

# ECEC services in **Italy**: towards an integrated 0-6 years system?



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## **Abstract**

Over the last decade, Italy has experienced exceptional dynamism in family and ECEC policies, combining stronger income support for families with major investments in services. The 2017 reform of the Integrated Zero-Six Years System marked a turning point, redefining objectives, financing, and governance, and aiming to progressively integrate educational, social, and work-care reconciliation functions across the 0–2 and 3–6 (preschool) segments.

Progress, however, remains gradual and geographically uneven. Persistent disparities limit advancement towards more equitable access, particularly in ECEC services for children below the age of three, and access criteria prioritise dual-earner households over disadvantaged families. The Next Generation EU-NRRP supports expansion by funding the building of facilities, but implementation is facing difficulties, due to administrative bottlenecks, rising costs, and the limited planning capacity of small municipalities. Ensuring continuity beyond the NRRP and coordination with funds for service management is crucial to consolidating results and reducing territorial disparities.

Quality and workforce issues also pose major challenges. The expansion of services for children below the age of three has largely relied on private providers employing staff under less favourable contracts, raising concerns about job quality. Some progress has been recently made in the non-profit sector, but improving working conditions entails higher costs, creating trade-offs between quality, affordability, and fiscal sustainability.

The governance tools introduced in 2017 (national pedagogical 0-6 and 0-3 guidelines, the Commission for the Integrated System, and territorial pedagogical coordination units), along with the establishment of the preschools evaluation system, represent important advancements. Yet stronger national support is needed to pursue expansion together with equity and quality.

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## **Index**

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>p. 05</b>
1.1 ECEC policies in Italy: an overview	
1.2 ECEC in Italy: towards an Integrated 0-6 System?	
1.2.1 <i>Preschools</i>	
1.2.2 <i>Services for children below 3 years of age</i>	
1.3 Broader social and fiscal policies relevant to ECEC	
1.3.1 <i>Leave for parents of young children – maternity, paternity and parental</i>	
1.3.2 <i>Cash transfers for households with young children</i>	
1.4 Macro trends with implications for ECEC	
<b>2. Availability, access to and use of ECEC services</b>	<b>p. 15</b>
2.1 Service coverage and provision	
2.2 Unmet demand and access inequalities	
2.3 Access policy design	
<b>3. ECEC service quality</b>	<b>p. 25</b>
3.1 ECEC staff conditions of employment and labour shortages	
3.1.1 <i>Employment regulation in ECEC and staff shortages</i>	
3.2 Staff children ratio	
3.3 Pedagogical practices, curricula and training	
3.3.1 <i>Pedagogical coordination</i>	
3.3.2 <i>Educational staff qualification levels and continuous training</i>	
3.4 Structural, physical and organisational requirements: the authorisation and accreditation system	
3.5 Monitoring and evaluation	
<b>4. Cost and financing</b>	<b>p. 36</b>
4.1 Overview of expenditure	
4.2 ECEC funds	
4.2.1 <i>A new structural National Fund for ECEC services</i>	
4.2.2 <i>Extraordinary funds to expand ECEC: NGEU funds in the Italian NRRP</i>	
4.2.3 <i>Financial support for the functioning of ECEC services</i>	
4.3 ECEC fees	
<b>5. Expanding provision, improving quality and reducing disparities: it's now or never</b>	<b>p. 45</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>p. 49</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>p. 50</b>

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 ECEC policies in Italy: an overview

The ECEC system in Italy has been historically segmented by children's age and this has determined profound differences between services for children aged 0-2 years and 3-6 years. Preschool provision for children of 3-6 years is quasi-universal, mostly free of charge (except for school meals) or highly affordable and fully acknowledged to be part of the education system. The below 3 years segment displays much lower service provision, 30% child population coverage nationally, with strong territorial disparities.

In 2017, a new "Integrated education system from birth to six years"<sup>1</sup> was introduced, with the objective of reducing the gaps between the two segments, enhancing educational continuity, and promoting coordination and improved governance across different providers in both segments. The implementation of such reform faces the complex multi-level governance of ECEC policy. While social policies have been strongly regionalised since the early 2000s (Kazepov, 2010), the central state has historically played a major role in preschool regulation and provision, whereas services for children 0-2 years, within differentiated regional frameworks, have largely been regulated and financed by municipalities. The 2017 reform has marked the institutionalisation of national funds for ECEC, which have been strongly reinforced by the post-pandemic National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) funded by NextGenerationEU (NGEU) resources, aiming at expanding provision.

Long-lasting issues of affordability for 0-2 years services have been dealt with through a progressive reorganisation and increase of monetary transfers to families in the last decade. However, production costs will hardly be maintained in the long run at the current (relatively low) level, as working conditions, including meagre salary levels, are hindering the recruitment necessary both to expand provision and enhance quality.

Pursuing the two objectives, expansion and quality, in parallel is fundamental for ECEC services to accomplish social investment objectives, including work-life reconciliation, social support and cognitive development. This is especially key as regards children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who benefit the most from attending ECEC services (Morgan, 2009) and yet continue to have lower access in 0-2 years services compared with other social groups.

The paper is organised in five sections. Section 1 outlines the Italian ECEC system and the recent reform towards an integrated 0-6 system, as well as the main leave and monetary policies relevant to ECEC. Section 2 analyses service availability across both the 0-2 and 3-6 segments, documenting territorial differences and variations by socio-economic background, nationality, and disability. Section 3 discusses quality of provision, with particular attention for staff working conditions, monitoring and evaluation systems. Section 4 examines the costs of the ECEC system for public authorities and for families and its financing, including the recent EU-funded expansion plan. Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the main emerging policy trade-offs that will likely affect the future perspectives of this policy sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative Decree 65/2017, following the Law 107/2015 '*Buona scuola*' (Good school).

The paper considers three geographic and administrative levels: national; macro-regional (North/Centre/South) and regional (19 regions and 2 autonomous provinces). In addition, to illustrate the degree of local variation in ECEC services, two municipal cases are discussed: Rome and Milan. The two largest cities in Italy (with 2,751,747 and 1,371,499 inhabitants in 2024, respectively) differ by territorial localisation (North vs Centre) and political dynamics. The Lombardy region has been governed steadily, for over three decades, by centre-right coalitions, and is known for a distinctive emphasis on public-private parity (Gori, 2011). The city of Milan, the regional capital of Lombardy, was aligned, with centre-right Mayors, through the 1990s and 2000s, but turned to centre-left in 2011. In contrast, both the region of Lazio and the city of Rome have experienced repeated alternation in regional and local politics, including a Mayor from the Movimento Cinque Stelle in 2016-21. The two cities are characterised by comparatively high ECEC demand and supply, due to size and to above-average rates of labour market participation, including for women. Coverage rates for children aged 0-2 are higher than the national average. Considering only publicly run or publicly funded ECEC services, coverage in 2023–24 was 31% in Milan and 36.5% in Rome (however, these data are not fully comparable, due to differences in the services included in the calculations).<sup>2</sup> In both cities, around two thirds of places for children below the age of 3 years are found in directly managed municipal services.

## 1.2 ECEC in Italy: towards an Integrated 0-6 System?

The governance of the Italian ECEC system is multi-level. The (central) State determines the essential levels of performance (*Livelli Essenziali delle Prestazioni*, LEP); defines the fundamental principles and general rules in education; oversees national planning, monitoring and evaluation systems; and acts as a service provider, exclusively for preschools. Regions have concurrent regulatory power over the organisation and characterisation of the facilities (structural standards) and exercise the administrative function of territorial planning (territorial standards) of provision. Municipalities are responsible for local regulation (defining service management rules) for both public and private 0-2 years services, and directly or indirectly manage municipal 0-2 years services and preschools (Mari, 2022, p. 95). They are also responsible for coordination and quality promotion over the entire 0-6 system at local level. Funding responsibilities are shared by the central state, regions and municipalities (see section 4).

The Integrated System 0-6 (SI06) promotes educational continuity, with the objective of overcoming the existing dichotomy between daycare centres and preschools. The 2017 decree intervenes on three levels: principles, strategic objectives and governance tools.

*Principles:* The SI06 Decree established, for children aged 0-6 years, the right to equal opportunities “of education, care, relationship and play” (art. 1.1), and defined ECEC services as *educational* services. Before 2017, the Ministry of Education’s<sup>3</sup> responsibilities and oversight only covered preschools, within ECEC. Since that year, its responsibilities extended

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the municipality of Rome includes in its calculations a type of integrative service (similar to *Spazi Gioco*, see par. 1.2.2) that enrolls around 800 children, while integrative services are excluded from the figures for Milan.

<sup>3</sup> Currently named Ministry of Education and Merit.

to the entire 0-6 years cycle: in compliance with functions and duties of regions and local authorities, it directs, coordinates, and promotes the integrated education system throughout the country.

*Strategic objectives:* The SI06 Decree defines strategic objectives concerning both quantity and quality of provision, differentiated by age-based segment, given the diverse starting points. For preschools, the objective is to achieve full universalisation and homogenisation of quality. For the 0-2 years segment, the quantitative objective is to ensure provision in at least 75% of municipalities (or aggregations thereof) and reach 33% of coverage.<sup>4</sup> In 2021 (Budget Law for 2022) this target was, for the first time, established as a minimum standard of provision (*LEP*) to be guaranteed nationwide. In terms of quality, tertiary education was set as the educators' entry qualification level,<sup>5</sup> and on-the-job training is promoted. A strategic objective is also to introduce conditions that ease ECEC attendance, thereby enhancing accessibility.

*Governance tools:* New governance tools were introduced to pursue these strategic objectives and the progressive integration of the two age-based segments. These tools include:

- at the national level, a three-year National Action Plan<sup>6</sup> defining financial resources available for the consolidation, extension and qualification of the Integrated System 06, and the National Fund that allocates them (see Section 4); a National Commission with consultative functions; and an information, monitoring and evaluation system (see Section 3);
- at the regional level, tools to support local coordination and the qualification of the Integrated system;
- at the local level, the *coordinamenti pedagogici territoriali* (territorial pedagogical coordination units), aimed at coordinating pedagogical and quality features across age-based segments and providers (see Section 3); and the *Poli per l'Infanzia* (educational hubs), aimed at realising the educational continuity across the age-based segments (0-6), research and innovation as well as participation and interaction with the wider social and services context (Sannipoli, 2022).

The Decree, thus, framed an innovative organisational model, that Mari (2022, p. 110) defines as a national “network administration” including public entities at different levels (State, regions, local authorities) as well as private entities (authorised or accredited providers), all pursuing the shared objective of ensuring a quantitatively and qualitatively adequate service throughout the country. Furthermore, the Decree specifies that the Integrated System 0-6 is to be “progressively established”, in relation to the available financial, human and instrumental resources. While the implementation of the SI06 is in progress, the underlying, 0-2 and 3-6 age segments continue to co-exist.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, we examine each of these segments and disentangle their main institutional differences.

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<sup>4</sup> When the reform passed, these were 52.9% and 24%, respectively (ISTAT, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> With exceptions, see Section 3.

<sup>6</sup> Upon agreement in the ‘Unified Conference of State-Regions-Municipalities and other local authorities’.

<sup>7</sup> The statistical definitions used to calculate coverage rates are ‘0-2’ and ‘3-5’. The administrative definitions, also commonly used in policy and everyday discourse, are ‘0-3’ and ‘3-6’ respectively. In practice, however, the actual composition of users in each segment is blurred: enrolment in preschools may occur as early as 2 years and 8 months and, under specific conditions, early enrolment has been permitted since 2003 from as early as 2 years and 4 months. Meanwhile, most children stay in daycare until the end of the school year, even after turning 3.

### 1.2.1 Preschools

Preschool provision is quasi-universal: about 92% of residents aged 3-5 years attend preschool or a primary school as early entrants (see Section 2). However, there are marked territorial differences in terms of access, service provision, and ancillary services. Moreover, participation is below average for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with migrant backgrounds or disability (see Section 2).

Preschools include public schools, managed by the central state, municipalities and, in some cases, by autonomous Regions and Provinces (such as Valle D'Aosta or the Province of Bozen), and non-public schools (private for-profit and non-profit schools). Public non-state preschools and most of the private preschools are “equalised” to state preschools (*scuole d'infanzia paritarie*): they are subject to authorisation and monitoring (e.g. of structural and staff requirements) by the Ministry of Education through its Regional School Offices and are granted annual financial support by the Ministry itself. State and equalised preschools are all part of the national education system, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. More than two thirds of preschools are publicly run, mainly by the central state. However, regional differences in the public/private mix are relevant, with potential or effective consequences in terms of quality.

State preschools are usually included in a school institute, which also comprises one or more primary schools (for children aged 6 to 10) and, often, middle schools (for those aged 11 to 14), that share the same management and many organisational, operational, and administrative rules (including personnel management). This can represent an obstacle to the implementation of the 0-6 system as preschools are much closer to the subsequent school cycles than to 0-2 years services. As we will see, teacher qualification requirements also exacerbate this feature.

Public and, in particular, state investment in preschools, including its role as the main provider, traces back to the late 1960s,<sup>8</sup> when social and political consensus was strong on the development of a mainly public 3-6 years educational system. This led to high enrolment (over 90%) by the early 1990s (Sabatinelli, 2016). Public investment in preschools is also connected to the fact that enrolment in preschool has long been legally defined as a “collective demand service”, a right accessible to all citizens free of charge or at minimal cost, although attendance has never been compulsory, nor linked to a legal entitlement. In sum, the role of the central state, and of the Ministry of Education in particular, in preschools has been historically much more significant than in services for children below the age of 3. This has multiple implications for the overall ECEC system.

### 1.2.2 Services for children below 3 years of age

In 2022-23, 30% of children below 3 years of age were enrolled in public or private daycare centres, a rate close to the 2010 Lisbon European target of 33% and only at two thirds of the new European target set at 45% for 2030.

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<sup>8</sup> With law no. 444/1968, the State started a process of nationalisation of preschool provision, both taking over ownership and management of facilities previously managed by Municipalities or public assistance bodies and building new structures throughout the country.

The system of provision for children below the age of 3 years is made up of daycare centres, micro daycare centres, spring sections, and integrative services. Daycare centres (*nidi d'infanzia* and *micro-nidi*, the latter hosting up to 10 children) welcome children between 3 months and 3 years of age. "Spring sections" (*sezioni primavera*) host children aged 24 to 36 months. They were introduced in 2006<sup>9</sup> with the aim of expanding ECEC service supply for younger children, thanks to lower construction costs (being located in existing daycare centres or, most often, preschools), and management costs (as they apply an adult-child ratio – 1 to 10 – lower than in preschools, but higher than in daycare).

Both daycare centres and spring sections pursue both work-life reconciliation and early education objectives, as they generally operate full time, although various part-time options are commonly available, and staff are primarily educators. Together, they provide 27.9% coverage of children 0-2 years (spring sections alone contribute with 3.8% coverage).

Additional 'Integrative services' include 'home-based educational services for small groups', 'play spaces' (*spazi gioco*) and 'centres for children and families' (*centri per bambini e famiglie*). Only the former pursue a reconciliation function, while their educational value largely depends on regional regulation about staff requirements. *Spazi gioco* and *centri bambini-famiglie* mostly pursue socialization objectives, as they are attended for only a few hours weekly, with or without accompanying adults (parents, grandparents, childminders). Coverage of integrative services is stable around 2% of children 0-3 (concentrated in 14.5% of municipalities in 2022).

