



The Role of the European Social Fund in Supporting Childcare Provision in the European Union

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Preface

This policy brief was developed by RAND Europe, which in 2011 was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to provide content and technical support for the European Alliance for Families platform, which became the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) in 2013.

The European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) was set up to explore demographic and economic challenges in the EU from a child and family-focused perspective. Its purpose is to share the best of policymaking for children and their families, and to foster cooperation and mutual learning in the field. This is achieved through information provided on the EPIC website, which enables policymakers from the Member States to search evidence-based child-focused practices from around the EU and to share knowledge about practices that are being developed, and also by bringing together government, civil society and European Union representatives for seminars and workshops to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

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The document is designed to provide insights into issues of interest to policymakers and practitioners. It has been reviewed by one of the EPIC external experts in child and family policy, and internally, following RAND's quality assurance processes.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.

The Role of the European Social Fund in Supporting Childcare Provision in the European Union

Emma Harte, Joanna Hofman, and Anastasia Sikiaridi, RAND Europe

Executive summary

- This policy brief discusses the role that the European Social Fund (ESF) plays in supporting childcare provision in the European Union (EU). Specifically, this brief looks at some of the Operational Programmes from the current funding cycle (2014–2020) which incorporate an element of childcare into their plans.
- Parents' access to employment can sometimes hinge on the availability of good quality childcare. EU policies relate to the question of childcare, social inclusion and access to employment.
- In addition, this policy brief categorises and compiles different examples of ESF funded projects from across the EU, which relate to childcare, from the previous 2007–2013 funding cycle, with the aim of encouraging new applicants to access the ESF.

1. Introduction

This policy brief outlines how the European Social Fund (ESF) can contribute to supporting childcare provision across Europe. It specifically aims to highlight the possibilities afforded by the ESF in this context and to inspire ideas for future projects. To this end, it provides a high-level overview of operational programmes that involve elements of childcare from the 2014–2020 funding cycle and also outlines examples of ESF support for childcare projects from the previous 2007–2013 funding cycle.

Childcare is high on the policy agenda for the EU, as evidenced by the Europe 2020 Strategy,¹ the regular monitoring of progress against the 2002 Barcelona Targets (European Commission 2002; European Commission 2013a) and Commission Communications targeted at improving social inclusion, such as the Commission Recommendation on *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*.² These strategies are often flanked by access to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), such as the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This policy brief will focus exclusively on the role of the ESF in supporting childcare provision in the context of supporting employment, children and social inclusion. The European Commission aims to tackle inequalities and promote childcare by encouraging the use of the ESIF (European Commission 2016a). For the funding cycle 2007–2013, approximately half a billion euros was made available for childcare services, although this was not channelled exclusively through the ESF (European Commission 2008). The ESF is one tool with which to translate EU social policy into practice. In supporting childcare provision, the ESF can, in principle, encourage parents into employment or education.

Childcare can be categorised as formal or informal. Formal childcare broadly relates to compulsory education, as well as after-school care, pre-school education, daycare centres and crèche facilities, where providers are usually professionally trained and qualified (European Commission 2008; Janta 2013).

¹ COM(2014) 130 final/2

² 2013/112/EU

Informal childcare usually occurs outside of a daycare setting by a provider who may or may not be trained and who is not subject to quality control or taxation. It can also include care provided by a non-parental family member (European Commission 2008; Janta 2013).

This brief is divided into two sections. First, it will summarise the priorities of the EU relating to employment, childcare and social inclusion and examine the role that childcare might play in employment, and gender and social inclusion. Secondly, it will outline the ESF's role in supporting childcare provision and provide examples of how some forms of formal childcare are supported by the ESF.

2. Childcare, employment and social inclusion

2.1. Considering childcare in the European Union context

The Europe 2020 Strategy aims to ensure, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the ten years up to 2020 (European Commission 2010a). Most prominent in this Strategy is the aim to address employment, educational attainment and poverty. The Europe 2020 Strategy has outlined a number of objectives that each of the EU Member States should meet by 2020. These include integrating 75 per cent of the population between 20 and 64 years of age into the labour market, reducing the number of early school leavers to below 10 per cent, increasing third level education completion to 40 per cent, and, importantly, ensuring that there are 20 million fewer people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission 2010a). Europe 2020 references the structural funds as central to enabling its flagship initiatives, of which there are seven (European Commission 2010a).³ The ESF features prominently in two initiatives which aim to tackle poverty and boost job and skills creation (European Commission 2010a).⁴

The European Structural and Investment Funds must bridge their work with the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission 2016b). The Europe 2020 Strategy stipulates that access to childcare facilities will be important in ensuring inclusive growth, which includes addressing employment, building skills and tackling poverty throughout an individual's lifetime (European Commission 2010a). Employment does not necessarily inoculate against poverty; however, the European Commission (2008) argues that the full participation of parents in the labour force can help to decrease the risk of poverty.

The Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 on *Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (2013/112/EU) outlines the importance of improving outcomes for children through early interventions. The underlying recommendations are married to the objectives of Europe 2020 in reducing the number of those at risk of poverty and boosting educational attainment. There are three key pillars to this Recommendation (European Commission 2013b):

1. Access to adequate resources
2. Access to affordable quality services
3. Children's right to participate.

³ Innovation Union, Youth on the move, A digital agenda for Europe, Resource efficient Europe, An industrial policy for the globalisation era, An agenda for new skills and jobs, European platform against poverty

⁴ European platform against poverty and An agenda for new skills and jobs.

The first two pillars relate to parents being able to access paid employment and, often linked to this, access to inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Both of these pillars advocate for the inclusion of parents by designing and providing childcare services that are flexible to parents' working schedules (as seen in the first pillar) and by including more children in ECEC by raising awareness of the benefits of these early interventions (European Commission 2013b).

Although the Commission Recommendation⁵ provides courses of action with no obligation on Member States to comply, more prescriptive mechanisms were established at the turn of the millennium. In 2002, EU Member States agreed on objectives towards increasing the number of children in childcare and enabling people with children to participate in the labour force as part of the wider strategy for Growth and Employment (European Commission 2008). These objectives are commonly known as the Barcelona Targets. The Commission argued that for many, especially women, parenthood can limit access to employment, or access to full-time employment, particularly when there is inadequate or no childcare provision (European Commission 2008). Although many Member States still have quite a long way to go, the Barcelona Targets illustrate the importance of childcare on the European Union's (EU) social agenda. Data from 2015 show that nine Member States⁶ have met the Barcelona Targets for ensuring 33 per cent of children up to the age of three are in childcare (Eurostat 2016a). Nine Member States reached the target of ensuring 90 per cent of children from age three to mandatory school age are in childcare (Eurostat 2016a).⁷ These figures have changed in recent years, highlighting how Member States can improve or fall short in the provision of childcare. Based on previous data from 2010 (Mills et al. 2014a), ten EU Member States⁸ met or surpassed the Barcelona Targets for children under the age of three in formal childcare, while 11 Member States⁹ met or surpassed the goals for children aged three years to mandatory school age. According to Mills et al. (2014b), the countries leading the way in meeting the Barcelona Targets based on data from 2010, namely Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and France, appeared to invest considerable sums of public funds in childcare.

