



first years
first priority

JUNE 2024

The power of networks to influence European policies and public investment for early childhood development

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE *FIRST YEARS, FIRST PRIORITY* EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN

A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE

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Foreword

It is with great pride and a sense of accomplishment that we present this document, *The power of networks to influence European policies and public investment for early childhood development*. Lessons learned and recommendations from the *First Years, First Priority* European campaign. This initiative has been a profound journey of collaboration, advocacy, and unwavering dedication towards the cause of early childhood development (ECD) across Europe.

The First Years First Priority campaign was born out of a crucial need to place the youngest members of our societies at the forefront of public policy and investment. Early childhood is a critical period that shapes the foundations of an individual's lifelong health, wellbeing, and potential. Despite this, the early years, especially those of children under three, often remain neglected in policy-making. Our campaign sought to address this gap, emphasizing the importance of nurturing care, comprehensive support systems, and robust public policies that cater to all aspects of ECD.

Throughout the campaign, we have witnessed remarkable progress and substantial achievements. We have seen an increase in awareness and prioritization of ECD in the political agendas of various countries and of the European Union (EU). The campaign's success is a testament to the power of collective effort and of the importance of having an enabling environment for advocacy at both national and European levels. It highlights the significant role that public bodies, civil society organisations, and experts can play in creating an ecosystem that supports young children and their families, especially those in vulnerable situations.

A key element of our campaign's success has been the power of networks to influence European policies and public investment for ECD. By leveraging a broad coalition of stakeholders, first and foremost our members in countries, we have been able to amplify our message and advocate more effectively for ECD. Our networks have provided a platform for sharing best practices, mobilizing expertise, coordinating advocacy efforts, and ensuring that ECD remains a priority on the European agenda. The networks' complementing and collective expertise and concerted actions have significantly contributed to influencing legislation and public investment that could benefit young children and their families across Europe.

Our journey has been marked by several key milestones. The development of country profiles, thematic papers, and policy documents has provided invaluable insights into the state of ECD across different countries and sheds lights on key priorities. These documents have not only informed our advocacy efforts but have also served as vital resources for policy-makers and stakeholders working towards the enhancement of early childhood services and programmes.

The lessons learned from this campaign are numerous and impactful. The importance of coalition-building, the benefits of cross-sector collaboration, and the necessity of a comprehensive approach to ECD are just a few of the critical takeaways. Our work has underscored that achieving meaningful change requires sound data and evidence, persistent advocacy, strategic partnerships, and an unwavering commitment to the rights and wellbeing of young children.

As we look to the future, we are filled with optimism and a renewed sense of purpose. The recommendations outlined in this document aim to build on the momentum generated by the campaign and to guide future efforts in advancing ECD across Europe. We call upon the EU institutions, national governments, and all stakeholders to continue championing the cause of ECD, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive from the very start.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this campaign. Your dedication, expertise, and passion have been the driving forces behind our achievements. Together, we have laid the groundwork for a brighter, more inclusive future for all young children and their families.



Liana Ghent
Executive Director
International Step by Step Association



Sabine Saliba
Secretary General
Eurochild

Executive Summary

In 2020 a coalition of European networks and national civil society organisations launched the *First Years, First Priority* campaign with a common vision – to ensure a healthy, safe and nurturing environment for all young children and their families, especially those facing poverty, exclusion and discrimination. Building on growing evidence of the importance of children's early years, the campaign aimed to increase attention to early childhood development (ECD), with more public investment and cross-sector, integrated policies for the benefit of the youngest in society. In doing so it has built a strong community of ECD advocates across Europe.

Collecting and disseminating evidence on ECD, and harnessing the growing attention to children at European Union (EU) level, campaign partners sought to drive change within the EU institutions and in several European countries. Partners have been advocating for an ecosystem of policies that support nurturing care for all children from their youngest years.

Awareness of the importance of investing in ECD has been raised up the political agenda in many countries, with strengthened capacity of national coalitions to influence public policy. Many governments have taken important measures to invest in children's early years.

However, challenges remain, and this paper identifies some useful lessons

from partners' experience of advocacy at national and EU levels. These include the need for more comprehensive and disaggregated data on children's early years, and for a more holistic, multi-sector and integrated approach to ECD, which includes all the enablers necessary to support nurturing care for every child.

This paper provides an overview of the contribution made by the campaign to the progress that has been achieved. It also highlights areas where this progress needs to be expanded and accelerated, and makes recommendations to national and EU policy-makers. It is hoped that the campaign's collective experience will help ensure that a holistic approach to children's early years is a public policy priority, for both national governments and EU institutions.

