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CREATING NEW FORMS OF CHILDCARE

Queuing for childcare places is a common phenomenon in Estonia. The care facilities for toddlers in no way meet the current demand, and the provision is not flexible enough to satisfy the needs of mothers who mostly work full-time and have to juggle their work with their family responsibilities. The Development Partnership (DP) "[Children Taken Care of, Mothers at Work](#)" does exactly what its name says: it creates new, alternative childcare services to enable young mothers to participate in the labour market.

THE MISSING LINK IN CHILDCARE – A POLICY PRIORITY

According to national statistics, less than 50 percent of all one to four year olds attend pre-school crèches or playgroups. For the larger part of this age group - more than 33.000 children - it is up to their parents to find a solution and this often turns out to be an arrangement in the grey market. In addition to the public kindergartens that provide high quality care and pre-school education for kids between four and six years of age, most Estonian parents would like to see alternative provision with flexible opening hours for their younger offspring. Naturally, they would also like to have such provision in the vicinity of their homes or workplaces. Parents also feel that "small kids need small groups", and that there should not be more than six to eight children in a unit, instead of the usual 15. However, to date, such services are extremely scarce and if even where they exist most families cannot afford them.

Establishing this missing link in the Estonian childcare system is a top policy priority. *"The best ideas are those which help to solve several problems at once,"* says Paul-Eerik Rummo, Minister of Population and Ethnic Affairs. He believes that *"by developing new flexible child care opportunities, we will provide a supplementary incentive to the increase in births that is already underway in Estonia. At the same time, we will improve the employment situation, particularly for women, and alleviate the risks related to the lack of qualified labour that threaten the country's economic competitiveness. Our policies will create a new basis guaranteeing that families can cope financially and emotionally."*

EQUAL is expected to play a key role in the development of these policies. The Ministry of Population and Ethnic Affairs, which is the lead partner of the DP, has joined forces with the Perekasvatus Instituut (Family Education Institute), the only institution in the country with expertise in family education, and the Põlva Union for Child Welfare, an NGO promoting the interests of mothers and children. EQUAL funding is being used to develop and introduce needs-tailored services, which can include playrooms in municipalities and so-called family day care that is based either in the home of the carer or of the family. Unlike kindergartens whose groups cater for children of the same age, family day care is provided for mixed age groups, thus reflecting the pattern in families that have several kids.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE NEW MODEL

Preliminary surveys and research explored and compared family day care in the European Union and also the viability of alternative forms of childcare in Estonia. This initial phase was an important stepping stone for the DP and helped to prepare the ground for the development and fine-tuning of the new model.

Training and supporting a dedicated group of future providers of the new services is at the heart of the DP's activities. Some 30 women received training that was specifically designed for "family care". The scheme, which was developed prior to the start of the project, is based on a Professional Standard for Childminders¹, the first qualification established by Estonia's Professional Council of Health and Social Work to concentrate on childcare. Qualification

¹ Professional Council of Health and Social Work: Professional Standard – Childminder II, III, 2005.

requirements are defined on five levels in the Estonian professional qualification system. Level I is the lowest and Level V the highest, but not all professions require the specification of qualification levels from Level I to Level V. The child minder standard includes level II and III and requires that the care providers possess the knowledge and skills to:

- guarantee a physically and mentally safe environment for children;
- observe the daily schedule of the child prepared by parents considering the age requirements of children;
- support the development of the child through daily activities (play, movement, etc.);
- observe the personal hygiene of the child, instruct and help the child with this if necessary;
- make sure that the child is fed, cooking for the child and helping her/him with eating if necessary;
- observe the health of the child, to promote the child's health and to care for sick children;
- communicate with the family, and develop the social contacts of the child.

The training reflects all these requirements in a highly practice-oriented way. It is interesting to note that the standard also contains specific skills and knowledge related to the needs of children with disabilities, as well as additional competences to initiate the youngsters in computer literacy and foreign languages.

The DP participants were the very first group to benefit from the new programme and to gain the certificate. During the last three months of 2005, the women completed the 160 hours of training, which was combined with work experience placements. *"More than one third of the EQUAL trainee group are kindergarten teachers or hold higher education degrees, and all the women have experience in working with children"*, reports Erika Vahtmäe, the Project Director, *"it is an excellent start for our initiative to involve so many highly qualified women."* She explains that the scheme takes account of a potential carer's formal and non-formal qualifications, which means that future candidates will be free to decide on how many units of the modular training they need to cover because if they already possess a relevant qualification, they can go straight on to sit the exam.