⁵ 2013/112/EU

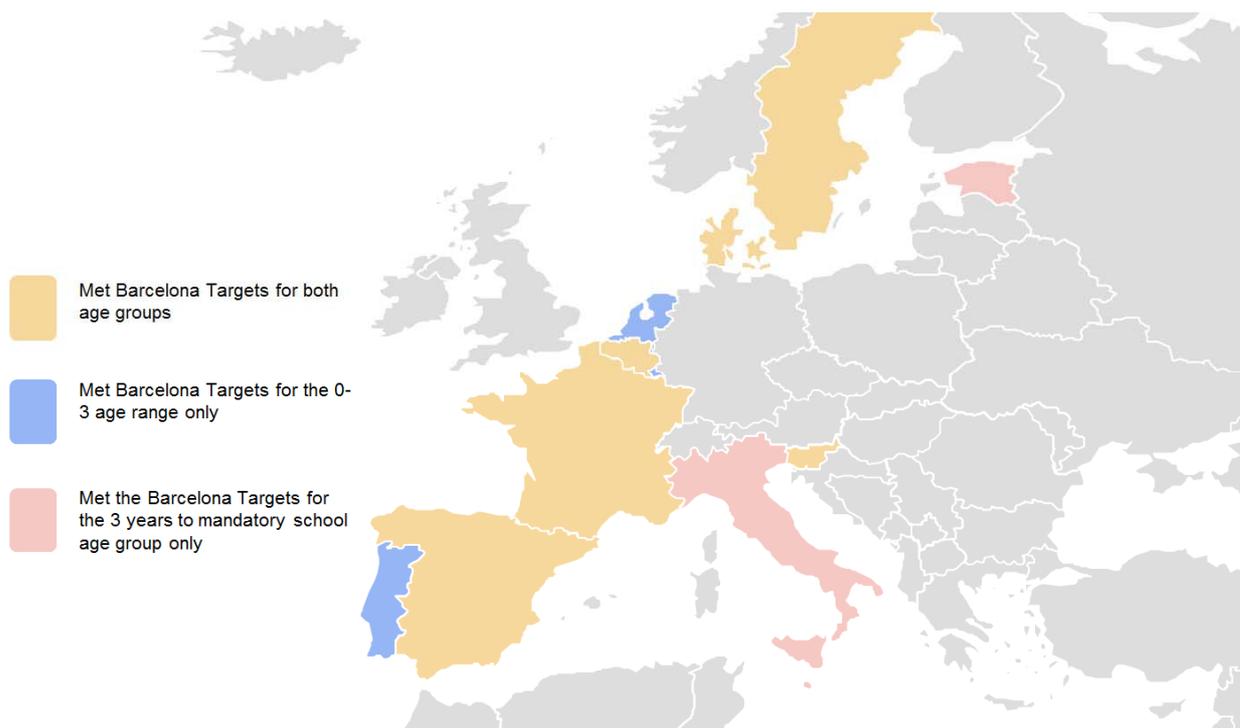
⁶ Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden

⁷ Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden

⁸ Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom

⁹ Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom

Figure 1: EU Member States which have reached the Barcelona Targets, 2013.



Source: Figure is authors' own based on data extracted on October 19th, 2015 from Eurostat, 2016b, SILC [ilc_caindformal]

2.2. Childcare and working parents

Childcare is more than a simple mechanism that allows parents to work; it has wider reaching implications. Childcare is a vehicle for parents, particularly mothers and those from vulnerable groups, to reintegrate into the workforce (Esping-Andersen 2009). Increasing opportunities for women to penetrate the workforce acts as a step towards diminishing the gender employment gap and the pension gender gap, which women who raise families rather than engage in paid employment outside of the household may experience (Mills et al. 2014b; European Commission 2013). The participation of mothers in the workforce is, on the whole, quite imbalanced across Europe. Mills et al. (2014b) showed that mothers are less represented in the workforce than childless women.¹⁰

Working towards increased social inclusion and gender equality, is a major target of the ESF's current funding cycle, and has been a priority since 2007. Women, more than men, can be marginalised in the labour force leading to lower levels of employment and full-time employment. Shifting perceptions of traditional gender roles may mean that women are increasingly expected to participate in the labour force while men are expected to become more involved in caring and parenting. Indeed, women's participation in the labour market has grown in the past ten years in the EU (Mills et al. 2014a) and will be essential towards reaching an employment rate of 75 per cent as outlined in Europe 2020 (European Commission 2010a). However, barriers to accessing childcare, such as cultural norms and costs, persist. Based on data from the 2010 EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), Mills et al. (2014b) explained that in half of

¹⁰ The exceptions to this were Denmark, Croatia and Slovenia.

European countries, 50 per cent of respondents approved of women with children up to the age of three participating in full-time employment. In addition, EU-LFS data from 2010 show that 53 per cent of women in EU countries between the age of 15 and 64, who do not work or who work part-time, and who have children up to the mandatory school age, do so because childcare is too expensive (European Commission 2013c; Mills et al. 2014a). However, affordability is not the only concern for mothers: one quarter of respondents claimed that the lack of availability of childcare services was problematic (Mills et al. 2014a). Another cited reason was that childcare was of insufficient quality (European Commission 2008). However, these reasons are only part of a larger problem and more information is needed to determine the impact that the availability of good quality childcare might have on employment.

2.3. Improving children's outcomes

ECEC can be of great benefit not only to parents who may struggle with maintaining a healthy work-life balance, but also for children in allowing them to harness valuable life skills. Often, unfavourable circumstances, such as being at-risk of poverty and social exclusion (ARPE) can be inherited from one generation to the next. Research suggests that disadvantage can impact on a parent's ability to invest in their children and that the transmission of inequality across generations is strong (Esping-Andersen 2008). Investing in early years interventions can promote social justice and economic productivity (Heckman 2006). Guérin (2014) outlines how socio-economic factors, parents' qualifications, among other factors, can impact on a child's academic success. Additionally, on average, academic achievement of children from low-income households lags behind their counterparts later in life (Guérin 2014).

Early childhood education and care can have a positive ripple effect on a child's educational outcomes and the benefits of early interventions carry over into adulthood (Esping-Andersen 2008). Such interventions have the greatest impact between the ages of 0 and 6 but their effectiveness diminishes thereafter (Esping-Andersen 2008). Additionally, childcare needs to be of high quality, and childcare staff qualifications also matter for care to be effective – this is particularly important in the case of underprivileged and migrant children (Esping-Andersen 2008; Vandebroek 2015).

In light of the empirical research, well-formulated family and social policies, and investment in good, affordable, quality childcare could contribute to addressing a number of disparities in the workforce, and in educational and life outcomes for children.

2.4. The ESF and childcare

Employability and social inclusion, including better outcomes for children, are core components of the European social agenda. The EU has a number of investment priorities which flank the main components of its social agenda, namely to invest in people through job and skills creation. Specific to this brief, ESF resources have been allocated to regional and local level projects to enhance childcare provision, to address gaps (either directly or indirectly) experienced by disadvantaged children, to assist parents in accessing the labour market and to make efforts towards addressing disparities in employment between men and women. To complement this agenda, the European Commission makes funds available to a wide variety of beneficiaries who are practitioners, companies and service providers, among other groups, by allowing access to grants to facilitate country, regional and local level projects. As the next section will outline, the ESF has provided funding to a number of projects which incorporate childcare provision into their plans.

3. The European Social Fund

3.1. Objectives of the ESF

The ESF is the oldest of the five ESIFs, established in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome to improve job opportunities in the Community. The ESF was created to promote the geographical and occupational mobility of workers and to help them adapt to restructuring sectors of the economy through retraining. Over the years, the ESF has adapted its focus to meet new challenges and needs. Nowadays, ESF support no longer requires an immediate employment focus. The ESF contributes to a wide range of EU priorities by promoting high employment and job quality, improving access to the labour market, supporting the mobility of workers, encouraging a high level of education and training, combating poverty, enhancing social inclusion, and promoting gender equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities (EU Regulation, 1304/2013).

