



Hidden potential: Childcare in Greece

GREEK & EUROPEAN ECONOMY OBSERVATORY

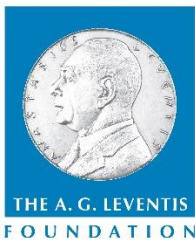
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Summary

- High-quality early childhood education and care helps children’s early development and positively affects educational, social and economic outcomes in later life for the children involved and for society at large. Conversely, the lack of affordable high-quality childcare creates deficits in abilities and skills, including soft ones, which raise social costs and drive down productivity.
- Compulsory pre-school education in Greece has recently been extended, now starting at age 4. Nevertheless, participation in early childhood education and care at a younger age remains below the European average. Limited availability of affordable subsidised places is a key obstacle to raising enrolment in childcare centres.
- The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) offered Member States generous funding for investing in childcare. This is especially important in countries like Greece, where female employment— though rising – remains low, which reflects the difficulties Greek women face in reconciling career and family responsibilities.
- Greece 2.0, The National Recovery and Resilience Plan, included measures to improve childcare quality and expand access. While some initiatives began, most were later abandoned, highlighting the fragility of reforms amid institutional bottlenecks.
- Despite setbacks, ECEC has gained some visibility in national debates. Yet without a long-term fiscal commitment and a coherent national strategy, it will be difficult to expand access for children under the age of 2, improve quality, and ensure equity in a sector that has historically been underfunded and neglected.

Introduction

The benefits of quality early childhood education and care are well documented. A recent OECD [report](#) has pointed out that high-quality childcare advances children's early cognitive development, improves their school performance in a variety of subjects (language, literacy, and numeracy), and cultivates their socio-emotional skills (such as attentiveness, motivation, and self-control). Moreover, there is considerable [evidence](#) that high-quality pre-school also helps support outcomes later in life: as James Heckman, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Economics, and his colleagues have [put](#) the rate of return on investment in "comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-five early education" at over 13%, which is far above that promised by most public investment projects, and "substantially higher than the 7-10% return previously established for preschool programs serving 3- to 4-year-olds".

Childcare does not just benefit children: it also benefits mothers. In fact, recent [studies](#) have revealed that employment rates and earnings levels of men and women start to diverge once workers have children, with women's labour market performance deteriorating, while that of men's being unaffected or even improving. This phenomenon has been dubbed the 'child penalty'.

What explains the child penalty?

...the availability of affordable childcare tends to correlate with more permissive social norms about mothers staying at work rather than giving up looking after their babies.

Claudia Goldin, winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Economics, has [argued](#) that gender norms, instilled in women (and men) when growing up, play a big role. Women whose mother did not work, or in societies where working mothers are frowned upon, are more likely to abstain from the labour market once they have children. Moreover, many jobs are not child-friendly. So, when a working woman has a child, she risks being perceived as having opted for the "mommy track", prioritising flexible or reduced work hours over career advancement. This, in turn, causes them to be passed over for promotion and so on.

While cultural norms are certainly important, institutional arrangements, such as parental leave policies and family-friendly care services, including childcare, are also known to play a decisive role. A recent ILO [report](#) has estimated that investing in universal childcare and affordable long-term care services could generate up to 280 million jobs globally by 2030, and another 19 million by 2035. What is more, institutional arrangements are known to interact with cultural norms. Recent [research](#) has found that the availability of affordable childcare tends to correlate with more permissive social norms about mothers staying at work rather than giving up looking after their babies.

Against this backdrop, the literature on labour market inequalities documents that women's and men's employment rates and earnings begin to diverge markedly after the transition to parenthood, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the motherhood or child penalty. In Greece, women experience significant declines in labour market participation and earnings after childbirth. The magnitude of the [child penalty in Greece](#) may reflect the combined influence of persistent gender norms that place primary caregiving responsibilities on women and institutional shortcomings that limit families' ability to reconcile work and care. This stands in sharp contrast to countries such as Norway, where comprehensive family-friendly policies and more egalitarian norms have contributed to high female employment rates and minimal child penalties.

