team is to provide counselling and supervision on monitoring ECEC quality for local authorities who seek advice, it does not have a mandate to carry out sanctions in case municipalities do not meet the new requirements. The municipalities that do not meet requirements will be contacted and offered support to do so.
- The municipalities that developed a promising practice will also be contacted, to provide inspiration for other municipalities.

So far, 11 municipalities have participated in either 1:1 and/or networks of directly aimed counselling and supervision support (including two urgent cases). An additional group of 6 municipalities has participated in a knowledge sharing network. Finally, approximately

3/4 of the municipalities has participated in webinars or conference activities offering guidance in elements of monitoring quality development in ECEC. This indicates that most municipalities are engaging in development processes, and the immediate evaluation of the team activities looks promising. Approximately ¼ of the municipalities have not yet reached out for support of the national monitoring team, nor participated in collaboration activities. Comparing this data with those derived from the mapping of monitoring models, it emerges that many of these municipalities have already implemented their new monitoring models. These municipalities will be however contacted by the national support team to engage in a dialogue and learn about challenges and opportunities they are experiencing and explore if guidance is needed.

Even if the new legislative requirements and the national support team has been operating for only one year, some key-elements related to the successful implementation of the initiative can already be identified:

- the trust-based approach adopted for engaging in dialogues with local authorities ensured that the support offered was relevant and addressing their actual needs, as otherwise municipalities could have chosen to decline the collaboration;
- the continuous dialogue with municipalities not only allowed the national support team to understand how improvement is happening, but also to collect a variation of promising monitoring practice which are disseminated for the benefits of other municipalities, that might be struggling in meeting the new requirements;
- the networking of municipalities strengthened the policy-making capacity of local administrators through peer-learning and cooperation activities, which were research-oriented;
  the collection of data on areas of the legislation posing challenges to municipalities might support the development of policy recommendations suggesting adjustment or clarification of the new legislative requirements.

The Primokiz approach: working with local governments to develop a local integrated early childhood strategy based on local data and needs analysis

Primokiz is an evidence-based program developed by the Jacobs Foundation and licensed to ISSA[56] for being used by its national members in their countries[57]. Whereas the primary goal of the Primokiz approach is not related to the design of M&E systems, it provides an example of how local administrators could be assisted in their role of developing comprehensive policies and cross-sectoral strategies to improve the quality of early childhood systems in their communities, by strengthening their capacity to collect and analyse data starting from existing M&E infrastructures. By employing the Primokiz approach, local authorities commit to collecting existing or new data regarding young children (demographic data) and the early childhood services in their respective municipality to learn about:

[56] International Step-by-Step Association

[57] The Primokiz approach has been used by ISSA together with the experience and results derived from the INTESYS project, with a focus on enabling policies and practices sustaining a more integrated approach to services for young children and their families provided at the level of local authorities. The main purpose of the Primokiz approach is to enable municipalities to develop comprehensive and responsive early childhood strategies that recognize and promote child's holistic development, the importance of early years and of quality services, the needs of children and their families, and the intrinsic connection between the different types of services that children and their families are provided with at the local level.

- the status of the early childhood system (access, affordability, quality, comprehensiveness, etc.)
- the extent to which the current local system responds to the actual needs of children and their families.

Guided by a *Primokiz facilitator* and under the coordination of a Local cross-sectoral Action Team (LAT) - which is led by a coordinator appointed by the municipality – the data to be collected and consolidated is decided at the local level. Relevant stakeholders at the local level are represented in the (LAT), including ECEC, health, social protection, culture, public spaces, etc. The consolidated data across sectors/services is meant to inform the municipality on how to best respond to the local needs in a strategic way, by establishing priorities and plans to address them on a short-, medium- and long-term, with adequate funding. The process leads to identifying gaps in service provision (children' or families' needs unmet), the areas for improvement on a wide range of issues: access, process quality, structural quality, local infrastructure, workforce. The Primokiz approach is a phased process and the key steps in the process are as follows:

- establish the political buy-in of local governments for working towards improving the early childhood services in communities to best meet the needs of young children and their families,
- set up local cross-sectoral teams led by the local government;
- carry out a locally led situation and needs analysis bringing together specialists and practitioners across early childhood sectors, local government representatives, families, and members of the community to collect data that will inform the development of the local strategy;
- based on the needs identified, decide jointly on short-medium-long term priorities for improving the early childhood services across sectors;
- develop a cross-sectoral early childhood strategy/action plan (or embed it into the existing local development strategies) reflecting the jointly decided priorities;
- approve, fund, and implement the action plan that promotes local partnerships and stakeholders' involvement;
- monitor the implementation of the plan outlined in the strategy or the action plan deriving from the strategy.

So far, the Primokiz approach has been successfully implemented by ISSA Members in Romania (21 municipalities) and Slovenia (8 municipalities, ongoing). The pilot implementation of the Primokiz approach has been funded by Jacobs Foundation in both countries.