The inclusion of services 0-2 within the competence of the Ministry of Education, as part of the Integrated System 0-6 reform, marks a shift in the social and political understanding of their nature, from social assistance to predominantly educational services.<sup>10</sup> Prior to the 2017 reform, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Family, or the Department of Policies for Family of the Presidency of Council of Ministries were broadly responsible for 0-2 years services. However, ever since the 1971 national law on municipal daycare services, national responsibility for 0-2 years services has been rather loose, limited to the definition of broad structural and service standards and to the discontinuous allocation of financial resources to build facilities (Sabatinelli, 2016). Even in the new SI06 configuration, the regulation of 0-2 years services essentially remains a subnational competence. Regions define both public and private facilities' structural and organizational requisites, such as services' size, spatial characteristics, adult-to-child ratio, and can financially support ECEC providers or users. Within regional standards, municipalities have broad competence to define the form of management (direct, outsourced, contracted out) as well as fee structure and levels.

The 33% minimum level of coverage set in 2021 as a LEP seems to supersede the definition of daycare centres as "individual-demand" services (introduced in the mid-1980s), that local authorities are not obliged to provide. However, it remains unclear at which territorial scale this target will be applied, as recent documents on the use of NGEU funds define it as a national benchmark, and introduce a 15% target at the regional level (Zanardi 2024; see Section 4).

Services for children 0-2 years can be provided directly or indirectly by municipalities or by private actors. Private providers are mainly third sector actors. They work for the market,

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<sup>9</sup> National Law n. 296.

<sup>10</sup> As it had been anticipated by the Constitutional Court in 2002 (ruling n. 467) and in 2003 (ruling n. 370).

enrolling children of families who pay fees out of their pocket, or managing company-based daycare centres, as well as for public authorities, managing outsourced public facilities and/or reserving part of their places to children in the ranking lists for municipal services (*in appalto*), under specific agreements (*convenzioni*). These different forms of management may co-exist in the same municipality, and even in the same facility, as in the case of a company crèche managed by a private provider, and reserving part of its places under agreement with a municipality. This produces a complex local governance that takes different forms in individual municipalities, or aggregations thereof (*Ambiti sociali*), that jointly manage services in a supra-local coordinated way (Neri, 2020).

### 1.3 Broader social and fiscal policies relevant to ECEC

#### 1.3.1 Leave for parents of young children – maternity, paternity and parental

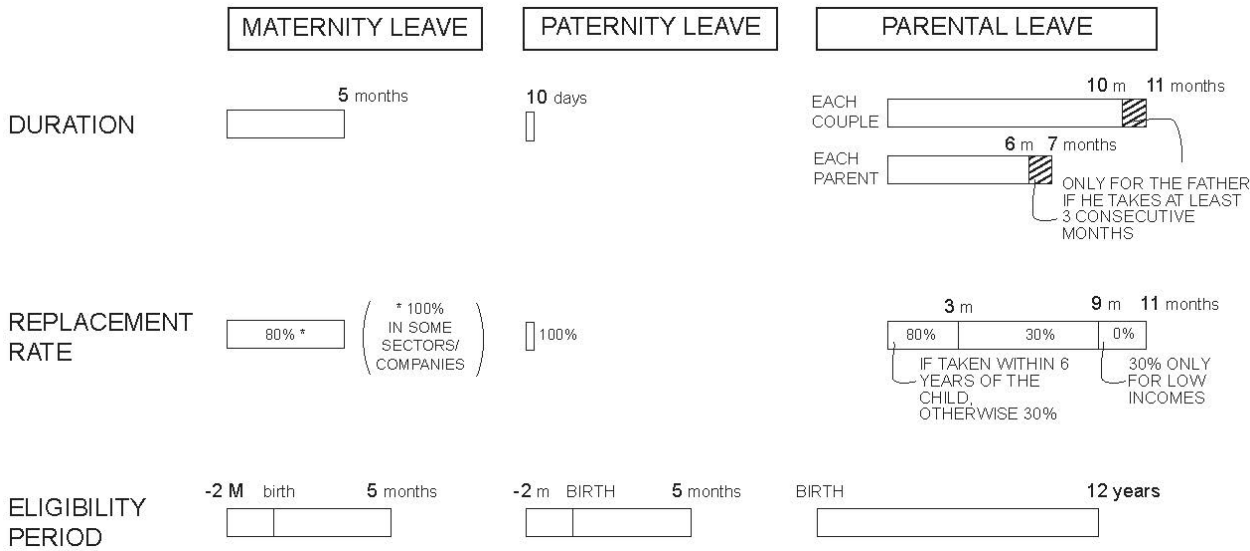
The leave package for parents of young children currently consists of maternity, parental and paternity leave. Figure 1 summarises the main characteristics. Compulsory maternity leave for female employees (even unemployed, under certain conditions) lasts 5 months and can flexibly start between 2 months before birth and the birth date. It is accompanied by a contributory allowance financed by social security equal to 80% of the monthly salary; this is integrated up to 100% by employers in some collective labour (sector- or company-level) agreements. Smaller allowances are provided for self-employed and collaborators, while an assistance-based means-tested allowance targets women not entitled to these measures.<sup>11</sup> Over the same period in which the maternity leave can be taken, fathers are entitled to a paternity leave of ten days, compensated at 100% of salary. Compared to other European countries, in Italy this measure was adopted with some delay, introduced only in 2013, and initially experimental and symbolic: only three days, only one mandatory (Villa, 2020). It has since been institutionalised, extended to public workers and slightly extended.

In addition to maternity and paternity leave, an optional parental leave entitles each parent to maximum six months leave and maximum ten months overall for the couple. Fathers' uptake is incentivised with an extra month, if they take at least three consecutive months. The leave can be taken until the child turns twelve, and can be used flexibly, part-time or in a piecemeal way. The allowance, as low as 30% of salary until 2023, has been gradually and partially raised. In 2025 it amounts to 80% of salary for the first three months, if the leave is taken before the child turns seven. This increase aims to support family income and favour the use by fathers, who generally earn the highest income in the family.

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<sup>11</sup> The monthly amount and threshold are updated yearly by INPS based on the variation in the ISTAT consumer price index; in 2025 the maximum yearly allowance is €2,037, for ISEE incomes below €20,382.90 (INPS 2025).

**Figure 1. Main features of maternity, paternity and paternal leave in 2025**



Source: authors' elaboration, based on [www.inps.it](http://www.inps.it).

Despite recent progress, work-family reconciliation remains difficult: due to scarce 0-2 years ECEC provision, two thirds of children lack daycare access, leaving a temporal gap of at least two years between the maximum 8 months of well-paid leave (5 months maternity leave + 3 months parental leave) and preschool entry (32-36 months, depending on the birth date). In comparative perspective, paternity leave is the weak element of the Italian leave package. Its duration is the minimum required by the EU Directive 2019/1158. The measure is a right, but not compulsory.<sup>12</sup> Take-up has tripled since its introduction, up to over 60% in 2022, and is higher in medium-large sized companies (77%) and among fathers with medium income level, as opposed to both very low- and higher- income levels (INPS, 2023). Yet recent surveys show limited awareness of this right. Moreover, its duration is considered too short, although only a minority of men supports equal duration to maternity leave (OsservatorioD, 2024), which indicates resistance to a full redistribution of care within couples.

A controversial issue concerns the exclusion of same-sex couples from the entitlement. A recent ruling (115/2025) by the Constitutional Court has declared this exclusion illegitimate, granting intentional mothers the right to paternity leave (Garofalo Geymonat, 2025).

**1.3.2 Cash transfers for households with young children**

Introduced in 2016 to support families in meeting child-care fees for 0-2 year-olds, the *Bonus Asilo Nido*, or Daycare-Centre Bonus, is paid to users of public or private daycare centres, spring sections and of home-based services for children with chronic diseases. Since 2020, the transfer amount varies depending on household income. In 2025, reimbursement ranges from €1,500 to €3,000 euros per year, and up to €3,600 for low-income households with a newborn. Managed by INPS, the Bonus is a reimbursement of fees already incurred by households: users need to anticipate expenditure, a burden for those in financial strain. Its

<sup>12</sup> Sanctions are foreseen for employers who deny workers' right, but not for workers who do not apply.

yearly financial allocation has increased from 144 million euros in 2017 to 937.8 million euros in 2025, with further increase planned, reaching €1,139.8 from 2029 onward.

In 2023, beneficiaries amounted to 480,000 children (up from 75,000 in 2017).<sup>13</sup> The average monthly benefit value was €204, slightly higher for users of private services (€214 vs. €192 in public ones), paid for a mean duration of 6.6 months. The subsidy represents a significant, but partial, contribution: on average families were reimbursed 62% of the fees paid, with a higher impact for low-income households (78%) than for higher-income ones (32%). A small number of chronically ill children (515 in 2023) received a yearly average payment of €2,720 for home-based educational services (INPS, 2024a, p. 242). Children who benefited from the Bonus represented 35% of all children under 3 years of age in 2022, up from 28.3% in 2021 (ISTAT 2024a, p. 54). Such proportion is even higher than the share of children below the age of 3 years enrolled in services, which suggests that the measure supports most if not all users.

However, significant territorial variations are observed in the take-up rate, which is lower in most Southern regions (INPS, 2023, p. 363-64), as well as in the share of costs covered by the measure (which is higher in Southern regions), with some coherence with the territorial differences in coverage rates and service fees (see par. 2.1 and 4.3). Therefore, families in regions with lower provision may be doubly penalised: they face higher barriers to service access and, partly as a result, have less income support (ISTAT 2025).

Before the introduction of the *Bonus Asilo Nido*, the only measure of support for ECEC fees was a specific tax reduction. Such measure still exists, but it does not apply if in receipt of the *Bonus*. It is limited in amount (at most €120/year per child below the age of 3 enrolled in a service) and excludes low-income families who pay too little in taxes for the reduction to be applied. The *Bonus* is both more generous and inclusive than the tax reduction.

Along the national measure, most Italian Regions provide their own demand-side benefits. Income support measures provided by the regions of Lombardy (*Nidi Gratis*, “Free daycare centres”, introduced in 2016) and Lazio (*Bonus Nido*, “Daycare allowance”, introduced in 2020) are an example of how these can vary by access design and selectivity. Both regional measures are financed through European Social Fund resources: for the year 2024/25 20 million euros in Lombardy vs. 12.1 in Lazio (vis-à-vis a population aged 0-2 of 200,096 in Lombardy vs. 107,062 in Lazio). In Lazio, resources for 2024-25 had initially been set at 4.8 million euros and substantially increased after they proved to be largely insufficient to meet the demand. Both measures are intended to complement the national *Bonus Asilo Nido* benefit, and both are means-tested. However, the Lazio measure is more inclusive by design: the means-test threshold is almost three times higher than in Lombardy (ISEE income €60,000 vs. €20,000<sup>14</sup>), and both users of public and private accredited providers can apply. In contrast, in Lombardy, on top of a stricter means-test, only services indicated by municipalities are included (as municipalities are the only providers co-funding services and applying income-related fees), and only users who reside in municipalities that adhere to the regional call may apply (three quarter of children below the age of 3 in 2019; Polis Lombardia, 2020). An issue

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<sup>13</sup> The figure is higher than the overall number of authorised places (341,000 in 2022/23, see Section 2), due to the turnover of users over the calendar year.

<sup>14</sup> And up to 25,000 for a partial subsidy.

of territorial inequality arises, as benefit access for households with similar socio-economic backgrounds depends on their place of residence (Guidetti, 2022).

Beyond income support measures directly aimed at meeting ECEC costs, other national and regional income support measures for families concur to the resources households can count on to tackle the cost of raising children, including the ECEC service fees. Italy's child allowance has been profoundly reformed with the introduction in 2021 of the *Assegno Unico Universale per i figli a carico, AUU*, or Universal Allowance for dependent children. The measure, managed by INPS, consolidates resources previously allocated to family allowances and tax deductions for dependent children.<sup>15</sup> In 2023 it was funded with over 18 billion euros, approximately 38% more than the funds previously destined to the pre-existing measures (MEF, 2022).

The AUU is paid starting from the seventh month of pregnancy until children turn 18, up to 21 years of age if they are in education or training, and without age limits for children with disabilities. The monthly amount paid for each child varies between €201 and €57.5 based on household socio-economic circumstances;<sup>16</sup> increases are granted for young mothers, large families, a child's disability, and children's young age. It has been estimated that the 50% increase in the AUU for children below 1 year of age (and, under certain conditions,<sup>17</sup> for children aged 1 to 3) and the *Bonus Nido* together more than fully cover ECEC fees (INPS, 2024, p. 246).

Income-related progressivity pursues equity, but risks discouraging the second income earner, generally the mother, from working. To avoid discouraging women's employment, an increase is foreseen under a certain income threshold, if both parents are employed; however, the difference is too low to compensate such disincentive (Saraceno, 2022a).

The new universalistic measure has notably enlarged inclusivity compared to the previous family allowances, which were doubly selective (category-based and means-tested) and to tax deductions that exclude low-income taxpayers. In 2023, its second year of operation, average AUU take-up reached 93% of children aged 1-17 years, exceeding 90% in all regions (INPS, 2024b). In terms of generosity, it is estimated that most children (77%) enjoy higher benefit levels than in the previous system: a 3% increase on average and 11.6% increase for lower incomes (UpB, 2022).

## 1.4 Macro trends with implications for ECEC

Italy is undergoing a long-standing decrease in the number of births. In 2023, births were 379,890, a 34.1% reduction compared with 2008 (the year with the highest figure since the early 2000s). This decline depends on a tendency to have fewer children (1.2 children per woman in 2023 against 1.44 in 2010), but also on the structural reduction in the female population of childbearing age (15-49) (ISTAT, 2024b).

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<sup>15</sup> Including the "Bonus for the newborns", a birth grant that had been operating, in a discontinuous manner, since 2003. The grant was recently reintroduced (in the Budget Law for 2025): €1,000 for each child born or adopted for households with an ISEE below 40,000€, net of the AUU.

<sup>16</sup> The maximum amount is paid for ISEE below €17,227.33, the minimum above €45,939.56 and to households who do not submit an ISEE document.

<sup>17</sup> Families with three or more children and an ISEE below €45,939.56.

The demographic decline produces an increase in ECEC service coverage even in the absence of, or in the event of limited, supply expansion. In this way, it may help achieve coverage targets in services for children below the age of 3 years, but this does not necessarily contribute to reducing territorial inequalities in provision. In terms of ECEC service planning, the decrease in the number of children is leading to the closure of 3-6 facilities in Italy: over 1,700 preschools are estimated to have closed in the last 10 years (Fortunati, 2025) and this trend could continue in the coming years. There is a potential opportunity for the conversion of preschool buildings to accommodate day-care centres and 0-6 *poli*, or hubs; the Ministry of Education is funding projects in this direction.<sup>18</sup> Yet, existing structures are often outdated, and seldom appropriate for current pedagogical approaches, ecological sustainability and cost-effectiveness, significantly limiting the possibilities for conversion.

The number of children with an immigrant background has increased over the years. In 2022 foreign children (children without Italian citizenship, including – due to the Italian citizenship regulation – many children born in Italy from foreign parents) represented 14% of all resident children aged 3-5 and 13.7% of those aged 0-2 years, a considerably higher proportion than the one found in the overall population (8.7%) (www.demo.istat.it). Potential demand for ECEC services is, therefore, characterised by notable and increasing diversity.

Italy's low birth rate is associated with the lowest female employment rate in the European Union (Eurostat LFS, 2024). Employment rates for women aged 25-49 is more than 20 percent points higher for those with no children (77.5% in 2023) than for those with children aged 0-5 (56.6% nationally, but as low as 38% in the South).