In Greece, compulsory pre-school education has recently been extended, now starting at age 4. Nevertheless, participation in early childhood education and care is below the EU average. The [report](#) of the Pissarides Commission, chaired by Sir Christopher Pissarides, winner of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Economics, delivered in January 2020 to the Prime Minister of Greece, stressed that the country needed a childcare development plan. The report inspired [Greece 2.0](#), the country's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), a unique opportunity for Greece (and other EU member states) to invest in expanding the supply and improving the quality of early childhood education and care, with generous funding from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

This policy paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, section 2 discusses the link between childcare and human development throughout the lifetime. Section 3 provides an overview of childcare in the EU. Section 4 describes the main features of childcare provision in Greece. Section 5 critically discusses the reforms of, and investment in, early childhood education and care in [Greece 2.0](#), and analyses the main implementation obstacles. The last section concludes with a summary of the main findings, and a discussion of implications for policy.

High quality childcare is seen to benefit all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Childcare and outcomes throughout the lifetime

The policy discourse around early childhood education and care has evolved significantly over the last 20 years or so. Childcare is now viewed as not only key to increasing women's employment, but as crucial to "laying the foundations for learning at school and throughout life", as a recent [study](#) put it, and a fundamental part of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). High quality childcare is seen to benefit all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children from low-income low-educated families lack the social and economic resources for the early developmental stimulation that determines success in school, work, and adult life. Affordable high-quality childcare supplies that stimulation, which makes it one of the most effective mechanisms for breaking the vicious cycle of social exclusion and the transmission of intergenerational inequality.

Strikingly, [results](#) from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey show that on average, across all OECD countries, 15-year olds who had attended pre-primary school for three years or more scored 45 points higher on mathematics than those who had attended pre-primary school for less than a year. (The average performance in mathematics across all OECD countries in 2022 was 472 points.) Given that PISA test performance and childcare attendance both tend to be higher for kids from more affluent better-educated families, PISA researchers also presented results accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and their schools. That narrowed the difference: other things being equal, pre-primary school attendance for three years or more improved average mathematics performance across all OECD countries by 16 points relative to pre-primary school attendance for less than a year. In Greece, the score difference between students who had attended pre-primary school for three years or more and those who had done so for less than a year was 48 and 28 points, before and after accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and their schools respectively (relative to a country average of 430 points).

Similarly, another [study](#) found that children who had attended pre-school did better in language, pre-reading, and early number concepts, compared to those who had not, other things being equal (i.e. controlling for background characteristics such as family income and education). Specifically, children who had been in high-quality pre-school for 2-3 years were nearly 8 months ahead in terms of literacy compared to children who had not. Other

studies confirm that high-quality early childhood education and care helps children's successful completion of compulsory education.

In the US, a [longitudinal study](#), led by James Heckman, examined the life course outcomes of participants of the iconic Perry Preschool Project, an experimental high-quality pre-school programme for disadvantaged African-American children in the 1960s. Results showed that those who had been at Perry Preschool as kids were more likely as adults to be in work, and earning higher wages, and less likely to be affected by poverty, family dissolution, or to have been incarcerated, especially for violent crimes. Moreover, participation in Perry Preschool significantly increased participants' job-related, health, cognitive and socio-emotional skills.

...high-quality early childhood education can be an effective tool for reducing intergenerational poverty.

Another [study](#) from the Perry Preschool Project demonstrated significant second-generation effects on education, employment, crime, and health outcomes. Specifically, the children of Perry Preschool participants were less likely to be suspended from school, more likely to complete regular high school, and more likely to be employed full-time. The mounting evidence of strong intergenerational effects spanning multiple generations suggests that high-quality early childhood education can be an effective tool for reducing intergenerational poverty.

Heckman's more recent [work](#) focused on the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education (ABC/CARE). These are childcare programmes that target the early years of disadvantaged, mainly African American children in the area of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The study found that children in ABC/CARE had significantly better outcomes in later life than those who had not received centre-based care or had received lower quality care. Moreover, ABC/CARE improved the economic prospects of children and their mothers, allowing mothers to enter the workforce and increase earnings, while their children gained the foundational skills that made them more successful in later life. The authors concluded that high-quality; birth-to-five programmes for disadvantaged children were great value for money: the study's "point estimate of the internal rate of return [was] 13.7% with an associated benefit/cost ratio of 7.3". In other words, each dollar spent on high-quality pre-school brought benefits worth \$7.30 in terms of increased labour income for participants and their mothers, reduced crime, and quality-adjusted life years gained for all concerned.