“...ensure a healthy, safe and nurturing environment for all young children and their families, especially those facing poverty, exclusion and discrimination”

Why a campaign on early childhood development?

THE PROBLEM:

Early childhood development is not a public policy priority

There is ample evidence of the importance of early childhood development (ECD). Children's early years are a foundation for their lifelong healthy development and wellbeing. There is consensus that children's healthy development requires a holistic approach, one that enables them to grow in a safe and nurturing environment, with healthy nutrition, safe and secure housing, access to healthcare, physical activity, early learning, and responsive caregiving.

The early years of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development, and highly influenced by children's environment, early experiences and interactions.¹ These experiences affect brain development, shaping children's cognitive, social and emotional capacities.² Investing in ECD, to ensure that parents and caregivers can provide nurturing care for all children, is essential for children and families, as well as for the wellbeing and prosperity of communities and societies. While children's development depends largely on the extent to which parents and caregivers are able to respond to their needs, their wellbeing is not exclusively a private matter. Poverty, inequality and exclusion, as well as poor living conditions, are critical stressors in children's and caregivers' lives. It is therefore essential to acknowledge and address the interconnected health and social determinants that significantly influence the wellbeing of young children and their families. Governments have a crucial role to play in supporting parents and other caregivers, and in creating an ecosystem of policies and services that support all families and young children, especially those most in need.

Child poverty in the European Union (EU) is an ongoing and urgent crisis. According to Eurostat, in 2023, 24.8% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion³, that represents 20 million children, one out of four children. This crisis goes beyond numbers and we have to do better to address it across the EU.

Despite overwhelming evidence of the importance of ECD, early childhood is often not a high priority in public policy. Very young children, especially those under the age of three, are often invisible in policy-making. The scarcity of data on children's early years (especially those under three) indicates insufficient knowledge of, and attention to, ECD. Limited or non-existent disaggregated data on the lives of young children who are living in poverty and social exclusion hinders efforts to improve public policy and investment for young children facing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities. These include children living in extreme poverty, Roma and Traveller

¹ *The First 1001 Days. An age of opportunity. Evidence Brief 1* Parent-Infant Foundation First 1001 Days Movement

² *In brief: The science of early childhood development* Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

³ *Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion* Eurostat, June 2024

children, children in (or at risk of entering) alternative care, migrant and refugee children (including those who are undocumented), and children with disabilities. For example, more than 90% of Roma children are at risk of poverty.⁴ Migrant children, especially undocumented children⁵, and children with disabilities face significant barriers when accessing essential services.⁶ Covid-19 both exposed and deepened poverty and inequality, with a disproportionate burden on the most disadvantaged families and communities, including very young children.⁷

THE SOLUTION:

More attention and public investment in early childhood development

All children need nurturing care to grow and thrive. Very young children and their families and caregivers need access to essential, inclusive and high-quality services and support – including health and home visiting services, parenting support, safe and secure housing, childcare, early learning and play, and healthy nutrition. This requires an integrated, holistic and cross-sector approach to ECD, one that includes – but goes beyond – a narrow focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC). There is global consensus on this, based on the Nurturing Care Framework⁸ developed by WHO, UNICEF and others. Nurturing Care encompasses five areas that are considered essential for ECD:

- ▶ Health
- ▶ Nutrition
- ▶ Early Learning
- ▶ Responsive Caregiving
- ▶ Safety and Security

Ensuring that every child benefits from nurturing care requires public policy leadership, coordination and public investment in policies and services that address ECD in a comprehensive way.

⁴ *Extreme poverty afflicts many of the 10–12 million Roma in Europe* Council of Europe Newsroom, 17 October 2019

⁵ *EU Council adopts Child Guarantee that benefits undocumented children* Picum, 21 July 2021

⁶ *Child Guarantee: don't leave children with disabilities behind* European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), 22 April 2021

⁷ *Guaranteeing Children's Future: How COVID-19, cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do* Save the Children, 2023