The key elements guaranteeing that data are used effectively to improving the current situation were strongly related to the key features of the Primokiz process:

- ensuring the committed support from the local decision makers and keeping them constantly engaged with the process
- giving purpose to and establishing shared responsibility among the members of the local teams for the process of collecting, processing, and using data in formulating relevant local early childhood strategies
- ensuring the participation of different stakeholders in different phases of the process.
- ensuring committed local leadership in leading the process – leading the local cross-sectoral teams, conducting local situation analysis (data and needs driven), formulating priorities and layout a strategic plan for addressing them, as well as implementing the plan.

- making visible the results achieved from implementing the process (including using the data) to those involved in it and sustain the commitment to reiterate the process so that they ongoingly learn about the needs and gaps in quality and comprehensive service provision.

After the implementation, local municipalities are well equipped to iterate the process following the strategy development cycle, and using existing local resources (staff time invested, premises for meetings, technical support for data collection/processing).

Spain: monitoring the expansion of early years provision under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan by increasing coordination between national and regional levels

Within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Spain will invest in the construction of new ECEC facilities, the rehabilitation and renovation of existing buildings and the equipment for the creation of at least 60,000 new publicly owned places for education of children under 3 years of age. The focus is on providing affordable public places for children residing in areas at greatest risk of poverty or social exclusion and in rural areas. The investment is also expected to cover operating expenses, including the salaries of teachers, during the deployment of the investment to encourage the Autonomous and Local Administrations to the creation of up to 40.000 new ECEC places. The monitoring initiative aims to ensure that the action will be implemented according to set priorities and made sustainable after the end of the funding received under the Next Generation EU programme.

On November 25, 2021, the Sectorial Conference Agreement of Education published a Resolution of the Secretary of State for Education approving the proposal for territorial distribution of ECEC funding within the framework initiative of the National Recovery Resilience Plan[58]. The Program to promote schooling with new publicly owned places, primarily for children aged 1 and 2, had a credit of 200,790,000€ with charge to the General State Budget for 2021. The concession was made by resolution of the Ministry of Education and Training Professional and was paid in advance to finance the actions[59]. The following distribution criteria were applied for the allocation of funding[60]:

- educational level of the population aged 25-64, in each Autonomous Community, according to data consolidated for the year 2020 (weighting 40%);
- net schooling rates in 0, 1 and 2 complementary years up to 60% (weighting 40%);
- dispersion of the population, according to the official population figures of the Spanish municipalities (weighting 20%).

The decentralized educational system represented a challenge to monitor the initiative as it could produce imbalances in the use of common indicators. Such challenge has been overcome by coordinating state and regional levels as follows:

- each education administration, within its respective scope of action, exercises certain powers support and facilitate self-evaluation of the newly created ECEC institutions,

[58] The action was funded for total amount of 200,790,000.00 € under the component 21 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan: "*Modernization and digitization of the education system, including education from 0-3 years*".
[59] In accordance with article 34.4 of Law 47/2003, of November 26, General Budgetary.
[60] The final distribution percentage comes from the result of the weighting of the three distribution criteria described, also in relation to the -population 0-2 years (latest definitive data on 01/01/2020, published on 01/21/2021).

- draw up and carry out plans for the evaluation of ECEC institutions, which will consider the socio-economic and cultural situations of families and pupils, as well as the environment where ECEC are established and its resources,
- draw up plans for the assessment of the management function to improve the functioning of ECEC settings,
- encourage ECEC institutions to draw up proposals for improving the pedagogical quality and equity of education and guide teaching practice.

Based on the commitments acquired within the framework of the schooling promotion program, a questionnaire has been drawn up that includes the most highlights of the implementation of the measure in each territory. In order to have information most up-to-date as possible, the deadline for delivery of the questionnaire was March 15, 2023.

The objectives of the program were established in the Agreement of the Sectoral Conference of November 25, 2021 and consolidated after the adoption of the objectives of Barcelona for 2030, set by the Council Recommendation on ECEC of December 8, 2022. In general, all the Autonomous Communities had already included these recommendations in the Early Childhood Education regulations, providing the legal instrument with which compliance with the recommendation has been requested.

With specific reference to the initiative described above, the key elements to successfully use the M&E results to improve ECEC policy could be summarised as follows:

- developing common indicators to be used for data collection,
- adopt a constant communication among all stakeholders,

gain the commitment from local authorities by sharing responsibilities for the monitoring process with them.

Slovenia: developing a comprehensive Quality Assessment and Assurance model

In Slovenia preschool education has been an integral part of the education system – with responsibilities for regulation and funding set at central level under the authority of the Ministry of Education (MVI) – since 1993. Preschool education is organized as a public service (very limited share of private provision exists) and the government is responsible for the national policy, the legislative framework and the general programme of preschool education. The main roles and functions of the different bodies responsible for quality assessment and assurance (QAA) of early childhood and school education are defined in the law[61], with specific reference to:

- national evaluation studies and piloting of innovations,
- external evaluation (inspection),
- self-evaluation.