Research findings like those cited above have been influencing the thinking of public policy analysts at international organisations and governments in Europe and beyond, leading to a new consensus about the promise of childcare to bring about gains in both efficiency (higher employment and earnings) and equity (lower intergenerational inequality and poverty).

High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in the EU: Policy Framework and Current Realities

The policy relevance of ECEC has grown steadily since the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, which marked a strategic shift toward increasing female employment as a core goal of the European Employment Strategy (Naldini and Jurado, 2013). In 2002 the European Council of that year set the so-called [Barcelona targets](#), echoing a new crop of [research](#) that highlighted the importance of childcare for reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion, and fostering creativity and innovation. The Barcelona targets specified that Member States should remove disincentives to female employment and strive to provide childcare

to at least 33% of children aged below 3, and to at least 90% of children from 3 to school age. Throughout the 2010s, the EU employed a range of soft governance tools to strengthen ECEC provision. A notable example is the 2013 Council Recommendation on Investing in Children, which urged Member States to guarantee access to high-quality ECEC as part of broader strategies to reduce child poverty and promote equal opportunities (Council of the EU, 2013). This was followed by the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems, adopted under the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The recommendation introduced a quality framework across five dimensions: access, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance—laying a shared foundation for ECEC reform across Member States (European Commission, 2019).

These initiatives reinforced the EU’s social investment paradigm, which views ECEC not only as a social policy but also as a strategic investment in human capital with long-term socioeconomic returns. This perspective has been integrated into broader EU strategies such as Europe 2020, underscoring the multi-dimensional value of early education.

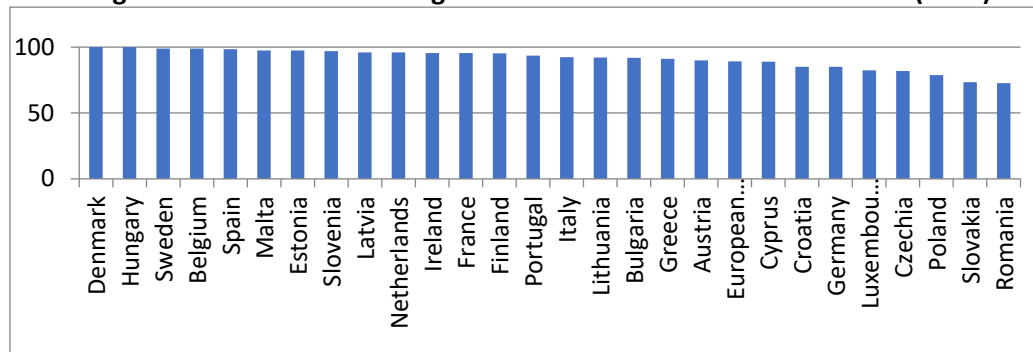
The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to care, highlighting its critical role not only as a social necessity but also as a key component of economic infrastructure. In response, the European Union increased its focus on strengthening care systems, particularly early childhood education and care (ECEC). A landmark step in this effort was the launch of the European Care Strategy in 2022, which laid out ambitious goals for accessible, high-quality, and affordable care services, along with better working conditions for care workers. This strategy also updated the Barcelona targets, aiming for at least 50% participation of children under three and 96% for children aged three and above in early childhood education programs. Complementing this, the European Child Guarantee was introduced in 2020 to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion can access essential services like education, healthcare, housing, and nutrition. This Guarantee provides a guiding framework for EU countries to design policies that reduce inequalities and support children’s well-being.

Despite the strong policy framework, the reality of ECEC provision remains uneven across Europe.

The Current State of ECEC in Europe: Progress and Persistent Gaps

Despite the strong policy framework, the reality of ECEC provision remains uneven across Europe. According to the [2025 Eurydice report](#), many countries have made progress, but disparities in access, quality, and governance persist.