There is one permanent feature that still makes the ESF distinct from other ESIF funds: the ESF focuses on individuals and aims to 'benefit people, including disadvantaged people such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants, ethnic minorities, marginalised communities and people of all ages facing poverty and social exclusion' (EU Regulation, 1304/2013).

Such a people-centred approach also allows for investments in ECEC that aim to benefit children and help break the cycle of disadvantage.

3.2. ESF organisation, management and funding

Organisation and management

The ESF is organised, managed and funded on the basis of seven-year programmes agreed in partnership between Member States and the European Commission, and implemented at national and regional levels. The current cycle covers the years 2014–2020.

Each Member State or region prepares their operational programme (or multiple programmes) to be funded by the ESF. Once agreed, operational programmes describe the priorities for ESF activities and their objectives, and fund numerous projects run by a range of public and private organisations. The operational programmes are implemented by managing authorities in collaboration with other partners, with the managing authorities held accountable for the correct, efficient and effective use of ESF resources.

The ESF priorities in each programme are the result of need analysis and decisionmaking processes which involve a range of stakeholders, from local government to EU level. In short, the EU provides a set of general rules that guide the use and management of operational programmes. This includes a general catalogue of options on which the resources can be spent (see Section 3.3.1). Based on this catalogue, Member States decide what they wish to prioritise (and fund) in their countries. These more specific instructions are developed by the managing authorities for each programme and result in a wide range of funding possibilities that vary greatly between countries and regions (see Section 3.3.2).

Whether or not and to what extent these possibilities will be taken up depends largely on concrete project proposals coming from civil society organisations, not-for-profit, as well as public and private institutions, which seek funding. Examples of such projects in the area of early childhood education and care are presented in Section 3.3.3.

Funding

The allocation of ESF resources varies according to the relative wealth of a region, meaning that the funds are more concentrated in poorer regions, which require greater financial support than others.

One of the principles of the ESF funding is subsidiarity, which means that EU funding should not replace national investments. Hence, the ESF contribution to operational programmes is further supplemented by either public or private mandatory co-financing from within Member States, ensuring that responsibility for its success is placed on a wider group of actors, including the government. This mechanism warrants that authorities from the local to the EU level have a vested interest in the success of projects and take ownership of their successful implementation. Usually, depending on the needs of the region, the EU can co-finance anywhere between 50 per cent and 95 per cent (in exceptional cases) of the total project cost (European Commission 2015a).

In the 2014–2020 funding cycle more than €86 billion has been dedicated to the ESF for human capital investment in Member States. Of this overall allocation, 20 per cent (accounting for approximately €17 billion) has been earmarked, in agreement with Member States, for activities improving social inclusion and combating poverty (European Commission 2016c).

3.3. ESF support for childcare provision and early childhood education and care

3.3.1. Thematic objectives set out at the EU level

For the 2014–2020 cycle, the EU set up 11 investment priorities, also called thematic objectives (TO).¹¹ Out of these, the ESF resources are dedicated to four of these priorities (see Figure 2):

- Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility (TO8)
- Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination (TO9)
- Investing in education, training and lifelong learning (TO10)
- Improving the efficiency of public administration (TO11).

Figure 2 (below) provides an overview of the scope of ESF support established for the funding cycle 2014–2020. The priorities listed below have been in place since 2014. These priorities provide the framework in which investments in childcare provision and early childhood education and care could be funded. According to the European Commission (2015a), investment decisions are based on needs

¹¹ Strengthening research, technological development and innovation (TO1); enhancing access to, and use and quality of, information and communication technologies (TO2); Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs (TO3); Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy (TO4); Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management (TO5); Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency (TO6); Promoting sustainable transport and improving network infrastructures (TO7); Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility (TO8); Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination (TO9); Investing in education, training and lifelong learning (TO10); Improving the efficiency of public administration (TO11).

analyses undertaken at Member State level to determine whether action should be taken under a particular priority or not.

Figure 2: Scope of ESF support (2014–2020)

Thematic objectives	Specific priorities as defined in EU Regulation, 1304/2013
 <p>Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to employment for job-seekers and inactive people • Sustainable integration into the labour market of young people • Self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation • Equality between men and women in all areas, including in access to employment, career progression, reconciliation of work and private life and promotion of equal pay for equal work • Adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change • Active and healthy ageing • Modernisation of labour market institutions and improving the matching of labour market needs
 <p>Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability • Socio-economic integration of marginalised communities such as the Roma • Combating all forms of discrimination and promoting equal opportunities • Enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality services, including health care and social services of general interest • Promoting social entrepreneurship and vocational integration in social enterprises and the social and solidarity economy • Community-led local development strategies
 <p>Investing in education, training and lifelong learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing and preventing early school-leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early-childhood, primary and secondary education including formal, non-formal and informal learning pathways for reintegrating into education and training • Improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary and equivalent education • Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups, upgrading the knowledge, skills and competences of the workforce • Improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems, facilitating the transition from education to work, and strengthening vocational education and training systems and their quality
 <p>Improving the efficiency of public administration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in institutional capacity and in the efficiency of public administrations and public services • Capacity building for all stakeholders delivering education, lifelong learning, training and employment and social policies

SOURCE: Adapted from European Commission 2016d and EU Regulation, 1304/2013

3.3.2. Opportunities provided at regional and national levels

Overall, a number of operational programmes relate to childcare provision and early childhood education and care. Table 1 provides an overview of a variety of funding possibilities outlined in the operational

programmes for the 2014–2020 funding cycle.¹² The summaries have been harmonised to the extent possible based on available information. More detailed information about ESF support in each Member State is provided by the managing authorities of each programme (see European Commission 2016e).

Table 1: Snapshots of operational programmes which include a childcare provision and/or an ECEC element in selected Member States (2014–2020)¹³

Member State	Operational programme
 Belgium	The Belgian operational programme “Investment for growth and jobs” aims to improve the social and professional integration of the most deprived people in the labour market in the Brussels-Capital Region. The programme will fund accompanying measures, such as support for childcare facilities for parents in training, and those looking for or starting a job, to facilitate access to the labour market.
 Bulgaria	The Bulgarian operational programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth” will invest in education (approximately €220 million) to improve key competences of students and children, including through innovative teaching methods. In addition, €110 million is dedicated to integrating children at risk of exclusion from education, and childcare institutions for children with special educational needs will be supported by the programme.
 Czech Republic	The Czech operational programme “Growth Pole” is expected to increase the number of three-year-old children in pre-school facilities by 13 per cent. The programme also aims to improve the provision and quality of childcare and education facilities by creating 3,000 new jobs.
 Estonia	The Estonian operational programme for “Cohesion Policy Funding 2014–2020” will dedicate 11 per cent of resources to social inclusion, reduce the rate of people at risk of poverty to 15 per cent by 2020 and improve welfare and social services. The programme aims to improve childcare options in the urban areas of Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu.
 Germany	<p>The German operational programme “Brandenburg” is active in the Brandenburg region and will invest in projects supporting sustainable employment and mobility, social inclusion, and education and training to boost skills and lifelong learning. The programme also encourages companies to improve the work/childcare balance. In families where both parents are unemployed, the programme will assist in improving educational opportunities available to their children.</p> <p>The German operational programme “North Rhine-Westphalia”, active in its namesake region, will invest approximately 20 per cent of resources to education, skills and lifelong learning, promoting</p>

¹² Please note the summaries provided below are based on brief descriptions of operational programmes available on the ESF website (European Commission 2016e). Operational programmes available on the ESF website were screened for the term ‘child’ to identify those that included specific mention of the childcare provision of early childhood education and care in their brief descriptions. Only programmes under the thematic objective of ‘Social inclusion’ were searched for. The study team could determine neither the exact total number of ESF programmes nor the total budget devoted to childcare.