The responsibilities for quality assessment and assurances are shared across different bodies:

1. *Quality and evaluation council*[62]: coordinates the evaluation of preschool, basic and upper secondary education programmes, and report to the Minister responsible for education. It defines strategies and the course of evaluation. It identifies common

[61] https://www.gov.si/zbirke/delovna-telesa/svet-za-kakovost-in-evalvacije/

[62] The competence in accreditation of education programmes and educational institutions is shared by the Minister responsible for education and national councils of experts (quality and evaluation councils), the members of which are nominated by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia.

evaluation issues, puts forward the commissioning of evaluation studies, invitations and selection of evaluation studies. The council monitors the procedure and report to the council of experts, the Minister, as well as to the professionals.

2. *Public institutes*:

- the *National Education Institute*[63] has the obligation to monitor systematically the effects of innovations introduced into the process of education. Its main responsibility is to monitor the development of kindergartens and school, provide support in transferring their knowledge into practice, and assess the quality of different practices. The National Education institute also includes the *National School of Leadership in Education*[64], that has the most prominent role in supporting school leaders and, also coordinates networking activities among schools and kindergartens with the aim to develop institutional capacities for self-evaluation and improvement;
- the *Educational Research Institute*[65] undertakes basic, applied research, and research for the development of educational programmes.

3. *Inspectorate of education and sport*[66]: as a constituent body within the Ministry, it carries out inspections of kindergartens and schools. The aim of the school inspectorate is to make sure that one applies with regulations and thereby protect the rights of children and learners. The areas of inspection include - organisation, - funding and - delivery of education programmes. Inspectors examine if the requirements for educational activities, compliance of organisation and exercising the rights of students and learners, as well as education staff are being met. Furthermore, it inspects if the education staff honours obligations and if pedagogical documents are properly kept.

In the last ten years, self-evaluation of educational institutions was the main issue in focus for enhancing the quality of early childhood and school education. The self-evaluation process has been since 2008 compulsory for all kindergartens and schools. The procedures and criteria for self-evaluation are not prescribed, as they are in the realm of the educational institution's autonomy:

- The obligation of head teachers to assess and assure quality with self-evaluation is specified under the Organisation and Financing of Education Act[67]
- Kindergartens have to develop annual reports on self-evaluation and the councils of relevant institutions examine and adopt the reports.
- In the scope of annual planning, the councils of kindergartens evaluate once a year or more the realisation of the annual work plan: in practice, the self-evaluation report often accompanies the report on the realisation of the annual work plan. In this way, it is possible to make reasonable association between development and evaluation processes at the institution.

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[63] https://www.zrss.si/en/

[64] https://en.solazaravnatelje.si/
Together they developed a *Protocol for introducing improvements and self-evaluation in schools and kindergartens*, which defines quality areas to planning improvements, implementing activities, monitoring the achievement of the set objectives: Protokol za uvajanje izboljšav in samoevalvacijo v šolah in vrtcih
They also implement the *Team Leadership Programme for Quality in Kindergarten, School – From Practice* and another program *Programme To quality with self-evaluation*. The professional cooperation and learning of headteachers and practitioners (in cooperation with the Pedagogical Institute) is currently taking place. In order to implement and further develop the model of quality assessment and assurance in kindergartens and schools, the School for Principals is implementing an accompaniment Monitoring to the quality of management in kindergartens and schools.

[65] https://www.pei.si/en/educational-research-institute/

[66] http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO460

[67] Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja (ZOFVI) (pisrs.si) (Article 49 of the Law)

- The kindergarten's council can conduct critical evaluation of educational activities by individual classes or by kindergarten in entirety.
- All staff, parents and learners take part in the process.
- The assembly of pre-school teachers, council of parent and kindergarten council examine once a year the school report, assess the results and effects of the programme and policy, form opinions on the report, as well as propose changes.
- At the beginning of the next school year, the development programme of the institution and the new annual work plan reflect the findings of internal evaluation.

Over the past years, various projects led by the public institutes in education supported the development of the self-evaluation processes and skills of educational institutions for its implementation. Such projects produced non-compulsory guidelines for self-evaluation, protocol and collection of indicators, and tools the help schools conduct self-evaluation more efficiently, and raise awareness of the common understanding of quality in education.

Ireland: improving coordination of ECEC quality assurance and development processes: a system-wide review.

In Ireland, policy responsibility for ECEC is shared between the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE). The DCEDIY is responsible, in the main, for pre-primary education and care while the DE has responsibility for primary education. While the legal starting age for primary school is 6 years, children as young as 4 years may enrol in primary schools.