In 2024, the share of children aged 3 to compulsory primary education age enrolled in childcare or nursery school across the EU stood at 89.2%. Greece exceeded the EU average, with a participation rate of 91.1%. Nine Member States—Denmark, Hungary, Sweden, Belgium, Spain, Malta, Estonia, Slovenia, and Latvia—had already met the revised 2030 target of 96%, while the Netherlands, France, and Ireland were marginally below the target.

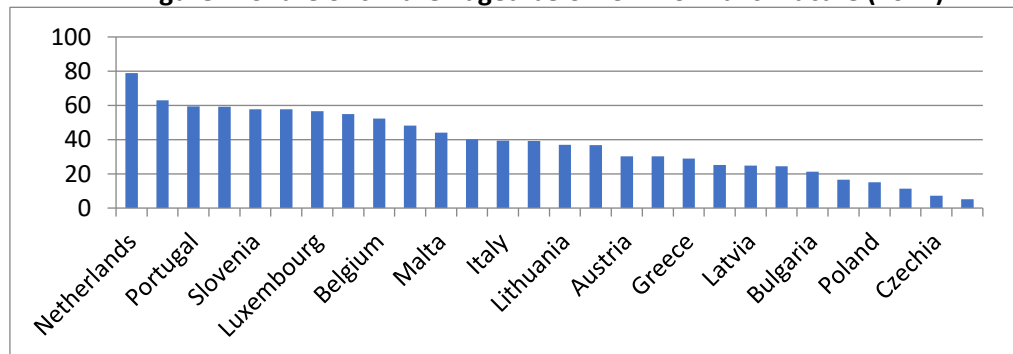
Figure 1: Share of children aged 3+ in formal childcare or education (2024)

Notes: Share of children aged 3 to compulsory primary education age who were in childcare or education for at least one hour per week in 2024.

Source: EU-SILC survey [ilc_caindformal].

Participation in early childhood education and care is generally lower among children under the age of three. Denmark and the Netherlands stand out with the highest participation rates of those aged under 3 in ECEC, reaching 60 % or over in 2024. In contrast, fewer than 10% of younger children attend ECEC in Czechia and Slovakia. In Greece, the relevant figure was just below 30%.

Demand for ECEC for children under 2.5 years generally exceeds supply in most EU countries.

Figure 2: Share of children aged below 3 in formal childcare (2024)

Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC (tepsr_sp210)

The persistent structural challenge across many EU Member States is the “[ECEC gap](#)”—the period between the end of well-paid parental leave and the point when children are legally entitled to a place in publicly subsidised Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This gap forces families to choose between returning to work, relying on informal care, or paying for private childcare. While countries like Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway provide guaranteed ECEC places immediately after parental leave, most EU countries do not. In Greece, for example, there is no entitlement to ECEC immediately after parental leave, leaving a gap of over two years. Across Europe, around one-third of countries only guarantee access in the final one or two years before primary school, underscoring the need for policy alignment to support both child development and parental employment.

Demand for ECEC for children under 2.5 years generally [exceeds](#) supply in most EU countries, though some—such as Denmark, Estonia, Malta, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway—effectively meet early demand by providing legal entitlement and universal access from a young age. In many Member States, including Greece, access improves significantly only after age three.

Access in ECEC is also socially stratified.

The structure and governance of ECEC also shape availability and quality. Europe has two main models: unitary and split. The unitary model treats ECEC as a single, continuous phase for all preschool-aged children under one ministry, with consistent staff qualifications and pay. This approach, common in Nordic, Baltic, and some Balkan countries, promotes universal access, continuity, and higher quality, especially for children under three. By contrast, the split model divides governance by age group, with separate regulations and qualifications, often resulting in fragmented services and inconsistent quality. Greece, along with Belgium, France, Italy, Czechia, and Portugal, largely operates a split system. Some countries, like Italy, are moving toward integration, with the Ministry of Education assuming broader responsibility for ages 0–6.