After this first step, the group was offered entrepreneurship training to enable its members to set up in business or to become self-employed. The training was underpinned by on-going individual counselling and this is continuing throughout the current process of establishing the services. The support package includes financial subsidies to renovate and furnish the location of their venture, and also expertise and know-how to help the women deal with any legal or administrative hurdles. Pille-Riin Moilanen is one of these business creators. Like all her colleagues she greatly appreciates the support provided by EQUAL. *"Starting to offer the new services from within the EQUAL project has been very useful, because all of us are much more visible for the public and can explain better what family day care really is and what our goals are. The project team has been very supportive throughout the training and examination time. Really, our problems have been heard and solved."*

In parallel to all these activities, the DP is preparing methodological materials and tools for current and future family childcare providers.

MAKING SMALL TOWNS MORE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

In Estonia, the legal responsibility for providing childcare lies with the municipalities. It is not always easy for the public authorities, in particular those in small towns and villages in rural areas, to satisfy the demand of parents. It is also not easy for parents in these areas to find services that respond to their needs in terms of flexibility, quality and size of groups. Sometimes they have to drive up to 40 kilometres every day to take their child to a suitable childcare service. The DP has set itself the task of helping parents and municipalities to remedy this situation.

The test bed is Põlva, a little town in the south - east of the country. It is the home of Põlva Union, a very active NGO, which has been working and pushing over the last few years for the creation of a playgroup for toddlers. The idea was that the playgroup should be based in a building that belongs to the municipality, which also houses other community services. However, senior citizens represent the majority of the population. This has, of course, an impact on the outcome of elections and so establishing and funding a playgroup was not exactly a top political priority for the local council. It required a lot of persistence, a number of convincing arguments and highly-

developed negotiation skills to bring the local policy makers on board and to get the green light for the opening of the playgroup. The coordinator of the group, Tiina Jurs, is quite proud of what has been already achieved: *“Families living outside of town are bringing their children to the playgroup while visiting different public institutions or other places. Those parents find the playgroup extremely useful. Also, parents whose smallest children are not yet going to nursery school are coming to the playgroup, so that the kids get used to the company of other children. And it also meets their childcare needs.”*

All the lessons learned from the Põlva pilot case, from the first glimmer of the idea to the opening of the playroom, are of crucial importance to the DP. These experiences, both positive and negative, will help the EQUAL partners to develop strategies, which have the potential to improve the social environment and to create and facilitate partnership and cooperation between local authorities and new childcare providers.

ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY AND MAINSTREAMING FROM EARLY ON

Even if the DP's aims and actions are perfectly in line with the family policy of the National Government and thus, its potential for mainstreaming its achievements is optimal, the partners still have to face a number of challenges if they are to really transfer the new model into the regular childcare system in Estonia.

One of those challenges is to raise the awareness of the public at large of the dilemma of reconciliation that marks the daily reality of young parents, and particularly the life of the mothers. Thus, the project activities are accompanied by information and publicity activities that aim to engender a culture that is supportive to children and families.

From its very beginning, the project has addressed different categories of key players such as local politicians and authorities, ministries, government agencies and national political decision-makers in an attempt to convince them of the necessity and value of these additional childcare services. As the number of concrete outcomes of the DP increases, it is expected that this mainstreaming strategy will gain momentum and also make an important contribution to the new legislation on social care that is about to be introduced into the National Parliament by the [Minister of Social Affairs](#). This law will be essential to the integration of alternative forms of childcare into the generous and comprehensive [Estonian family policies and practices](#). These include parental leave offering benefits to parents (mothers and/or fathers!) that match their previous income over a period of 14 months, birth grants, childcare benefits, family and single parent allowances, family holiday subsidies and various tax credits - to name just the most important [family benefits](#). Adding needs-tailored, high quality and flexible care services to this impressive package would make a real difference to the daily lives of the youngest members of society and of their parents.

A CROSS-BORDER LEARNING PROCESS

The “Children Taken Care of, Mothers at Work” DP is cooperating with three transnational partners in [France](#), [Italy](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). Under the name of [Primavera](#) this Transnational Partnership (TP) has the aim of developing new competencies, services and businesses in the care sector. In particular, partners intend to exchange good practices related to the empowerment of those target groups that might become carers by providing innovative guidance, counselling, training, qualification, coaching and business creation paths. Provoking an impact on gender, social and employment policies at local, national and EU level is part of the common agenda, as is raising public awareness about the importance of care services in the evolution of European societies and about a new concept of Equal Opportunities through social communication and action. This involves the joint production of audio-visuals materials and press campaigns and also of printed reports assembling the outcomes of comparative studies on innovative methodologies and training processes in the participating countries.

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