Therefore, the ECEC sector in Ireland is characterized by a centralised governance within semi-split responsibilities, and by a large share of private provision (mixture of private for-profit and non-profit services). Ireland has two inspectorates, reflecting its semi-split system: Tusla (the statutory regulator) and the Department of Education Inspectorate (which inspects the educational dimension of ECEC). Both inspectorates have roles in quality control and quality improvement, though with different emphases:

- Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) is a Government agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children, under the auspices of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (D/CEDIY). Tusla's Quality Assurance Directorate is responsible for regulation, supervision and quality assurance across a range of areas, including registration and inspection of ECEC settings[68]. Tusla EYI inspects all registered ECEC settings, focusing on both structural and process elements of quality provision and operational elements which impact on child development and welfare;
- the Department of Education Inspectorate, in addition to inspecting schools and other education centres, conducts education-focused inspections of ECEC settings that are in receipt of public funding from D/CEDIY, under an agreement between D/CEDIY and the Department of Education, and in accordance with the terms of public funding contracts for ECEC settings[69] .The Department of

[68] Inspection of ECEC settings is undertaken by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (EYI), the independent statutory regulator. The role of Tusla is outlined in the Child and Family Agency Act 2013.

[69] Between 2016 and 2022, the Department of Education Inspectorate only inspected the ECCE programme (for children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months), but from 2023 is carrying out inspections of all publicly funded ECEC, including provision for children aged 0-3.

Education Inspectorate also evaluates early education provision within primary schools (which can cater for children aged 4 and older).

Quality support agencies include:

- Better Start National Early Years Quality Development ("Better Start") is a national initiative established by D/CEDIY and hosted by Pobal (an agency that works on behalf of Government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development). Better Start promotes quality and inclusion in ECEC settings for children from birth to six years of age supporting ECEC providers to improving the quality of their pedagogical practices based on Síolta (the national quality framework) and Aistear (the national curriculum framework). Better Start's Learning and Development Unit coordinates the delivery of continuing professional development programmes and resources. As part of the Access and Inclusion Model, Better Start works to support the full participation of children with disabilities in ECEC settings.
- 30 City / County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are funded by D/CEDIY to work at local level, across the whole country, operating to Local Implementation Plans agreed by D/CEDIY. The CCCs provide a point of contact to ECEC settings and to parents, for example by delivering guidance on funding programmes, locating quality services, meeting regulatory requirements, information on the Access and Inclusion Model, and accessing capital funds. They also provide professional development training and mentoring to ECEC settings.

Based on monitoring data and inspection findings *First Five – the Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028)* – noted that the quality of regulated ECEC is highly variable, and that implementation of the national quality and curriculum frameworks for ECEC is inconsistent across services. Therefore, committement was made to progressively reform the ECEC (and school-age childcare) regulatory and inspection systems and strengthen quality assurance, with a renewed emphasis on self-evaluation, to complement and prepare ECEC settings for external evaluation. Ireland requested the OECD to carry out a country policy review of ECEC sector quality in Ireland, including a particular focus on ways to strengthen the quality assurance and improvement system[70].The OECD review of monitoring and evaluation in Ireland made a number of recommendations on aspects of the system for improvement, including the following recommendations on use of the outcomes of inspection and monitoring processes:

- review the statutory steps available for Tusla to deploy in cases of services that are falling persistently short of expected standards: strengthening Tusla's ability to take robust action for ensuring that speedy and decisive remedial interventions are implemented;
- increase ease of access for parents to user-friendly information about the quality of services, drawing on the results of both Tusla and Department of Education inspections (e.g. through development of a web portal for parents, which brings together inspection findings, information about financial support and other relevant information on ECEC providers in their area);

[70] The OECD review process involved:
- commissioning of a *background report analysing* the current quality assurance and improvement system (publicly available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d9ca-early-learning-and-care-in-ireland-oecd-background-report/),
- convening of an *international expert advisory group*,
- *focus groups with stakeholders*, including bodies representing *children* and *parents*, as well as meetings with *managers* and *staff* of ECEC settings.

- develop a stronger and more coherent infrastructure for providing quality development support for ECEC settings, as access for providers to external guidance and support for improvement appeared to be limited and patchy overall;
- strengthen arrangements for enabling appropriate data sharing between the national bodies with an interest in quality monitoring and improvement, including the inspectorates, government departments and other agencies, to support collaborative action, improve risk identification and to enable the integrated, holistic analysis of performance in the sector[71].

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth accepted the OECD's recommendations, and work is under way to follow through on the recommendations. In 2022, two inter-agency working groups were established[72]:

- an Inspection Streamlining and Coordination Working Group, involving D/CEDIY and the two inspectorates, aiming to strengthen coordination and collaboration, including data-sharing arrangements, between the inspectorates;
- a Quality Assurance and Improvement Working Group, involving D/CEDIY, the two inspectorates and relevant agencies involved in providing quality supports to ECEC settings, aiming to strengthen the linkages between the inspectorates and the quality support agencies, including strengthening referral and support pathways for settings identified in inspections as needing additional supports.