Costs for ECEC vary widely, particularly for children under three. Low fees (often below PPS 100) are found in Estonia, Hungary, Malta, Finland, Sweden, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, while medium fees (PPS 100–249) are common in Czechia, Germany, Spain, Croatia, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, and Norway. Fees are higher in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, France, and Greece, where average costs reach PPS 472. Independent private centers generally charge more than public providers. Many governments offer partial compensation or subsidies for private care, helping to reduce the financial burden on families.

Access in ECEC is also socially [stratified](#). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds—particularly migrants, minorities, or low-educated parents—attend formal childcare less frequently than children from affluent, highly educated families. Across nearly all EU countries, attendance under age three is higher among the richest 20% of households. [Research](#) suggests that these “[Matthew effects](#)” largely reflect supply-side barriers, such as affordability and availability, rather than cultural preferences, highlighting areas where policy intervention can directly improve equity.

The current state of ECEC in Greece

Greece invests only 0.27% of GDP in early childhood education and care (ECEC)—the second-lowest in the EU.

Greece [invests](#) only 0.27% of GDP in early childhood education and care (ECEC)—the second-lowest in the EU after Ireland (0.14%) and far below the OECD average of 0.71%. Nordic countries spend over 1%, reaching 1.6% in Sweden. This chronic underfunding limits accessibility, affordability, and quality, reduces women’s workforce participation, and reinforces social inequalities. Children’s uptake of childcare depends on availability, accessibility, affordability, and quality.

Greece follows a split ECEC system. Early education for four- and five-year-olds is provided in kindergartens (nipiagogeia) under the Ministry of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, following a national curriculum and staffed exclusively by university-trained teachers. Since 2018/19, compulsory education begins at age four, reflecting broader early inclusion.

[Childcare](#) for children under four is highly fragmented and involves multiple ministries:

- Ministry of Interior oversees municipal nurseries and centers (vrefikoistathmoi, vrefonipiakoistathmoi, paidikoistathmoi) and manages licensing, supervision, and inspections.
- Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs regulates private ECEC centers.

This division results in no legal entitlement, no national curriculum, and inconsistent quality standards for children under four. Home-based programs, such as “[Neighborhood Nannies](#),” subsidize care for infants aged 2 months to 2.5 years but still operate in only 61 of 332 municipalities.

Availability

Reliable, comprehensive data on ECEC infrastructure and enrollment is limited. The Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government (EETAA) collects [data](#) only on ECEC centers participating in the EU subsidized program. In 2023, Greece had 1,537 infant centers (up to 2.5 years) and 2,676 preschool centers (2.5 years to school age). Exact capacities of all ECEC centers remain unknown, preventing accurate assessment of unmet demand.

The data highlight critical shortages: 53,699 infants and young children up to 2.5 years received vouchers in 2023, and 56,907 vouchers were issued for 2.5–4-year-olds. Yet it is often reported that many vouchers went unused for the infant category, indicating shortages of places for this age group. For example, in Athens in 2025, there are 2,038 public places for toddlers, but only 1,204 for infants (data derived from Δημοτικό Βρεφοκομείο Αθηνών).

In 2024, only 28.9% of children under three were enrolled in ECEC – well below the EU average of 39.2%.

Another key constraint is limited opening hours. Many centers operate only standard office hours, which is insufficient for parents with longer or irregular working hours. This particularly affects low-income families who cannot afford extended private care or alternative arrangements. Geographic gaps and limited public transport exacerbate access issues. Participation rates reflect these challenges. In 2024, only 28.9% of children under three were enrolled in ECEC —well below the EU average of 39.2% and the revised target of 45%—though participation has doubled from 14.5% in 2013.

Affordability

Public ECEC is mostly municipal, with low, income-tiered fees and waivers for families in need. Only [28 public DYPA](#) (formerly OAED) nurseries serve infants and toddlers entirely free of charge, enrolling 605 children under 2.5 and 567 aged 2.5–4. Eligibility requires parents to have at least 50 days of insured work, unemployment benefits, or OAED support. Operating costs are covered by a wage contribution from IKA-ETAM-insured employees.

