

# Raising the quality of early childhood education and care by strengthening governance, monitoring and evaluation

2024-2026



*A brief on the EU multi-country TSI project with Bulgaria and Portugal*

## The case for ECEC

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a powerful equalizer for children's development and lifetime opportunities. It lays the foundations for learning and competence development and helps combat inequalities and social exclusion, favouring especially the most vulnerable children. ECEC is also an important policy tool for employment, enabling parents to reconcile family and work life.

Children's right to affordable, high-quality ECEC is recognised a core principle under the European Pillar of Social Rights. Through the European Education Area (EEA) Member States have pledged to improve its accessibility, inclusivity and quality.

## Challenges for Bulgaria and Portugal

**Bulgaria** and **Portugal** both face challenges in ensuring comprehensive quality levels across the ECEC system. In both countries, responsibility for ECEC is split among different authorities, and a plurality of service providers are following different quality standards. This structure, while complex, highlights the need for comprehensive and coherent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms, including strengthened co-operation across Ministries, that can provide a full

picture of ECEC service effectiveness as a pre-condition for ensuring consistent quality and equitable access across services.

**Bulgaria** is committed to reforming the ECEC system as a key factor for holistic early childhood development (ECD). Improving quality in education and reducing the country's socio-economic disparities are among its national priorities. Striving to maintain its commitments under the European Child Guarantee National Action Plan and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to promote equal opportunities and inclusive education, the country has undertaken considerable reform efforts to strengthen the ECEC system. This includes the development of a National ECEC Quality Framework, supported by the European Commission through the Structural Reform Support Programme (2020-22). Despite the efforts, challenges persist, among which:

1. The lack of a holistic approach to quality and inclusivity, as well as insufficient supply of ECEC services, leading to regional disparities in access and learning;
2. A diversity of service providers and lack of uniformity in the regulatory processes;
3. A fragmented M&E system and inconsistent data collection efforts.

**Portugal** has proven its commitment to strengthening the quality of its ECEC services through the Child Guarantee Action Plan, aimed at expanding its preschool education network and increasing coverage rates in daycare centres, and by developing a suite of technical and guiding documents, to define and strengthen quality processes across the ECEC sector.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access and consistent quality across services, among which:

1. The lack of common quality standards, with subsequential disparities on budgeting, planning and evaluating the sector;
2. Improve access and attendance for all children, especially the ones from vulnerable backgrounds;
3. A limited supply of ECEC services, putting a strain on the system, in view of increased demand.

## Raising the quality of ECEC by strengthening governance, monitoring and evaluation: EU support for national reforms in Bulgaria and Portugal

To support their national reforms Bulgaria and Portugal have jointly requested technical support through the European Union's Technical Support Instrument (TSI), which provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms.

### Intended impact and outcomes

This 2-year TSI project aims to raise the quality of early childhood education and care for children from birth to start of compulsory school education years in Portugal and Bulgaria. It supports the reforms in both countries enabling the authorities to take action to strengthen the governance of the ECEC systems and develop comprehensive monitoring & evaluation (M&E) systems in support of high-quality services.

More specifically, the project works towards the following outcomes:

- The Bulgarian authorities adopt a concept for a comprehensive system for the monitoring & evaluation of early childhood education and care, and a practical toolkit to support its implementation at different levels of the system.
- The Portuguese authorities adopt a tested and piloted quality framework for early childhood education and care.

For this multi-country project, Bulgaria and Portugal will engage in a range of joint activities and reflect on each other's reforms. Joint peer learning events with other European countries will be organised

throughout the project to foster deeper co-operation and mutual capacity-building among stakeholders. This collaborative approach ensures the alignment of goals and the sharing of innovative solutions between Portugal and Bulgaria.

### Key project deliverables

The project will produce the following key deliverables to achieve the above outcomes:

- "As is" analysis of governance and M&E with regards to quality in ECEC to identify the strengths, weaknesses and needs of the sector.
- Analysis and lessons from European good practice in ECEC from other countries with relevant experiences for Bulgaria and Portugal.
- Tools to monitor & evaluate the quality of ECEC for national and municipal authorities, as well as practitioners at setting level, piloted in selected settings.
  - **Bulgaria:** A concept for a comprehensive M&E system for ECEC, and an associated M&E toolkit;
  - **Portugal:** A national quality framework and associated indicators.
- Proposals for a communication strategy to raise the public awareness on the importance of quality ECEC.
- Consolidated recommendations and next steps for the implementation and dissemination of the frameworks by the State authorities in Bulgaria and Portugal respectively.



### The project partnership

This 2-year project is funded by the European Union through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) and implemented by UNICEF.

Technical support is provided by UNICEF Europe and Central Asia regional office and UNICEF Bulgaria country office's Early Childhood Development section, in co-operation with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM).

Project leadership for **Bulgaria** is provided by the Ministry of Education and Science, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Health.

For **Portugal**, project leadership is provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation and the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security.