¹³ This table provides an overview of programme provisions for childcare provision and the ECEC and is based on brief descriptions of the programmes found in English. Childcare is not the main focus of each programme, but features in some capacity.

Member State	Operational programme
 Greece	<p>good-quality schooling from early childhood through to primary and secondary education. The programme will support training for some 16,000 education personnel in day-care centres.</p> <p>The Greek operational programme “Attika” aims to improve the attractiveness of the region as a place to live and ensure social cohesion. The programme is expected to create 450 places in supported child care facilities.</p> <p>The Greek operational programme “East Macedonia/Thrace” aims to boost economic development and create job opportunities. The programme is expected to increase the capacity of healthcare services and supported childcare and education infrastructure.</p>
 Hungary	<p>The Hungarian operational programme “Central Hungary” is expected to create 4,500 new or improved childcare facilities, including crèches and kindergartens.</p> <p>The Hungarian operational programme “Human Resources Development” will support the transition of 10,000 children from institutional to community-based services. The programme will also promote equal access to good quality early childhood education.</p> <p>The Hungarian operational programme “Territorial and settlement development” aims to increase childcare capacities by approximately 18,000 new places for children up to three years old.</p>
 Italy	<p>The Italian operational programme “Basilicata” will invest 25 per cent of its resources to support disadvantaged or poor jobseekers and to improve the work-life balance for carers – mainly women – improving their employment opportunities and care services for children.</p> <p>The Italian operational programmes “Lazio” and “Autonoma di Trento” will invest in employment, social inclusion, education and gender equality. Both programmes are expected to facilitate access to work for the most disadvantaged people, including women, and to improve capacity of care services for children up to three years old.</p> <p>The Italian operational programmes “Piemonte” and “Tuscany” will support employment measures, social policies, and education. Both programmes are expected to improve socio-educational services in childcare. They will also support a better work-life balance helping women into employment.</p> <p>The Italian operational programme “Umbria” will invest in projects improving childcare services, in an attempt to bridge the gender gap in employment by facilitating greater female participation in the labour market.</p> <p>The Italian operational programme “Puglia” will support projects that increase the capacity for childcare and education infrastructure.</p>

Member State	Operational programme
 Poland	<p>The Polish operational programmes, including “Podlaskie”, “Kujawsko-Pomorskie” and “Lubelskie”, aim to improve access to high quality pre-school education for children of three to four years of age.</p> <p>The Polish operational programme “Lodzkie” also aims to extend the capacity of supported childcare or education infrastructure.</p>
 Portugal	<p>The Portuguese operational programmes “Alentejo”, “Algarve”, “Lisboa” and “Norte” are expected to increase the capacity of childcare and education infrastructure.</p>
 Slovakia	<p>The Slovak operational programme “Human Resources” will invest in improving the quality of early childhood education and care, improving work-life balance for parents and supporting children's development. The programme will also fund projects that support people from disadvantaged groups, including children, to improve their future opportunities.</p>

SOURCE: European Commission 2016e

The operational programmes for the 2014–2020 funding cycle have been in place for less than two years and they may continue until 2022.¹⁴ To stimulate new ideas and planning for childcare provision and ECEC practices in this extended timeframe, examples of the ESF funding for projects from the previous cycle are provided below.

3.3.3. ESF project examples at local level

Overview and method statement

The wide scope of the ESF and provisions at the national and regional level allow for variety in the co-financed initiatives. This section outlines examples of ESF funded projects that acted as vehicles for supporting childcare provision and early childhood education and care. Based on the thematic objectives and operational programmes outlined in the previous sections, the study team created four categories to group examples of how the ESF might support childcare provision and early childhood education and care (see Table 2 for an overview of the selected practices):

- Stand-alone childcare provision and/or early childhood education programmes
- Childcare provision as accompanying measures in projects largely focused on labour market integration
- Childcare provision as a measure of improving work-life balance, flexible working arrangements and gender equality in the workplace
- Other initiatives aiming to improve the capacity and/or quality of childcare.

¹⁴ The funds allocated for the 2014–2020 cycle may be used up to two years longer.

These categories broadly reflect the type of interventions carried out under ESF programmes. They also serve to tie these examples in with the objectives and priorities of the ESF, while leaving some room for flexibility and innovation in addressing persistent challenges and responding to the emerging needs of people in Europe.

The following examples come from the most recently completed ESF cycle: 2007–2013. They have been identified by running a search through the ESF project database for the terms ‘child’, ‘children’, ‘childcare’, and related terms (European Commission 2016e).¹⁵ The study team scanned through the examples in the database and selected projects for the funding cycle 2007–2013. The study team also ran an online search for ESF childcare programmes using terms like ‘ESF’, ‘European Social Fund’, ‘2007–2013’, ‘child’, ‘children’, ‘childcare’. We then selected 13 examples based on their apparent relevance, available data and relevant documentation. The study team also tried to ensure a balance in the case study selection between EU-15 and Member States which have entered the EU since 2004 (with the exception of Croatia) in order to understand the priorities and actions taken within each context.¹⁶ In some instances, information on these project examples was provided in the language of the country where the initiative was based, significantly impacting on our ability to process it. In addition, readers should keep in mind that much of the data on which these case studies are based come from European Commission sources.

None of the practices provided in this section are listed as an ‘evidence-based practice’ or a ‘promising practice’ on the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC)¹⁷ as their descriptions often lack the necessary level of detail.¹⁸ To the extent possible, we tried to gather information on the number of people who reportedly participated in each programme and on whether or not the project continued after ESF funding had ceased. In many cases, projects have not been evaluated, and information about potential evaluations was not (sufficiently) available to formally assess their success or effectiveness. It is beyond the scope of this policy brief to evaluate these practices. To this end, we avoid the term ‘best practice’ in relation to the projects outlined below.

¹⁵ The ESF project search engine is no longer updated and many of the projects kept in this are from the 2000–2006 cycle. Given that this policy brief focuses mainly on projects from the 2007–2013 funding cycle, we cannot give an absolute figure for the number of projects in the database relevant to this time period.

¹⁶ Note that some the examples are sourced from the 2007–2013 cycle. Croatia entered the European Union in July 2013 and did not feature in our search.

¹⁷ The European Platform for Investing in Children funded by the EC focused on child and family practices and programmes aiming to break the cycle of disadvantage and strengthen the capacities of children and their families. See more on http://europa.eu/epic/index_en.htm (accessed 23/09/15).

¹⁸ The project, *Les Castors*, was submitted to the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) and is featured in the *Practice User Registry*. The *Practice User Registry* is a tool which allows practitioners to share information on the development and implementation of their practices in the spirit of knowledge sharing. If practices have been subject to evaluation, the EPIC team will review the practice for inclusion in the *Evidence-Based Practice* repository.

