

THE CHILDCARE SERVICES SECTOR DEVELOPMENT: ROMANIAN SITUATION IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Summary: *Early childhood education and care services are closely linked to other social policy developments. Therefore the evolution of this sector influences substantially how social policies for the family are defined. In this article authors describe the current situation and the recent development of the early childhood education and care sector in Romania. The sector's challenges will be analysed in the context of baseline scenario regarding the evolution of population from 0 to 6 years. The analysis of the administrative data will be complemented by the results on the perception of Romanian parents regarding the development of the child care system collected through a quantitative research (questionnaire based survey) developed by the authors in October 2017. The results show a poor development of the nurseries system in Romania compared to that of kindergartens in a context of a country where issues of reconciling work and family life are quite difficult to reach for parents with low wages.*

Key word: *early childhood education and care services, social policies, family, reconciling work and family life.*

JEL classification: I20, I28

1. Early childhood education and care policies: context and development

Certainly the most important moment for the childcare service development in the European Member states was the launch of the Barcelona targets in 2002. These targets were set under the understanding that parenthood has a high impact on employment rate of women. The primary goal of the Barcelona targets was to remove the barriers of female labour market participation (European Commission, 2013). The underlying expectation was that if nations could enhance the affordability, availability and quality of childcare, mothers with young children would no longer face barriers to entering and remaining in the labour market (European Commission, 2014a, 2014b, 2013; Esping-Andersen, 2009). Member States were encouraged to focus on the creation of formal childcare arrangements that cover a sufficient number of hours per week to enable parents to acquire and sustain employment, in different forms (Eurofound, 2016, 2015). From that moment many European governments put family and childcare policies into place to help couples to have children and to ensure a good balance between work and family responsibilities. But childcare provision cannot be developed in isolation and should be explored in the context of other systems that interact with the care of children and the family unit (Matei, 2014).

Even if not many countries have managed to reach the indicators established in 2002 for the year 2010, progress in the development of early education services cannot be denied in any of the Member States. According to Eurostat indicators, in 2010, for the category of children between three years old and the compulsory school age, only 11 Member States achieved the objective of 90% gross enrolment rate. The situation for children under the age of three was even worse, with only 10 Member States reaching the Barcelona target (European Commission, 2014a, 2014b). In both cases, Romania has failed to reach the indicators (Matei and Ghența, 2018, Matei, 2014).

As many others European countries Romania has a split early childhood education and care system according to the age of the children, provision of the services being delivered in

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separate settings for younger and older children: pre-preschool education (for 0 to 3 years old) and preschool education (for 3 to 5/6 years). Currently, the administrative responsibility for nurseries (crèches) and kindergartens often organised alongside each other rests with the local authority. They are financed by the local authority and the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research (through County School Inspectorates). The first legal recognition of the ECEC system in Romania was made only in 2011, the Education Law no.1/2011 officially promoting the concept of ECEC in Romania (pre-preschool education level and preschool education level).

The most popular ECEC services in Romania are nurseries (crèches) and kindergartens. The nursery system provision started in the 1970s, but the level of provision has significantly decreased especially after the 2000s (see Table 1). Until 2001, the nurseries system was under the responsibility of Ministry of Health (being mostly based on a health model), but this has now changed and responsibility is shared between Local Counties and County School Inspectorates. The new legislation in 2011 brought greater consistency to the services for children between 0-3 years, a new set of national standards and curriculum for this age group being developed. But for the age group 0-3 years we cannot speak about a functional system of ECEC services, a major deficit being identified regarding the number of existing units, as well as on human resources within these units (Matei, 2014).

The kindergarten in Romania has over 100 years of tradition in Romania. The gross enrolment rate has successively risen over the time. But the positive evolution of the indicator continues to keep discrepancies by residence area, especially because of the various difficulties of access in rural areas (UNICEF, 2008). Until the introduction of the preparatory class in compulsory education, only one of five children aged 6 years going to school. After 2012 the ratio was seven out of ten.

Table no.1. Enrolments in childcare services (nurseries and kindergartens)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Nurseries	840	573	358	291	289
Gross enrolment rate (0-2 years)					
Year 2016: 6.4					
Kindergartens	12.529	12.772	10.080	3.769	1.498
Gross enrolment rate (3-5 years)					
Year 2016: 84.1					

Data source: INS: [SCL101A] – Unitățile școlare pe categorii de unități școlare; [SAN 101A] – Unități sanitare pe categorii de unități, forme de proprietate, macromregiuni, regiuni de dezvoltare și județe; [SCL102A] – Gradul de cuprindere în învățământ a populației de vârstă școlară, pe sexe.