Child poverty rates are steadily high in Italy. Incidence and intensity of both absolute and relative poverty grow as the number of children below the age of 18 in the family increases and is highest among families with three or more children under 18. In 2023, 10.6% of families were in *relative* poverty, with the highest incidence among families with three or more children under 18 (38.7%). Child poverty is more widespread in the South, where ECEC provision is more limited (ISTAT, 2024b).

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<sup>18</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic, 17 March 2025, and subsequent Decrees.

## 2. Availability, access to and use of services

This section analyses ECEC service availability and describes supply composition, showing, for services for children under 3, the link between the increase in service coverage and the growth of private provision. It examines inequalities in access by socio-economic and migration background and disability and discusses these with respect to policy access design. The substantial differences between preschools and services for children below 3 years require a separate discussion of the two segments.

### 2.1 Service coverage and provision

#### *Pre-schools*

With regards to preschools, coverage rates are not far from universal, including early entrants to primary school, that is, children enrolled in primary school earlier than the standard age requirement (6 years), if turning 6 by April 30 of the first school year. According to ISTAT data (2024a), in the school year 2022-23, 91.9% of children from 3 to 5 years attended either a preschool (89.7%) or primary school as early entrants (2.2%).<sup>19</sup> Total attendance is under 88% for 3 year-old children and increases with age, with the highest level for children aged 5 (94.1%, including 6.5% of early entrants into primary school).

The incidence of early entrants into primary school shows marked territorial differences, ranging, in 2002-23, from 13.5% of five-year-olds in the South and 10.9% in the Islands to 4.4% in the Centre and only 2.6% in the North of Italy. These territorial disparities are linked to early entry into preschool, which is more frequent in the South due to the lower availability of daycare services (see below). Children starting preschool a year early are also more likely to enter primary school early. As such, the inadequate provision of educational services for children below the age of 3 influences the schooling path of young pupils and may have negative consequences, in particular among children who are not school-ready at that age (Ponzo and Scoppa, 2014).

If we consider the preschool attendance rate for children aged 3–5 years, there has been a slow but constant decline in the last decade: from 92.2% in 2014 to 88.2% in 2020 (ISTAT, 2024a). After 2021, when data was strongly affected by the pandemic, the 2022 attendance rate (89.7%) could signal a reversal of the previous trend.

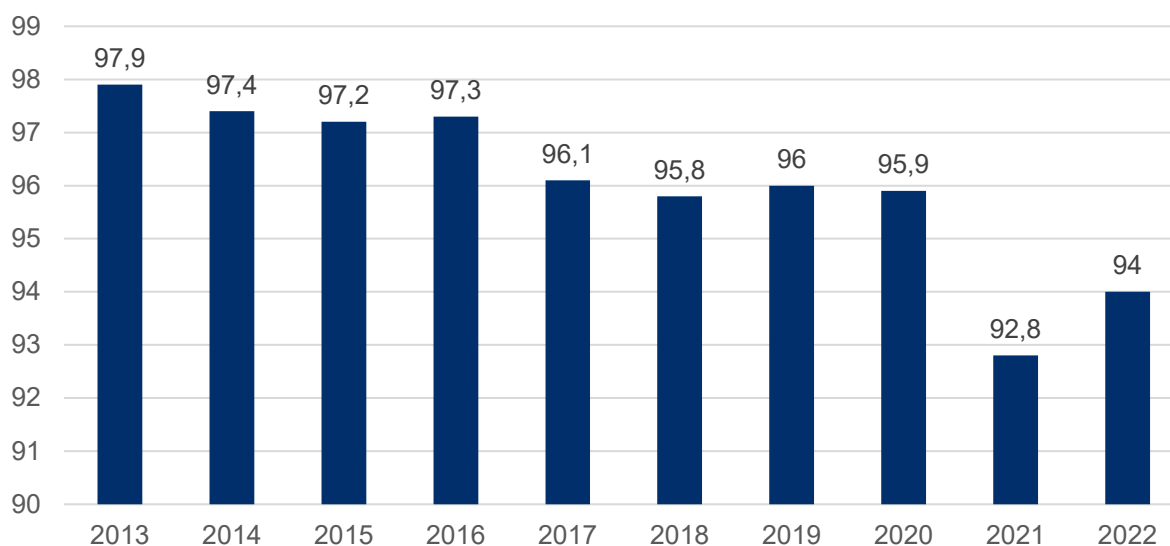
If we focus only on children aged 4–5 (Figure 2), there is a decline in preschool participation (including early entrants in primary school) from 2013 (97.9%) to 2021 (92.8%), followed by a recovery in 2022 (94%). In the same year, at territorial level, attendance rates vary from 96.8% in Southern Italy to 91.6% in Central Italy, with shares around 93% in the North (data from annex to ISTAT, 2024c). In the last decade, the participation rate of children aged 4-5 years

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<sup>19</sup> If we also include three-year-old children still attending a daycare centre or another ECEC service for younger children, the share of children aged 3–5 attending an educational or school service rises from 91.9% to 94.1% in 2022–23. In 2023–24, this share stands at 94.7% (Istat, 2025), but the source does not allow us to disaggregate this overall figure.

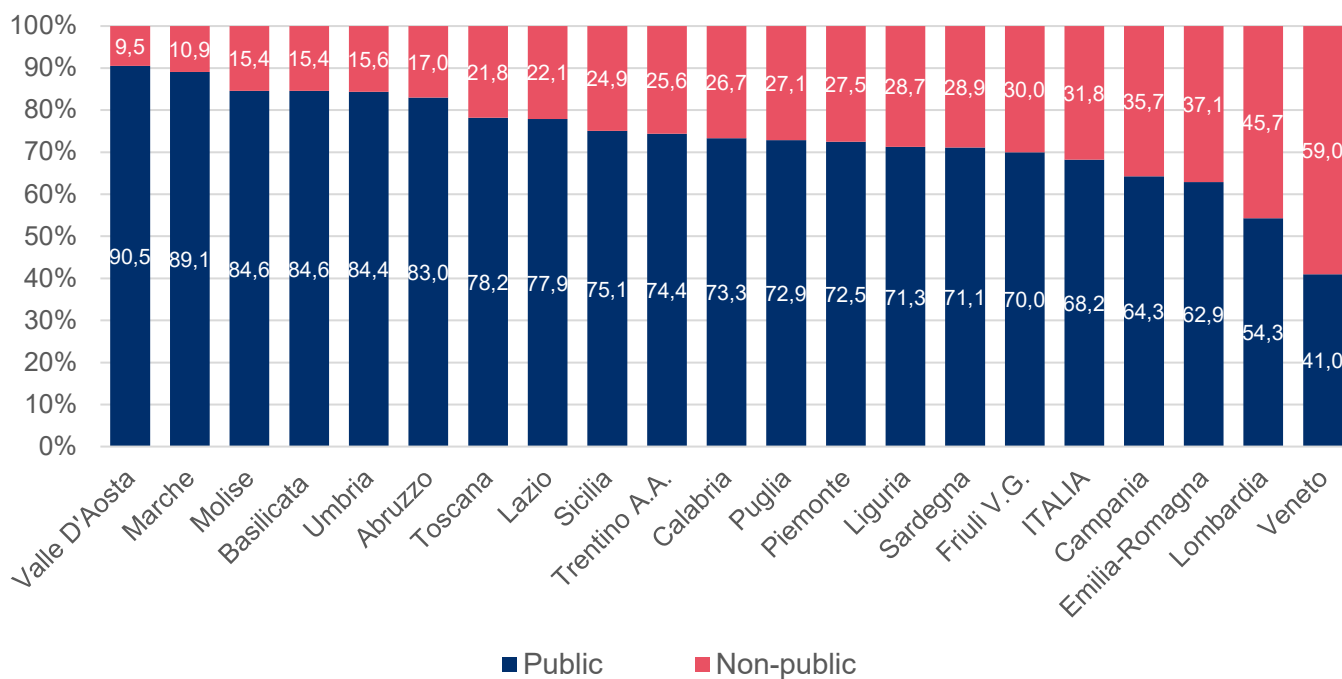
has always been higher in the South, perhaps also in relation to the lower presence of foreign children, who tend to have lower participation rates, in these areas (see below).

**Figure 2. Preschool (and early entrants to primary school) attendance rate for children aged 4-5 (%), years 2013-22**



Source: ISTAT (2024c)

**Figure 3. Share of public and non-public equalised preschools by region, %, year 2022-23**



Source: ISTAT (2024a, p. 79), elaborations from Ministry of Education data.

State preschools have been historically fundamental in expanding service coverage towards universalisation since the end of the 1960s (Frabboni and Pinto Minerva, 2008); this was especially true in the South, where private preschools were less spread. Within the public sector, municipal preschools have always been innovative and remain important benchmarks across different types of providers (Neri, 2020).

As we will see in Section 3, the type of provider may also affect service quality. There can be significant differences – usually in favour of public schools – in terms of staffing levels and working conditions, as well as better access to facilities and teaching materials (Fortunati et al., 2010).

Public preschools (run by state, municipalities, or by autonomous regions) are the majority at national level (68.3%) and in all regions except for Veneto. However, territorial differences are significant (figure 3). Public schools are a large or very large majority in the smallest regions and in the Centre and South, while private schools are a relevant part of the provision in some highly populated Regions in the North (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, together with Veneto) and in Campania. State-run preschools represent 61.3% of all preschools and accommodate 64.3% of all enrolled children in 2022-2023 (our calculations based on data from Ministry of Education). They are particularly dominant in the Southern and Central-Southern regions. Shares below 50% of all preschool enrolments are found in Emilia-Romagna, where municipal preschools still have a strong presence, Lombardy and Veneto, where private preschools have traditionally been more present (Neri, 2020).

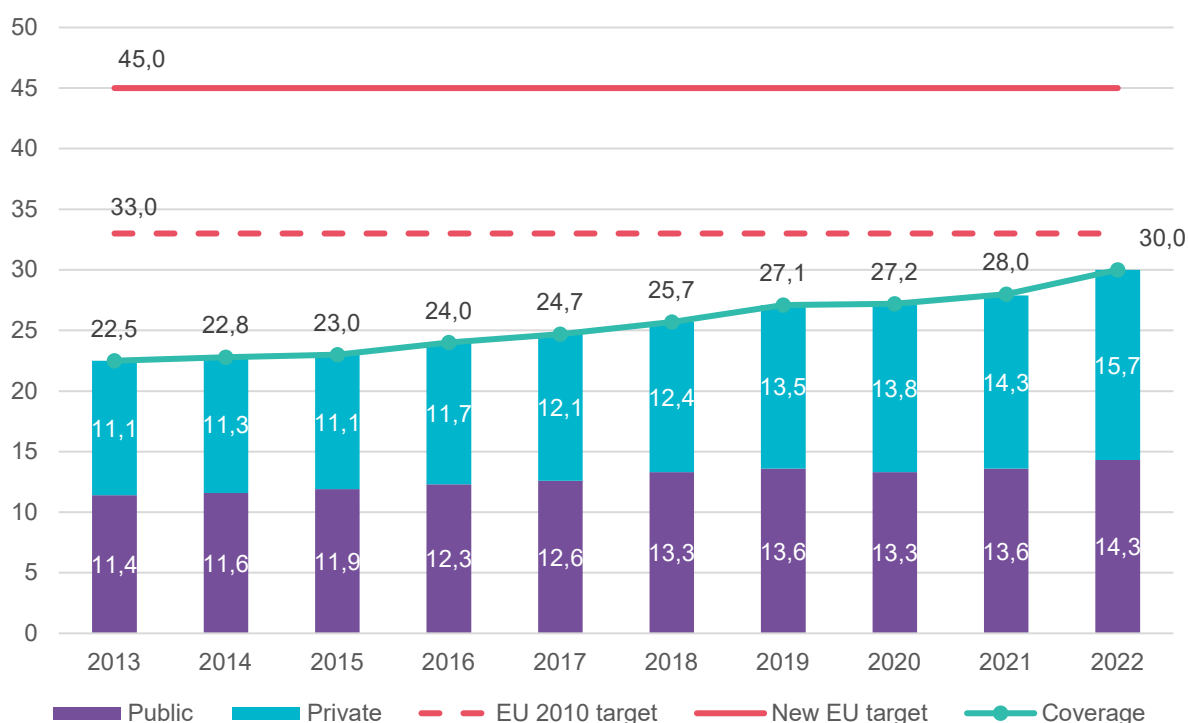
There are also differences in terms of hours of attendance. In all types of preschools, most students attend full-time (40 hours a week), with an overall average of 73.9% in 2022-23. However, this share reaches 85.3% in state-run preschools and drops to 52.9% in equalised (private and municipal) ones. In the latter, so-called “extended” hours (50 hours a week) are more common (27.3% of children attending private preschools), compared to an overall value of 12.3%, which drops to 4.3% in state-run preschools (ISTAT, 2024a).

### *ECEC services for children below the age of 3 years*

In contrast with the quasi-universal enrolment of children aged 3 to 5, ECEC coverage of children below the age of 3 is less than one third and widely differentiated on a territorial basis. In 2022-23, overall coverage is at 30%. This is the result of a supply of 14.3 places in publicly owned services and 15.7 places in privately owned services per 100 children under 3.

As figure 4 shows, overall ECEC coverage has increased by 7 percentage points in the last decade, an increase of more than one third that is partly explained by a slight growth in the number of authorised places (despite a fall in the pandemic years), and is mainly due to the strong decline in the number of births (-40,000 children aged 0-2 per year on average in the last ten years) (ISTAT 2024, p. 2).

**Figure 4. Public and private authorised places in ECEC services per 100 children aged 0-2, year 2013/14 – 2022/23 (%)**



Source: ISTAT (2024a)

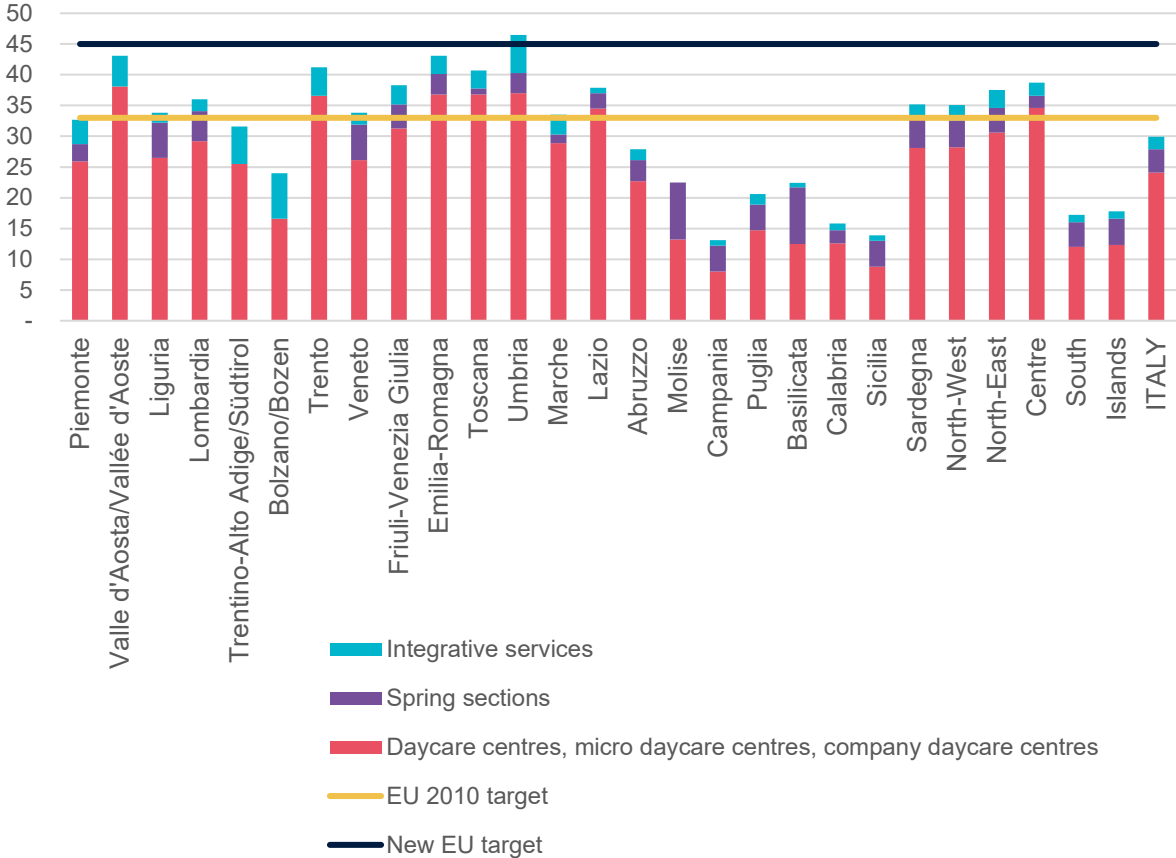
The increase in provision has occurred in parallel with a growing role of private providers, both independently and in partnership with public actors (Da Roit and Sabatinelli, 2013). Of all children attending services managed or funded by municipalities, the share of those attending a facility directly managed by the municipality has decreased by 10 percentage points between 2013 and 2022 (from 53.9% to 43.8%). In the same period, the share of users of municipal facilities outsourced to private providers has increased by almost the same (from 22.3% to 31.9%), while the share of users in places in private facilities reserved for municipal rankings has remained quite stable, over 13% since 2014 (ISTAT, 2024a, p. 17).