Many families rely on private centers, where fees often exceed €300/month and are higher in urban areas. Many ECEC centers accept EU co-funded vouchers (for details [see](#)) since 2010, but not all do. One contributing factor is the occasionally there have been [delays in payment](#) of voucher funds to ECEC centers. Although EU funding has been crucial, it also highlights a structural challenge: long-term sustainability requires integrating these programs into the national budget rather than relying indefinitely on EU resources.

The [2025–2026 voucher program](#) expanded income thresholds (€35,000 for two-child families, higher for larger families), retaining a €379 million budget, using a points system considering income, employment, family size, and disability. [Voucher values](#) for ECEC specifically are:

- (0–2.5 years): €2,612/year without meals, €3,239 with meals
- (2.5–4 years): €1,985/year without meals, €2,162 with meals

This covers €180–€270/month—often below private fees—forcing families to cover the remainder.

[OECD data](#) illustrate why subsidies are so critical. Greece has some of the highest gross childcare costs in Europe: for a two-earner couple with two young children (aged 2 and 3), fees amount to 51% of average earnings—more than double the EU average of 20.2% and far above the OECD average of 25.6%. Only a few countries, such as the Netherlands (64%) and Switzerland (63%), rank higher. By comparison, Spain (9%), Portugal (21%), and Italy (37% before rebates) are significantly more affordable. After subsidies, Greece’s net childcare cost drops to 8% of average earnings (6% of family net income), aligning closely with the EU average. However, this apparent affordability is achieved almost entirely through extensive public subsidies, masking the fact that without state support, childcare in Greece remains prohibitively expensive for most families.

Quality

Quality in early childhood education and care is commonly assessed using two main indicators: child-to-staff ratios and minimum qualification requirements for staff. In Greece, [public infant classes](#) have a maximum of 12 children, supported by two core practitioners and one assistant, while child classes (ages 2.5 to pre-primary) may include up to 25 children with one core practitioner and one assistant. In the private sector, group sizes are more strictly regulated, with limits such as 10 infants per group in infant care centres and 15 children per group in child care centres.

When comparing [child-to-staff ratios](#) internationally, Greece performs better than the OECD average, with about 10.2 children per contact staff member and 10.2 children per teaching staff member in pre-primary education. This ratio is also slightly better than the EU23 average, indicating a relatively favorable staffing level compared to many European countries. However, Greece’s ratios are higher than those in Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Iceland, which maintain much lower child-to-staff ratios, reflecting smaller groups and more intensive staffing. Conversely, Greece’s ratios are substantially lower (better) than in some Southern and Eastern European countries, including Spain and Italy, where ratios tend to be higher.

Regarding staff qualifications, about half of European countries require that at least one team member caring for children—regardless of age—holds a bachelor’s degree (ISCED level 6) throughout the entire early childhood education and care phase. Greece is among these countries, alongside Denmark, Germany, Finland, and others. Some countries, like Portugal and Iceland, require a master’s degree (ISCED level 7) as the minimum qualification, while France and Italy have mixed requirements depending on the child’s age. However, actual qualifications and staffing arrangements can be more complex in practice, influenced by national policies and workforce conditions.

Despite these structured indicators, [evidence](#) on the quality of childcare services for children under three in Greece remains limited. This highlights the need for consistent quality standards across all forms of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Eurydice, 2025). Current [regulatory criteria](#) primarily focus on physical facilities and hygiene, with limited attention to educational quality.

As a result, knowledge about the quality of childcare in Greece relies heavily on isolated [research efforts](#). These studies generally indicate low to medium levels of quality, particularly in areas such as teaching and learning practices, and relationships between families and educators. Importantly, most research focuses on urban settings, leaving rural

...evidence on the quality of childcare services for children under three in Greece remains limited.

areas understudied. Another critical concern remains the absence of national educational guidelines or curricula for childcare centers serving children under four. This lack of guidance fragments the system and hinders efforts to improve quality, reflecting the relatively low status of childcare within the Greek education system, in contrast to countries where coherent standards and pedagogical frameworks exist across all early childhood services.

Overall, Greece's ECEC system shows incremental progress amid structural challenges. Participation has increased but availability—for children under 2.5—and limited opening hours remain critical constraints, and quality issues persist. These gaps hinder gender equality and labor market participation, as inadequate childcare restricts women's employment opportunities.