Table 2: Overview of selected case studies

Project title	Country	Dates	ESF Funding
Stand-alone childcare provision and/or early childhood education programmes			
Quality in education – a step to equality	Romania	2009–2011	€719,476
Creating a nursery for multiply disadvantaged families	Hungary	2009–2012	€196,408
Childcare provision as accompanying measures in projects largely focused on labour market integration			
La Balle au Bond	France	2007–2010	€41,204
Young Mums Will Achieve	United Kingdom	2007–2013	€156,633
Les Castors	France	2007–2013	€334,436
Family Links	United Kingdom	2011–2012	€300,000
Childcare provision as a measure of improving work-life balance, flexible working arrangements and gender equality in the workplace			
Conciliación de la Vida Laboral	Spain	2007–2013	€16,128,547
Working for the welfare of the family	Lithuania	2009–2012	€1,100,000
The Success Project	Lithuania	2009–2012	€597,429
Part-time training in Hamburg	Germany	2010–2013	€596,080
Kindergarten for children of staff in the General University Hospital in Prague	Czech Republic	2012–2014	€266,919
Other initiatives aiming to improve the capacity and/or quality of childcare			
Busy Bees – Community improvement and employment	Croatia	2011–2012	€94,551
Valiflex	Luxembourg	2011–2013	€194,589

Stand-alone childcare provision and/or early childhood education programmes

Many countries and regions still fall short in meeting the Barcelona Targets and the ESF can help fund projects which address this situation. The Greek Operational Programme “Reconciliation of Family and

Professional Life” for the 2007–2013 funding cycle identified gaps in pre-school care provision and helped support pre-school education for children under the mandatory school age (EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion 2014). The examples below come from different EU Member States addressing specific needs and problems identified at the local level.

Quality in education – a step to equality, Romania, 2009–2011



SOURCE: REF Romania

Context

About 535,140 people who identify as Roma live in Romania – a number that is considered to underestimate the true figures, estimated at between 1.4 and 2.5 million (Radu 2011). Bacau, Buzau, Calarasi and Iasi are counties in the east and southeast of Romania with varying numbers of Roma populations, estimated at 3 per cent, 4.5 per cent, 8 per cent and 2 per cent of the total populations, respectively (CPHCC 2012). Roma people have faced discrimination and social exclusion in many European countries, including in Romania.

Data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2014) show that 45 per cent of Roma children in Romania between the age of four and compulsory school age attended preschool or kindergarten in 2010–2011. Research suggests that a combination of institutional and structural factors within the educational system led to higher drop-out rates and higher levels of non-attendance among Roma children (FRA 2014). In 2007–2013, Romania committed to addressing the challenges faced by ethnic minorities, including Roma, and to promoting social inclusion through the ESF funding (European Commission 2012a).

Access to education

The ‘Quality in education – a step to equality’ project ran from 2009 to 2011 and was led by Amare Rromentza, an NGO that aims to promote education in the Roma communities (Amare Rromentza 2016a). The project was part of the National Roma Integration Strategy, which aimed to improve access to education, employment and health services for the Roma population (European Commission 2013d).

The purpose of the project was to increase the number of Roma and non-Roma children in pre-school education and prevent children from dropping out of the education system. The project implemented an international curriculum for 800 children in 40 kindergartens in Bacau, Buzau, Calarasi and Iasi and facilitated access to pre-school education for approximately 160 Romani-speaking children (Amare Rromentza 2016a). The project also invested in training teachers, to equip them with the necessary skills to run the education modules, and setting up support groups that include parents (European Commission 2012b; European Commission 2013d).

ESF Funding

The project received support through the operational programme ‘Human Resources Development 2007–2013.’ The ESF contribution amounted to €719,476, with a total budget of €853,213 (European Commission 2012b).

Results

It was reported that this programme reached approximately 950 Roma and non-Roma children and helped encourage young Roma to complete their education (European Commission 2012b). The NGO Amare Rromentza (2015b) stated that a number of similar projects were implemented in the country (Amare Rromentza 2015b). No independent evaluation or assessment of this or similar projects was sourced.

Creating a nursery for multiply disadvantaged families with children through the active involvement of parents and the promotion of local partnerships in Battonya, Hungary, 2009–2012



SOURCE: Shutterstock / Pavel L
Photo and Video

Context

According to Eurostat (2016c), in 2013 more than a third (33.5 per cent) of the population in Hungary was at risk of social exclusion (while the percentage of children living in a household at risk of poverty was more than 40 per cent). Hungary was hit hard by the economic crisis, with unemployment reaching double digits in 2010, and social challenges affecting disadvantaged groups and poorer regions persist (European Commission 2016f). ESF funding in 2007–2013 was meant to address some of these problems.

Battonya is a town in the Békés County in the South Great Plain in southeast Hungary, with a population of about 6,000 people (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2015). Located in one of the most disadvantaged micro-regions of the country, its population is mainly rural and counts among it a large Roma minority. Common characteristics of these regions are, among others, non-competitive education (no further training after primary school), child poverty, poor public health and safety provision, dangerous indebtedness and low employment (Frigyes 2016). While nursery care is well-established in the South Great Plain, in four micro-regions nursery provisions were inadequate and nurseries in the Békés County were at risk of closure (South Great Plain Operational Programme 2007).

Combating marginalisation and facilitating local partnerships

The project was established in 2009 to create a nursery for disadvantaged families in Battonya through the active involvement of parents and the promotion of local partnerships.¹⁹ Creating an institutional network of collaborators was the core element of the project and it initiated a partnership with organisations such as Vis Medica Kft, the SUPPORT Foundation, Peoples' Friendship Library, the Supporting Association of Poor and Large Families, the Family and Child Welfare Supporting Staff, a nurseries network, as well as Serbian, Romanian and Hungarian nursery schools (European Commission 2014a).

The project aimed to integrate local services and to provide inclusive development support through the nursery. While also helping parents and children with health issues, the model included numerous activities, such as interactive playgroups, mentoring and health education.

ESF Funding

The project received support through the operational programme "South Great Plain 2007–2013." The ESF contribution to (and the total budget of) the project amounted to €196,408. The nursery project ran for three years, from October 2009 to March 2012, receiving ESF support throughout the period.

Results

Reportedly, 97 children and their families benefitted from the programme and 20 external experts participated

¹⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=46&langId=en&projectId=962>

(European Commission 2014a). While no evaluation could be sourced in English regarding the specific results of the project, the European Commission (2016c) reports that the support and development of the participants contributed 'to the improvement of both children's skills and parents' key competences and habits'.

Childcare provision as an accompanying measure in projects largely focused on labour market integration

Traditionally, ESF support has been associated with employment support and labour market integration. For many, limited access to good quality and affordable childcare is a barrier to pursuing training and employment. This is particularly true for single parents, most of whom are women. Across the EU many ESF projects aimed to combat this challenge.

La Balle au Bond, Seine-et-Marne, France, 2007–2010



SOURCE: © Shutterstock/Mila Supinskaya

Context

Seine-et-Marne is a French Department located in Île-de-France and has a population of about 1.3 million people as of 2012 (Insee 2016). Overall, youth unemployment is one of the main challenges in France. General unemployment in France has remained above 9 per cent since 2009 (European Commission 2012d), although unemployment in Seine-et-Marne was 6.9 per cent in 2009.

The total contribution of the ESF to France during the 2007–2013 funding cycle was €5.4 billion. The main target of the funding was to enhance employment and training opportunities (European Commission 2012d).

Support for families

In 2007, the Employment House of the Seine-et-Marne Department established La Balle au Bond project, a counselling service that offers 'made-to-measure solutions for young mothers looking for work' (European Commission 2011). The project offers bespoke services to mothers, including counselling, to help them reconcile work and family life. The service provided by La Balle au Bond project also involves analysing a family's social and financial situation and liaising with multiple stakeholders, such as employers, social services and early childhood workers.

ESF Funding

The ESF contributed €41,204 out of a total of €82,610 required to complete the project (European Commission 2011). Information regarding the details of the individual co-funders could not be sourced. The project was launched by the French Department of Seine-et-Marne as part of the wider National Strategic Framework.

