

24 November 2020

European Social Partners joint statement on childcare provisions in the EU

Introduction

As part of their autonomous work programme 2019-2021, on 17 September the European Social Partners organised a meeting on childcare provisions in the EU. This was part of a series of meetings bringing together EU and national social partners and experts to discuss how to improve the performance of labour markets and social systems. As a result, we have published the following statement:

General remarks

As recalled in the European Pillar of Social Rights, all children have the equal right to upbringing, high quality care and education for their personal development and well-being. Quality, accessibility and affordability of childcare are thus crucial to ensure these rights to all children in the EU, support disadvantaged groups in society and tackling poverty. Efforts are particularly needed to ensure care and leisure facilities to vulnerable children, such as children living in poverty and of ethnic minorities.

Available, accessible, affordable and quality childcare facilities are also essential for parents to work. Given that women are still predominantly responsible for caring duties, childcare is particularly important in increasing women's employment, thereby making an essential contribution to gender equality and tackling the gender pay gap. At the same time, efforts should be made to incentivise more men to join the childcare workforce.

The Barcelona targets on childcare were agreed by EU member states in 2002. Whilst the target of 33 % of children under 3 years old in childcare has been reached across the EU as a whole and the target of 90 % of children from age 3 until mandatory school age has nearly been reached, this hides large differences between member states and among different territorial realities within the same state. Unfortunately, availability of accessible, affordable and quality childcare is not yet a reality in all countries, with some still significantly lagging behind. This has a negative impact on labour market participation of parents and therefore on employment overall, as well as on gender equality. In contrast, some member states have reached and even surpassed the Barcelona targets, which means they no longer act as an incentive in such cases, whereas continual improvements remain necessary across the whole of the EU.

Beside a general issue with understaffing, there is also a shortage of after school hours and holiday childcare in Europe. This is detrimental for children's well-being and represents a major obstacle to full-time paid work for parents with school age children to remain in employment and increase their working hours, as well as attract more women into the labour market.

National childcare systems are diverse including in the funding structures, the share of public and private facilities and the modalities of provision, e.g. accessibility. We support effective investment in childcare, which ensures availability, accessibility, affordability and quality to all, in a long-term perspective - as enshrined in the EU's Social Investment approach. This has to be determined by each member state according to their national system. The EU's role is to complement member states' efforts and we support the indication by the Commission that EU funding through the MFF, the recovery and resilience facility and the European Social Fund should complement member states' investment in childcare.

The quality of childcare is very much determined by those that work in the sector. It is important to ensure that workers have the appropriate level of qualifications, good working and remuneration conditions, professional development paths, and that the value of the sector, including the educational value, is well recognised. These aspects are important in attracting and retaining staff and providing quality of service. Collective bargaining is a key tool to address challenges and bring about improvements in working conditions, in full respect of national industrial relations systems. Men are underrepresented in the sector, which contributes to gender stereotypes regarding male and female roles in the labour market as well as in society more broadly.

Social dialogue plays a role in developing practical tools to increase access and affordability to childcare, for example by creating joint funds by collective agreements to support childcare projects addressing specific needs of working parents in specific sectors, such as care for children with illness and disabilities, care outside regular opening hours.

Recommendations

In view of the general remarks above, the European Social Partners make the following recommendations.

To EU member states:

- We encourage EU member states, in particular those who are lagging behind in implementation of the Barcelona targets¹, to step up their efforts to ensure provision of accessible, affordable and quality childcare in a sustainable way, in full respect of national systems, including by:
 - Focusing on childcare provision in their national recovery and resilience plans, including qualitative and quantitative objectives/targets, objectively verifiable milestones and appropriate and economically sustainable financial investments in the sector;
 - Using the funding opportunities provided by the recovery and resilience facility and the European Social Fund;
 - Implementing country specific recommendations on childcare as part of the semester process;
 - Using the Commission's reform programme support mechanism;
 - Implementing principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social rights².

¹ So far, in Malta, Estonia, Ireland, UK, Latvia and Cyprus, the target of 33% was not reached, as well as in Austria, Romania, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia, where the rate was less than 25 %. The 90% target was not reached in Austria, Malta, Luxembourg, Hungary, Finland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, UK, Poland, Romania, Greece and Croatia.

² "11. Childcare and support to children: Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities."

- We encourage EU member states to support raising the 33% Barcelona target to at least 50% aiming for total coverage in the long run so that it provides more ambition for those already reaching or surpassing it, and to support introduction of a new target on provision of after school hours childcare.
- We encourage the collection of more broken-down data, unveiling the social and territorial factors of inequalities in access to childcare provision, so as to better define the specific as well as the overall targets
- We encourage EU member states to design their childcare policy always taking into account that public and private childcare providers need to be given a regulatory framework which allows for a level playing-field, whilst respecting that this is a decision for the national level;
- We encourage EU member states to promote affordable, accessible and quality childcare facilities, by highlighting the importance and benefits for child development as well as for employment, labour markets and gender equality.
- We encourage EU member states to promote the value of working in the sector, to ensure good working conditions including by strengthening collective bargaining and ensuring quality, stable jobs, fair salaries and adequate level of social protection and to take actions to attract staff to the sector, in particular men.

To the European Commission:

- We call on the European Commission to include in the forthcoming Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, actions to support member states in improving provision and quality of childcare and of tools and incentives to support the work life balance at work, in line with implementation of principles 2, 9 and 11 of the Pillar.
- We call on the European Commission to strongly encourage member states, in particular those lagging behind in implementation of the Barcelona targets, to step up their efforts to ensure provision of accessible, affordable and quality childcare in a sustainable way, in full respect of national systems. This should include better follow-up with member states where more forceful action is needed to implement country-specific recommendations on childcare, including by:
 - Encouraging member states to focus on childcare provision in their national recovery and resilience plans, including by setting quantitative and qualitative objectives/targets, objectively verifiable milestones and costings;
 - Encouraging member states to channel the complementary financial support made available through the MFF, the recovery and resilience facility, and the European Social Fund, to improve provision of childcare and tools to support work life balance.
 - Supporting interested member states to improve childcare provision at the national level by mobilising the European Reform Support Programme;
 - Promoting learning between member states and social partners on how best to improve availability, affordability and quality of childcare provision in a way that supports economic growth, is fiscally viable, and adequately takes into account employers and workers' needs;

- We call on the Commission to support member states in setting comparable targets and to ensure that a monitoring and benchmarking of member states' actions takes place at EU level. This should build on the existing work of the Council's Social Protection and Employment Committees.
- We call on the European Commission to gradually raise the current Barcelona target of 33% to at least 50% aiming for total coverage in the long run, taking into consideration also the quality, affordability and territorial diffusion (NB: For those member states that already reached the EU average of 35%, roughly half have already achieved 50% and the others have achieved between 37 – 49%. Therefore, this target would represent progress.
- We call on the European Commission to introduce a new target for provision of after school hours childcare.
- We encourage the Commission to support member states to promote the use of affordable, accessible and quality childcare facilities and the value of working in the sector, by highlighting the importance and benefits not only for employment, labour markets and gender equality, but also for child development and tackling child poverty.