Although work in responding to the OECD recommendations is still at an early stage – and the results of the reform will only be seen over the coming years – the success factors facilitating the process of ongoing reform could be outlined:

- political commitment to reform, in particular to the enhancement of Tusla's enforcement powers, drawing on the whole-of-Government support for the commitments in First Five;
- a system-wide approach, reflected in the commissioning of a sector-wide review of the quality assurance and improvement system, as well as in the broad terms of reference of the inter-agency groups established in response.
- involvement of stakeholders in the review process, and a collaborative, inter-agency approach to responding to the OECD's recommendations.

4.4.3 Following-up on negative M&E results

Developing a shared culture of evaluation and building capacity at the level of the policies and practices are crucial elements for ensuring the ongoing improvement of ECEC quality in a systemic perspective. In such perspective, **the commitment of all stakeholders to strive for quality improvement can be sustained over time by**:

[71] More specifically, the OECD review found that a strong culture of using evidence and evaluating policies is apparent in the Irish ECEC context, and that there are a growing number of ways in which data and evidence from monitoring activities are being gathered and analysed to support quality assurance, with the different bodies engaged in inspection or regulation activities focusing on information relevant to their specific areas of interest. However, it also found that there is a need to explore how data and intelligence can be shared more easily between the various national bodies involved. It suggested that possible options for overcoming this difficulty could involve the development of a shared 'data lake' or central data hub which integrates the data and intelligence from each of the bodies into a single coherent database.

[72] The two inter-agency working groups established to respond to the OECD recommendations are, among other objectives, tasked with examining ways to strengthen data-sharing arrangements between the relevant agencies.

- **promoting participatory reflective processes** in ECEC settings, whereby internal and external evaluations support staff in the analysis, review and planning of their practice in a way that is more responsive of the needs of children, parents and local communities,
- **providing ECEC settings with external support** (CPD, pedagogical guidance, coaching) that help them to address their weaknesses and are responsive of the professional development needs of practitioners and pedagogical leaders,
- **coordinating the actions of all the bodies involved in the design and implementation of M&E processes** (inspectorates, educational/evaluation agencies, local authorities), **as well as those who are responsible for quality development initiatives** (i.e., pedagogical guidance and training centres, agencies at national and local level,…).

However, the above case studies also show that closer consideration should be given to follow-up actions when M&E results highlight a low quality of provision – which is acknowledged to have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing and learning – or worrying situations pointed out by parents. In this regard, the case studies illustrate actions that can be put in place to follow-up on the results of negative M&E results.

In **Ireland**, policy proposals aiming to enhance the enforcement powers of the Tusla inspectorate were made and approved by Government in January 2023. The need for reinforcing the power of the statutory inspection body Tusla to enforce immediate and decisive responses – such as closure or implementation remedial interventions – in cases where settings are falling persistently short of expected standards emerged from a political and public opinion concern arising from a 2019 documentary showing serious and significant breaches of regulations in three ECEC centres.
In **Slovenia**, the Inspectorate of education and sport conducts announced or surprise inspections at the suggestion of students, their parents or guardians, council of parents, or community of students or staff. If faults are identified, the inspection can be repeated.
In **Cyprus**, annual visits are carried out by the education inspectorate both in public and private preschool provision (3-6). During the visits, the officers will go through documentation, observe practices and have interviews with staff and parents. If any issues arise regarding structural or process quality letters are forwarded to kindergartens with comments/suggestions that need to address and report back in a specific timeframe. In private settings, if serious issues arise regarding the law or health and safety, reports/suggestions are forwarded to a special independent committee for private schools to decide on the next steps. In case of complaints or serious issues detected in public settings, inspectors may undertake more visits to evaluate a specific aspect of provision under attention, with a view to ensure that practice are improved.
In the **Flemish Community of Belgium** two agencies are responsible for quality assurance and development of ECEC provision for children under the age of 3: the Governmental Agency of the Minister of Welfare, Health and Family (*Opgroeien* - formerly Kind & Gezin) and the Care Inspectorate Agency of the Minister of Welfare, Health and Family (*Zorginspectie*). The two agencies are entrusted with different responsibilities, but they closely collaborate in relation to monitoring and developing quality of ECEC services for young children.