Results

Reportedly, a total of 113 parents were helped by this project, 110 of whom were women (European Commission 2011). Of the beneficiaries of the project, 69 managed to secure the childcare facilities they wanted while 44 were trained to become child carers (European Commission 2011). According to the European Commission (2011), a second centre offering the same services was established in Marne la Vallée in 2009 (European Commission 2011). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Young Mums Will Achieve, Cornwall, UK, 2007–2013

Context

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is the only region in England categorised under the Convergence banner of the ESF. A total of £164 million (approximately €119.7 million)²⁰ was devoted to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly for the 2007–2013 funding cycle (Department for Work and Pensions 2006). In the UK, two per cent of non-working mothers with partners and three per cent of single mothers cited a lack of available childcare as reasons for non-engagement in employment in 2011 (Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2011). It is estimated that roughly 17,000 16–18 year olds not in employment, education or training (NEETs) were mothers caring for children (Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2011). Further, 74 per cent of NEET teenage parents are at risk of social exclusion (Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2011).

Cornwall Council is engaged with working with teenage parents in order to ensure they achieve positive outcomes and engage in education, employment or training (Cornwall Council 2014). According to Cornwall Council, teenage mothers are at an increased risk of suffering from poor mental health, and teenage mothers and their children risk falling into poverty (Cornwall Council 2014). Cornwall Council has therefore developed a strategy to reach young mothers under the age of 19 in order to reduce their risk of entering into a cycle of disadvantage, with the aim of having better outcomes for both mothers and their children.

Providing opportunities for teenage mothers

The award-winning project Young Mums Will Achieve (YMWA) was established by a partnership between Cornwall Council, Fit'n'Fun Kids and Cornwall College in 2009 (Fit 'n' Fun Kids 2016). Other partners included a network of social workers, midwives and youth workers, some of whom signposted teenage mothers to this initiative (Department for Work and Pensions 2012). The overarching aim of the programme was to enable young women to engage in education and training to improve their employment prospects. Prospective participants identified a number of barriers to pursuing such activities that the partnering organisations addressed. Chief among mothers' concerns was access to childcare, finance and transport (Department for Work and Pensions 2012).

YMWA was designed to provide increased opportunities for young mothers, between the ages of 14 and 19, to engage in training to continue on to further education and/or employment. This project awards qualifications to young women and has integrated childcare provision and transport into its model (Fit 'n' Fun Kids 2016) to ease the burden and to support the educational and professional aspirations of the women.

The project affords young women the opportunity to increase their employability and to build functional mathematics and English language skills, among other beneficial services (Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum 2014). The women are also offered access to on-site crèche facilities and a transport service to the venue (Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum 2014). This project is an innovative example of reaching young women at risk of social exclusion, to encourage their development and facilitate their accession to the labour market or to further education. The programme's apparent success led to the establishment of eight other groups across Cornwall (Fit 'n' Fun Kids 2016).

Childcare services were provided by Fit'n'Fun Kids. It was important to allow mothers to learn while ensuring their children were appropriately cared for, and that the women were not too far away from their children. As a result, the childcare provider scoped venues to source appropriate facilities which met the standards required by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Department for Work and Pensions 2012).

²⁰ In 2007, £1 was equal to approximately €0.73. This is based on historical exchange rate information found at <http://www.oanda.com/currency/historical-rates/>, as of 19 August 2015.

Information from Fit'n'Fun Kids specific to the first YMWA initiative has not been found. In its description of the YMWA programme for its branch in Newquay, Fit'n'Fun Kids outlines its policy of inclusivity and endeavours to cater to all children, irrespective of cultural background (Care & Support in Cornwall 2015). Fit'n'Fun Kids takes a holistic approach to childcare, ensuring that all children are included, irrespective of their cultural background, and that children's health and wellbeing is incorporated into the activities, as well as by preparing children to transition into primary school.

ESF Funding

The European Social Fund co-financed the project by providing €156,633 between November 2009 and July 2011 (European Commission 2012e). The details regarding individual investments from co-funders are unclear.

Results

The project benefitted from ESF support over two academic years (2009–2011) and, as a result, a reported 145 women took part in the programme (European Commission 2012e). Results from this period show that 95 per cent of participants gained qualifications in literacy and numeracy, with an overall retention rate of 90 per cent (Department for Work and Pensions 2012).

Prior to the establishment of the YMWA programme, fewer than 20 per cent of teenage parents were in employment, education or training (EET) in Cornwall; however, by the end of October 2011, this figure rose to 35 per cent (Cornwall Council 2014). Cornwall Council attributes this fifteen per cent increase to the success of YMWA (Cornwall Council 2014).

Although we have not sourced an evaluation of this programme under the ESF funding, the success and impact of the project may be demonstrated by the establishment of a number of other branches across Cornwall.

Les Castors, Pays de la Loire, France, 2007–2013

Regional context

Rezé, situated in the Loire region, is home to the micro-crèche Les Castors. The population of Rezé is 39,372 as of 2012, 2,851 of whom were children under the age of 5 (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique & Association nantaise d'aide familiale 2012).

Solutions for long-term change

In March 2012, the micro-crèche Les Castors was established as a 'short-term crutch' to support a wider programme known as Pas à Pas to get parents into work (Le Canard Social 2012). In this vein, the crèche welcomes children for a maximum of six months before another childcare solution is found. This service is beneficial as it allows parents to search for and engage in work, secure in the knowledge that their children are being cared for. The crèche is open between 7:30 in the morning until 8 in the evening (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique 2016).

The programme takes a three-pronged approach to childcare. First, it is adaptable to each child, placing a clear focus on their needs and patterns (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique 2016). Secondly, the crèche is designed to provide support to parents seeking to pursue educational or professional activities (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique 2016). An individual supports parents in their job-seeking pursuits and helps them to find a longer term childcare solution (L'Europe S'Engage en France 2016). Finally, the crèche creates a community environment in which children of all ages can interact, contributing to their overall social development (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique 2016). Flexible in nature, the service can be tailored to each family's specific needs and childcare can be provided at home, if necessary.

ESF Funding

Les Castors crèche requires a reported €230,000 per annum to run (Accueil Petite Enfance 2016). When the crèche was first established, it received funding from a variety of sources, chief among which were the European Social Fund and the Espoir Banlieue (Caisse d'Allocations familiales de Loire-Atlantique & Association nantaise d'aide familiale 2012). The crèche was co-funded by the ESF to the amount of €334,436 (European Platform for Investing in Children 2016) and the Association of Nantes Family Support (ANAF).

Results

Reportedly, 70 families have been able to access this service since 2011, in one of the three crèches currently in operation (European Platform for Investing in Children 2016). It is unclear if this programme has been subject to an evaluation. Nonetheless, the programme was funded in 2011 and is still running to the present day. This is a clear sign that Les Castors was a good intervention when it was established, and there is an appetite for its services.

Family Links, London, United Kingdom, 2011–2012



SOURCE: Pavel L Photo and Video/shutterstock

Context

There is no national figure for how many people are homeless across the UK, partly because statistics are recorded differently in each nation and partly because these data are difficult to capture. However, according to Crisis (2016), 3,673 people slept rough at some point in London during 2009–10.

Community Links (2016), a charity based in East London, has been working for 40 years in supporting vulnerable members of the population in the most social and economically deprived areas. ESF allowed the organisation to focus on homeless families with out-of-work single parents (European Commission 2013e).

Support for homeless families

The project was launched by Community Links in April 2011 and aimed to help people overcome barriers to employment and to deliver targeted support to homeless families in London (European Commission 2013e).

Recruitment took place in the local community by reaching out to places where jobless parents would gather (such as women's refuges and children's centres). Project staff chose participants based on their understanding of the local homeless community and their needs. The Family Links project involved several hours of intensive, tailored, one-to-one support and training to guide participants into employment. The support included childcare provision, if and where appropriate.

ESF Funding

The project received support through the operational programme "England and Gibraltar 2007–2013." The ESF contribution amounted to €300,000.