The overall ECEC supply composition remained broadly stable between 2013 and 2019, with roughly half of authorised places in public services and half in private ones. Since 2020, the number of private authorised places has overtaken public ones (ibidem, p. 3). Publicly owned *nidi* and *sezioni primavera* are on average larger in size and constitute 35.9% of the total active services, but account for 48.9% of authorised places.

National average figures hide profound territorial differences. In terms of territorial diffusion, in 2022, 62.6% of Italian municipalities had some kind of municipal provision (directly managed or outsourced service, agreement with private facilities, or monetary support for users of private centres) up from 52.7% in 2012, though considerably below the 75% target established by the 2017 reform. Over the same decade, coverage increased in all macro-regions, but territorial gaps were not reduced. In the South and Islands just over 17 places per 100 children aged 0-2 were available in 2022/23, considering both public and private provision. Coverage

was around or more than the double in the North-West (35%), in the North-East (37.5%) and in the Centre (38.8%) (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Available places in public and private ECEC services per 100 children aged 0-2 by type and by region and macro-region, 2022-23 (%)**



Source: ISTAT, Indagine sui nidi e servizi integrativi per la prima infanzia

Thus, while all the Centre-Northern regions have reached or exceeded the 33% minimum level of provision (corresponding to the “old” 2010 European target), with the sole exception of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, among the Southern regions, on the contrary, only Sardinia has met the target (35.2%; figure 5). Coverage also varies with the size of municipalities, ranging from 26.3% for municipalities up to 10,000 inhabitants (which represent 85% of Italian Municipalities), to 35.5% for those over 50,000 inhabitants. In smaller municipalities, supply is less developed, and predominantly represented by private providers, while in larger cities public provision is prevalent (ISTAT 2024a, p. 13-14).

Between 2013-22, ECEC coverage for 0-2 year-olds increased in all regions, but if we consider the net increase in the number of available places, trends vary. The largest expansion is observed in Campania (+72.7%), Basilicata (+36.1%), Bolzano Province (+35.1 %), Puglia (+29.1%) and Calabria (+19.7%). Conversely, in several Centre-Northern regions available places have diminished, indicating that the increase in coverage is determined by the reduction in birth rate (ISTAT, 2024a).

In sum, the last decade marked an increase in coverage of ECEC services for children below the age of 3 years, largely dependent on the decrease of potential demand due to demographic trends rather than by actual increase in provision. While the coverage target of 33% is getting closer in national terms, the new European target of 45% would require double the increase in coverage achieved by Italy in the last decade. Moreover, the long-standing territorial gaps are not substantially altered by the recent dynamics, despite some southern regions stand achieving significant increases in the number of authorised places.

## 2.2 Unmet demand and access inequalities

In Italy, the size of unmet demand is substantially different between preschools and ECEC services for children below the age of 3 years. In preschools, the issue of waiting lists has not received particular attention, likely because of quasi-universal provision. The widespread presence of state-run preschools has generally compensated for local circumstances of insufficient supply, even by allowing exceptions to regulations on the number of children per class. However, in recent years, demographic decline raises concerns about oversupply and poses new issues in terms of territorial planning.

With regards to services for children below the age of 3, the existence and length of waiting lists highlight unmet demand. Such information should, however, be viewed as an approximation, since not all households who need or desire to attend a service apply for it in practice, due to lack of information, cultural barriers, unaffordability. In addition, waiting lists vary over the school year, due to enrolled children renouncing to their place or applicants finding different solutions (Sabatinelli, 2016).

Waiting lists are managed by municipalities for municipally run or funded services, and by providers for private services. Overall, 56.3% of ECEC facilities have waiting lists, 61.7% of *nidi* and 38.2% of *sezioni primavera*, highlighting more severe shortages for younger children. Unmet demand is higher in the public sector (67.6%), especially in directly managed services, than in private facilities (49.4%), though also significant for private providers under public agreements. This points to a preference of households for fully public services and, among private ones, for those that are affiliated to the public system. In 44.6% of services with waiting lists, unmet applications equal 10-25% of capacity. The greatest pressure is found in the South (ISTAT p. 56-57), consistently with the lower diffusion and coverage rates in this area.

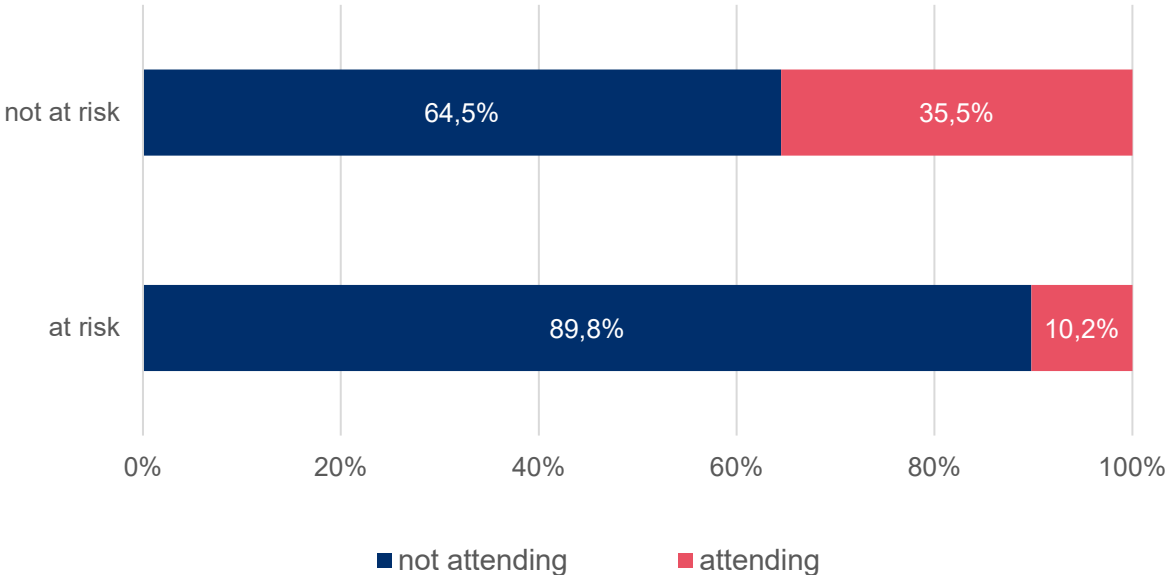
The gap between demand and supply also translates into inequalities of access. Data show that access to ECEC services is systematically lower for children with lower socio-economic status, migrant background or disability.

In terms of socio-economic family background, a so-called “Matthew Effect” is observed, with participation generally higher among families with medium-high incomes and education levels (Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018). In Italy, this is an issue also in preschools, although social inequalities appear less severe because of the quasi-universal access to the service. In 2022, preschool attendance is higher among families in the highest income quintile (98.3%) compared to the lowest quintile (91.1%). The average household income for those attending preschool is €21,777 versus €15,246 for those not attending (ISTAT, 2024a). Also, mother’s employment status is positively correlated with preschool attendance, that reaches 96.8%

when the mother is employed versus 94.5% when only the father is employed. Together with the choices made by households, this can also depend on the priority criterion assigned when both parents are employed in public preschools. Finally, higher parental education also matters: attendance stands at 96.5% among children with at least one parent holding a university degree (or higher), compared to 92.5% for families in which the highest qualification is an upper secondary school diploma (ISTAT, 2024a).

Socio-economic inequalities are more evident in access to services for children below the age of 3 years. On average, families who use the daycare centres have an income that is 30% higher than the one of those who don't access them (in 2022 €23,598 net equivalent household income versus €18,085). Moreover, children attending daycare centres are significantly more present among the highest income quintile (47.1% versus 30-32% in the three central quintiles).<sup>20</sup> Attendance is only 10.2% in families at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and more than three times higher (35.5%) in the rest of the population (figure 6). Parents' education also matters, but their employment status is the main determinant of access to services for 0-2 year-olds: enrolment is 14.2% in families with only one working parent, while it reaches 38.6% in those with both working parents (ISTAT, 2024a). This gap may reflect multiple factors: two-earner households have more intense reconciliation needs, possess more resources, and access criteria set by Municipalities to rank applications tend to prioritise them (see par. 2.3).

**Figure 6. Children attending daycare centres per risk of poverty or social exclusion. year 2022 (%)**



Source: ISTAT (2024a), based on EU-Silc, p. 63

Inequalities in access to ECEC services also depend on children's citizenship. The enrolment of foreign children (defined as children with non-Italian citizenship or stateless) in preschools is comparatively high: 84.4% of resident foreigners aged 3 to 5 years. Yet, a significant gap is observed with Italian citizens, for whom preschool attendance is as high as 95.9% (ISTAT, 2024a). The gap is more significant for children below the age of 3 years: foreign children

<sup>20</sup> The figure for the lowest quintile is not statistically significant.

attending daycare centres and “spring sections” are 14.4% of resident foreigners under 3, less than half the attendance by Italian citizens (30.3%).

From a territorial point of view, enrolment among foreign children is higher in the North than in the South.<sup>21</sup> For preschools, the difference is more than 15 percentage points (89.1% vs 73.6%), that translates into a quasi-universal access in the North and the exclusion of more than a quarter of foreign children in the South. For services for children below 3 years of age, attendance of foreign children in the South (6.3%) is less than half than in the North (15.9%), and marginal. Enrolment in the Centre is similar to that in the North for children below 3 years of age (15.2%), and close to that in the South for preschools (78.2%) (ISTAT, 2024a).

Foreign children are present in 40.1% of ECEC services for 0-2 year-olds. The share is higher in public services (60.7%), especially those directly managed (69.4%). By contrast, private facilities report lower figures (27.6%) on average, dropping further in those not having an agreement with the municipalities (22.5%) (ISTAT 2024). The gap in public facilities may be partly explained by the lower incidence of two-earner households among foreign residents, which is not compensated by other priority criteria (see par. 2.3). Cultural and information barriers may also play a role (Bosisio and Santero, 2020; Bovo and Cordini, forthcoming). On the other hand, the low presence of foreign children in private facilities may be related to the high cost for families, facing not income-related fees, with national or regional subsidies granted only ex-post.

Enrolment of children with disability is guaranteed by Italian law (104/1992) in both segments of ECEC, upon child’s disability certification. A child’s disability is, in fact, the most protected feature in access to public ECEC services (see par. 2.3). Moreover, spaces must be adapted to welcome children with disability and supporting staff must be provided.

In 2021-22, 21.2% of the population below the age of 3 with disabilities attended a daycare centre or a “spring section”, compared with 24.8% among children without disabilities (ISTAT 2024a). The presence of children with disabilities in ECEC services rises with age, possibly linked to disability certification increasing with children’s age. The ECEC attendance gap among children aged 0-2 with and without disabilities is wider in Southern regions (9.3% vs. 14.6%, in 2021-22), while in the Centre, attendance of children with disabilities (36.2%) is slightly higher than that of the rest of the population (34.3%).

As is the case with children with a migrant background, children with disabilities are more likely to attend public ECEC settings. In preschools, almost three quarters of enrolled disabled children attended a state facility in 2019-2021 (Ministero dell’Istruzione, 2022). In services for 0-2 year-olds, the higher share is found in municipal facilities (27.6%), especially directly managed (34%), versus 10.1% of private facilities, that may be less equipped, in terms of staffing and space, to cater for children with specific needs (ISTAT 2024a, p. 73).

In sum, children are disproportionately excluded from ECEC services in Italy if they have a disadvantaged socio-economic status, a migrant background and – to a lower degree – a disability. The gap is particularly acute in services for 0-2 year-olds, given supply shortages,

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<sup>21</sup> Reflecting the general territorial distribution of foreign residents, the incidence of foreign children is noticeably higher in northern areas than in the South (ISTAT, 2024a).

but is also present in preschools, despite quasi-universal coverage. All in all, accessibility and diversity are higher in publicly managed facilities and – to a lesser extent – in private facilities affiliated to the municipal systems, which suggests that governance tools like the agreement (*convenzionamento*) extend inclusionary features to non-public providers that are part of the publicly-funded ECEC system.

### 2.3 Access policy design

Access criteria are set by state preschools themselves, by individual providers in private preschools, and by municipalities in municipal ones. Private preschools commonly adopt municipal criteria, especially when operating under public procurement. Among the criteria most commonly used to determine priority access to preschools are: children from households with disabilities or certified personal or family issues, or in foster care or under educational-assistance placement; orphaned children with only one parent; children whose parents are both employed full-time, followed by those with one parent working full-time and one part-time and, then, by those with only one working parent; children with siblings attending the same educational institution (Fundarò, 2021).

For public services for children below the age of 3, municipalities have the competence to define access and ranking criteria, leading to significant differences across municipalities. Despite such variation, some key common features stand out. Family and work reconciliation appears the most important function acknowledged for early ECEC services and helps explain the inequalities in access in favour of families with medium-high incomes and education levels seen in par. 2.2 (Gambardella, Pavolini and Arlotti, 2015). Parents' employment status is, in fact, the most used access criterion: in 2022-23, 94% of municipalities apply criteria that relate to employment and almost half (48.5%) assign the highest score to households in which both parents work (ISTAT, 2024, p. 58). Far less weight is assigned to household income. Only a quarter of municipalities consider a household's ISEE, the national indicator of equivalent socio-economic condition of the household, among the ranking criteria, and only 5.3% assign the maximum score to economically disadvantaged families. Absolute priority is assigned to children with disability in over three quarters of municipalities and to those reported by social services for severe social/economic hardship in more than half of them, but only in a tiny minority (6.8% and 0.5%) to refugee status or migrant background (ibidem).

Against the backdrop of national statistics, a closer look at the cases of Milan and Rome illustrates how access criteria may vary. In both cities, access criteria to municipal ECEC services largely privilege the work-family reconciliation objective over social inclusion, with some difference between the two contexts. In Milan, absolute priority – entitlement to a reserved place – is assigned to children with certified disability or in foster care. In Rome, absolute priority is guaranteed by the maximum score attributed to certified disability and to children with a particularly challenging family and/or economic situation (as certified by the municipal social services or by the Local Health Authority); though no reserved place is guaranteed. Additional points are assigned in both contexts for household members with disabilities, single parents, orphaned children or those in the process of adoption.

