



Case Study Briefing

The integrated system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Emilia-Romagna Region. Case studies of innovative services.



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1. Overview

The Report presents the results of an eight-month research study undertaken under the INNOSI Project framework, pursuing three main *objectives*:

- exploring in which ways ECEC services can be beneficial to a wide array of actors – children, families and local communities – who were directly involved in the project;
- collecting knowledge on how quality and accessibility of ECEC services could be improved through integrated governance (partnership between public, private NFP and community stakeholders);
- analysing, through a case study approach, the integrated system of ECEC services in Emilia-Romagna Region as an example of good practice of Social Innovation, with particular reference to social economy initiatives that pro-actively engage with local actors, including children, their families and the communities in which they are living.

2. Key policy implications

According to the EC COMM 66/2011, improving the **quality** and **accessibility** of ECEC systems across Europe is crucial for all aspects of economic and social growth, as early childhood education lays the foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability.

The case study revealed that no-one model of service fits all. Rather, key success factors for increasing **accessibility** of ECEC provision reside in the *flexible combination of different funding sources* coming from the public sector – as well as from the private NFP sector and private sources – within a *comprehensive framework of public policies that responsively addresses the needs identified within each community while striving for universalism*.

The case study showed how high **quality** ECEC provision *is achieved through the co-creation and sharing of knowledge, expertise and experiences that are generated by innovative forms of public governance*: local and regional networks, partnerships with parents, coalitions for policy advocacy, inter-agency collaboration. The evidence gathered highlights that ECEC quality is more likely to be the **RESULT OF JOINT ACTIONS INSCRIBED WITHIN A COMPETENT SYSTEM** rather than the direct consequence of practitioners' individual competences. The key-factors contributing to the successful development of high quality ECEC are connected to:

- the elaboration of a regulatory framework ensuring an even level of structural quality across services,
- a shared pedagogical vision that actively encourages participation of families and community stakeholders to the management of ECEC institutions,
- the presence of a coordination infrastructure and of participatory networks at municipal, provincial and regional level which sustain bottom-up innovation and the scaling up of successful initiatives through the documentation and exchange of good practices - *pedagogical coordinators as crucial system figures*,
- a strong focus on continuing professional development activities that are organised in the form of 'laboratories for social change' – empowering ECEC professionals – rather than as 'top-down training',
- inter-agency cooperation among professionals and institutions operating across different sectors (healthcare, social welfare, education) for the welfare of young children and their families at all levels of the system (from the local community level to the inter-departmental collaboration at regional level);
- policy decision-making processes carried out in close consultation with ECEC professionals, pedagogical coordinators, community advocacy groups and other relevant stakeholders.

3. Context

Three cases of innovative ECEC services were selected:

- *“Filonido”*, a daycare centre attended by children aged 0-3 and located in the city of Bologna;
- *“Girotondo intorno al Bosco”*, a small educational group (home-based) attended by 0-3 aged children and located in the rural community of Serramazzone on the modenese Apennine;
- *“La Gabbianella”* & *“L’albero delle meraviglie”*, an integrated service encompassing a daycare centre (attended by 0-3 aged children) and a centre for children and parents (attended by 2-5 aged children and their families) located in the town of Comacchio.

Filonido is a clear example of a social investment localised-policy given the fact that it offers a very high quality nursery service, at the price established by the Local Authority, to a broad number of families. *Filonido* is located in a very high density office-district (the “Trade district”) that is characterised by the concentration of many private enterprises (consultancy, financial and commercial intermediaries), cooperative enterprises (Insurance, Bank Services, Umbrella organisations giving services to their membership) and Public Agencies (the Regional Government), with an high proportion of women workforce. The possibility to entrust their children in a functional nursery service – with a flexible time schedule – near their work, allows them to conciliate their working life with their family life, and to ameliorate their life-working balance. It is about very high skilled, well educated, middle class women who occupy middle-high level job positions in the tertiary sector of the economy.

“La Gabbianella” & *“L’albero delle meraviglie”*, on the other side, are an example of social investment micro-policy in the sense that they offer a public space, a shared place where children and adults belonging to different generations and socio-cultural backgrounds can meet in a welcoming environment, that nurtures – both formally and informally - children’s education and socialisation experiences. It is a particularly important facility especially in a traditionally deprived and isolated geographical area, and a key actor of the community in the effort to build an inclusive and cohesive society.

The Serramazzone family day-care centre, on its part, is an example of community-based social investment policy given the fact that it offers a nursery service – in a small, informal, friendly and familiar setting – to families that otherwise would not have the possibility to care in a high qualified way for their children. Taking into consideration that the municipality of Serramazzone is a small village on the hills outside the big city of Modena, in a very industrialized and developed area of production, with many young families without relatives in the neighborhood, the family-day care centre not only offers the possibility for the parents to conciliate family-work balance but it also contribute to build social networks in the local community.

4. Sources of evidence

Given the characteristics of the “case study method” a variety of data sources has been taken into consideration:

- a) official documents (Laws enacted by the Regional government; Regulations enacted by municipalities);
- b) unofficial documents (bylaws of nonprofit organizations; minutes of Board of Directors of for profit enterprises involved in corporate welfare programs);
- c) grey material (research reports, evaluation reports, etc. by public bodies and research institutions);
- d) face to face interviews with representatives from public administration, nonprofit organizations, private corporations, parents associations, etc.;
- e) focus group with representatives of the above mentioned organizations;
- f) on-site observation of ECEC services Centers.

