



**A flexible
preschool system
for every child:**

diversifying early learning
in Europe and Central Asia

CASE STUDIES



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Diversification: Why, what and how?

Through national, regional¹ and global² commitments, governments across the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region have committed to universalizing access to quality, inclusive preschool to support holistic development and to provide every child with the opportunity to thrive.

Diversification is recognized as a transformative strategy to advance early learning due to its potential to rapidly expand access to quality preschool and meeting the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable.³

The process of diversification has emerged in Europe and Central Asia as a response to a range of policy challenges related to inclusion, quality, displacement, and financial sustainability, among others. Yet knowledge and evidence about this process has not yet been captured systematically.

Drawing on experiences within the ECA region, *A flexible preschool system for every child: diversifying early learning in Europe and Central Asia* and *Case Studies* begins to:

- explore how diversification of preschool is understood within the region and synthesize experiences into a working definition and set of guiding principles;
- document some examples of how diversification is already supporting the realization of universal, quality, inclusive preschool and lessons learned from implementation;
- reflect on the lessons learned so that governments can engage with diversification actively and systematically;
- propose recommendations for governments and partners to adopt a diversified approach and build system resilience.⁴

Although the report focuses on preschool services, the findings and recommendations have implications for early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems more broadly, a topic which could be explored in future work.

What is diversification?

Diversification is a flexible, adaptive and inclusive approach to planning which supports children's learning and development, responds to families' evolving needs, and builds the resilience of ECEC systems by offering a range of preschool models within an integrated system.

A diversified system can support:

- increased equity and participation in ECEC by marginalized groups. By ensuring that the preschool models available meet the needs of all communities, governments can support enrolment in preschool. See for example, the community-based model.
- more efficient use of financial resources. By investing in efficient and cost-effective models which deliver quality and inclusive services, governments can expand preschool provision sustainably and increase the social returns from investment. See for example, the half day preschool model.
- sustainability and resilience of ECE systems. By maintaining the flexibility to adapt to changing demographics and needs, systems are better able to respond to social or environmental shocks.

At least half of the countries within the region operate at least one model in addition to the

classic full-day model of preschool. The mapping identifies seven preschool models operating in the region: half-day, community-based, public private partnerships, forest schools, home-based services, itinerant, remote, accelerated.⁵

Diversification is a system-wide approach, which takes place within a broader context of ECEC reforms, over several years. Diversification impacts all five core functions⁶ of an effective ECEC system: i) planning and budgeting; ii) workforce development; iii) curriculum; iv) quality assurance; v) engaging families and communities.

A strong equity and inclusion lens should be applied to planning and implementation activities to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities and from marginalized communities, have access to quality services.

For recommendations about how to select or scale a model, and how to integrate multiple models into an integrated system please see the report *Diversification of Preschool in Europe and Central Asia*.

Why these case studies?

The case studies complement the report by illustrating in more detail how diversification is taking place across the region, and some of the lessons learned from these experiences. Through dialogue with multiple stakeholders, it became clear that there was demand for additional illustrative examples of the following themes:

- offsite construction, and its potential to increase access to inclusive and quality services;
- community-based services and how these have been used to reach marginalized communities in both rural and urban areas;
- scaling a model from a regional pilot to a nationwide service;
- integrating a full range of models into the ECEC system over time;
- costing preschool models to support budget dialogue and to inform planning.

Diversification of preschool settings using offsite construction in Türkiye and Ukraine



Identifying ways to expand the reach of quality ECEC services affordably, equitably, and rapidly is a challenge faced by many governments across the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.⁷ Offsite construction approaches have been explored by governments in Europe and Central Asia to support diversification of preschool, and ECEC services more broadly. Offsite construction can be used to expand access to ECEC services in areas of high demand or low supply, and to upgrade older infrastructure to become child-friendly and inclusive. Offsite construction has been used successfully in Croatia, Czechia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Poland, Türkiye, and Ukraine, and are also being considered in Kosovo.⁸

Offsite construction entails manufacturing a classroom in a controlled environment and then installing it in the location where services will be provided.⁹ Common offsite construction approaches include modular classrooms,¹⁰ which can be manufactured using a range of methods and materials.¹¹ Once all construction, delivery, and maintenance costs are considered, on average modular classrooms cost a similar amount per unit to establish and maintain than brick and mortar classrooms.