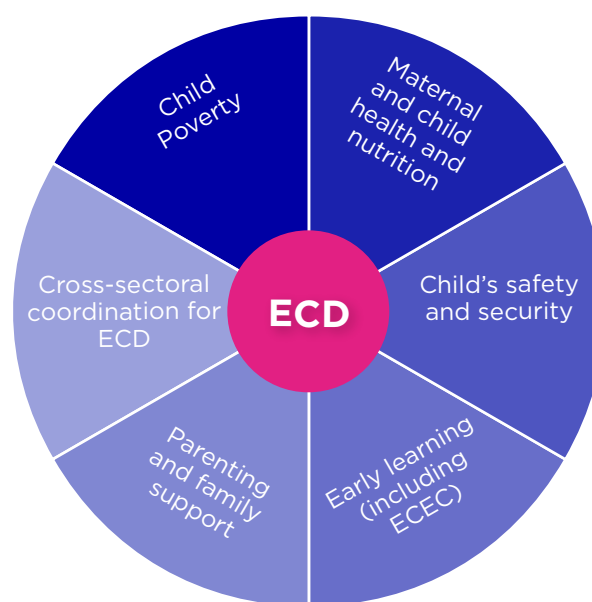
⁸ *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* WHO, UNICEF, Every Woman Every Child, World Bank Group, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Early Childhood Development Action Network, 2018

Our response, a cross-European campaign

FIRST YEARS, FIRST PRIORITY CAMPAIGN VISION

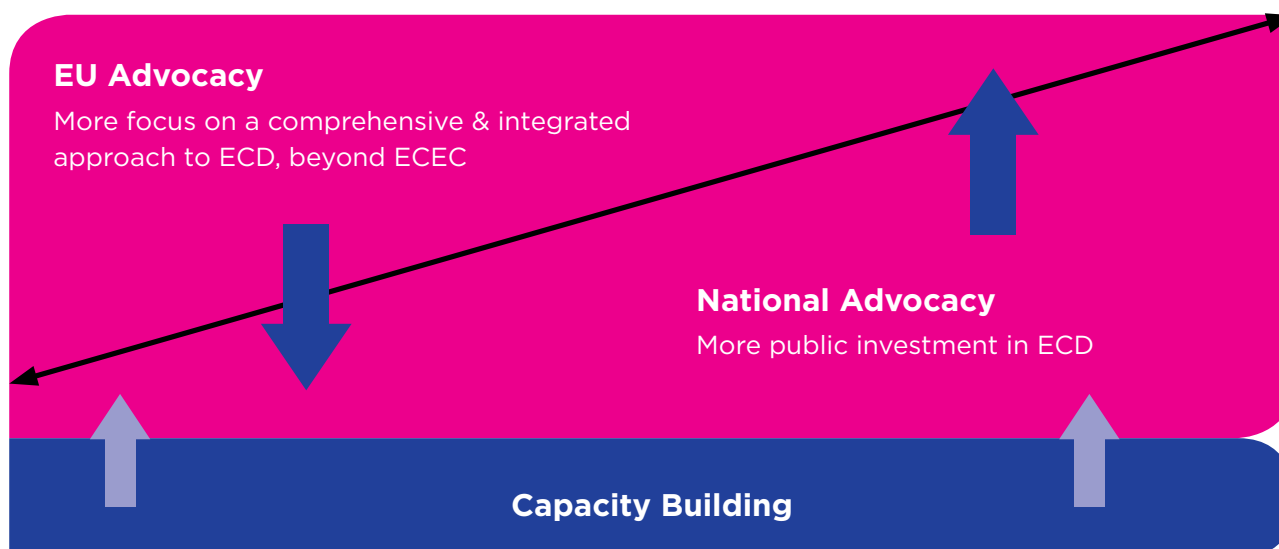
Through public policies and spending, all families, particularly those living in adversity, get the support they need to provide a healthy, safe and nurturing environment for their youngest children.

The campaign aimed to promote a holistic perspective to policies impacting child development, with a child and family-centred approach and a focus on integrated, cross-sector coordination.



OUR APPROACH

The First Years, First Priority campaign aimed to link EU policy and funding initiatives to national level action and investment in ECD, through a 'top-down, bottom-up' approach to advocacy. With this approach, the campaign aimed to influence both the EU level and the national level, using evidence and expertise from different countries to inform EU policies, while simultaneously using EU policy initiatives to catalyse change at the national level.



Through advocacy at country level, the campaign also sought to build and strengthen national coalitions, with civil society organisations working together to build support for more public investment in ECD.

The campaign benefited from a strong partnership between networks and organisations with respective strengths and expertise, working together in alliance towards a common vision.

OUTPUTS AND WAYS OF WORKING

The campaign operated at two levels, with advocacy activities focused on EU institutions on one hand – led by the campaign co-leads and partners – and national advocacy led by the *First Years, First Priority* National Coordinators (NCs). Campaign partners identified opportunities and developed resources to ensure synergy and a shared focus, and to provide mutual learning. Capacity building for advocacy was also provided.