These data highlight the need to continue supporting childcare services both in urban and rural areas through projects and specific measures on the development of pre-school education and participation in early childhood education even if the forecast for the 0-6 years population is not encouraged, but this is a constant of many European Member states.

2. Trends for the population 0-6 years in European Member States

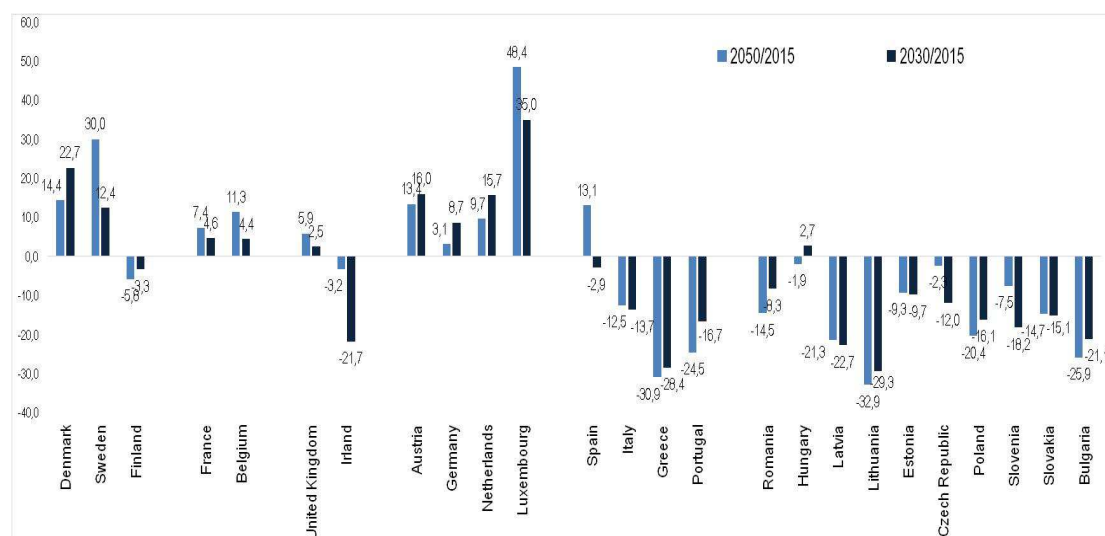
In 2015 the vast majority of European states had a low population share of 0 -3 years in the total population, below 5%, with the exception of Ireland slightly above of this threshold (6.2%). Differences are not significant between the Nordic countries: Sweden - 4,8%, Denmark - 4,1%, Finland - 4,4%. The Baltic countries show values close to these for the same year (Latvia - 4,1%, Lithuania - 4.1%, Estonia - 4.3%). Romania (3.8%), Bulgaria (3.7%) and

Hungary (3.7%) show similar values for the evolution of the 0-3 years population, although below the level of the Nordic and Baltic countries. As we move to the centre of Europe and to the Mediterranean zone, we note decreasing values of the share of children aged 0-3 years in the total population: Germany - 3.4%, Austria - 3.8%, Italy - 3.4%, Portugal - 3.4%.

For the year 2050, it can be noted changes in the share of the population aged 0-3 years in the total population, namely slight increases only in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe and Baltic countries such as Romania, Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia. The other countries are marked by decreases in the share of children aged 0-3 years in the total population.

For the 2015-2030 period, the most significant increases in the number of 0-3 year old population were estimated for Luxembourg (35% increase) and Denmark (22.7% increase), no significant changes in 2030 year compared to 2015 being recorded in share of children aged 0-3 in the total population. Significant decreases or very small increases have been estimated for former communist East European countries and Baltic countries: Lithuania (a decrease of about 30%), Bulgaria (21.1% decrease) or Hungary (an increase below 3% - 2.7%). It can be noted the situation for the group of ex-communist and Baltic East European countries for which estimates of the evolution of the number of children aged 0-3 years are pessimistic both for the period 2015-2030 and for 2015-2050, the only exception being Hungary, for which there is a slight increase forecast. For the period 2015-2050, increases are estimated for some of the Nordic countries (Sweden - 30% increase) and Central European countries (Luxembourg - 48.4% increase), countries with high proportions of the 0-3 year old population in total population for 2015 (see Graphic 1).

