**Context**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC), as defined by UNESCO, is the “holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.” Extensive academic evidence, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), shows that students who participated in ECEC for more than one year achieved higher scores in standardised mathematics tests at age 15. Pupils not attending pre-primary education have a threefold greater chance of low performance compared to children having had at least one year of ECEC.

Access to ECEC limits the development of competence gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Limited availability of ECEC is particularly challenging for children who are already starting life at a disadvantage, due to a range of factors such as poverty, disability or originating from a Roma or migration background.

While access to ECEC is crucial, the quality of provision is equally important. Ideally, curriculum frameworks or pedagogical guidelines should be in place, including the necessary educational components for younger children. Deficits in quality of provision may also be due to low qualification and competence of teaching staff and limited opportunities for professional development.

Furthermore, quality of provision varies greatly within and between partners, between private and public settings, between urban and rural or remote areas as well as between age groups (0-3 and 3-6).

**EU initiatives**

Within the EU, each Member State is responsible for its own education and training system, whereas EU policy is designed to support national action and help address common challenges. To this end, a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (“ET 2020”) has been developed and allows Member States to identify and exchange best practice. It seeks to advance educational policy reforms at the national level.

In 2009, an access to ECEC benchmark was adopted within the ET2020 strategic framework “with a view to increasing participation in early childhood education as a foundation for later educational success, especially in the case of those from disadvantaged backgrounds”. The benchmark aims to ensure that at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC by 2020.

The ET2020 benchmark complements another target, previously agreed at the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 (with a view to improve female labour market participation), which defined that by 2010, 33% of children under three years old and 90% of children between three and the mandatory school age should have access to services.

Based on the latest figures from the Education and Training Monitor 2018 the ET2020 benchmark has already been achieved at EU level (95.3%). However, the progress made towards the Barcelona objectives is slower, as 16 EU Member States have yet to achieve the 33% target.

On 20 May 2019 the Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC systems has been adopted.
It presents a quality framework to inspire Member States in their strategic thinking and invites them to create corresponding national frameworks. Furthermore, it addresses the key challenges and suggests policy options where reforms could yield high quality improvement benefits. The quality framework refers to five main areas:

- ensuring that early childhood education and care services are accessible, affordable, and inclusive;
- supporting the professionalisation of staff depending on existing levels of professional qualifications and working conditions;
- enhancing the development of early years' curricula so that they meet the wellbeing and educational needs of children;
- promoting transparent monitoring and evaluation of services at all levels of governance;
- ensuring adequate funding and a legal framework for the provision of services, including creating and maintaining tailored national or regional early childhood education and care quality frameworks.

In line with the above priorities, a new ET2020 Working group (2018-2020) on ECEC was recently established, which will focus on social inclusion and professionalisation of staff.

**EU tools to support ECEC**

The European Commission has developed different tools to support ECEC:

- the Erasmus+ programme supports different types of projects which contribute to the quality of early childhood education and care, including through training and professional development of staff involved in this sector;
- EU-wide platforms (e.g. school education gateway) which also focus on ECEC;
- a series of studies and analysis (from the ECEC working group and Eurydice and NESET).

**Situation in the Western Balkans**

In the Western Balkans as elsewhere, children from poor and disadvantaged families, with disabilities and from a migrant background are often excluded from early childhood education and care because of inadequate provision, unaffordability, rural residence or stigma against disability and ethnic affiliation. While children from these categories would certainly gain the most from participating in ECEC.

Equity gaps that start in the early years, widen progressively transmitting disadvantage and marginalisation from one generation to the next. Participation rates of children aged between 4 and the age of compulsory primary education in some economies are as low as 12-18% e.g. Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo* followed by North Macedonia (23%), Montenegro (43%), Serbia (48%) and Albania (80%). This is in fact the ET2020 benchmark where the six partners concerned perform more differently from each other and still far from the ET2020 target of 95%.

Within this context, the European Commission encourages that all children, from birth to school entry, have equitable access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection, care and early learning services that address their developmental needs. ECEC is an important component of the Economic Reform Programmes (ERP) process, as well as the recently approved Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care.

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* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
Systems. It is also a principle laid down in the European Pillar of Social Rights and one of the indicators in the social scoreboard.

A wide range of partners cooperate in the area of ECEC in the Western Balkans together with governments to expand provision of pre-primary education services, improve access, eliminate inequities (particularly for Roma and children with disability), and promote inclusivity.