Through the *First Years, First Priority* campaign, some new national coalitions on ECD were set up, with the participation of diverse organisations and institutions working with young children, including children facing particular vulnerabilities and discrimination. Others, through the campaign, gained increased momentum for their advocacy on family and child focused policies. Many NCs created accessible on-line platforms to enable the dissemination of resources and information on ECD in their country – including reports, country profiles and videos.

Building the evidence

To inform advocacy actions aimed at influencing EU and national policy, campaign partners built new evidence and collected existing data on ECD. This work resulted in the development of:

► Country profiles

The campaign produced a [Country Profile](#) for most of the participating countries, with analysis of data on the situation of young children across several policy areas that impact on child development and wellbeing. The information available across countries indicated that more consistent data collection at national and European level is needed to improve decision-making on policies and finances affecting early childhood, and to track progress. A [cross-country analysis](#) provided recommendations for better data collection and monitoring within and across countries in Europe, and for shared policy priorities at European and country level (Annex).

► Policy documents

The campaign developed several policy papers in response to EU initiatives related to children. The papers highlighted the need to include a focus on children's early years, with evidence-based policy recommendations (Annex).

IMPORTANCE OF EVIDENCE AND DATA ON ECD

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign gathered and disseminated the evidence and data available on ECD, while also highlighting significant gaps in data collection and availability, and why these should be addressed. Data on very young children is essential to inform policy-making and decide on public investment.

The campaign highlighted the following:

- The need for more comprehensive national and cross-national data on early childhood, including disaggregated data on children in vulnerable situations.
- The need for disaggregated data on very young children, especially those aged 0–3.
- The need for the European Child Guarantee common monitoring framework to build on the current indicators and include additional indicators on ECD – such as indicators on housing deprivation, on nutrition and on access to pre- and post-natal care for women and infants.

► Thematic papers

The campaign published six papers, focusing on thematic issues and on groups of young children who are disproportionately affected by poverty and social exclusion (Roma, migrants and refugees, and children with disabilities). These were informed by civil society organisations and networks with specific expertise, including Make Mothers Matter, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), and the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) (Annex).

► Advocacy updates

A regular update on key EU policy developments, and opportunities for advocacy, was shared with all campaign partners every two months.

► Newsletters, website, social media

The campaign produced a monthly newsletter for supporters which included all campaign news and content on a dedicated website and on social media.



Lessons learned

An independent, external evaluation of the *First Years, First Priority* campaign pointed to 'its significant effectiveness with a high-level of achievement of the objectives, and signs of strong foundations for future evidence-based ECD advocacy.'⁹ Awareness of a more comprehensive approach to ECD and of the importance of investing in children's early years has been raised up the political agenda in many countries. The campaign enabled and strengthened the capacity for national coalitions to influence public policies on ECD, despite limited capacity and external challenges.¹⁰

The evaluation also offered insights and recommendations to help partners build on the campaign and ensure longer-term change, including cross-national peer-to-peer learning, strengthening the research and evidence-base for ECD, and building a pan-European community of practice and advocates among ECD and child rights organisations. The evaluation also pointed to future advocacy opportunities after the European Parliament elections in June 2024, with a new EU legislature and new leadership of the European Commission.

Some useful lessons learned are:

- ▶ The importance of having an **enabling environment for advocacy on ECD**, at the EU level. As one participant said: "The EU has provided an enabling framework for early years policy dialogue, I think it is unprecedented".¹¹ For example, in Bulgaria there was a favourable period for policy reform. The adoption of the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee created an encouraging and enabling environment for advocating for increased public attention to the rights of the child and investments in ECD.
- ▶ The **importance of working in coalition** when advocating for ECD. For Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso in Portugal, the government welcomed the organized, collaborative, constructive engagement of civil society and the social sector. For Plataforma de Infancia in Spain, due to the diversity of services and administrations in Spain, it was important to involve a wide range of civil society organisations, from the field of disability, early care, childhood etc. to ensure that advocacy was carried out in as many areas and spaces as possible. In Bulgaria, Trust for Social Achievement and For Our Children Foundation worked in coalition, maintaining momentum with persistent advocacy efforts. Those campaigning on ECD used established networks – such as the National Network for Children and the Coalition Childhood 2025 and coordinated their activities for the promotion of specific policy issues.

