

## INFLUENCING SYSTEMS AND POLICY MAKING

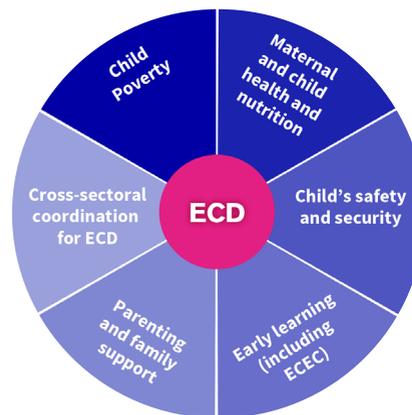
As a Regional Network, ISSA joins alliances and contributes to regional and country initiatives aimed at increasing the awareness of the importance of ECD, as well as advocating for stronger political will and investment in services for young children.

### The First Years, First Priority campaign

The Europe-wide campaign *First Years, First Priority*, launched in 2020 and co-led by Eurochild and ISSA, has made great steps in its mission to ensure that ECD stays high on the political agenda. Focused on prioritizing children from birth to six years, especially the most vulnerable, and rooted in the understanding that, from the

day they are born, all children have rights, regardless of their dependency status, the campaign has been raising awareness in European and national institutions of the need to provide concrete responses to the immediate effects that the escalation of poverty and social inequality has on ECD and, most importantly, on the most vulnerable children.

*Through its initiatives, ISSA works on strengthening the awareness and knowledge of quality, equitable and integrated provisions, so that each young child and their family can enjoy the right to respectful and responsive environments and services.*



ISSA led the development of [nine country reports](#), in which the ECD situation at the national level was analyzed through case studies and fact sheets. National Coordinators from the following countries have contributed to developing a snapshot of their countries, divided into six policy areas which impact ECD: Serbia, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Bulgaria (ISSA Member, Trust for Social Achievement), Romania (ISSA Member, Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development and France (ISSA Member, EduEnsemble).

These country profiles have been added to the [cross-country analysis report](#), which summarizes the data collected in the nine countries and serves to draw attention towards four key findings across policy areas impacting Early Childhood Development: the scarcity of data on children's early years, especially on children younger than three; the limited or non-existent disaggregated data on the lives of young children

under six who are living in poverty and social exclusion; and the need to both guarantee universal access to ECEC services and to integrate a multi-sectoral approach to early childhood, with leadership and coordination that addresses children's and families' needs in a comprehensive way.

Along with national reports, the *First Years, First Priority* campaign has advocated joint policy proposals, and put forward statements and position papers at the EU level, in order to influence policies such as the Child Guarantee, the European Care Strategy, and the Barcelona targets. Together with its associate partners (the European Public Health Alliance and the Roma Education Fund) and national collaborators, ISSA and Eurochild have illustrated the work of the campaign through social media channels and its [website](#), where all resources are kept up to date, and made freely available.



## Primokiz: Assisting local governments to improve services offered for young children

Since 2019, ISSA has been piloting the development of the [Primokiz approach](#) in Romania and Slovenia, in partnership with ISSA Members Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (CEPD) and the Education Research Institute – Step by Step Center for Quality in Education, respectively. Under the Romania Grows with You initiative, this phased-based methodology developed by the Jacobs Foundation has been implemented in 21 localities, supporting local governments in their efforts to improve the services they offer

for young children. This has been done in a strategic and participatory way so that better access to high-quality early childhood services can be provided to young children in their communities.

The Primokiz Handbook and a structured seven-phased process to build local leadership, together with the expert and technical assistance provided by CEPD have ensured that the objectives for early childhood set in the situation analyses have been included in local development strategies and have supported their implementation

in the municipalities. One successful example can be found in Brasov municipality, where the local authorities have decided to develop a stand-alone strategy for early childhood grounded in the priorities resulting from the situation analysis developed by using the Primokiz approach. According to a survey conducted in Romania in December 2021, all 21 communities found the process of developing the situation analysis report very useful. Out of these, 17 considered the process extremely positive since it facilitated enriching cross-sectoral cooperation and made possible a common reflection on the real needs expressed by practitioners, parents, and members of the communities. The process also enabled joint discussions around the priorities to be set for developing high-quality early childhood services.