Graphic no. 1. The dynamics of the population aged 0-3 years, 2015-2030, 2015-2050 (%)



Data source: Eurostat, Population on 1st January by age and sex [proj_15npms]

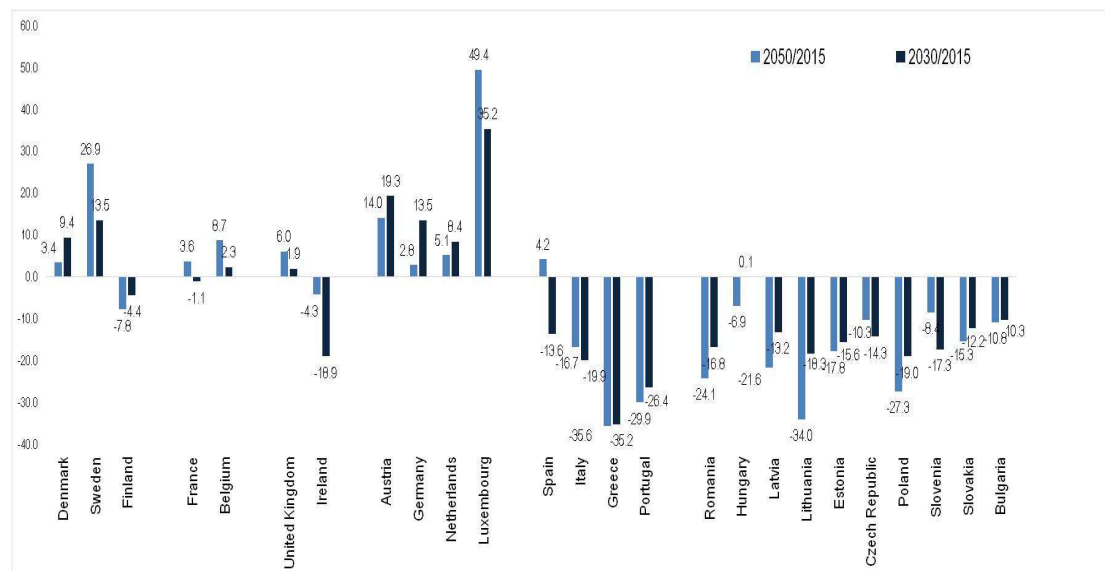
For the 4-6 year old population, the share of the total population is even lower, below 4% for all European countries, with the exception of Ireland, which approaches the 5% threshold - 4.8%. Germany recorded the lowest share of the population aged 4-6 in the total population in the year 2015, of 2.6%.

For 2050, it can be noted changes in the share of the population aged 4-6 years in the total population, with decrease in most of the countries surveyed, the exception being Bulgaria. The projections for numerical evolution for this category of population for the year

2050 are lower than those estimated for 2030 for all former communist countries, Germany, but also for Mediterranean countries (except Spain and Italy).

Significant increases in the number of children aged 4-6 years old are estimated for the Nordic countries (except Finland), Belgium, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg (the highest increase of 35.2%). For the same period, the most significant decreases were expected to occur in the case of Eastern European countries, Greece (decrease of 35.2%) and Portugal (a decrease of about one third compared to 2015) (see Graphic 2).

Graphic no. 2. The dynamics of the population aged 4-6 years, 2015-2030, 2015-2050 (%)



Data source: Eurostat, Population on 1st January by age and sex [proj_15npms]

For the period 2015-2050, the estimated increases for Luxembourg and Sweden are maintained and even more pronounced: 49.4% and 26.9%, respectively. Instead, the Mediterranean countries (except for Spain), the Eastern European and the Baltic countries will record decreases. From the last group of countries, Lithuania, Romania and Poland are predicted with the most significant decreases: 34.0%, 24.1% and 27.3%.

These demographic projections suggest that the demand for ECEC services will decrease in the future. The trend alone is not enough to compensate for the current shortage of ECEC places, which exists in almost all European countries particularly with respect to the younger age group (European Commission, 2014a, 2011, 2009; Lyon and Penn, 2012). Particularly Romania needs to take important steps in this area, especially for the age category 0-3 years.

3. Development of ECEC system in Romania: perceptions of parents

3.1. Methods and study design

A quantitative methodology was developed by the authors in order to identify the factors that influence the use of early education services (kindergartens/nurseries) in Romania, after a qualitative research phase. The main goal was to assess at a national level the overall activities of ECEC staff based on opinions expressed by parents of children enrolled in ECEC services using a survey based questionnaire. One specific module from the questionnaire was designed to assess the development of ECEC settings (nurseries and kindergartens). Two main issues were addressed: (1) development of ECEC settings and (2) main problems in ECEC settings (kindergartens and nurseries).