⁹ *First Years, First Priority Campaign Evaluation Report* Chris Stalker, 22 March 2024

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

- ▶ The **benefits of strong collaboration between different networks** with respective strengths and expertise, working together towards a common vision, and acting as a leverage for building alliances. Partnership and collaboration between networks with expertise in ECD, in research and in advocacy and communication enabled the campaign's credibility and effectiveness.
- ▶ The **importance of evidence and data** when engaging with governments on ECD to inform the development of policy asks. For Children's Rights Alliance Ireland, having a strong evidence and research base ensured that civil society could develop persuasive arguments to effect policy change. In Portugal, using studies and data from international sources, particularly the EU, was considered important to keep the dialogue open with national policy makers. However, the lack of reliable and systematically collected data on ECD remains a challenge in most countries.
- ▶ The **effective implementation** of existing commitments, laws and policies on ECD provision is an issue in some contexts. In Portugal for example, Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso highlighted the problem of securing the financial and other resources necessary to implement ECD services and to enable good practices.
- ▶ The **disproportionate focus on access to ECEC**, without a more holistic approach to ECD, continues to be a challenge at both EU and national level in many countries. There is a need to broaden the focus on access to ECEC as a means of enabling parents to work, towards a holistic, multi-sector and integrated approach to ECD, which includes all the enablers necessary to support nurturing care for every child.



Advancing early childhood development in Europe

EU COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN'S EARLY YEARS

There has been unprecedented EU attention and commitment to children and children's rights in recent years, with the adoption of the European Child Guarantee, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the revised Barcelona targets on ECEC. However, as previously stated, the EU institutions' recognition of the importance of children's early years has been largely confined to ECEC, rather than a more holistic approach to ECD.

The *European Pillar of Social Rights* and its Action Plan represent a strong commitment to greater equality and social rights protections across the EU. However, its target of reducing child poverty by 5 million falls far short of the ambition needed to tackle current challenges.

The *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* represents a milestone for the protection and promotion of children's rights across the EU and beyond. It recognizes that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years, and provides a strong framework for governments to increase public investment and support for early childhood, and empower and strengthen vulnerable families and communities.

The *European Child Guarantee* has enabled greater political attention to child poverty and social exclusion at the national level, including in children's early years.

The *Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030* adopted by Member States in 2022 reflected many of the recommendations highlighted by the *First Years, First Priority* campaign.¹² The Recommendation asks Member States to increase children's participation in quality ECEC, with specific targets on enrolment rates for children under three. The emphasis on the need for ECEC services to be of high quality, provided in a safe, nurturing and caring environment, and with the continuous professional development of ECEC staff with better qualifications and working conditions, echoed many of the campaign's recommendations. These include the need for quality ECEC for children facing particular barriers and vulnerabilities, including children with disabilities or with special educational needs, and children facing discrimination (such as Roma children) – ensuring their access to mainstream non-segregated ECEC facilities, with professional staff and specialist support.

The European Parliament has been a vocal champion in tackling child poverty and social exclusion, with a growing understanding that this must include early childhood, as a formative time in children's lives. A Resolution adopted by the European Parliament in 2023, *Children first – strengthening the Child Guarantee, two years on from its adoption*,¹³ highlighted the importance

¹² *Response to the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care, Barcelona Targets for 2030 First Years, First Priority Campaign*, January 2023

¹³ *Children first – strengthening the Child guarantee, two years on from its adoption* European Parliament, 21 November 2023

of investing in children's earliest years and of having targeted measures to ensure access to integrated and comprehensive services for all young children, especially those in greatest need.

The full implementation of these EU initiatives, by Member States, must now be a priority. At the same time, there is a need for increased recognition, in both EU and national policy-makers, that children and families require a holistic approach to ECD services, interventions and support, one that goes beyond access to childcare.

As an example, the *European Semester Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations* rarely mention children, or include brief references to child poverty and to ECEC (seen as needed to enable participation in the labour market). So children are still largely invisible in the EU Semester Process, which is focused on economic and employment concerns.

NATIONAL COMMITMENTS AND PROGRESS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

There has been progress on ECD policy and services in several countries where the campaign was active, and there are commitments and policy initiatives that recognise the importance of ECD. However, challenges remain. The European Child Guarantee, and available EU funding, provide opportunities to strengthen ECD systems at country level. However, despite national progress in some areas, many Child Guarantee National Action Plans and the biennial reports on its implementation do not adequately include a focus on ECD.