In order to collect the information of the letters d), e) and f) above mentioned, we tailored methodological tools for the specific purpose of the study:

- A] Interview outline - for face to face interviews with ECEC Public Officers;
- B] Interview (or Focus Group) outline - for face to face interviews with ECEC Services professionals (Educators and pedagogical coordinators);
- C] Interview (or Focus Group) outline - for face to face interviews with parents whose children are attending ECEC services;
- D] Interview outline - for face to face interviews with Managers of Corporations and Public Authorities involved in “Corporate Welfare Activities”;
- E] Template - for field observation of daily activities in the ECEC Services.

5. Main findings

In line with the findings of the European Commission's study '*CoRe: Competence Requirements in ECEC*' (Urban et al., 2011), the evidence gathered from the case study analysis underline that the **QUALITY** of educational and care practices enacted in early childhood settings is more likely to be the **RESULT OF JOINT ACTIONS INSCRIBED WITHIN A COMPETENT SYSTEM** rather than the direct consequence of practitioners' individual competences. In the cases of social innovation that were examined, the key-factors contributing to the successful development of high quality ECEC practices are connected to:

- the elaboration of a regulatory framework ensuring an even level of structural quality across ECEC services in the Region (R.L.1/2000 and amendments) in relation to: coordination, mentoring and guidance of professionals at team level, practitioners' joint work opportunities and non-contact time for participating in collective meetings, in-house professional development, action-research projects (approx. 80-120 hours/year) and meeting with parents;
 - a shared pedagogical vision that actively encourages the participation of families and community stakeholders to the management of ECEC institutions: in this sense, the fact that early childhood institutions are conceived as a public good (see box 1 under par. 4.4.1) implies that parents are perceived as partners rather than as end-users ('service approach') or costumers ('private business approach');
 - the presence of a coordination infrastructure and of participatory networks at municipal, provincial (CPP) and regional level which sustain bottom-up innovation and the scaling up of successful initiatives through the documentation and exchange of good practices...
- ... in this sense continuing professional development activities are organised in the form of 'laboratories for social change' (Manini, 2006) – empowering ECEC professionals – rather than as 'expert led training' aimed to the acquisition of predefined skills;
- inter-agency cooperation among professionals and institutions operating across different sectors (eg. healthcare, social welfare, education) for the welfare of young children and their families at all levels of the system (from the local community level to the inter-departmental collaboration at regional level);
 - policy decision-making processes that are carried out in close consultation with ECEC professionals – such as the pedagogical coordination networks (CPP) – with community advocacy groups and with other relevant stakeholders.

In particular, the analysis of the data collected through interviews and documentary sources emphasise the **CRUCIAL ROLE** played by pedagogical coordinators as **SYSTEM FIGURES**. By constantly connecting – in their everyday work – the educational and social needs emerging at local level (regular meeting with ECEC staff and families, services' supervision) with pedagogical practice innovation through guidance and professional development initiatives, the coordinators become catalysers of change both at the level of ECEC services and at the level of local policy advocacy processes. In this regard, the findings from the cases studies highlight that it is precisely the mutual interaction of bottom-up and top-down innovation processes – characterising the connection between experimental pedagogical practices and responsive ECEC policies in E-R – to be key-factors of success of local social innovation initiatives.

6. Impact & Implications

The lessons learnt from the case studies analysis point out that CERTAIN CONDITIONS ARE NEEDED for the successful development of social innovation in the ECEC field. Such conditions encompass:

- the presence of a *coherent system of public policies* providing a regulatory framework according to which funding to public and private-NFP provision could be systematically provided on the basis of *accessibility and quality requirement satisfaction* (eg. inclusion of children with special needs, income-related fees favoring the participation of low-income families, reasonable adult: child ratio, pedagogical coordination, amount of paid working hours without children allowing staff to participate in collegial meetings and ongoing professional development activities available for staff free of charge);
- *a shared commitment to ECEC as a public good at all level of governance* – from the regional level, to the local level to the level of ECEC service providers – which *encourage bottom-up policy advocacy and sustains innovation through responsive policy-making processes*.

The analysis of the data collected through interviews to key-stakeholders at the different locations in which the case studies were based also highlight that social innovation in ECEC is more likely to happen in contexts where:

- *traditions of civic engagement and educational activism* are present or emerging in the local community;
- *the initiatives aimed to the development of ECEC services are driven by a commitment to children's rights and social justice* – starting from parents and communities groups – rather than from a 'return of investment' rationale (eg. ECEC services viewed as profitable assets).

7. Further information

To access the full report, please go to:


<http://innosi.eu/461-2/>


For further information on InnoSI: Innovation in Social Investment: approaches to social investment from the scientific perspective, visit our website at <http://innosi.eu/>

To view the Community Reporting video with a personal experience of the case study please follow the link below

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1vtHOjD7gN3zKX7Kt-0maRSDfD-v3moC

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