Similar to Romania, eight municipalities in Slovenia started the Primokiz process in 2021 and have reached the point of having



developed situation analysis reports. When endorsed by local authorities, the reports will serve as a grounding document for the development of responsive local strategic plans.

Both Slovenian and Romanian teams have learned a lot from each other during the exchange sessions organized and facilitated by the

ISSA Secretariat. The peer-learning process has been mutually rewarding: while the Romanian team has felt the validation and recognition of their work, offering counselling on possible challenges and barriers when implementing the Primokiz process, the Slovenian team has benefitted from their colleagues' experience in approaching local

municipalities, setting up local teams and conducting the situation analysis on early childhood services in each municipality.

The Primokiz approach proves to be especially helpful in challenging situations or emergencies, for instance responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the high number of refugee families.

*“It is so impressive to see how much has been achieved in almost four years of implementation in Romania. At the beginning, the local teams were not quite clear on what Primokiz would actually bring to their work and communities. Now, in all communities, we have local teams committed to prioritizing early childhood beyond the end of the project, with a more strategic style of thinking, grounded in the actual needs of their communities. New early childhood services have been created; new staff have been hired where shortages were critical; playgrounds have been built; existing services have been improved; and concern for the youngest children has remained on local political agendas. The results are there to stay, and have been constantly supported and financed by local authorities.”*

*Mihaela Ionescu,  
ISSA Program Director*

## ENABLING INCLUSIVE ECEC SERVICES

Through its work, ISSA promotes the progressive universalism principle, which encourages universal provision with additional services for those in need of a specific approach and support. By ensuring universal provision, all children benefit. By offering additional services, the most disadvantaged, most vulnerable, or those most at risk receive the support they need.

### REYN: Responding to emerging needs and priorities

The unprecedented crisis derived from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation many Roma children, families and communities live in. The Romani Early Years Network (REYN) Initiative, through consultation with different national REYN's, has learnt about the need to respond to emerging needs and priorities at the country level. Therefore, a small amount of financial support has been deployed to national REYNs so that each national network can implement diverse actions, tailored to country-specific contexts.

The so-called mini-grants were launched at the beginning of 2021 and will be finalized in October 2022. National REYNs actively

responded to the call through different and meaningful intervention proposals covering advocacy, professional development and the empowerment of Roma parents.

In a small suburb of Beveren (Belgium), mothers with children up to three years old gathered to play and meet in a calm and safe environment. Networking and peer-learning opportunities took place from the national (Ukraine) to the international levels (Slovakia and Czech Republic) in order to identify common challenges and move towards efficient solutions that prioritize the current situation of Roma children. Special attention was paid to the recognition and promotion of Roma educators within the ECD workforce in

countries like Kosovo, Bulgaria and Hungary, through initiatives such as the REYN Hungary Award and new professional development opportunities. Facilitated by access to the mini-grant, REYN Bulgaria introduced the mechanism of REYN internship giving [opportunities to young Roma ECD professionals](#) to gain their first work experience in the field of early childhood.



### Research on the status of young Roma children in Europe

In 2021, in partnership with the well-established Roma Studies Groups (CEG) at the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA) of the University of Barcelona, the REYN initiative conducted research to develop an overview of the status of young Roma children in Europe, focusing on those under six years old and their families.

Covering key areas that impact a child's development, such as health, hygiene and nutrition, safety and security as well as early learning and the living environment, the study analyzes the structural and emerging issues that might have widened during the COVID-19 crisis, leading to an increase of inequality and social exclusion.

The final report, to be launched in summer 2022, seeks to give visibility to children's needs and to raise the key stakeholders' awareness to respond with effective policies and programs enabling each child to reach their full potential – to grow and thrive!

