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Article

Provision of Childcare Facilities in the European Union – An Analysis of Member States' Progress Towards Meeting the Barcelona Targets

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PROVISION OF CHILDCARE FACILITIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION – AN ANALYSIS OF MEMBER STATES' PROGRESS TOWARDS MEETING THE BARCELONA TARGETS¹

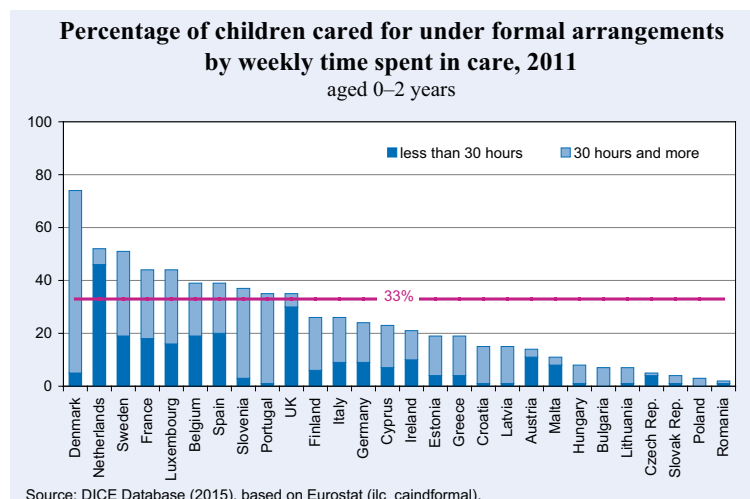
In 2002 a meeting of the European Council in Barcelona set targets to improve the provision of childcare in the European Union (Mills et al. 2014, 1). The intention of the so called 'Barcelona targets' was to encourage EU member states to remove disincentives to female labour force participation. Taking into account the demand for childcare facilities, it was agreed to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 percent of children between three years old and the mandatory school age, and to at least 33 percent of children under three years of age (Barcelona European Council 2002, 12).

The indicator used for measuring progress towards the Barcelona targets is defined as the *number of children cared for under formal arrangements as a proportion of all children in the same age group* (European Commission 2013, 26). This means that the indicator measures the actual use of existing childcare provision (i.e. coverage rates) and not the number of available childcare places (Mills et al. 2014, 3). Formal arrangements include all kinds of care organised and/or controlled by a structure, which means that direct arrangements between the carer and the parents have been excluded from the definition. It therefore encompasses education at preschool, centre-based services, a collective crèche or daycare centres, including family daycare and professional certified childminders (European Commission 2013, 26). The indicator is further broken down by two levels of usage (children cared for up to 30 hours a week; and children cared for 30 hours or more a week) and two age groups (children aged under three; and children aged between three years and the mandatory school age) (Mills et al. 2014, 3).

In 2011, the usage of childcare facilities was still not in line with the Barcelona targets in many EU member states. Looking at childcare services for children aged zero-to-two years, Figure 1 shows that only ten member states (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain, Slovenia, Portugal and United Kingdom) achieved or surpassed the objective of a 33 percent coverage rate. 16 member states were below 25 percent and Slovakia, Poland and Romania did not even reach the five percent limit. Figure 1 highlights that there are not only considerable cross-country differences in childcare coverage, irrespective of the number of hours spent in formal childcare arrangements, but that there is also large variation between member states in the weekly time children spend in care. In Denmark, Slovenia, Portugal, Croatia, Latvia, Bulgaria and Poland the services are essentially used on a full-time basis (30 hours and more). Usage of part-time formal childcare (less than 30 hours) is predominant in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic and Austria. It is interesting to note that Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium and Spain complied with the targets for the first age category as early as in 2005, while France, Portugal and the United Kingdom were close to achieving them by this time. Member states that made considerable progress towards meeting the objectives between 2005 and 2011 include Slovenia (+13 percentage points), Luxembourg (+22 percentage points), Greece (+12 percentage points) and Austria (+10 percentage points).

Analysing facilities for children from three years of age to the mandatory school age, Figure 2 shows that in 2011, nine member states (Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Sweden, United Kingdom, Estonia, Slovenia and

Figure 1



¹ Please see also the article by Plantenga and Remery in this issue.