In both cities, household income plays no role in the process of ranking applications, though it is taken into account in the determination of ECEC fees, see par. 4.3. The criteria applied

chiefly favour parents who are active in the labour market, with a higher score if they work full time (or at least over 50% part-time in Milan), or in education. Instead, a minimum score is assigned to parents who are unemployed in Rome and jobless in Milan.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, in both contexts, employed parents are largely prioritised over jobless parents, specific conditions of family vulnerability are considered, but family income is not. Therefore, children of low-income, one-earner households have the least probability of being admitted. While children with disabilities or severe, certified social or family hardship are given priority, ECEC access criteria in the two largest cities, as in most others in Italy, favour work-family reconciliation over social inclusion.

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<sup>22</sup> In Milan, parents' most recent employment status is considered, provided they have worked for at least 6 of the previous 12 months or are receiving unemployment benefits.

## 3 ECEC service quality

### 3.1 ECEC staff conditions of employment and labour shortages

#### *Employment continuity*

Staff continuity is considered a key element in ensuring service quality (Horm et al., 2018). In this regard, although there is no quantification of satisfactory or acceptable levels to safeguard quality, policy efforts should aim to limit and possibly minimise the share of temporary educational and teaching staff (ISTAT, 2024a). According to a survey (ISTAT, 2024a), in 2022-23, permanent educational staff accounts for 68.9% of total educational staff in daycare centres and *sezioni primavera* (74.8% in public providers and 63.1% in private ones). Approximately 70% of educational staff in 0-2 services are employed under permanent labour contracts in the North and Centre of Italy, compared to just over 60% in the South. About 47% of staff in ECEC services for children under 3 years of age have been employed for over five years, 36% between one and five, and 17% for less than one. In the public sector, 50.8% have over five years of service, with no major territorial differences. In the private sector, staff continuity is lower in the South (34%) than in the Centre and North (46%). These gaps may affect service quality, favouring Central and Northern regions. They are partly due to the more recent expansion of services in the South, suggesting that differences may gradually narrow.

In the public sector, in recent years recruitment policies have promoted greater staff continuity in ECEC services, mainly through the conversion of temporary contracts into permanent ones (the so-called *stabilisation*). This has also involved municipalities, where the recruitment of temporary ECEC staff had long been used to address staffing gaps, especially in the previous decade, when the austerity policies had imposed severe restrictions on hiring and personnel expenditure (Neri, 2020).

In the case of Rome, the use of temporary contracts was made possible by allocating a large share (more than half) of the so-called “internal” (municipal) fund for flexible work, as regulated by national collective bargaining. Consequently, only a limited amount of resources remained available to cover short-term replacements, which in recent years has sometimes led to early closures of ECEC services or restrictions on new enrolments, as the educator-to-child ratio could not be met. These circumstances have generated tensions with trade unions and families in Rome. More recently, a stabilisation process has been launched with the aim of gradually reducing the share of temporary staff. Between 2021 and 2024, about 750 educators and preschool teachers in Rome obtained permanent positions, while an additional 1,000 are expected to be stabilised by 2025. According to municipal targets, the use of temporary educational and teaching staff (when the recruitment of permanent staff is not possible) should be eliminated or at least strongly reduced by 2027.

Similar dynamics have occurred in Milan, where stabilisation began earlier. This process has been made possible by an increase in available resources (see section 4) and, at least in the case of Rome, by the relaxation of public employment hiring restrictions after the Covid-19 pandemic (Neri, 2020). However, even when financial resources are available, ECEC services may still face staff shortages due to the broader trend of workforce scarcity in the sector (see below).

### 3.1.1 Employment regulation in ECEC and staff shortages

In Italy, employment regulation and working conditions in ECEC depend on the nature of the provider – whether public, private for-profit, or private non-profit – as different National Collective Agreements (NCAs) apply to different types of providers. This resulted in a high level of fragmentation in employment regulation in the sector (Neri, 2017; Dorigatti et al., 2020; Sowell, 2022). The situation is further complicated by the presence of intermediate or hybrid (public-private) providers, which may adopt distinct approaches to regulating employment (Neri, 2020).

In terms of overall labour costs, significant differentials exist among the NCAs. Salaries set by public NCAs are systematically higher than in the private sector, while working conditions are more favourable: teachers work 36 hours per week in the public sector compared to 38 hours in the private sector, enjoy longer annual leave, follow fixed daily schedules with a maximum number of hours per shift, and have stronger job security (Fortunati et al., 2010; Zurru, 2014; Sowell 2022). In preschools, disparities in labour costs also occur within the public sector, since state and municipal schools apply different NCAs.

Analysis of the main current National Collective Agreements (NCAs) in the public and private ECEC sectors, conducted for this paper, finds that, in the second half of 2025, the gross statutory base monthly entry salary ranges from €1,445 to approximately €2,250 for daycare educators and from €1,445 to just over €2,460 for preschool teachers, depending on the specific NCA applied (data derived from the official texts of the NCAs collected in the CNEL Official Archive: <https://www.cnel.it/Archivio-Contratti/Contrattazione-Nazionale/Ricerca-CCNL>).<sup>23</sup> Salaries may then be supplemented through second-level collective agreements, with integrations often set at around €200–300 a month, though highly variable. In the private sector, the presence of this effective second level, as well as the fact that it is renewed in conjunction with the signing of new NCAs, should not be taken for granted. Average wages in ECEC are lower than in the upper levels of the education system, with the exception of teachers in state pre-schools, whose salaries are aligned with those of state primary school teachers. Over the previous decade, the freeze on collective bargaining in the public sector from 2010 to 2016 (de facto until 2018), together with the corresponding — and in some cases even longer — lack of agreement renewals in the private ECEC sector, led to a loss of real purchasing power for workers in the sector (Mori and Neri, 2020). This decline has only been partially offset by the contract renewals following the freeze and by the most recent agreements.

An important development in the latest round of collective bargaining renewals has been the relative upgrading of daycare center educators. Since the early 2020s, educators in daycare centers typically earned less than preschool teachers (from gross €90 to €200 less at entry level), reflecting differences in qualification requirements and contractual classification levels. Following the introduction in 2017 of the mandatory requirement for daycare educators to hold

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<sup>23</sup> A guide to the archive is available at: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/rapporti-di-lavoro-e-relazioni-industriali/focus-on/norme-contratti-collettivi/Documents/Guida-consultazione-Archivio-nazionale-CCNL.pdf>. For the public sector, the official texts of the NCAs can also be found on the ARAN website (the Agency for the Representation of Public Administrations in Collective Bargaining): <https://www.aranagenzia.it/contratti-aran/>

a specific bachelor's degree (see section 3.3.2), implemented from 2019, the most recent collective agreements provide for the reclassification of graduate educators at the same contractual level, and therefore on the same pay scale, as preschool teachers. These provisions do not apply to non-graduate educators, who remain at a lower classification and pay level under most NCAs. However, given staff turnover and the existence of mechanisms for progression to higher classification levels in several public and private agreements, the latest contract renewals are leading to a general (though gradual) improvement in the relative wage position of daycare center educators vis-à-vis preschool teachers and other educational levels.

Wage differentials between the public and private ECEC sectors have historically been significant (Dorigatti, Mori and Neri, 2020; Neri, 2020; Neri, 2023), and the analysis of current NCAs confirms these disparities. For educators in daycare centers, in terms of gross base monthly entry salary, the gap between the public Local Government NCA and the main private-sector agreements ranges from €400 to €800 per month, in 2025, depending on the private NCA considered for comparison. For preschool teachers, this difference can reach up to €1,000 gross per month when considering the statutory base entry salary of state preschool teachers, which is approximately €200 higher than that of municipal preschool teachers (there are no state daycare centers in Italy) (data and calculations based on official texts of the NCAs). These differences may be partially offset, though not necessarily, by the greater scope for wage supplements available through second-level collective bargaining in the private sector, where such arrangements are in place (Neri, Dorigatti and Mori, 2025).

Weekly working hours also differ across collective agreements. In the public sector, municipal ECEC staff work 36 hours per week, while state preschool teachers have a 25-hour weekly teaching load (plus 80 annual hours for internal organizational activities). In the private sector, weekly working hours range from 34 to 38 hours, depending on the collective agreement applied. Public-sector NCAs provide for 30–32 days of annual leave, whereas the main private-sector agreements provide between 26 days (the most prevalent arrangement) and 34 days (data and calculations based on official texts of the NCAs).<sup>24</sup>

For municipalities, wage and regulatory differences and gaps between public and private providers create strong incentives to externalise ECEC services. Research has also shown that outsourcing may undervalue “non-frontal” activities—planning, documentation, family meetings, training- which are not always covered in contracts with private providers (Dorigatti et al., 2020; Sowell, 2022). Their limited economic recognition reduces municipal expenditure but risks prompting providers to overlook quality-essential functions.

From the workers' perspective, less favourable pay and working conditions in private or outsourced services make public employment more attractive. Staff therefore tend to move from private to public jobs, strengthening continuity within the public sector. Additionally, public NCAs and public providers (especially municipalities) often promote collegiality, experience-sharing among colleagues, family involvement, and professional development – factors strongly linked to service quality (European Commission, 2021). Conversely, these factors may

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<sup>24</sup> In the (public and private) NCAs, four days of annual leave are attributable to abolished public holidays and, depending on the NCA, are converted into paid leave to be taken (either mandatorily or not) during the year or into additional salary.

be less guaranteed within private providers due to contractual and tendering mechanisms, potentially leading to medium-term repercussions.

Low wages and poor working conditions, together with limited career prospects and difficulties in balancing work and private life, have made the childcare profession unattractive in many European and non-European countries (OECD, 2020). In Italy, this has contributed to a growing staff shortage, which has been reported by public and private employers as well as unions in both 0–2 and 3–6 ECEC services (Sowell, 2022).

Additionally, higher qualification requirements for ECEC staff, such as the above-mentioned introduction of the compulsory degree to work in daycare centres, while intended to enhance professionalism and service quality, risk creating further imbalances between labour supply and demand in absence of coordinated planning among public authorities, universities, and service providers.

According to CNEL (2024), assuming an average educator-to-child ratio of 1 to 6, an additional 25,000 educators will be required in the coming years. Yet, in 2022, only 7,790 graduates obtained a bachelor's degree in Educational Sciences across all specialisations (early childhood, adult education, social education, etc.), and over 30% of these graduates are already employed. This indicates a serious risk of insufficient professionals to meet the growing demand for these services. At present, in both our case studies of Milan and Rome, staff shortages are mainly due to difficulties in recruiting personnel with the required qualifications.

The widespread recognition of staff shortages and the need for feasible solutions have prompted reflection on contractual policies by key national policy makers and actors in the education and care sectors. So far, the most significant outcome of this process was the 2024 renewal of the NCA for social cooperatives, which significantly improved pay and working conditions for ECEC staff, although significant differences with public sector employees remain.

Given that social cooperatives are among the main private providers in the private sector, this development could gradually trigger a general improvement in staff and working conditions. However, private employers argue that greater public funding is necessary to sustain the resulting increase in labour costs without increasing user fees.

### 3.2 Staff children ratio

The child-teacher ratio is a key indicator of quality. Presidential Decree No. 81/2009 sets a maximum cap on the number of children in preschool classes at 18-26 children, with a maximum of 29 in exceptional circumstances. Where children with disabilities are enrolled, this number is reduced to 20 children. Each class is assigned two teachers, based on a standard schedule of a 40-hour week. The number of teachers assigned does not decrease for classes operating on a reduced 25-hour schedule. No critical issues in meeting these standards is reported. The 2009 regulation also requires an additional teacher for children with disabilities, at least for part of the attendance time. However, a shortage of teachers for children with disabilities is reported (Magni, 2024).

In daycare centres, the staff-to-child ratio is not defined at the national level but depends on regional laws, resulting in a fairly variable framework. Regional regulations often establish different standards depending on the age and developmental stage of the children, and these standards are also very diverse, ranging from 4 to 10 (ISTAT 2024a). In the case of children aged 24-36 months, staff-to-child ratios range from 1:7 in Lazio and Marche to 1:10 in Piedmont, Emilia Romagna and Calabria (ISTAT, 2024). Ratios are usually higher for younger children (up to 1:4 for children under 1 year old, in some regions). In overall terms, an average ratio of one educator for every 6 children is assumed in services for 0-2 year olds (ibidem). Within this framework, an average ratio of one educator for every 6 children is typically assumed. Challenges in meeting these standards appear to emerge only in private services in the South, where there is greater reliance on non-educational staff (ISTAT, 2024a).

In Milan, the educator-to-child ratio in daycares is 1:6, with two or three additional educators depending on the size of the service. The ratio is lower than the regional Lombardy requirements (1:8 during “targeted activities”, that is hours when educational activities are concentrated, and 1:10 in the remaining hours). In Rome, in line with regional Lazio regulation, the ratio is 1:7. Unlike in the past, the current approach in both cases does not differentiate standards by children’s age. This may facilitate the creation of mixed-age groups, while also responding to potential, specific service needs.

Over the years, compliance with the legal ratio with available staff has been met also calculating the average daily absence rate and the variation in the number of children throughout the day (due to flexible entry and exit hours and part-time arrangements). In Rome, for instance, the consolidated staggered staff shift model concentrates the presence of educators during the central hours of the day. In recent years, however, difficulties have emerged, especially in centres with lower absence rates (23% on average in Rome), during periods of higher attendance (typically in spring), or where children’s arrivals and departures are less spread out. According to regional regulations and agreements with unions, whenever ratios are not met, the municipality is required to provide an additional substitute educator under short-term daily contracts. Yet, recruitment is not always timely, due to logistical constraints and the low attractiveness of these contracts.

### 3.3 Pedagogical practices, curricula and training

Italy’s 2017 reform provided common tools for educational and pedagogical guidance across the 0–6 years system, promoting processes to standardise service quality and reduce inequalities, while respecting the system’s predominantly decentralised governance as well as the historical, cultural, and organisational diversity of different areas of the country.

In 2018, a “Commission for the Integrated System of Education and Instruction” - a consultative and propositional body of the Ministry of Education, composed of experts appointed by the Ministry, regional governments, and local authorities, serving a three-year term – was established. Although continuity was affected by the challenges of the Covid-19 emergency and by the successive changes in government since 2018, during its first two terms the Commission played a crucial role in laying the foundations for the pedagogical and didactic framework of the SI06.

Among its main initiatives, as set out in the 2017 reform, the Commission delivered the Pedagogical Guidelines for the Integrated System 0-6, approved in November 2021 (Ministerial Decree No. 334), and the National Guidelines for Educational Services for Early Childhood, for children below the age of 3, approved in February 2022 (Ministerial Decree No. 43). While the former provided a general framework for integrating services for children aged 0 to 6, the latter constituted the first comprehensive national pedagogical and didactic framework for children aged 0-2 years, applicable to all providers and regions. These documents do not include explicit measures to ensure implementation or compliance, but offer all actors guidance on developing the SI06, while respecting both territorial specificities and provider diversity. Moreover, the Commission is in charge of monitoring the implementation of the SI06 reporting periodically to Parliament.