The Governmental Agency of the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Family (*Opgroeien*) is entrusted with the following responsibilities:
- preparing policy and giving policy advice to the Ministry, as well as implementing the policy laid down by the Ministry;
- advising the Ministry on the required qualifications and competences of staff working in ECEC settings;
- checking compliance with the requirements to obtain a license to start a ECEC settings for children under 3 and issuing the license (every individual setting has to have a license);
- following-up and enforcement of the outcomes of the on-site visits conducted by the Care Inspectorate Agency (as specified below);
- ensuring a balanced distribution of the budget released by the Flemish Government for the creation of new places and for the retention of existing places over the different regions/municipalities based on objective parameters;
- collaborating with, and supporting, local authorities in their local director's role;
- informing families with young children.

The Care Inspectorate Agency of the Minister of Welfare, Health and Family (*Zorginspectie*) is, amongst others, entrusted with the responsibility of conducting external evaluation of all ECEC settings for children under 3 years. During this visit, the inspectors from the Care Inspectorate Agency check whether the legal requirements are being met and monitor and evaluate the pedagogical quality on-site. Reports with the findings of the inspectors are shared with the governmental agency *Opgroeien* (formerly Kind & Gezin). Based on these findings and the advice of the inspector, the governmental agency is responsible to ensure the follow-up (enforcement) of the on-site visit. During the visits, inspectors use the MeMoQ instrument [73] to monitor and evaluate the process/pedagogical quality in ECEC settings. The results obtained with this instrument are integrated in the final report of the on-site visit.

Due to a major crisis in some ECEC settings for under 3, a series of initiatives were developed – both at center and system level – to strengthen the quality of ECEC provision by:
- starting from existing tools or methods to monitor and evaluate quality (structural and process quality);
- using available monitoring results;
- taking into account all implicated and most relevant stakeholders (parents, settings, providers, local authorities, the Flemish Government,…).

Coordinated actions are still at this moment being implemented, with specific reference to both center and system levels.

The main initiatives at center level are:

- increasing the professionalism of staff by raising the level of qualification: this is not a stand-alone initiative, but rather part of a comprehensive strategic project to increase the professionalism in ECEC settings for children under 3 years. Since 1 April 2022, everyone with a degree of at least Bachelor's level (regardless the specialization or field of study) is eligible to be recruited for the position of childcare worker or leader in a setting for children under 3 years;

[73] https://www.kindengezin.be/nl/professionelen/sector/kinderopvang/kwaliteit-de-opvang/pedagogische-aanpak

- providing coaching instead of foreseeing solely enforcement or immediate closure of an ECEC setting as follow-up of a “negative” report of the Care Inspectorate. The objective is to engage in an intensive support process with the provider for 4 weeks. The aim is to be strongly present on the work floor (e.g. daily or during a number of half-days per week). A definitive decision will be made after the Care Inspectorate revisited the individual setting after those 4 weeks to check if the previous observed shortcomings are tackled properly or to check if the provider is sufficiently equipped to tackle the previous observed shortcomings and/or to prevent future ones;
- better screening of starters (competences and organizational skills), before issuing a license to ECEC settings for children under 3 years. To this end, an exploratory conversation will be held between the future provider and a representative of the governmental agency mainly to examine the competences and the policy-making capacity of the provider. The aim is to assess whether the provider will be able to manage the setting taking into account every aspect: human resources, finance, administration, pedagogical knowledge, providing pedagogical support, knowledge of the development of children, etc. Guiding principles to help to conduct this conversation will be developed. The result of this conversation will be documented;
- increasing the frequency of the on-site visits of the Care Inspectorate in combination with introducing visits of the Care Inspectorate as an immediate response after complaints received from parents or other third parties.
In order to be able to reach some of the objectives above, supplementary inspectors are to be recruited as well as supplementary staff in the governmental agency in order to be able to guarantee the follow-up of the on-site visits[74].

The main initiatives at system level are:
- conducting a benchmark study concerning the number of children per adult in ECEC settings for children under-3 in comparable countries and analyze what would be the impact of a modified ratio;
- start a follow-up measurement of the pedagogical/process quality in Flanders based on a representative sample (first measurement was in 2016);
- evaluation of the MeMoQ monitoring instrument used by the inspectors in order to evaluate the process/pedagogical quality in individual settings, to assess whether it should be revised, adapted, fine-tuned or complemented with other tools;
- increasing the transparency of M&E results for parents: the reports with the findings of the Care Inspectorate will be made public as well as the follow-up actions undertaken (what measures have been taken to improve quality and why);
- optimize the collaboration with the Care Inspectorate Agency including the exchange of information. This includes making agreements regarding the procedure for follow-up inspections, integrate the view of the Care Inspectorate in the evaluation of specific cases and let the Care Inspectorate participate in the risk assessment of individual settings;
- analysing the internal procedures in the governmental agency (that is responsible for the follow-up of the on-site visits) in combination with making the IT-system more performant to allow data-mining. In time, based on the information in the IT system, gathered from complaints, reports, information from external partners or collected from the dialogue with the provider, this data mining should allow to detect patterns and to make better predictions of possible risks or poor quality[75].