Results

Family Links ran for one year (until March 2012). According to the European Commission (2013e) the project reported that over 165 people enrolled in training and 25 jobs were created. Its success was measured by the fact that the original objectives were met mid-way through the project's implementation (European Commission 2013e). However, the study team did not source an external evaluation of this programme.

Childcare provision as a measure for improving work-life balance, flexible working arrangements and gender equality in the workplace

A large proportion of ESF support is also dedicated to improving the adaptability of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to changes in the workplace. Some of these changes reflect increasing flexibility of working arrangements, efforts to improve work-life balance and gender equality in the workplace. A number of ESF projects put these priorities in focus by facilitating childcare provision for people in employment.

Conciliación de la Vida Laboral, Familiar y Personal, Castile-La Mancha, Spain, 2007–2013



SOURCE: © iStockphoto

Context

Unemployment in Spain increased from 8.3 per cent in 2007 and 11.4 per cent in 2008 to 25.2 per cent in 2012 (OECD iLibrary 2013). Castile-La-Mancha is the third largest region in Spain. According to information from the National Public Employment Service's Jobs Observatory, the number of unemployed jobseekers in Castile-La-Mancha was 207,316 (or 5.06 per cent of the total unemployed population in Spain) (EURES 2016).

During the programme years 2007–2013, just over €8 billion was dedicated in ESF funding, complemented by €3.3 billion from the national budget (European Commission 2016g). Around €6.3 billion in total was dedicated to enhancing employability, social inclusion and equal opportunities (European Commission 2016g).

In order to combat disparities between the genders, the regional government of Castile-La-Mancha in Spain pledged €61 million in 2008 for projects aiming to help reconcile work and family life (Castilla-la-Mancha 2008).

Opportunities for employment

The project 'Conciliation de la Vida Familiar y Personal' was launched in 2007 by the Council for Employment and Economy with the help of ESF funding. The overarching aim of the plan is to help residents reconcile work and family-life. More specifically, the plan's key objectives include: 'promoting the employment of women, who more often act as primary carers; supporting the creation of jobs and businesses in the childcare sector; making it easier for local companies – especially SMEs – to voluntarily establish flexible working strategies that help staff balance work and family responsibilities' (European Commission 2013f).

Specifically, the regional administration made an effort to promote public policies that facilitate this reconciliation, within the framework of social dialogue. Several activities were carried out along the following three intervention axes: a) aid to companies for the implementation of reconciliation programmes, e.g. incentives for promotion for workers with family responsibilities; b) financial contribution for workers, e.g. aid for excused absences and overtime work; and c) training, information and awareness to promote cultural change, e.g. communication campaigns (Castilla-La-Mancha 2011).

ESF Funding

The total cost of the project was €20,160,684, and the European Social Fund contribution was €16,128,547 for the project duration (2007–2013).

Results

The project was funded by the ESF over the course of seven years. It was reported that approximately 34,000 people participated in this programme, 53 per cent of whom were women (European Commission 2013f). Company participation was also noted, with 48 reporting the implementation of measures to combat gender inequality, according to the European Commission (2013f). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Working for the welfare of the family, Tauragė, Lithuania, 2009–2012

Context

Taurage County is located in the west of Lithuania and is home to 127,400 people, or 3.8 per cent of the Lithuanian population (Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2016a). The majority of the county is employed in the service sector, followed by industry and construction, while agriculture also holds an important place in the structure of the economy (Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2016b). Affected by the crisis, the years following 2008 witnessed rising unemployment, which was intensified by low internal workforce mobility.

While childcare services are widely available in cities across Lithuania, such options are scarce in the countryside (European Commission 2012f). For rural women, this means that they often end up holding the traditional role of home-carers as they find it difficult to balance life, family and work (European Commission 2012f).

During the programme years 2007–2013, Lithuania committed to promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning, and to improving employment opportunities, among other commitments. Special attention was given to those most vulnerable to and affected by unemployment, such as young women with families. ESF funding for the total period amounted to €1 billion with co-funding from the national government resulting in a total of €1.2 billion. In Taurage, the Centre of Social Services of Pagegiai Municipality is committed to increasing opportunities for families to integrate into the community by providing information, advice and services partially or entirely free of charge.

Access to employment

The project 'Working for the welfare of the family' was launched in September 2009 by Pagegiai Municipality's Centre of Social Services in Taurage County with help from ESF funding. The overarching aim of the project was to assist rural women and families confined by the lack of available social services, such as childcare and nursing homes, in the region. Specifically, the project provided career advice and training in languages or computers for the women, to assist them with finding employment (European Commission 2012f). To help with balancing life and work, the project also provided care for children or elderly family members when it was needed (European Commission 2012f). The project was inspired by other projects in other ESF countries and by Norway in its promotion of social inclusion (European Commission 2012f).

ESF Funding

The total budget for the project was approximately €1.1 million (European Commission 2012f).

Results

The project ran for three years, from September 2009 to August 2012. According to the European Commission (2012f), the project had a significant impact as it 'helped municipal authorities upgrade their whole approach to groups at risk'. Between 50 and 100 individuals participated in the programme and at least 25 gained employment and were provided with homecare support as a result of this intervention (European Commission 2012f). A number of disadvantaged families with children with disabilities are currently enrolled in a rehabilitation centre during the day. Another testament to the project's success is that a major local company was able to set up crèche facilities for its workers in the region. The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

The Success Project, Kaunas, Lithuania, 2009–2012

Context

Kaunas County is home to Kaunas, the second-largest city in Lithuania, which has historically been a leading economic, cultural and academic centre in the country. As of 2008, the population of the county was 676,000, constituting roughly 20 per cent of the national population (Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2016 c).

During the 2007–2013 funding cycle, Lithuania committed to promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning, and improving employment opportunities, among other objectives. Special attention was given to the most vulnerable and those affected by unemployment, such as young women with families (European Commission 2012g). ESF funding for the total period amounted to €1 billion, which was complemented by co-funding from the national government, raising the total to €1.2 billion (European Commission 2012g).

The Kaunas Women Employment Information Centre is a public organisation whose mission is to support women in the workplace and business and to promote women's equality. In addition to conducting workshops and training, they also have various programmes to promote equal rights and opportunities such as a Women- Leaders Programme and a Women Trafficking Prevention Programme (Kaunas Women Employment Information Centre 2016).

Supporting a work/life balance

In September 2009, the Kaunas Women Employment Information Centre, with the help of ESF funding, launched The Success Project. The overarching aim of the project was to help women achieve a successful work-life balance. Part of the project was also designed to promote family-friendly work environments (European Commission 2014b).

As part of the project, childcare services for people struggling to combine work and family commitments was provided. Additionally, the project assisted the unemployed by conducting training and workshops in foreign languages, computer literacy and social skills, to name but a few (European Commission 2014b). The project also included bespoke services, such as one-to-one search assistance. Last but not least, they also gave training and advice to employers, workers' representatives (trade unions, work councils) and municipal representatives, in areas including family-friendly work environments, flexible work organisation and gender equality.

ESF Funding

The ESF contributed €597,429 to the project over three years.

Results

Throughout the three years of the ESF funding, from September 2009 to August 2012, a reported 389 people participated in The Success Project (European Commission 2014b). Of those, 193 were unemployed (of whom 32 per cent were able to find jobs) and 196 were in work (European Commission 2014b).