RRF: A Missed Opportunity in Greece's Early Childhood Education

Greece's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) outlined ambitious reforms aligned with European policy trends, but implementation outcomes were significantly constrained by systemic bottlenecks.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Greece's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system faced multiple challenges. The existing childcare voucher program, which supported families, was nearing expiration, creating uncertainty for children's access to care and for municipal childcare employees, many of whom had long been funded by EU programs. Greece's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) outlined ambitious reforms aligned with European policy trends, but implementation outcomes were significantly constrained by systemic bottlenecks.

Greece's RRF program included three core interventions. The first aimed to expand childcare places for infants and toddlers. The NRRP initially targeted [50,000 new places](#) for children aged two months to 2.5 years through the [UB4 initiative](#), which co-financed up to 50% of construction or expansion costs for public and private providers, with a maximum grant of €300,000 per project. Newly created places were required to be maintained for at least three years.

The [second intervention](#) sought to establish workplace-based childcare units for firms with 100–250 employees. With €16 million in funding, it targeted 120 firms to support infants aged six months to 2.5 years, covering renovation, equipment, and staffing for two years. This [initiative](#) aimed to improve work-life balance and support women's labor participation.

The third reform axis focused on creating a unified [national curriculum](#) to address ECEC fragmentation. Originally launched as the [Kypseli programme](#), it targeted children aged 3 months to 4 years to support cognitive development and facilitate integration into primary education. The plan included the National Council of Preschool Education, a pilot program, and staff training. In 2024, it was revised as the "[Development of an Educational Framework, Psychometric Tool, and Psychoeducational Interventions in Infant, Toddler, and Preschool Care Centers](#)". It included pilot implementation in 90 centers, development of psychometric assessment tools, psychoeducational interventions, parent guidance, and a national communication and evaluation strategy.

Despite their promise, these reforms faced significant obstacles. The expansion of childcare places was the most difficult. The initial 50,000-place target was reduced to [20,000](#), yet even this lower target was unmet. The RRF framework did not allow further downward revisions, leading to the discontinuation of the expansion component. Private providers hesitated due to the financial burden of covering 50% of costs amid rising

expenses and uncertainty, while municipalities faced regulatory hurdles and scarcity of suitable sites. A deeper structural issue was the lack of secure and predictable operational funding: the EETAA childcare voucher had lost real value over time. Consequently, very few new places were proposed under the RRF.

The workplace-based initiative similarly failed. The eligibility threshold of 100–250 employees excluded the overwhelming majority of Greek firms rendering the measure inaccessible to most potential participants. As a result, employer uptake remained minimal, and the initiative was ultimately removed from the RRF plan.

In contrast, the [curriculum reform](#) progressed further but implementation faced obstacles. [Municipal unions](#) highlighted labor concerns such as insecure contracts, while some [university departments](#) which were originally excluded from the design criticized the program. In response, the reform retained its pedagogical ambitions, including early development screening and professional developments but shifted to non-RRF funding sources, [explicitly involving universities](#).

The limited outcomes of Greece's RRF ECEC reforms reflect structural, institutional, and policy design constraints.

The limited outcomes of Greece's RRF ECEC reforms reflect structural, institutional, and policy design constraints. Reliance on private participation assumed capital support would drive expansion, yet without secure operational funding, providers could not commit. Unlike Greece, [other countries](#) such as Italy, Spain, Germany and Portugal, directed RRF resources toward public ECEC places, ensuring both equity and coverage. Territorial targeting was another missing element. [Some countries](#) (i.e. Spain and Italy) prioritized investment in rural, low-income, or underserved areas. Greece lacked both the data and strategic framework to allocate funds regionally, reducing the reform's effectiveness.

Despite some progress, Greece's RRF experience highlights both potential and limitations. ECEC has gained visibility in national debates, and initiatives such as the emerging national curriculum and early developmental monitoring provide a foundation for future reforms. Yet, the lack of a coordinated long-term strategy and fragmented administration prevented systemic change, leaving persistent gaps in access, particularly for children under three.