[74] The Flemish government has foreseen a budget of more than 8 million to do this.

[75] A budget of more than 1 million has been foreseen by the Flemish government to make the existing IT-system more performant.

5. Pointers for policy developments

It has long been recognised that while M&E of ECEC has the potential to be associated with positive impacts on ECEC quality and practices, the mere existence of an M&E process for assessing ECEC quality is not enough on its own to promote quality improvement in ECEC services, policies and systems. **M&E systems are better positioned to promote improvements in ECEC if they are designed to be coherent, coordinated, and optimised across vertical and horizontal levels of an ECEC system.** This can be achieved by, for example:

- **Establishing a shared understanding of quality - ideally covering the entire sector by adopting a common approach to ECEC - as starting point**:
    - defining a clear legislative framework (setting out the purposes, values and principles underlying M&E)
    - developing a pedagogical framework (quality or curricular framework) for ECEC
    - ensuring that quality frameworks for 0-3 and 3-6 provision in split systems work together to promote pedagogical continuity and smooth transitions for children and families
- **Consulting with end-users to understand which data would be most useful to support quality improvement**:
    - using evidence as a basis for engaging stakeholders in the discussion of a coherent set of indicators in line with the agreed pedagogical framework (research-informed discussion)
    - when designing a M&E system engage all stakeholders in the participatory process of defining the relevance of indicators at different levels: centre-level (staff and parents), management level (national agencies, inspectorates, local authorities), policy level (policy decision-makers)
    - when reviewing a M&E system already in place ensure the buy-in of all above-mentioned stakeholders and seek expert input, including drawing on learning from experiences in other countries, as this could bring an added value to the debate
- **Collecting data around quality dimensions that allow children's, parents' and staff's perspectives to emerge**:
    - ensure that evaluation is experienced as something useful and important to ECEC professionals, so that self-evaluation becomes embedded in their everyday pedagogical work
    - ensure that the views of children, parents and staff are represented in both internal and external evaluation processes
    - report the findings of M&E processes back to service users for transparency
- **Developing data collection tools combining structural and process quality dimensions in a complementary way:**
    - make sure that appropriate tools are used for M&E of structural as well as process quality
    - make sure that all stakeholders involved in M&E are equipped with guidance and support to use such tools effectively for improving the quality of ECEC provision both at centre level (pedagogical practice) and system level (policy steering)

    - avoid over-burdening ECEC staff with data collection exercises (only those data that could be put to use and acted upon should be collected)
- **Developing an IT infrastructure to support systematic data collection and analysis:**
    - IT systems should be secure enough to guard against breaches and hackers, safeguarding that sensitive data is seen only by those persons who have the right to access such information
    - IT systems should be designed as useable enough to facilitate aggregation and analysis, and flexible enough to accommodate a range of indicators as well as developments in new or existing indicators
    - IT systems across health, care, education and social sectors should also be coordinated to allow inter-operability, thus facilitating the development of a comprehensive cross-sectoral strategy for the quality improvement of early childhood services at local level (across education, welfare, health sector)

Continuing quality development of ECEC provision relies on the commitment and responsibilities shared among individuals, professional teams, institutions, local/regional/national authorities and agencies working together for creating the conditions so that **all children - and their families - can benefit of the best possible educational opportunities to nurture their potential and thrive** within the communities they are living in. Member States therefore could make efforts enabling that:

- **All the actors involved in M&E processes have a clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities:**
    - professionals employed at central M&E agencies have the right blend of expertise necessary for fulfilling their role/s (sound knowledge of ECEC policies, research and practice) and to effectively coordinate inputs, roles and responsibilities across different levels of governance
    - professionals conducting external evaluations have a strong background in ECEC and relevant expertise in supervision and coaching to ensure that assessment of pedagogical practice during the visits are carried out in a context-sensitive and developmentally oriented way
- **Collaboration between the agencies responsible for quality assurance and quality development is strengthened to**:
    - increase the effectiveness of quality improvement initiatives by tailoring support measures such as continuing professional development (CPD) and pedagogical guidance to the actual needs of ECEC settings
    - closely follow-up the action to be undertaken in case of negative M&E results
    - facilitating the mapping, dissemination and upscaling of good practice at system level
- **A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of practice by investing in staff ongoing professional development and pedagogical leadership:**
    - offering guidance and support for providers in conducting self-evaluation processes (i.e. in-service training opportunities, digital tools, resources and manuals)
    - strengthening the capacity of pedagogical leaders for guiding ECEC teams in self-evaluation processes (including the design of quality improvement plans)
    - ensuring that internal and external evaluation are carried out as mutually complementary processes at centre level