Some countries have adopted national strategies for ECD. Through its *First 5 – a Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028*, **Ireland** has a whole-of-government approach that aims to tackle child poverty, reform the ECEC system, increase parenting support and promote children's health and development with a dedicated child health workforce. This achievement followed years of advocacy and engagement by civil society actors in Ireland, working together to put young children at the heart of government policy. **France** has adopted a national *First 1,000 Days* strategy, which includes pre-natal and post-natal health support for parents, newborns and infants, with increased support for children's early years and for single-parent families in particular. In **Bulgaria**, with engagement from civil society, the government has developed an *Annual Plan for Early Childhood Development*, as part of its efforts to address child poverty and implement the European Child Guarantee.

Several countries have made efforts to improve access to ECEC. In 2022, **Portugal** passed a law to progressively extend free childcare for all children, with government funding to cover the costs of childcare services. The law aims to ensure universal access to ECEC as a means of addressing inequality. However, concerns remain on the need to increase the available places, to ensure quality services and an ECEC workforce with the necessary expertise, training and qualifications to meet the specific needs of some children. **Romania** has expanded access to ECEC for children aged between 3 months and 6 years. Romania has included quality early childhood education as part of its *2020–2024 National Strategy for the Defence of the Country*, in recognition of its fundamental importance for society. In 2023, Romania adopted a new law

regulating the operation of early education services for children under three years of age such as crèches, day-centres for children and complementary services. Currently Romania is undertaking a programme to build 110 new crèches with funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. **Bulgaria** has abolished fees for kindergartens and nurseries, as part of its interventions to address child poverty.¹⁴

In **Finland**, relatively low rates of child poverty and social exclusion are due to a supportive social security system which includes benefits for all families with children, including a child allowance and access to ECEC for every child. However, potential cuts to the social security system threaten to reverse this trend. Challenges remain in ensuring that a shortage of ECEC teachers and trained staff do not compromise the quality of childcare services. In addition, a greater understanding of a holistic approach to ECD, and its importance for children's learning, is also needed – beyond the focus on ECEC.

First Years, First Priority in BULGARIA

In **Bulgaria**, For Our Children Foundation and the Early Childhood Development Alliance participated in the development of national strategies – including the National Plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the National Strategy for the Child, and the Annual Plan for Early Childhood Development – as members of national consultative bodies and working groups. We had the opportunity to promote measures, approaches and principles in policy-making on ECD and on the rights of the child. As *First Years, First Priority* National Co-coordinator, we contributed to the development of the workplan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee National Action Plan and to the development of Bulgaria's national ECD strategy.

For Our Children Foundation, Bulgaria

First Years, First Priority in IRELAND

In **Ireland** there has been a strong commitment to reform ECEC and increase investment in this area. In the last two budgets the government has invested €1bn in the childcare sector. However, there is a need to target investment towards breaking the cycle of child poverty. In May 2024, the Irish Government launched Equal Start, a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation for children and their families who experience disadvantage. For Equal Start to work, Budget 2025 needs to invest in this new funding model and develop an implementation plan that allows the new model to be agile enough to learn and respond to the unique needs of the children it supports.

Children's Rights Alliance, Ireland

¹⁴ *Children's rights: Political will or won't? Eurochild 2023 report on children in need across Europe* Eurochild, 2023

First Years, First Priority in SPAIN

In **Spain**, we worked to incorporate into our political advocacy actions the need to invest in early childhood, taking into account its special situation of vulnerability. Political decision-makers are aware of the special needs of this group, and although there is direct aid for families with young children, it is still not enough to cover their real needs.

Plataforma de Infancia, Spain

First Years, First Priority in ITALY

In **Italy**, advocacy on ECD entails many different actions, including using the media and social networks, contacting parliamentarians and local policy-makers, but also working with professionals in charge of education, health and social services. Advocacy is a key activity that needs dedicated people and ideally a team of professionals from different backgrounds. The biggest challenge is that policy-makers usually do not see ECD as a priority, and it is easier to work at local level than at government level, and to engage directly with ECD professionals, trying to change their practices. Action at the grassroots is very important, but it is important to work at both national and local level.

Centro per la Salute del Bambino, Italy

In **Italy**, Centro per la Salute del Bambino focuses on inter-sectoral work as a requisite for both universality and effectiveness, and developed an integrated multi-professional Nurturing Care course through a joint effort by the National Institute of Health, professional societies of educators and health professionals.