The Kaunas Women's Centre believes that they were able to establish good cooperation between employers, workers and municipal representatives, with 151 employers and 235 local authority staff attending their workshops (European Commission 2014b). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Part-time training, Hamburg, Germany, 2010–2013



SOURCE: © Katja Nitsche

Context

Hamburg, a major port city in northern Germany, has a population of approximately 1.7 million, based on data from 2014 (DESTATIS 2016). Since 2013, children from the age of one in Germany have had the right to enter kindergarten; previously, this entitlement was reserved for children aged between three and six (Population Europe Resource Finder and Archive 2016). Hamburg's ESF priorities for the 2007–2013 cycle were people-centred: the aims were to create employment and curb social exclusion (European Commission 2010b.)

Flexible vocational training

The Department of Employment and Education (Beschäftigung und Bildung e.V.) launched a part-time training programme in Hamburg in March 2010 with help from ESF funding. This intervention was designed to allow individuals to engage in training while maintaining their home life. Young parents and carers have been able to benefit from this programme (European Commission 2012b).

SAiT, the Training Service Agency, brings together apprentices and businesses that are interested in training part-time and provides consulting services free of charge (SAiT 2016). The training schemes (around 30 hours a week) are flexible enough and allow participants to manage their family and professional lives. At the same time, they have the opportunity to receive personalised advice to match training with their skills and ambitions, as well as receive support to find placements in local companies (European Commission 2012c).

ESF Funding

50 per cent of the total budget of €596,080 was contributed by the ESF (European Commission 2012c).

Results

Since March 2010, a reported 600 people or more have availed themselves of this programme's services in order to enhance their skills through vocational training (European Commission 2012c). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Kindergarten for children of staff in the General University Hospital, Prague, Czech Republic, 2012–2014



SOURCE: © Vseobecna fakultni nemocnice v Praze

Context

In the Czech Republic, the responsibility for the allocation of European Social Fund capital lies with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). In total, €3.8 billion was given to the Czech Republic in the 2007–2013 ESF cycle. At this time, the Czech Republic had a population of between 10.2 and 10.5 million (Eurostat 2016b).

Between 1990 and 2007, Radio Praha (2007) reported that the number of day nurseries in the Czech Republic decreased from 1,040 to 52, creating a shortage in childcare provision and making it difficult for women and families to combine work and family. This shortage of state sponsored day nurseries is exacerbated by the limited number of private opportunities as well as their high cost.

Getting nurses back to work

The General University Hospital of Prague became aware of the lack of childcare provision, as many skilled nurses were forced to leave work to take care of their children. The kindergartens for children of nursing staff was launched in 2012 with the help of ESF funding. The hospital started its own nursery that could accommodate 24 children between three and six years of age (European Commission 2014c). The hospital invested in the reconstruction necessary to create a motivating, fun and practical environment that complied with the statutory norms.

ESF Funding

This programme was funded from 2012–2014, during which time the ESF contributed 4,168,228.70 CZK (€153,145.14) out of a total budget of 7,264,886.64 CZK (approximately €266,919) (European Commission 2014c).

Results

As a result, a reported figure of 56 parents were given the opportunity to continue with work and 61 pre-school children were placed in this childcare facility (European Commission 2014c). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Other initiatives aiming to improve the capacity and/or quality of childcare

Many ESF-funded projects escape strict categorisation and yet contribute to better childcare provision. Supported by other EU funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund, which allow for infrastructure development, these projects further improve the capacity and/or quality of the childcare provision across the EU.

Valiflex, Confederation Caritas, Luxembourg, 2011–2013



SOURCE: © iStockphoto

Context

Luxembourg, with a population of 549,680 and a GDP of approximately €49 billion is one of the wealthiest regions in the EU (European Commission 2016h; European Commission 2016i). The European Social Fund for opening pathways to employment is managed by the Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de l'Économie sociale et solidaire (European Commission 2016j).

Providing training for quality childcare

The Valiflex project's main objective is to provide childcare training for job seekers. Additionally, the project affords some participants the chance to engage in advanced training which could lead to a degree. Participants engage in a ten-week course, with the option for those with relevant experience to complete an additional three week long module that can lead to a diploma (European Commission 2013g).

ESF Funding

The ESF contribution was 50 per cent of the total budget of €389,178 (European Commission 2013g).

Results

The project validated participants' experience and offered them bespoke programmes, including an action plan and training. Reportedly, of the 17 participants from the first cohort, 12 received jobs within three months of completion of the programme (European Commission 2013g). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

Busy Bees – Community improvement and employment, Pleternica, Croatia, 2011–2012



SOURCE: © iStockphoto

Context

Pleternica is located in the east of Croatia in the region of Slavonia and the population of the municipality is 11,323 as of 2013 (UrbiStat 2016). Croatia joined the EU in 2013 but was eligible for ESF resources before its accession. Youth unemployment is a major problem with 45.5 per cent of 15–24 year olds out of work in 2014 (Eurostat 2016d). Croatia's funding priorities focus on social inclusion and employment. In the 2007–2013 funding cycle, Croatia received a total of €152,413,106 of EU money (European Commission 2015b).

Supporting individuals with training

The 'Busy Bees' project was established in partnership between the City of Pleternica, the Oppidum Association and the Croatian women's society. Oppidum works in a rural area of the city with young people and women for the development of civil society (Udruga Oppidum 2016). The main purpose of this initiative was to train

individuals in childcare and pre-school education, and consequently provide childcare to parents in employment (European Commission 2013h).

The programme sought to target a core group of 30 individuals (Grad Pleternica 2016). The core group was comprised of individuals from a larger pool of potential participants of 225 young people, primarily with secondary school or college diplomas (Grad Pleternica 2016). In 2011–2012, this programme allowed ten unemployed young people from the area to retrain in childcare services and equipment was provided to two children’s playrooms in two remote villages (Udruga Oppidum 2016).

ESF Funding

Between 2011–2012 the ESF contributed €94,551 to the Busy Bees programme (European Commission 2013h).

Results

A reported 225 people participated in the programme, each of whom received mentoring and training in childcare or pre-school education (European Commission 2013). The study team did not source an evaluation of this programme.

4. Concluding remarks

The aim of this policy brief is to demonstrate how the ESF supports childcare provision and to illustrate practical examples of this across the EU through co-financed projects. The ESF is an evolving instrument that, over the years, has made efforts towards increasing employability and adaptability in a dynamic labour market and has supported the social and economic integration of the most disadvantaged people across the EU. The Member States, as well as regional and local actors, may use the possibilities the ESF offers to address the challenges they face.

To date, many operational programmes aligning with EU priorities have been developed and supported by the ESF through funding for regional and local initiatives and projects, as the examples from this policy brief have illustrated. In order to continue to support a work-life balance and to ensure positive outcomes for children, individuals interested in establishing childcare interventions at the regional or local level can apply for grants through the ESF and current operational programmes. Local and regional governments can do their part in identifying the gaps in childcare provision and raising awareness of the ESF among practitioners to encourage them to apply for funding. Individuals and organisations can take inspiration from the examples of projects and, if necessary, build appropriate partnerships to create interventions responding to their local needs and contexts. Managing authorities²¹ of each operational programme are the first port of call in providing information on types of support and procedures that need to be followed.

Going forward, however, additional attention needs to be paid to monitoring and evaluating such projects and initiatives, particularly those that are innovative and novel. Practitioners should consider evaluating their practices in childcare provision in order to facilitate and promote the uptake of best practice. In this vein, it would also be useful for more childcare practitioners to submit details of the development and the implementation of the projects involving childcare provision to the European Platform for Investing in

²¹ A list of country-level ESF managing authorities can be accessed here: <http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=45&langId=en>

Children for review. As a result, a critical mass of information on ‘evidence-based’ or ‘promising’ practices can form to ensure that a wider range of people benefit from positive and useful interventions with the purpose of transferring the practices, or of scaling them up.

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