Unlike ECEC services for younger children, preschools have operated within a structured national pedagogical and didactic framework since 1991. In 2012, this framework took the form of the National Guidelines for the Curriculum of Preschool and the First Cycle of Education, later updated in 2018. Rather than being organised around subject-based disciplines like in primary schools, the Guidelines for the Curriculum for preschools are structured around five “fields of experience”, which identify broad areas of children’s learning and development. For each field, the Guidelines set out general learning objectives and expected developmental outcomes, while granting preschools a high degree of pedagogical and curricular autonomy. Pedagogical guidelines were aligned with those of primary education, so preschools were conceived as being more closely connected to primary schools than to 0–2 services. The new Guidelines, approved in December 2025 (Ministerial Decree No. 221), seem to broadly preserve this orientation. They have been widely criticised for their weak links with 0–2 services and for paying limited attention to a vertical curriculum across age groups (GNNI, 2025).

### 3.3.1 Pedagogical coordination

In the Italian ECEC system, pedagogical coordination takes two forms: coordination within individual ECEC services or groups of services managed by the same provider (“internal coordination”) and territorial coordination units operating at the municipal or provincial level. In the first case, coordinators oversee curricula, educational activities, objectives, quality, and environments, and often manage resources, liaise with parents, and support staff training. Internal coordination is usually funded by individual schools and providers, and the function may also be assigned to external professionals.

According to ISTAT (2024a), in 2022–23 over 90% of daycare units had a pedagogical coordinator. In more than 30% of cases, the coordinator also worked as educator, while in 26–27% the role was performed by an external professional – common in private services in the South, especially spring sections, with 6–8 weekly hours devoted to coordination. By contrast, internal coordinators, who more common in public daycares in the North (over 54%), dedicated about 15 hours weekly. In state preschools, coordination responsibilities are assumed by principals, but this arrangement may be less effective given the breadth of their duties. It can be hypothesised that a low number of coordination hours or the absence of this function may have negative effects on service quality.

While internal coordination has been developed since the 1970s-1980s without being legally mandated, territorial coordination units have been piloted over the past two decades before being formally introduced nationwide by the 2017 reform. Territorial coordination units are

funded by the National Fund for the Integrated System (see section 4.2.1). These units oversee and promote quality of all 0–6 services within a given area, by ensuring forms of coordination and the creation of networks among ECEC providers. Territorial coordination is expected to support the development of educational activities, the planning of continuous training, and to cooperate with universities in updating tertiary education programmes for ECEC educational and teaching staff. By 2023, 300 territorial coordination units (operating at town or provincial level) had been activated across 10 Regions, nine of which are located in Central and Northern Italy (Stringher et al., 2024). This highlights significant geographical disparities in the diffusion of these governance tools. Members of the units are usually professionals with a pedagogical background or internal service coordinators. Municipalities often play a leading role in managing these units (Stringher et al., 2023).

### 3.3.2 Educational staff qualification levels and continuous training

The initial training required by law for educational and teaching staff in Italy differs markedly between the 0–2 and 3–6 segments, as explained below. This represents an obstacle to building an integrated system, making staff mobility between the two segments difficult and keeping them divided into two separate blocks. Preschool teachers remain closer in terms of training profile to primary school teachers. Their career prospects also tend to point towards primary education, where transitions are relatively straightforward as they require the same type of degree.

Since the mid-2000s, teaching in preschools has required a single-cycle five-year university degree in Primary Teacher Education, qualifying also for primary schools. However, those who obtained a teaching diploma from the *Istituto magistrale* (a secondary school designed to train future teachers) by 2001/2002 may still access preschool positions without a degree.

For services for 0-2 years, since 2017 (de facto since 2019), educator positions require either a three-year university degree in Educational Sciences with an early childhood track, or the five-year Primary Teacher Education degree, if this includes or is supplemented by a 60-credit specialisation course. Certain equivalent qualifications earned before 2017 (or specific diplomas obtained by 2015) also remain valid. The introduction of degree requirements aimed to raise staff qualifications but has generated scepticism among providers due to cost and recruitment difficulties. In this context, the creation of a professional body (the “Order of Pedagogical and Educational Professions”), with mandatory registration in 2024, for all educators (and not including preschools and school teachers) could worsen staff shortages, especially with respect to ECEC services for 0-2 year-olds. Unions, employers, and Regions have requested transitional flexibility, and registration deadlines have been extended (from August 2024 to March 2025). Impacts will be assessed in the coming years.

In 2022–23, 48.1% of educators in services for young children below the age of 3 held a degree in psycho-pedagogical fields. Shares were higher in the South (55.5%) than in the North (49.6%) and Centre (44.6%), and in the private sector (53.1%) compared to the public (42.9%) (CNEL 2024). This reflects the more recent development of early childhood services in the South and private sector.

Declining preschool demand, due to demographic trends, and growing need for daycare have raised debate on retraining preschool teachers for ECEC 0-2 years services. Such policies face obstacles due to differences in initial training and, as noted in previous research (Sowell,

2022), the reluctance of preschool teachers to move to daycare, linked to prestige and, to some extent, pay. Therefore, proposals have been made to revise university training to establish curricular continuity across 0–6 ECEC services, linking the three-year degree for 0–3 educators to a new two-year master’s degree granting access to preschools, alongside the existing five-year programme (CNEL 2024).

Continuous training is divided into mandatory and optional activities. Mandatory training, defined by national and regional regulations, covers professional updating, auxiliary roles, and topics such as safety. Optional training supports professional growth and quality improvement. Staff participation rates vary territorially: 70% in the North, 64% in Central Italy, and 56% in the South (ISTAT, 2024). In the past, continuous training hours were not contemplated in several private-sector NCAs, or to a lesser extent than in the public sector; however, these differences have declined over time, as private sector agreements have increasingly included mandatory training hours

### 3.4 Structural, physical and organisational requirements: the authorisation and accreditation system

All services for children under 3 years old or under 6 years needs to meet certain structural, physical, and organisational requirements. Preschools follow a well-established national regulation defined by acts and norms, along with primary schools. In the case of ECEC services for children below the age of 3, regions are responsible for setting requirements or standards to be met.

Regional regulations identify two steps for services for children under the age of 3: authorisation and accreditation. Authorisation, which is granted to services meeting minimum standards, is indispensable for operation. Accreditation, which is awarded based on compliance with further standards of quality, is necessary to receive public funding or manage contracted services for the public sector.

To obtain authorisation to operate a service for children under 3 years old, regional acts set three main standards: the staff-to-child ratio, illustrated above; the square metres per child in indoor spaces; and the maximum capacity per service unit (see ISTAT, 2020; 2024). Regarding indoor spaces, regional requirements for daycare centres range from 5 sqm/child in Abruzzo to 8.5 in Umbria (with the special cases of the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, where the values are 10 and 4, respectively). Many Southern regions fall within the higher range, with values of 7.5 sqm (ISTAT, 2024).

Regarding maximum capacity, most regional laws set the limit per daycare service unit at 60 places, with a small, variable quota of additional places for over-enrolment, provided that staff-to-child ratios are respected.

According to ISTAT (2020), all Italian regions have approved accreditation dedicated and quite comprehensive regulations (except for Sicily, which adopts more fragmented rules). In terms of quality requirements, 11 regions explicitly refer to staff qualifications and continuous training, although only a few specify a minimum number of training hours. The presence of a pedagogical project and a coordinator is identified as an accreditation requirement by seven

and six regions, respectively, but other regions leave the task of defining these requirements to the User's Charter, which, introduced in the 1990s following international experiences, describes users' rights as well as the features and functioning of a public service. In this regard, three regions identify the definition of user participation tools as an accreditation requirement.

### 3.5 Monitoring and evaluation

In Italy's 0–6 ECEC services, there has traditionally been limited culture and practice of monitoring and evaluation. The prevailing focus has been on inputs – staff numbers, funds, users, and structures – rather than processes, outputs, or outcomes. Information systems remain fragmented at regional and local levels and are often of limited evaluative use. Some progress has been made over the past 10–15 years, especially in preschools. The 2017 reform aimed to reinforce this shift by assigning the central government responsibility for defining monitoring and evaluation criteria for all 0–6 services and for creating a national information system, though its relation to existing systems remains unclear. Moreover, progress in monitoring 3–6 services has been closely tied to that in primary schools, further reinforcing separation from the 0–2 years segment.

In terms of data, information on preschools is collected by the Ministry of Education through the SIDI (*Sistema Informativo dell'Istruzione*), which includes structural, organisational, financial, staff, and student data. SIDI data are provided by regional offices of the Ministry and directly by schools. They are accessible to preschool and school staff, Ministry officials, and, partly, to users.

With regards to evaluation, preschool education follows the model used in primary schools, using the RAV, *Rapporto di Autovalutazione*, or Self-Evaluation Report (Fontani, 2017). The RAV, activated in 2015, has always been mandatory for schools.<sup>25</sup> For preschools, the RAV was introduced in 2018 in a specific version (*RAV Infanzia*), which has been voluntary and experimental until 2024-25, whereas in primary schools it has been compulsory. Since 2025-26, all preschools have also been required to fill it in. It comprises 42 indicators and 99 descriptors across four areas: context, outcomes, educational processes, and organisational/teaching processes (Freddano and Stringher, 2021). Within the outcome area, four sub-areas are identified for preschool children: developmental and learning outcomes; school outcomes in terms of transitions and dropouts; long-term outcomes measured through INVALSI tests for children attending school; and outcomes related to well-being at school. Between 2018 and 2020, 1,028 public and private preschools completed it; INVALSI then selected 464 of them for research (INVALSI, 2020; Freddano & Stringher, 2021). This research was supported by training sessions for principals, coordinators, and teachers, and followed by webinars involving stakeholders (INVALSI, 2020). Future challenges include resuming systematic compilation, interrupted by Covid-19, organising and carrying out the implementation for all preschools and experimenting with external evaluation alongside the RAV self-evaluation.

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<sup>25</sup> Introduced by Presidential Decree No. 80/2013, it is a structured self-assessment based on common indicators from the Ministry and INVALSI (the official Italian institute for school evaluation), completed every three years by the principal and teachers, and published online, to identify strengths, weaknesses and priorities for the three-year "Plan for Improvement," where schools define specific actions.

Before and alongside the RAV, several self-assessment tools have been piloted at the local level, drawing on international experiences. Over the last decade, these initiatives have combined traditional instruments such as SOVASI (Scala di Osservazione e Valutazione della Scuola dell'Infanzia) and AVSI (Autovalutazione della Scuola dell'Infanzia), both representing national adaptations of the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale), with international tools such as ITERS-3, ECERS-3, or CLASS. These experiments have taken place in several municipalities or areas in Central and Northern regions, such as Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Marche, Veneto (Bondioli et al., 2015; INVALSI, 2020; AA.VV., 2020; Bartolini, 2022; Bove et al., 2023), sometimes involving also Rome and Southern schools (D'Ugo and Vannini, 2015). All these experiences represent relevant progress in evaluation and complement the national RAV Infanzia, but they are still used in an experimental and fragmented way.

In services for children under the age of 3, some progress has also been made in developing quality evaluation systems, although it has been slower and less consistent. No national tools similar to the RAV are in place, and existing experiences remain highly fragmented, being implemented only at regional and local levels, mainly in the Central and Northern regions. This still reflects the traditionally fragmented governance of daycares and other ECEC services for children under 3. Local initiatives are usually based on self-assessment and rely on scales adapted from international models, such as SVANI (Scala per la Valutazione dell'Asilo Nido) and ISQUEN (Indicatori e Scala di Valutazione della Qualità Educativa del Nido). In this regard, the (relatively) most recent region-wide experiences include those of Tuscany, which has developed its own quality evaluation system for services for children under 3 (Regione Toscana, 2015), and Emilia-Romagna (2016). In this last Region, it is worth recalling that the Regional government, the regional offices of the Ministry of Education, and the University of Bologna have jointly promoted a project (2022-2025) aimed at defining a framework for quality and its evaluation within the services of the SI06 (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024).

Moreover, several regions refer to quality evaluation within their regulatory frameworks for the accreditation of services for children under the age of 3 (ISTAT, 2020). In this regard, eleven regions require the implementation of instruments and tools for quality evaluation, although references to this obligation are usually generic, with some exceptions where they are more precise and specific, such as in Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Umbria.

Finally, customer satisfaction surveys are widespread in both 0-2 and 3-6 services, often carried out by municipalities, but no data on their adoption is available.

For 0–2 services, data collection has been supported over the past decade by SINSE (*Sistema Informativo Nazionale dei Servizi Socio-Educativi per la Prima Infanzia*). However, participation by regions has been uneven, concentrated in the Centre and North. Access to data collected by school and elaborated by regions depend on regional rules. As mentioned, the 2017 reform assigned the central government responsibility for developing a national information system covering all 0–6 services. Yet, it remains unclear how this new system will be harmonised with data collection mechanisms already in place for 3–6 services, particularly SIDI.

If we consider our two local cases, a combination of monitoring and evaluation tools are being employed in both Milan and Rome: annual self-evaluations of sections and services are conducted by staff and the pedagogical coordinator in municipal daycare centres and preschools, as well as yearly customer satisfaction surveys for families. Quality certification is applied to certain processes in daycare centres, such as the organisation of the settling-in period and enrolment procedures; these practices seem to be particularly emphasised in the case of Milan.

## 4. Cost and financing

### 4.1 Overview of expenditure

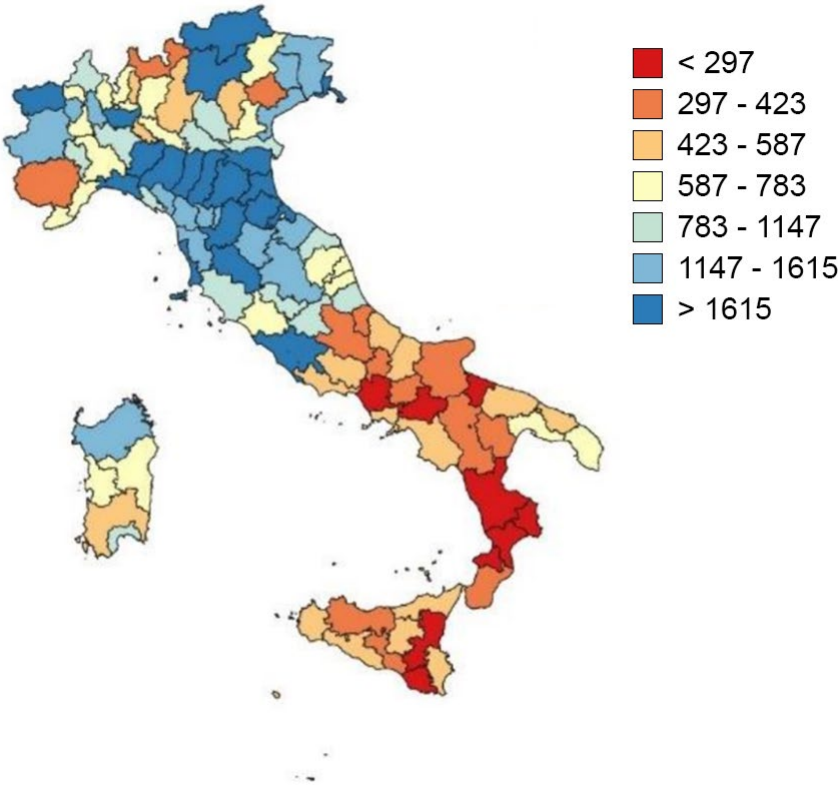
Italy has historically allocated limited public resources on policies for families and children, a traditional feature of familialistic welfare regimes (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). General government total expenditure on family and children was estimated at 1.4% of GDP in 2023, against an EU average of 1.8% (Eurostat, 2024). Public expenditure on ECEC slightly increased from 0.46% on GDP in 2000 to 0.56% in 2019, mostly attributed to preschool provision (0.5%), compared with services for children below the age of 3 (0.1%) (OECD database).