Table no.2. The structure of the sample

Target Group	Urban area		Rural area	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Parents of children enrolled in ECEC services (private/public nurseries/kindergartens)	459	55.6	366	44.4
Total: 825				
Methods/tools: Survey (PAPI/CATI) National representative sample Standard error: +/-3.5%				

Source: INCSMPS Survey, 2017.

The field activity was carried out during October 2017. All of the ethical considerations were ensured during the survey. Procedures for selecting participants were in accordance to the methodological approach for implementing quantitative research methods. After data collection, quantitative descriptive analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20.

3.2. Data analysis and discussion

In line with trends registered for the enrolment rates in nurseries/kindergartens, parents' perceptions about the development of the ECEC system are much more favourable with regard to the kindergarten, this being a similar issue for both areas of residence (see Table 3). Only 24.6% of the parents consider the crèche (nurseries) system to be sufficiently developed in Romania, while an approximately double percentage of parents (44.2%) have the same opinion on the kindergarten system.

The experience shapes the perceptions of the parents, the lower access to the nurseries (crèche) system in Romania caused mainly by the inadequate development of this segment of early education services leads to a high percentage of parents who cannot express an opinion on the development of the nurseries system in our country (about 3 times higher than the percentage recorded for the same category of response in the case of kindergarten system).

Table no.3. Development of ECEC settings

Type of ECEC settings	Respondents from urban area	Respondents from rural area	Total
Nurseries			
Sufficiently developed	18.5 %	32.2 %	24.6 %
Insufficiently developed	66.9 %	32.0 %	51.4 %
Can't appreciate	14.6 %	35.8 %	24.0 %
Kindergartens			
Sufficiently developed	32.5 %	59.0 %	44.2 %
Insufficiently developed	61.2 %	32.5 %	48.5 %
Can't appreciate	6.3 %	8.5 %	7.3 %

Source: INCSMPS Survey, 2017.

In the preparatory phase of quantitative research, during the focus group discussions with parents of children enrolled in nurseries/kindergartens, a number of problems in the functioning of nurseries and kindergartens in Romania have emerged. These have been systematized into the body of a question that has been subject to parental assessment at national level.

The insufficient number of units developed through the ECEC system in Romania was the main identified problem, more acute in the case of nurseries (42.2%) than in the case of kindergartens (32.4%).

Professional education of the teaching staff and the insufficient number of this category of staff in both institutions (nurseries and kindergartens) are also important issues that affect the functioning of the ECEC system. These issues are overcome in the case of kindergartens only by the problems that characterize the existing equipment (15.0%).

Table no.4. Main problems in ECEC settings

	Nurseries	Kindergartens
	%	%
Insufficient number of existing units	42.7	32.4
Poor professional education of teaching staff	7.9	8.5
Poor professional education of medical staff	2.2	2.4
Poor professional education of carers staff	1.8	1.7
Low number of teaching staff	6.4	8.5
Low number of medical staff	1.6	5.0
Low number of carers staff	2.1	2.2
Insufficient equipment	6.7	15.0
Unsatisfactory staff salaries	4.6	6.7
Can't appreciate	24.1	17.7

Source: INCSMPS Survey, 2017.

The opinions of parents, representatives at national level, support the process to develop consolidated policies in the field of early education and care services in Romania. In the context of the estimations regarding evolution of the 0- 6 year population the entire family policy needs to be reconsidered in Romania. The Nordic countries can serve as an example in this regard, the comprehensive childcare policies being one of the main characteristics of the Nordic welfare model (Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007).

4. Conclusion

Early childhood education and care services are closely linked to other social policy developments. Therefore the evolution of this sector influences substantially how social policies for the family are defined. The demographic projections for the population 0-6 years suggest that the demand for ECEC services will not increase in Romania. Unfortunately, at this moment our country does not have a system of education and care services developed to cope with existing needs of Romanian parents. Particularly Romania needs to take important steps especially for the age category 0-3 years.

In accord with the European Commission recommendations to develop research in the field of early childhood education and care, this article brings empirical evidences based on a representative survey for the Romanian population of parents with children enrolled in ECEC services that support the process of developing ECEC settings in Romania. The insufficient number of units developed through the ECEC system in Romania was the main identified problem, more acute in the case of nurseries than in the case of kindergartens. Professional education of the teaching staff and the insufficient number of this category of staff in both institutions (nurseries and kindergartens) are also important issues that affect the functioning of the ECEC system.

This article highlights the importance of integrated policies in the field of childcare sector. A well-structured set of programs and measures developed with a focus on reconciling professional life with family life can be a stimulating factor for families in their desire to give birth to new generations. A well-developed system of early childhood education and care has beneficial effects for family and employment policies, education policy and also for the all economic policy.

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