A coordinated national strategy, supported by long-term fiscal commitment, is essential to close the ECEC gap, support child development, and enhance opportunities for parents—particularly women—to participate fully in the workforce.

Recommendations for Systemic Transformation

Greece still faces the challenge of transforming ECEC into a universally accessible, high-quality system. A coordinated national strategy, supported by long-term fiscal commitment, is essential to close the ECEC gap, support child development, and enhance opportunities for parents—particularly women—to participate fully in the workforce.

Moving toward a unified governance model, under a single ministry responsible for all ECEC services, should be the first priority, as it would streamline policy and clarify and enable coordinated oversight and evaluation. Greece also needs to allocate larger part of its national budget to ECEC to ensure the continuity of the childcare voucher as EU co-financing phases out. This allocation should allow for the full hiring of municipal ECEC staff, securing a stable workforce that has previously been supported through EU funds for over 10 years. At the same time, the voucher value should be re-evaluated and increased to improve affordability and access. Beyond vouchers, public provision must be strengthened, for example through the expansion of municipal and state-run centers such as the DYPA's 28 stations, aiming to provide as many free-of-charge places as possible to reduce the persistent ECEC gap. Given this gap and low female employment, legal

entitlements might need to start from the age of three, prioritizing resources where they can have the greatest social and economic impact.

Strengthening national investment is also essential because current funding priorities have left important areas under-resourced—notably the 3–5 age group. The RRF reforms did not allocate resources for improving kindergarten infrastructure, despite growing concerns about the condition of facilities, particularly in densely populated urban areas. [Reports](#) frequently highlight issues such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate maintenance, underscoring the need for public investment beyond the narrow focus on children under 2.5—an area where other countries, such as [Italy](#), have used RRF funds to upgrade infrastructure for older preschool-aged children.

Addressing inequalities is another key priority. The current system disproportionately benefits children who can access private centers, while children from underprivileged families face limited opportunities. Expanding public provision, ensuring coverage for all children, and implementing robust quality standards will help reduce these disparities.

Data infrastructure is also critical. Currently, the main source of information is EETAA, but this is insufficient for planning and monitoring since it includes only the child care centers participating in the voucher. Every municipality should provide comprehensive, standardized data on enrollment, staffing, and service quality and fees. Without such information, policy-makers cannot accurately assess unmet demand, target resources effectively, or monitor the impact of reforms.

Finally, ECEC must not be treated as a stand-alone policy. Strong coordination across ECEC, labor-market and social protection, is essential to reduce the motherhood penalty.

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Key priorities for Greece’s ECEC system:

- **Governance:** Move toward a unified governance model under a single ministry responsible for all ECEC services, to streamline policy, and enable coordinated oversight and evaluation.
- **Fiscal Space & Public Provision:** Integrate ECEC into the national budget, fully hire municipal staff, revalue the childcare voucher, and expand public, free-of-charge provision through municipal centers such as DYPAs’ 28 stations. Consider adjusting legal entitlements to start from age three to reduce the ECEC gap, and support female labor force participation.
- **Data Infrastructure:** Strengthen data systems beyond EETAA by requiring all municipalities to provide standardized data on enrollment, staffing and fees. Reliable data is essential for assessing unmet demand, targeting resources, and monitoring reform impacts.
- **Long-Term Strategy & Equity:** Develop a comprehensive national ECEC strategy that prioritizes universal access, quality standards, workforce development, and targeted support for underprivileged children, ensuring that both coverage and quality are achieved across the system.

Final note

This report assesses the RRF ECEC reforms in Greece and provides a broader analysis of early childhood education and care in the country. Beyond evaluating the reforms, it examines how childcare supports human development throughout life, compares Greek provision with other EU countries, and describes the main features of childcare in Greece. It critically analyses the RRF 2.0 reforms and investments, showing that while the period

represented a missed opportunity for structural change in ECEC, it provided visibility and momentum, initiating important steps such as curriculum development. Most importantly, the RRF experience highlighted that incremental or piecemeal reforms are insufficient. Only a comprehensive, integrated strategy can ensure that all Greek children receive high-quality early childhood education and care. Every day without such a strategy leaves children waiting at the starting line.

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