Financing responsibility for ECEC provision is differentiated among the two age-based segments. For preschools, the State is responsible for provision of state preschools – that represent around 60% of the supply – and provides contributions to equalised municipal and private schools. Municipalities are responsible for municipal equalised preschools, net of state contributions. For services for children below 3, municipalities are financially responsible for municipal provision and for the construction of new premises. The central state and the regions allocate resources to support expansion of facilities. These have been scant and scattered in the past, but significant changes are observed in recent years. With the Integrated System 06, a permanent system of national funding is currently being built to co-fund both construction and management, as we shall see below. Additionally, the implementation of the Italian NRRP has enabled an extraordinary effort by the central state, through European NGEU funds.

In 2022, overall, Italian municipalities destined 1.7 billion euros to childcare services (daycare centres, spring sections and integrative services). Fees paid by families cover 18.1% of such overall municipal expenditure (301 million euros) (ISTAT 2024a, p. 15). The majority of municipal resources is absorbed by direct management of municipal structures: focusing on daycare centres and spring sections, on average, 62.1% of municipal expenditure in 2022, net of users' contributions, is destined to cover staff costs. One quarter of the expenditure goes to the contracting out of municipally owned services to private providers (up by ten percent points, coherently with the increase over time in mixed forms of management, see section 2). Smaller shares cover agreements with private daycare centres, reserving all or part of the places (7.8%), as well as contributions to users of private or public services (3.4%), and to private services without agreements with municipalities (1.5%).

Municipal financial effort on ECEC services is strongly differentiated by geographic area. Expenditure on educational services for early childhood was on national average €938/year per resident aged 0 to 2 in 2021. Variation by province ranges between a maximum of €5,068 spent in Trieste and a minimum of €51 in Caserta (CNEL ONSST, 2024, p. 28; see figure 7).

**Figure. 7. Average social spending for each resident aged 0 to 2 years of single and associated municipalities net of user and National Health System co-participation, Early Childhood Educational Services area, data by province, year 2021 (euros)**



Source: CNEL OSST (2024, p. 28)

**4.2 ECEC funds**

This paragraph reviews the new structural national fund for ECEC services; the post-pandemic NGEU funds dedicated to ECEC expansion, and their allocation process; and the earmarked resources introduced to support the functioning of services.

**4.2.1 A new structural national fund for ECEC services**

The ‘National Fund for the Integrated System 06’ (*Fondo nazionale per il sistema integrato di educazione e di istruzione dalla nascita ai sei anni*), introduced with the 2017 reform, represents an important step in the planning and funding of 0-6 services.

The National Fund, established by the Ministry of Education, co-finances both construction and renovation of structures to host ECEC services, management costs, as well as staff training and territorial pedagogical coordination outlined in section 3. The national budget is divided between the Regions, that co-finance by no less than 25% of the national transfers, with own resources or European funds, and define priorities and distribution among municipalities. The Ministry transfers resources directly to Municipalities, conditional on timely

financial reports, both to ensure appropriate use of resources and to gradually build a national monitoring system.

The allocation of resources to regions is based on three criteria (table 1):

- a) current participation to educational services (with higher weight on services for children below the age of 3, acknowledging the higher financial effort of municipalities),
- b) current potential demand,
- c) the 0-2 services coverage gap (targeting all Southern regions, except Sardinia, and the Bozen Province in the North).

Regions with a 0-6 coverage lower than the national average are required to destine at least 5% of the national resources they receive to Spring Sections or to 0-6 Childhood hubs, considered more cost-effective solutions to expand provision.

Allocations are defined for three-year periods. Resources have increased steadily from 209 million euros in 2017 to 309 in 2022, then decreased to 275.7 in 2025 (see table 2 in paragraph 4.2.3).

**Table 1. Resource allocation criteria: National SI06 Fund**

Resource allocation criteria		Share of resources allocated
a) number of children enrolled in	<3 educational services	40%
	non-state equalised preschools	10%
b) size of population aged	<3	20%
	3-5	10%
c) higher gap from national average of available places in services <3	20% only in Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Apulia, Sicily, Bozen Province	

**4.2.2 Extraordinary funds to expand ECEC: NGEU funds in the Italian NRRP**

Observers doubted that the resources of the SI06 National Fund were enough to cover the different policy priorities and objectives – expansion, quality enhancement, reduction of territorial gaps (Fortunati, 2025). However, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, ECEC expansion became a flagship of Italy’s NRRP, supported by significant NGEU funds. Initially, €4.6 billion were allocated to create 264,480 new places in daycares and preschools, aiming to meet the “old” 2010 European target of 33% of coverage for children below the age of 3. Following the Plan’s revision and EU Council approval, at the end of 2023 resources decreased to €3.24 billion, with the objective of creating 150,480 new places (UPB, 2025).

Procedures and criteria to allocate NRRP resources to municipalities (the implementing bodies) have changed over time, to adjust to a tight implementation schedule (works were to be completed by the end of 2025, later postponed to June 2026) and initial low municipal application rates, particularly by municipalities with lower ECEC provision to start with. In an

initial phase, the Government opted for a bottom-up approach, a public call to all municipalities (Viesti, 2022; UPB, 2025). However, applications and targeting were limited: only 30% of funds were allocated to municipalities with no services, against 20% to municipalities with coverage over 33%, mostly large cities and urban centres in the Centre-Northern regions (Tosi and Zanardi, 2024). Partly in response to these difficulties, in 2024 the Government launched the “New daycare centres plan”,<sup>26</sup> adopting a top-down procedure to accelerate the creation of new places and support municipalities with lower service provision. A quota was reserved for metropolitan cities (on the assumption of high demand) and for aggregations of small municipalities (to favour small local bodies less likely to undertake such projects). The Ministry identified and ranked municipalities with higher need,<sup>27</sup> defined the number of places to be created and provided technical support through the centralization of tenders and contracts. This top-down approach improved resource targeting towards areas with lower coverage. Still, only less than two thirds of the priority municipalities adhered, resulting in only around 50% of the financed places being in construction (ibidem). In March 2025 a new call was released, with partly different target,<sup>28</sup> and strong pressure on project implementation due to the tight schedule.

The difficulties and delays in allocating NRRP funds for ECEC expansion may be referred to several factors. First, the time frame was short, considering that local administrations were committed at the same time on different NRRP calls and planning initiatives (Viesti, 2022). Second, most Italian municipalities are small, rely on limited administrative staff, and had been even further understaffed during the austerity years following the Great Recession (Pavolini, 2022; Neri, 2020). Municipalities with no supply also lacked the complex and multidisciplinary know-how needed to plan ECEC services (Garbarini, 2022). Finally, the low propensity of local politicians to invest in ECEC, reinforced by uncertainty over continued national funding for functioning costs not covered by NRRP funds, may also have played a role (Saraceno, 2022).

Overall, NRRP resources have predominantly reached territorial ambits with a lower supply of ECEC service coverage, with a quota per resident below 3 years of age (€3,533) that is twice the one received by ambits with high coverage (ISTAT, 2025). However, 22% of funds went to municipalities with coverage above 33%. The vast majority (98%) of very small municipalities (<500 inhabitants), most of them with low shares of residents below the age of 3 and no ECEC provision, did not apply for NRRP resources (UPB, 2025). Moreover, a trade-off emerges between the objective of renovating a large patrimony of existing and outdated facilities, pursuing fundamental security and ecological principles, and the goal of maximising additional places, as renovation projects are more expensive than new constructions and therefore contribute less to expansion (UPB, 2025).

Italy’s Parliamentary Budget Office (UPB) estimated a high share of NRRP ECEC projects (70.1% nationally) in the ‘execution’ phase in December 2024, while only 11% were in the ‘conclusive’ phase in the Centre and South, versus 18% in the North – against a target completion date of June 2026 (UPB, 2025). A recent estimation envisages that NRRP and related national resources will enable an expansion in ECEC coverage for children below the age of 3 to 41.3% nationally, not far from the 2030 EU 45% target (Save the Children, 2025).

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<sup>26</sup> Allocating also national funds from the national ‘Daycare centres and preschools Fund’ (Ministry of Interiors).

<sup>27</sup> Based on three weighed criteria: resident population; resident population aged 0-2; coverage gap from 33%, net of the new places funded with the first NRRP allocation.

<sup>28</sup> Municipalities with <3 provision below 33% and at least 45 resident children aged <3.

However, territorial differences are expected to persist. The UPB defines different scenarios. In all of them, three quarters of new places would be created in daycare centres, and the remaining quarter in preschools. The 33% target would be reached at the national level, but not in all regions: Campania and Sicily would remain beneath that coverage target, together with Trentino Alto-Adige and Apulia in the least favourable scenario. Distance between Northern and Southern regions would be reduced, but within-region differences would persist (UPB, 2025). However, the delays in resources' allocation and projects' development have implied an increase in costs, linked to inflation, which jeopardizes such forecasts (Corte dei Conti, 2025).

#### 4.2.3 Financial support for the functioning of ECEC services

As NRRP resources do not cover functioning costs, a major concern raised by scholars and stakeholders is the risk of expanding facilities, whose management would be unsustainable without adequate transfers of resources to municipalities. To cover rising functioning costs of municipal ECEC services, an earmarked increase of the 'Municipal Solidarity Fund'<sup>29</sup> was introduced from 2022. The goal is guaranteeing the minimum level of provision (LEP) for children under three, set at 33% and assessed locally. For this reason, the resources apportioned are planned to progressively increase, as detailed in table 2, from €120 million in 2022, to €1,100 million annually from 2027. To support the most disadvantaged territories, funds for 2022-2026 are assigned only to municipalities with coverage below 28.88% (MEF, 2024, p. 4).

While municipalities with higher provision are not supported in their operating costs, resources also reached those with lower coverage that have not undertaken NRRP expansion. In fact, among the 5,150 municipalities receiving the FSC funds in 2024, only 31% will create new ECEC places via NRRP resources (most of them, 46%, located in the South), while 38% will not (Save the Children, 2025, p. 146).<sup>30</sup>

The match between the number of new ECEC places planned and the FSC funds that will be received is also varied. It is estimated that around 20% of municipalities that have created new places will cover only up to 5% of functioning costs with the FSC, while a minority (3%) will cover at least 70% (ibidem). It should be noted that resources are allocated based on a standard cost for full-time daycare service user, approximately €7,670 per year, which experts and stakeholders consider lower than the actual cost, estimated at over €9,000 (Alleanza per l'Infanzia, 2020).

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<sup>29</sup> The *Fondo di solidarietà comunale* (FSC) finances municipalities to pursue equalization. For the years 2025-28 earmarked resources are allocated in the 'Special Fund for the Equity of Service Levels' (*Fondo Speciale per l'Equità del livello dei servizi*, FELS), established after a ruling of the Constitutional Court (n. 71/2023) confirmed the compulsory destination of these resources to remove socio-economic imbalances and fully guarantee human rights (MEF, 2024, p. 3).

<sup>30</sup> The remaining are at risk of oversized ECEC expansion, due to very low number of residents aged <3.

**Table 2. Resources allocated to ECEC expansion, 2017 onwards (million euros).**

Year	NFSI06	FSC / FELS <sup>b</sup>	NRRP <sup>c</sup>
2017	209.0		
2018	224.0		
2019	249.0		
2020	264.0		
2021	<sup>a</sup> 307.5		3,200
2022	309.0	120	
2023	304.2	175	
2024	281.9	230	
2025	275.7	300	
2026	t.b.d.	450	
2027	t.b.d.	1,100	
2028	t.b.d.	1,100	
2029 onwards		1,100	

Source: Authors, based on the Distribution Decrees of the Ministry of Education, years 2017-2024 and Budget Law for 2022, n. 234/2021, art. 1, comma 172.

<sup>a</sup> Plus 1.5 million € for the establishment of the SI06 National Information System.

<sup>b</sup> See note 25.

<sup>c</sup> Including national funds, see note 23.

Table 2 summarises the size of national resources available to municipalities for ECEC expansion and operation. All in all, a new financing commitment by the central State is observed, not only in terms of structural investments (in the construction or renewal of premises), but also as an assumption of part of the cost that local bodies bear for the functioning of services, and with an objective of reducing territorial imbalances in provision.

While this trend has been favourably welcomed by stakeholders and scholars, some critical points have also been highlighted. First, the different lines of financing are separated, established at different Ministries, and their regulation is partly incoherent, adopting partially different definitions of objects and targets, with the risk of creating a situation in which the number of new places exceeds those whose management is financially supported in the long run (Lattarulo and Ravagli, 2022; Save the Children, 2025). Second, despite the commendable emphasis on monitoring and audit reporting required of municipalities, the rationale underlying the criteria used to allocate national resources, as well as the implementation process of NRRP projects, remains quite opaque (Viesti, 2022; Openpolis, 2024).

### 4.3 ECEC fees

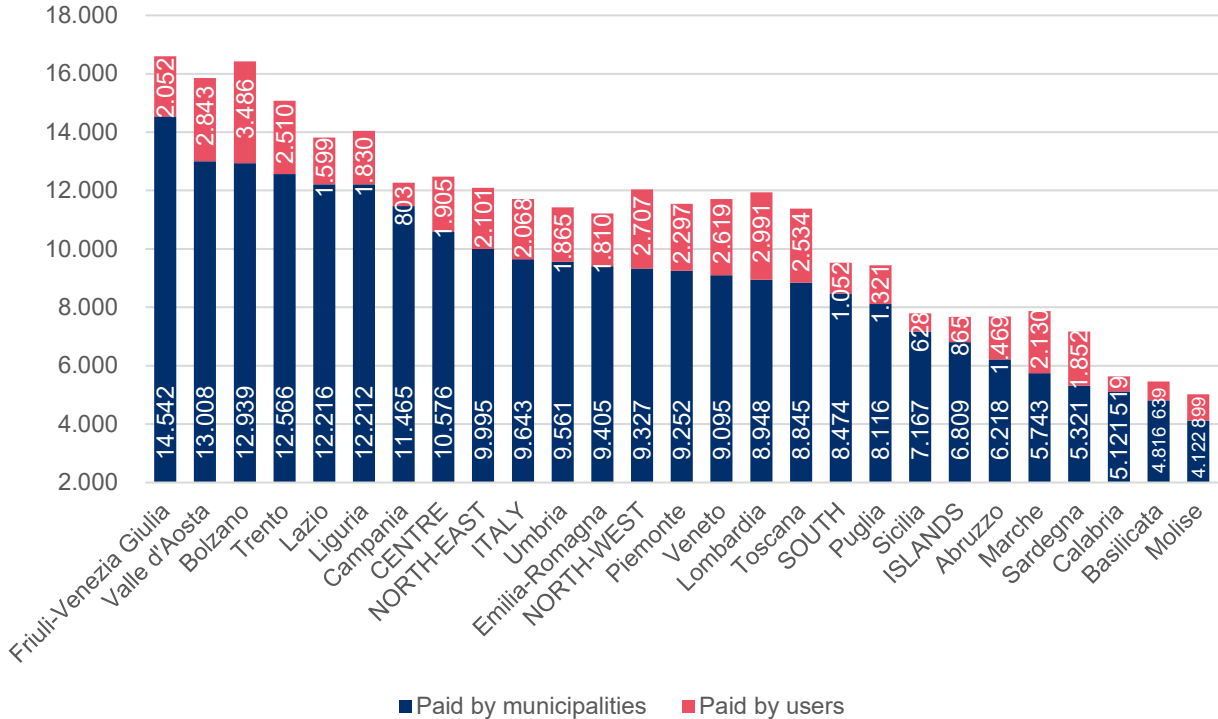
This section mainly considers the costs and fees of daycare centres for children below the age of 3. Attendance of preschools is, in fact, free of charge for most children, since state facilities have no fees attached and municipal ones may have only an annual subscription fee or no fee. It should be noted, however, that important elements of such services, such as meals, transportation and extra-hour services display a cost, including in public facilities. Private

equalised preschools, that host around one third of children nationally, charge attendance fees, that vary widely across contexts as well as across providers.