Germany) achieved the Barcelona target of a 90 percent coverage rate irrespective of the weekly time spent in care. Most of the other member states, however, still need to make substantial efforts in order to meet the defined objectives, especially Croatia, Poland and Romania. As far as the second age group is concerned, the member states differ greatly in terms of hours spent in formal childcare arrangements. In Denmark, Estonia, Slovenia, Portugal, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria formal childcare facilities are mainly used on a full-time basis (30 hours and more), whereas member states like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland and Romania are characterised by a part-time usage (less than 30 hours) of formal childcare services. While Belgium, France, Denmark, Spain and Italy met the targets established for the second age category as early as 2005, the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden were merely approaching the objective by this time. The extent of the childcare services used by children from three years of age to the mandatory school age declined in some countries between 2005 and 2011: Spain (-8 percentage points), Hungary (-4 percentage points) and Cyprus (-5 percentage points). But several EU member states also made huge progress towards meeting the Barcelona target regarding the second age group during the period between 2005 and 2011: Portugal (+51 percentage points), Malta (+18 percentage points), Austria (+16 percentage points) and Slovenia (+15 percentage points).

Member states that joined the European Union after 2002 (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta, Cyprus in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania in 2007; and Croatia in 2013) were not represented at the meeting of the European Council in Barcelona, but in 2008 the importance of the Barcelona targets was reaffirmed in the employment guidelines adopted by the Council (Plantenga

Figure 2

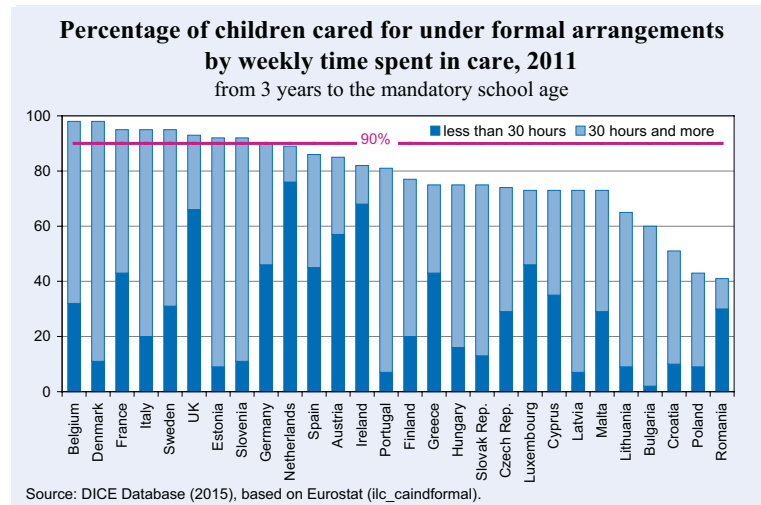
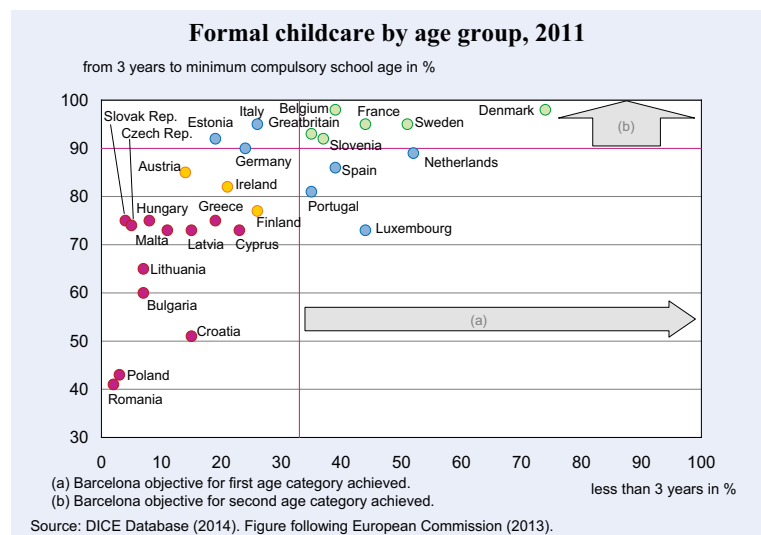