Italy has introduced a first 1,000 day strategic objective among the national health prevention plan, and 18 out of 21 Regions are implementing it. Rates of absolute child poverty are high (13,4%), and are increasing after the minimum income measure for poor families ('Reddito di Cittadinanza') was substantially reduced by the Government formed in October 2022. The New Generation Fund is investing in ECEC services to address the low access to early years daycare but is facing a dramatic lack of ECEC professionals. The Child Guarantee National Action Plan is expected to tackle this through multisector action at local level.

Spain introduced a Minimum Vital Income scheme in 2020, to address poverty and exclusion. However, challenges remain, with significant regional variations across Spain, in terms of child poverty, education and social services. Efforts are needed to ensure the full implementation of the scheme, including assistance for households to apply for it and ensure that families do not miss out. There is also a need to increase family and parenting support, i.e. by establishing universal parenting aid through refundable tax deductions. The approval of a universal child-rearing allowance, ensuring quality early care services for children in need and creating accessible, free and quality 0-3 education places are some of the measures needed to support children in their early years.

First Years, First Priority in PORTUGAL

In **Portugal**, the campaign implementation strategy was based on an extensive coalition, representing more than 2,500 national institutions dedicated to the early years, and the organization of two 'First Years Count!' Big Meetings, which involved the commitment of policy-makers, researchers and universities, as well as raising media awareness. Coalition partners took part in the initiative 'Did you know?...' which has more than 50 questions/answers about ECD, to engage ECD professionals and the general public.

*Fundação Nossa Senhora
do Bom Sucesso, Portugal*



Looking ahead – Our recommendations to the European Union institutions and to national governments

There have been many positive developments in the course of the campaign, at both EU and national level. There has been unprecedented attention to children's early years, in the European Commission and European Parliament. EU Member States are increasingly recognising the need to invest in children's early years, including in their efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. However, much remains to be done, and the progress made needs to be continued, expanded and accelerated.

The EU must continue to champion children's rights and to work with Member States to put children at the heart of policy, legislation and funding. This must include the youngest children and their families, especially those who are excluded and discriminated against.

Drawing on lessons learned throughout the campaign, *First Years, First Priority* partners would like to share some recommendations for the newly elected European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the new European Commission.

- Strengthen efforts to **end child poverty, social exclusion and discrimination**, and ensure the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the European Child Guarantee and the revised Barcelona targets for Early Childhood Education and Care.



- ▶ Ensure that EU policy and legislation are guided by, and consistent with, the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**, and any other relevant updates or new strategies, which recognize that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.
- ▶ Set up an integrated, **cross-sector Working Group on early childhood development**, in the European Commission, that brings together relevant Directorates-General stakeholders and civil society organisations, ensuring the sharing of promising and good practices across the EU.
- ▶ Support the expansion of **systematic data collection on early childhood**, with additional longitudinal and disaggregated indicators in the forthcoming updated common monitoring framework of the European Child Guarantee.
- ▶ Initiate and support a **European Year of Early Childhood** to mobilise actions, resources, and foster learning and best practices across the EU.

EU Member States and Accession countries must ensure that ECD is a national public policy priority, with comprehensive and integrated policies and services that go beyond childcare provision, and with specific attention to children facing exclusion and discrimination.

- ▶ **Increase public investment in early childhood**, ensuring universal access to essential services for all children aged 0–6.
- ▶ Increase investment in measures that **strengthen families experiencing adversity, prevent family separation, support parents and guardians** in their role as primary caregivers for young children, and involve them in decision-making processes for effective social inclusion.
- ▶ **Foster cross-sectoral coordination** across policy initiatives targeting the most vulnerable children and families at the country level, i.e. connecting efforts in different sectors, fostering partnerships among public, private, and non-governmental stakeholders, and addressing discriminatory barriers and practices.
- ▶ Fully **implement the European Child Guarantee, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the revised Barcelona targets** on Early Childhood Education and Care.
- ▶ Work with public bodies, civil society organisations and experts in ECD to **create an ecosystem of services** that can support all young children and their families, especially those in need.
- ▶ Ensure attention to children's rights in the **European Semester Cycle**, including child rights in early childhood.
- ▶ Work with us to encourage the European Commission to promote a **European Year of Early Childhood and engage with this initiative**.