For services for children below the age of 3, private providers are free to define their own fees for places that are not contracted out or under agreement with municipalities, with significant variation among localities and among providers. For municipally funded places, municipalities are allowed to charge users a contribution, as daycare centres have been considered, since the 1980s, ‘individual-demand services’. Each municipality is free to define its own criteria for users’ financial participation, in terms of fee levels, application of an income-related parameter, number and range of income brackets, presence and threshold of fee waiver. Such variability gives origin to significant inequalities, as users with similar household composition and income level may pay significantly different fees even in neighbouring municipalities.

In such a composite situation, there is a lack of systematic data. Two sources can be used to estimate fees paid by users of daycare centres. ISTAT measures the yearly expenditure of a subgroup of ECEC users: those attending directly managed municipal daycare centres, where fees are mostly income related. In 2022 the national average per-user expenditure borne by users was 2,068 euros, with great territorial variation. Regional averages range from 519 euros in Calabria to over six times more (3,486 euros) in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (figure 8). The average amount paid by families tends to increase more than proportionally as income increases: it is around 2% of annual disposable income in the lowest income regions (Calabria, Campania, Sicily, Basilicata), and higher than 5% in the highest income regions, except for Emilia Romagna (3.8%) and Umbria (4%) (ISTAT, 2024a, p. 22).

**Figure 8. Average yearly expenditure per user of municipal directly managed daycare centres and spring sections, by region (€), 2022-23**



Source: ISTAT, 2024a.

A second source is a survey on municipal daycare centres carried out in all county towns of Italian provinces, estimating the fee that a household defined as “typical” (two parents, one child below 3 years, a yearly income level of 19,900 euros) would pay for a full-time place. In 2019-20 (latest data available) the national average was €303/month (prior to regional or national benefits). Over time, sharp territorial differences were confirmed, along a general North/South gradient, but also within regions (CittadinanzAttiva, 2019).

Given the wide variation of fee levels and parameters for services for children below the age of 3 across Italian municipalities, it is useful to take a closer look at the cases of Milan and Rome. To enable comparison, we focus on the most similar arrangements available in the two cities (see table 3).

The organisation of users’ co-payment in the two cities shows both similarities and significant differences. In both cases, fees in municipal daycare services are income-related upon provision of ISEE certification, and users with lowest income are fully exempted from payment. In both cases, fees include meals. That said, the fee structure comprehends only 4 income brackets in Milan, compared with 10 in Rome, resulting in stronger proportionality to households’ socio-economic conditions in the latter. The exemption threshold is higher in Milan – up to €6,500 vs. €5,000 in Rome. The maximum fee is similar (€518 in Rome vs €502 in Milan) but applies above a higher ISEE-income threshold in Rome.

The fee structure has remained unchanged in Milan over the last decade, and fee levels rose by 8% over the same period, with a stable 4.5 ratio between the highest and lowest fee (estimations based on data in Cerea et al., 2015). In Rome the fee structure was considerably simplified in 2021 when, following the introduction of a new regional regulation, the income brackets were reduced from 71 (!) to 10. Fees were increased in 2024 to adjust them to inflation, safeguarding the three lowest income brackets and slightly redistributing the cost towards the highest ones (+11-15%).

**Table 3. Main features of the fee system for municipal daycare centres in Milan and Rome, year 2024/25**

	Milan	Rome
Yearly tuition fee	Paid apart, non-refundable, not income-related (€ 56.20 in 2024/25)	Consists of the first month's fee, non-refundable, income-related (first income bracket exempted)
Monthly fee		
Service included		
Daily hours	8.40 hours, 7:35 – 16:15	8 hours, 8:00 – 16:00
Meals	Yes	Yes
Income-related	Yes, upon ISEE	Yes, upon ISEE
Threshold (ISEE yearly income) for total fee exemption, €	6,500.00	5,000.00
Lowest fee, €	111.30	53.60
Income bracket (ISEE yearly income, €)	6,500.01 – 12,500.00	5,000.01 – 10,000.00
Nr. of intermediate income brackets	2	8
Highest fee, €	502.20	518.00
Income bracket (ISEE yearly income, €)	above 27,000.00 or if no ISEE submitted	above 50,000.00 or if no ISEE submitted

Source: own elaboration of local documents.

In sum, the combination of availability and cost defines quite different configurations of public daycare centres in different areas of the country. In Southern regions, they ensure a lower coverage, but the lower fees paid by users reflect a more 'social' function. In Northern regions, service coverage and enrolment is higher, but they are more expensive for users.

As seen in par. 1.3, the national demand-side subsidy *Bonus Asilo Nido* supports users in meeting the costs of both public and private services for 0-2 year-olds, although the need to anticipate the expenses may hinder participation especially of the most vulnerable households; scattered regional schemes add a further degree of territorial differentiation, on top of locally diversified provision and regulation.

## **5. Expanding provision, improving quality and reducing disparities: it's now or never**

The last ten years saw an exceptional effervescence in family policies in Italy. The 2017 reform reframed the 0-6 system as an organic cycle and redefined policy objectives to reduce the institutional separation between the two age-based segments, enhance quality, expand provision and envisage greater inclusion. In parallel, additional resources to expand service provision and qualify it on the one side, and to support the income of households with children on the other, were introduced. On the supply side, the 2017 SI06 reform and related national funds for ECEC provision and management, and the NRRP resources for ECEC expansion mark a significant increase in public expenditures on ECEC. On the demand side, measures include the Bonus Asilo Nido, the AUU, Universal Child Benefit, the partial increase of parental leave benefit. All in all, these initiatives reflect a “defreezing” of Italian family policies, that is changing the profile of support for parents of young children (Madama and Pavolini, 2025).

Several policy dilemmas arise from the new 0-6 configuration, and how it relates to the pre-existing regulation of the two separate 0-2 and 3-6 segments, coupled with the gradual, not fully linear and territorially uneven implementation of the reform.

In terms of governance, several elements still need to be reformed in a 0-6 perspective, especially the coordination between different institutional levels responsible for regulation of the 0-2 and 3-6 segments, to promote further integration.

In terms of policy goals, the educational function has been a clear and long-standing orientation in preschools, as is evident both in organisational terms and in quality regulation. The 2017 reform fully recognizes services for children below the age of 3 as educational and promotes educational continuity across the two segments through specific governance tools. However, progress in the implementation is not wholly consistent, and the distance between the two segments persists in everyday practice (see below on quality).

The work-family reconciliation function is present in both segments, although in some cases the reduced hours in preschools require families to activate other solutions (childminders or informal care) to entirely cover working and family needs. The quasi-universal provision prevents a reconciliation/inclusion trade-off in the 3-6 segment. On the contrary, in the 0-2 segment, the supply/demand mismatch requires the application of ranking criteria in publicly funded services. These predominantly reward dual-income families, emphasising the reconciliation function over social support.

Concerning access and use, the 2017 reform set as strategic objectives the inclusion of all children, the full universalisation of preschools (in line with the EU target of 96% by 2030) and the 33% minimum standard of provision for services for children below 3 (well below the 45% 2030 EU target). Inequalities in participation are observed across both segments. Although still improvable, participation of children with disabilities (especially in public facilities) points at a good capacity of inclusion. At the same time, children of low educated and less affluent families, as well as those without Italian nationality, remain under-represented among ECEC users. In preschools, quasi-universal provision has kept these disparities to a minimum, although the partial decrease in preschool participation seems to affect more children from

less educated and lower-income families. Access inequalities are instead much sharper in the 0-2 years segment.

With regard to preschools, a possible solution discussed by policy makers and other stakeholders is to make attendance mandatory, but this idea still seems far from practical implementation. In the ECEC segment for younger children, the 33% LEP definition aims at reducing territorial disparities in both availability and enrolment. However, contradictory specifications in official documents leave the scale of application uncertain. If confirmed, a LEP interpretation at 33% nationally and 15% regionally would represent a de facto downwards revision of the ECEC coverage target, in favour of controlling expenditure, and would leave the current territorial disparities virtually unchanged. Consequently, children in Southern regions and in rural areas would continue to have fewer access opportunities than those living elsewhere in the country.

The reduction of territorial imbalances is also an explicit goal of recent European and national funding aimed at expanding ECEC provision. It is expected that this goal will be partially achieved. However, an expansion of provision may be hindered both by both insufficient funding to cover functioning costs and a shortage of teachers and educators' (see below).

Expansion of provision alone does not prevent the persistence of Matthew effects. To increase participation of lower-income and foreign families, information and language barriers need to be addressed. Besides, while national monetary support measures reduce the burden of 0-2 fees, especially for lower-income users, the ex-post reimbursement represents a barrier for many.

The decline in birth rates, particularly pronounced in Italy, paradoxically makes coverage goals more attainable, as the potential demand (fewer children) decreases. However, research results suggest that higher ECEC availability (more places) could contribute to slow down birth decline (ISTAT 2024d). A plan to convert the space freed up in schools and preschools into 0-2 places within 0-6 hubs could contribute to this endeavour.

In terms of quality, the expansion of services for children under the age of 3 has largely relied on private provision, where staff are employed under less favourable national collective agreements (NCAs) than in the public sector. This creates risks for job quality and, indirectly, for service quality, particularly in areas such as staff continuity. Yet, current labour market shortages may encourage greater attention to improving working conditions, with the aim of making the profession more attractive. Signs of this shift have emerged in some NCA renewals in the non-profit sector during 2024-25. Nonetheless, significant improvements in salaries and employment conditions inevitably imply higher costs, which may conflict with public finance constraints and risk undermining expansion goals. Addressing staff shortages also requires reconsidering the divide between daycare educators and preschool teachers in tertiary education requirements. Establishing a single, or at least integrated, tertiary education pathway would enable a more rational allocation of staff across ECEC segments and foster a workforce with training that is more coherent with the objectives of 0-6 integration.

The 2017 Decree introduced two important governance tools to enhance quality and reduce disparities across the country. At the national level, the Commission for the Integrated System of Education delivered fundamental guidelines that provide a framework for integrating 0-6

services and, for the first time, national pedagogical guidelines for services for children under 3. These important steps contrast with the recent updates of the guidelines of the Curriculum for 3–6 services, which overlook integration between the two ECEC segments and continue to align preschools more closely with primary school. At the local level, new territorial pedagogical coordination units, tasked with supervising and promoting the quality of all 0–6 services within a given area, are being progressively activated. However, technical and financial support from the central state appears necessary to ensure a more homogeneous development of these units nationwide.

Monitoring and evaluation for quality improvement have long been overlooked in Italian ECEC, though progress has been made, particularly in the 3–6 segment. The national self-evaluation system RAV has been piloted in preschools since 2018 and has now become mandatory for public and private equalised institutions. In contrast, evaluation in the 0–2 years segment remains fragmented and highly heterogeneous across regions and municipalities. Some regions have included quality assessment among accreditation requirements, while some municipalities have adopted international tools. On the data front, two entirely separated national information systems have been established, one for preschools and schools and another for 0-2 ECEC services, the latter only partially implemented. This highlights the need for stronger central government investment in an integrated, national monitoring and evaluation system, aimed at supporting quality improvements, fostering greater homogenisation, and promoting educational continuity between the two segments. Although the 2017 reform assigned this responsibility to the central government, its implementation remains uncertain.

In terms of financing, unprecedented national resources have been devoted to supporting the establishment of the SI06 and the achievement of its quantitative and qualitative objectives following the 2017 reform. In parallel, wide post-pandemic NGEU-NRRP investments were destined to ECEC expansion. Not least, significant national resources are for the first time devoted to covering operation costs of municipalities with low coverage that expand provision. All together these funds represent a new national commitment to fund ECEC services for children below the age of 3, for long left at the initiative, and financial support, of municipalities. However, these funds are separate, established at different Ministries, and lack full coherence in terms of allocation process, targeting, eligible costs. An organic reorganisation would be beneficial to better coordinate structural funds for expansion and maintenance with those covering management costs. Ensuring certainty and clarity in the availability of funds is a fundamental condition to support local bodies in investing in ECEC expansion as well as to ease monitoring.

NRRP implementation, which was supposed to follow a tight schedule, has so far encountered challenges in municipal applications and project implementation. Localities with stronger tradition in ECEC provision were in a better position to respond to NRRP calls. At the same time, the combination of the 2017 SI06 reform and NRRP represents an opportunity for municipalities with lower or no provision, similarly to the ‘nationalisation’ process that in 1968 paved the way for the quasi-universalisation of preschools. All in all, a relevant increase in coverage is expected nationally, with a partial reduction of territorial imbalances. The latter goal will need further national commitment also in the post-NRRP phase. The end of the current phase, characterised by exceptional availability of resources, will in fact represent a sensitive transition. Governance tools tested in the later phases of NRRP implementation, such

as the push towards joint supra-municipal solutions and the centralised support to local authorities, should be maintained in the long term to favour ECEC expansion.

Regarding costs for families, while preschools are either free of charge or largely affordable, fees for ECEC services for younger children are comparatively high in both private and public services, especially in Northern regions. The affordability issue has been tackled through investments in demand-side monetary transfers. The introduction and gradual increase in funding of the national daycare voucher, the *Bonus Asilo Nido*, have significantly reduced the burden of ECEC fees for most households, especially lower-income families. The support is particularly relevant in connection with the recently redesigned AUU, Universal Child Benefit. However, the requirement for families to pay fees upfront and be reimbursed *ex post* represents a barrier for many. Moreover, territorial disparities in provision imply that families living in areas with limited ECEC infrastructure are doubly disadvantaged: they face more limited access to both services and, consequently, to demand-side income support. Although the *Bonus Asilo Nido* is income-related, fees in private services are not. As a result, low-income families excluded from public or publicly funded services due to insufficient provision (and the strong priority given to dual-earner households) may struggle to access private services as an alternative option.

ECEC policies in Italy are at a crossroads and the process of implementation of the recent reforms will shape rights and opportunities of young children and their families in the coming years.

## Glossary

- AUU, *Assegno Unico Universale per i figli a carico*, Universal Allowance for dependent children
- AVSI, *Autovalutazione della Scuola dell'Infanzia*, Preschool Self-Evaluation
- CNEL, *Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro*, National Council for Economy and Labour
- ECEC, Early Childhood Education and Care
- ECERS, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale
- EU, European Union
- FSC, *Fondo di solidarietà comunale*, Fund for municipal solidarity
- FELS, *Fondo Speciale per l'Equità del livello dei Servizi*, Special Fund for the Equity of Service Levels
- INPS, *Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale*, National Institute for Social Security
- INVALSI, *Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*, National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System
- ISTAT, *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica*, National Institute for Statistics
- ISEE, *Indicatore della situazione economica equivalente*, National indicator of equivalent socio-economic condition of the household
- LEP, *Livelli Essenziali delle Prestazioni*, minima levels of performance
- NCA, National Collective Agreements
- NGEU, Next Generation EU
- NRRP, National Recovery and Resilience Plan
- RAV, *Rapporto di Autovalutazione*, Self-Evaluation Report
- SI06, *Sistema Integrato 0-6 anni*, Integrated System 0-6 years
- SOVASI, *Scala di Osservazione e Valutazione della Scuola dell'Infanzia*, Observation and Evaluation Scale for Preschools
- UPB, *Ufficio Parlamentare di Bilancio*, Parliamentary Budget Office

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