- **A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of policies through shared responsibilities, strategic planning and coordinated governance:**
    - ensure systematic dialogue and exchange among agencies and bodies responsible for ECEC quality assurance and policy development at central level, to ensure coherence in policy actions following M&E results
    - prioritize a collaborative approach to M&E, where central agencies work in close cooperation with local authorities to enable the development of tailor-made approaches to quality improvement (which are responsive of the diversified needs and resources of each community)
    - providing guidance and counselling to local authorities which are responsible for implementing M&E processes in decentralised system
    - creating networks for facilitating peer-learning exchanges and dissemination of good practices

6. Annex

European Education Area - Working Group

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Template for submitting case studies (Topic 2)

Background

In the context of its mandate to discuss monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC, the European Working Group on ECEC is seeking to **identify good practice on the effective use of monitoring and evaluation results for ECEC quality improvement at the level of practice or policies.**

The objective is to support national WG members to develop coordinated systems for monitoring, evaluating and improving the quality of ECEC provision through peer learning.

WG members are therefore invited to draft case studies, which will be reviewed and analysed by the European Commission and ECORYS team. They will be shared with the Working group, either during online meetings or in written, and will be included in the 2nd Working Group report (spring 2023), along with lessons learnt from these case studies and policy conclusions.

Instructions for case writers

- **As much as possible, the case studies should describe national or large-scale practices. Alternatively, they should emphasise the conditions for scaling up smaller-scale practices which have demonstrated their impact.**
- **Please keep in mind that you are writing for readers who may not be familiar with your national ECEC system: the context needs to be carefully explained, as should be the specific concepts / words. Please do not use acronyms, or make sure they are explained.**
- **Please draft the case study in English if possible**
- **Please include as many links, references, resources as possible to illustrate your case study**
- **Please write no more than four-five pages when describing your case study**

Case studies, questions and comments should be addressed to EAC-WG-ON-ECEC@ec.europa.eu.

General information

Name of the practice/policy initiative (in EN)			
Name of the practice/policy initiative (in original language)			
Country			
Scope : effective use of M&E results for ECEC quality improvement	*At the level of* ☐ practice ☐ policy ☐ both	☐ in integrated system/centralised ☐ in integrated system/de-centralised ☐ in split system/centralised ☐ in split system/decentralised	
Geographical scope of the practice	☐ national	☐ regional / local	☐ ECEC provider (umbrella organizations, NGOs,…)
Timing	Start date: End date (if any - actual or planned):		
Has the practice been evaluated / assessed?	☐ yes ☐ no (but your case study is welcome anyway !) ☐ yes - but not by an independent organisation ☐ on-going; results expected by:		
Additional resources	Please add links to any relevant information sources / references:		
Case writer	Name: Job title: E-mail:		
Date of drafting			

Summary

Please describe the case study in maximum 200 words

Detailed information

Background: governance and infrastructure of M&E system

Please describe the system of M&E within which the case is embedded (Governmental and/or Independent Agencies responsible for functions associated to quality assurance and improvement in your country)

Purpose and rationale of the initiative described in the case study

What would best describe the reasons under which the case you are describing was initiated?

- ☐ We wanted to change and develop a policy/practice and we developed our monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in order to get the appropriate information and data to support this change
- ☐ Our usual M&E system produced some results which indicated that we needed to improve the quality of a specific practice or policy and we were able to use these results to make this change
- ☐ Our usual M&E system produced some results which indicated that we needed to improve the quality of a specific practice or policy but information was not sufficient, which led us to develop new M&E tools/processes before we could change our policy/practice
- ☐ Other (please provide more information below)

Any other comment/additional information?

Practice / policy which has been improved (or which is currently being improved)

Please explain which policy or practice you have been able to improve thanks to monitoring and evaluation results (e.g. staff professionalisation and working conditions, inclusiveness of the system or a setting, coordination with other services, etc.)

Description of the M&E initiative leading to the improvement of policy or practice

Please explain how M&E results have been used effectively to improve the policy or practice mentioned above with specific reference to:
a) source of information and data,
b) tools and processes used to gather these results,
c) actors responsible for producing and interpreting M&E results,
d) actors responsible for designing and implementing follow-up actions addressing areas for improvement (emerged from the analysis of M&E results) .

Funding

*Was there a dedicated funding allocated to the **collection** of M&E results? If yes, please tell us more (amount, source, uses, etc.)*

*Was there a dedicated funding allocated to the **use** of M&E results? If yes, please tell us more (amount, source, uses, etc.)*

Lessons learnt

*What were the main difficulties to **produce/gather reliable M&E results**, on different levels (national and local) to improve the relevant policy/practice? How did you overcome them?*

*What were the main difficulties to **use M&E results** on different levels (national and local) to improve the relevant policy/practice? How did you overcome them?*

What were the key elements to successfully use these M&E results to improve ECEC practice or policy?

Drawing from the case study, what are your 3 key messages / recommendations to other decision makers at national/ regional/local and/or European level who would like to follow a similar process?

1.
2.
3.