*“Participants in the studies witnessed advantages in the children when attending preschool: acquiring a new language, understanding the daily routine, learning about tolerance and good manners. Additionally, children are able to make new friends there. All of these skills help children have a smoother transition into school.”*

*REYN Slovenia research team*



## Diversity+: There is no quality without equity in early childhood services

Following its launch in 2020, ISSA has continued to provide technical support for the Diversity+ project, a European Union Erasmus-funded program that aims at strengthening ECEC services in their work towards the full, high-quality inclusion of all young children. In addition, ISSA is overseeing the communications and dissemination activities of the project.

In a context of complex multi-diverse societies, the European project provides ECEC professionals, managers and practitioners with governance, benchmarking, recognition and professionalization tools to help them transform their practice and open up to the diversity that exists among children and families.

During 2021, ISSA worked closely with the following partners to develop resources and tools, starting with the [Diversity+ eBook](#): CIAPE (Italy), Link Campus University (Italy), Fondatsiya na Biznesa za Obrazovani (Bulgaria),

Schola Empirika (Czech Republic) and ISSA Member Open Wide School (Slovakia).

Under ISSA's lead, the consortium has launched the [Diversity+ Charter](#) (a set of minimum requirements that ECEC services and institutions have to meet to accommodate different types of diversity and be classified as inclusive and diversity positive) and the [Footprint Assessment Tool](#) (an interactive digital tool to support ECEC to assess current services and gain understanding

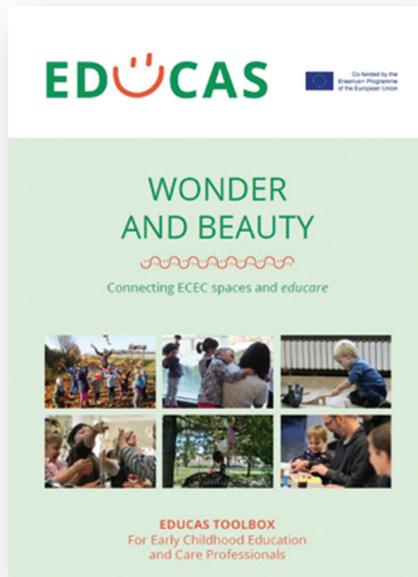
of the steps needed to improve their provision).

Both resources have been translated into the four languages of the project partners, as well as English. Additionally, ISSA has provided a Dutch version.

More concrete resources will be included in the [toolkit](#) of this three-year project, such as an interactive digital assessment tool and a set of thirty games to help ECEC practitioners work with children on recognizing and addressing biases, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion.



## EDUCAS: Creating child and family friendly learning spaces in ECEC centers



Together with four research centers and eight early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers distributed in Lithuania, Belgium and Italy, ISSA has worked on the EDUCAS project on how to create child and family friendly learning spaces in ECEC centers. The project has earned the Epos Quality Label for Good Practice in 2021.

Throughout the three years of its duration, partners in Belgium (FL), ISSA Member VBJK, the University

of Parma in Italy and the Center for Innovative Education, ISSA Member in Lithuania have undertaken a thorough examination of existing visions and methods related to organizing ECEC environments in their contexts.

With the support of two ECEC centers in each country, the consortium has developed action research paths that are tailored to the contexts in which the six ECEC centers are working. These joint reflections of experts and practitioners on their pedagogical vision and its connection to learning spaces have established the grounds for the development of a [toolbox](#) with approaches, methods and tools to support professionals working on ECEC spaces with an *educare* approach.

The resources, available on the [EDUCAS webpage](#), bring together research, policy and practice on such inspiring aspects of ECEC as the use of space, and how to make learning, caring and playing possible in an inclusive way. As one of the practitioners pointed out, “I am

surprised at how much you can do with simpler and fewer materials in the classroom. We can see that children are calmer.” The project ended with an [online event](#) in June 2021 hosted by ISSA, in which the toolbox was introduced and partners of the three countries involved in the project shared their experiences and findings in several workshops.

ISSA's role in the project included providing technical assistance and leading the communication and dissemination activities, including the design, production and translation of EDUCAS resources.

*“The main purpose of the EDUCAS Toolbox is to provide professionals with supportive and inspirational guidelines so that each one can implement it in their own way. The material has been created thanks to the participation of children, families, professionals and external experts.”*

*Zorica Trikić,  
ISSA Senior Program Manager*