

More ambitious targets are needed to ensure all children have access to quality early childhood education and care

EU Alliance for Investing in Children's reaction to the adoption of the Council Recommendations on the revision of the Barcelona Targets

The [EU Alliance for Investing in Children](#) (Alliance) brings together over 30 European networks representing millions of children, families, professionals, and volunteers sharing a commitment to end child poverty and to promote child well-being across Europe.

At a time when [over a quarter of children in the EU are at risk of poverty and social exclusion](#), the Alliance partners urgently call for the setting up of an ambitious European Care Strategy, well-equipped to deliver for all children. Combined with the proper implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the Strategy has the potential to catalyse political commitment and policy and budgetary reforms within EU Member States in support of children's access to inclusive, affordable, and quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), while helping to improve the quality of life of children, families, and carers. For this reason, [whilst highlighting several specific concerns](#), the Alliance welcomed the European Commission proposal and stressed the urgent need to adopt ambitious ECEC targets.

On 08/12/2022 the EPSCO Council has adopted the [Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona targets on Early Childhood Education and Care](#). The document **includes many of the positive elements** of the [Commission's proposal](#), such as the strong focus on the quality, accessibility and affordability of the services provided, the recognition of the barriers that prevent participation, the need to provide concrete support for formal and informal carers, and the proposal to introduce a legal entitlement to ECEC.

On the other hand, **the Recommendation missed the vital opportunity to show national governments' commitment in significantly enhancing children's access to ECEC services at the national level**. The European Commission's proposal recommended Member States to ensure that by 2030 at least 50% of children below the age of three can participate in ECEC. The Council Recommendation has now lowered this threshold to 45% and set up a series of different dynamic targets for different groups of countries. This development raises serious concerns.

These new dynamic targets concern Member States that have not yet reached the targets, set as late as in 2002, of a 33% participation rate in ECEC. The agreed text thus recommends these Member States to increase ECEC participation in relation to their respective current participation rates:

- By at least 90% for Member States whose participation rate is lower than 20%
- By at least 45% for Member States whose participation rate is between 20% and 33%

While recognising the utility of implementing a targeted approach to support countries with lower rates to set achievable goals, **we believe that the framework included in the Recommendation is inadequate, and likely to further perpetuate inequalities between EU states and regions**. Our understanding is that, according to the new system:

- Countries whose participation is lower than 20% (Slovakia, Czechia, Romania, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria) are expected to reach an average **20.3%** participation rate – instead of 45% – by 2030.
- Countries whose participation rate is between 20% and 33% (Croatia, Lithuania, Austria, Germany, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Malta), are expected to reach an average **38.6%** participation rate – instead of 45% – by 2030.
- Of the remaining ten countries, only Finland is expected to increase its rate from 38.1% to **45%**, because all the others (Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, France, Belgium, Portugal, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Denmark) already register rates higher than 45%.

This means that the newly proposed general 45% target would concern only one country, Finland. Nine countries will not be expected to improve their accession rates, while the remaining seventeen will remain far under the Recommendation's main objective. This is unacceptable and set to fail millions of children across the EU.

During such a fragile historical momentum of interlocking social crises, these targets do not seem to reflect the seriousness of the challenges family and children are facing – and the necessity of our society to urgently support children's access to early childhood education and care.

The Alliance partners are striving to build an ambitious and fair Europe for children in early childhood, in line with international legal obligations laid down in the EU Treaties, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The adopted Recommendation epitomises a fragmented Social Europe lacking the political commitment to address the situation and a full understanding of the fundamental value played by ECEC in the development of children and building a fairer society. It is also detached from the EU's ambitions for a socially-just Recovery and Resilience building, response and preparedness to crises and emergencies.

In the upcoming years, the Alliance will work to capitalise on the many [valuable elements](#) included in the Recommendation and enhance the understanding of the importance of quality ECEC for children, families and society. We will also advocate for Member States to work towards the implementation of more ambitious national targets and demand a mid-term review of the Recommendation's implementation and proposed targets.

This statement was endorsed by the following partner organisations of the Alliance:

- Alliance for Childhood European Network Group
- COFACE Families Europe
- Don Bosco International
- Dynamo International
- EAPN - European Anti-Poverty Network
- EASPD - European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities
- EPA - European Parents' Association
- EPHA - European Public Health Alliance
- European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network

- Eurochild
- Eurodiaconia
- EuroHealthNet
- Learning for Well-being Foundation
- Make Mothers Matter
- Mental Health Europe
- Red Cross EU Office
- Save the Children Europe
- SOS Children's Villages