First Years, First Priority Publications

Country Profiles and Fact Sheets

Country Profiles (2021)	Fact Sheets (2020)	National Coordinator
Bulgaria	Bulgaria	For Our Children Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement
Finland	Finland	Central Union for Child Welfare
France	France	Ensemble pour la Petite Enfance
Hungary	Hungary	Family, Child, Youth Association
Ireland	Ireland	Children's Rights Alliance
Italy (not available)	Italy (not available)	Centro per la Salute del Bambino
Portugal	Portugal	Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso
Romania	Romania	Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development
Serbia	Serbia	Pomoc Deci
Slovakia (not available)	Slovakia (not available)	Open Society Foundation Slovakia
Spain	Spain	Plataforma de Infancia

Accompanying the Country Profiles, the *Cross-Country Analysis, Snapshot of early childhood development data and policies in nine countries*, synthesizes the data, providing essential insights into the findings across countries.

The campaign also published a number of case studies, highlighting examples of ECD programmes and initiatives in different countries, including [Bulgaria](#), [Finland](#), [Hungary](#), [Ireland](#), the [Netherlands](#), [Romania](#), [Slovenia](#), [Slovakia](#) and [others](#).

Thematic Papers

- ▶ [*Putting early childhood at the heart of the European Child Guarantee*](#) (November 2022)
- ▶ [*Prioritising the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff*](#) (November 2022)
- ▶ [*Ensure universal access to maternal healthcare in the European Union*](#) (November 2022)
- ▶ [*Young refugee and migrant children and their families*](#) (October 2023)
- ▶ [*Young children with disabilities and their families*](#) (October 2023)
- ▶ [*Young Roma children and their families*](#) (October 2023)

Policy Documents

- ▶ [*Policy Brief*](#) (April 2021)
- ▶ Position paper [*The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and its importance for early childhood development*](#) (May 2021)
- ▶ Position paper [*Proposal for a European Child Guarantee: what does it mean for early childhood development?*](#) (May 2021)
- ▶ [*Statement on the Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee*](#) (June 2021)
- ▶ [*The European Child Guarantee: an opportunity to invest in early childhood development*](#) (July 2021)
- ▶ [*Snapshot of early childhood development data and policies in nine countries. A cross country analysis*](#) (July 2021)
- ▶ [*Submission from the First Years First Priority campaign to the European Commission open consultation on Pathways to School Success*](#) (September 2021)
- ▶ [*Nurturing care from the start: First Years First Priority campaign position paper on the European Care Strategy*](#) (February 2022)
- ▶ [*Proposals on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on ECEC*](#) (March 2022)
- ▶ [*Proposal for a Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income Schemes in the EU: an investment in nurturing care in early childhood. First Years, First Priority position statement*](#) (March 2022)

- ▶ [*First Years, First Priority campaign Response to the European Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success*](#) (September 2022)
- ▶ [*Response to the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care Barcelona Targets for 2030*](#) (January 2023)
- ▶ [*Quality Housing for All Young Children – from the start*](#) (March 2023)
- ▶ [*Response to the European Commission's Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health*](#) (July 2023)
- ▶ [*2024 EU Elections – Putting early childhood at the heart of a social Europe*](#) (March 2024)





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AUTHORS

Dr Agata D'Addato, *Eurochild Head of Programmes*
Giorgiana Rosa, *Advocacy Consultant*

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

agata.daddato@eurochild.org

THE CAMPAIGN

The **First Years First Priority** Campaign focuses on prioritising children from birth to six years, with special attention to the first 1,000 days, and is rooted in an understanding that, from the first day they are born, all children are rights holders – despite their dependency status. The Campaign advocates for more political visibility and resource allocation to early childhood, focusing especially on the most vulnerable children – such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children in or at risk of entering alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty. With these aims in mind, the campaign works to ensure that early childhood development (ECD) remains high on the political agenda, by building a strong community of advocates at the EU and national level.

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NATIONAL COORDINATORS OF THE CAMPAIGN:

- Bulgaria – [For Our Children Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement](#)
- Finland – [Central Union for Child Welfare](#)
- France – [Ensemble pour la Petite Enfance](#)
- Hungary – [Family, Child, Youth Association](#)
- Ireland – [Children's Rights Alliance](#)
- Italy – [Centro per la Salute del Bambino \(Centre for Child Health and Development\)](#)
- Portugal – [Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso](#)
- Romania – [Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development](#)
- Serbia – [Pomoc Deci](#)
- Spain – [Plataforma de Infancia](#)



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THE PARTNERSHIP

First Years First Priority is a joint initiative of **Eurochild** and the **International Step by Step Association** (ISSA). We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe. The [European Public Health Alliance](#) and [Roma Education Fund](#) are associate partners.