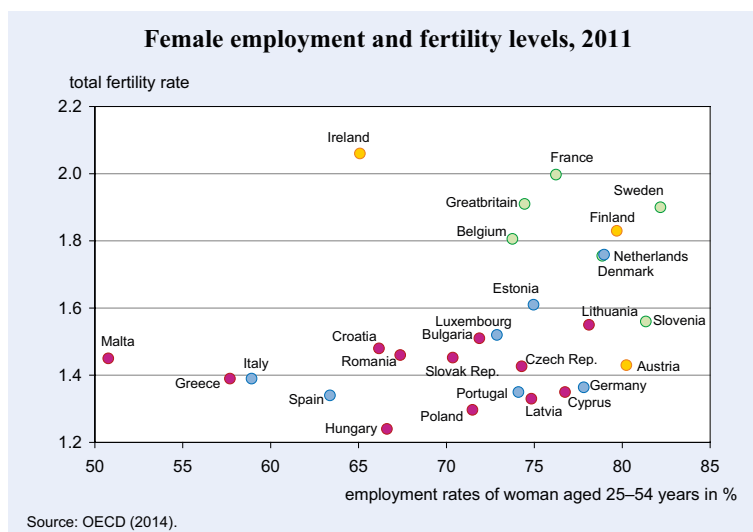
Figure 3



and Remery 2009, 7). Nevertheless it is striking that in 2011 the “new” EU member states still performed poorest in terms of progress towards the Barcelona targets (with the exception of Slovenia for children aged zero-to-two years and Estonia for children from three years of age to the mandatory school age).

Figure 3 summarises the results discussed above and gives an overview of the progress of each EU member state towards the Barcelona targets with respect to both age categories in 2011. The horizontal axis represents the coverage rate for the first age group (children aged under three) and the vertical axis represents the same for the second age group (children aged between three years and the mandatory school age). The axes inter-

Figure 4



sect at its corresponding threshold values of 33 percent and 90 percent respectively. This implies that EU member states that are located at the bottom left panel of Figure 3 were unable to meet either target. This group consists of the following 15 countries: Romania, Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, Austria, Ireland and Finland. While the latter three are approaching at least one of the targets, the other member states still need to make considerable progress to achieve the established objectives. Countries that complied with only one of the two targets are Portugal, Spain, Luxembourg and the Netherlands for the first age category and Estonia, Germany and Italy for the second age category. Only six countries achieved both targets in 2011: the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Belgium, France, Sweden and Denmark (see upper right panel of Figure 3). It is interesting to note that these countries also combine high fertility rates and high rates of female employment (see Figure 4). Nevertheless care must be taken when interpreting these results. Fenge and Ochel (2001) stress that besides the provision of good-quality childcare facilities, various other factors influence the reconciliation of the employment of women and family life: generous systems of paternity and maternity leave, flexible working arrangements and an adequate income for families to afford formal childcare arrangements (earned income, childcare allowances, tax reductions, subsidies of childcare fees). In combination with these measures, the availability of affordable and quality childcare services is essential to achieve a work-life balance; and thereby removing disincentives to female labour force participation, as stated in the

Presidency Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (European Commission 2013, 4).

Finally, it is important to note that when interpreting the indicators used to measure the progress towards the Barcelona targets, certain aspects should be borne in mind. Mills et al. (2014) highlighted that a relatively low coverage rate in certain countries does not necessarily mean that there is a shortage of childcare, because it can also indicate that parents use alternative strategies to care for children like extended parental leave options or informal care.

Furthermore, progress towards the Barcelona objectives is measured irrespective of the number of hours spent in formal childcare arrangements. The previous discussion showed that the services are mainly used on a part-time basis (less than 30 hours) in many member states. This lack of full-time care could act as an obstacle for women seeking to acquire and sustain full-time employment (European Commission 2013, 10). The fact that the Barcelona targets only focus on young children below compulsory school age without taking into account the out-of-school services for school-going children is also problematic, because in many countries school hours are part-time and generally not compatible with full-time employment (Plantenga and Remery 2013, 7).

Sarah Reiter

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