A key advantage of offsite construction is that classrooms have the potential to open and welcome children more rapidly than is usual through onsite construction.¹² The offsite construction schedule is usually shorter and more predictable since it is not impacted by factors such as climate, term dates, or coordination between multiple suppliers and contractors.¹³ In the ECA region, where flexibility in legislation exists, procurement procedures governing offsite construction can be much shorter than the lengthy processes of planning permission and procurement of traditional construction, that can span years.

Some offsite construction designs offer environmental benefits including reducing construction waste by up to 40%¹⁴ and on average offering better energy performance over the classroom's life cycle.¹⁵ Modular buildings are designed to be constructed and deconstructed, so that buildings can change over time without need for demolition and can be targeted to areas where services are absent or missing, potentially increasing their lifespan.¹⁶

In terms of function, modular classrooms offer children a similar, or sometimes better, learning environment than a permanent structure.¹⁷ Just like

brick and mortar classrooms, modular preschool classrooms are fully connected to utilities including water and electricity to ensure that children have appropriate wash, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Modular classrooms can be designed to be fully accessible for children, parents, or teachers with disabilities. Like any other early learning space, modular classrooms should be equipped with child-friendly furniture, spaces and teaching and learning materials. To ensure a quality learning environment, the design and materials should facilitate sufficient ventilation and air quality¹⁸ and should be comfortable for learners in all seasons.¹⁹

To get the most out of offsite construction processes, government planning, procurement and budgeting processes must be aligned with offsite construction processes.²⁰ For example, regulations and legal frameworks must clearly permit the procurement routes particular to offsite construction; and budget timelines and processes must accommodate a small number of high-value payments to manufacturers.

Türkiye

In 2019, the Government of Türkiye set itself the challenge of universalizing preschool enrolment for 5 year olds by September 2023. Due to the size of Türkiye's population, although the gross enrollment rate among 5 year olds was already high at 92 per cent,²¹ the absolute numbers of children to enroll were in the thousands. A key strand in the Ministry of Education's strategy to universalize preschool enrollment has been modular preschools.



A major barrier to enrolment in preschool was the limited supply of public preschool places. While modern primary schools had been built with preschool classrooms on site, some older facilities either had no preschool classroom, or had no additional classrooms into which to expand, despite demand from families. The Government of Türkiye identified that modular preschools would offer a solution to this challenge in school environments where there was space on school grounds to install a modular building.

Each modular building is fully accessible and contains two classrooms with capacity for 20

students each. Some are accompanied by a small playground or garden for preschoolers to encourage outdoor learning. All are fully connected to utilities. Türkiye had a surplus of trained teachers, so was able to draw from this pool of qualified candidates to staff the preschools. The modular preschools generally offer a half-day curriculum, with a morning shift and an afternoon shift. With support from UNICEF, the Government of Türkiye has installed 660 prefabricated preschool classrooms across the country, with the capacity to enroll up to 25,000 preschoolers.

Lessons learned:

- The use of modular classrooms appears to have been successful in increasing enrolment in several provinces, with the possible exception of the Northeast where events such as the earthquakes of 2023 may have impacted use of public space. Although modular preschools were installed in these locations, it is unclear whether the modular classrooms have increased access for children under Turkish or international protection.
- The messaging around offsite construction matters. The modular preschools were originally named “container classrooms,” a reference to the fact that the construction materials are sourced from shipping containers. This resulted in a negative perception about the quality of the classrooms and learning environment among some people. After installation, the reception among parents and school leaders has been reported to be generally positive.
- Roles and responsibilities for the rollout fell upon both national and provincial governments. Strong coordination has been required to galvanize a shared vision around timelines, deliverables, and to ensure accountability to deliver high quality services for children.

Ukraine

Since the onset of war in February 2022, kindergartens in Ukraine can operate only if there is an appropriate shelter for young children, parents and teachers to retreat to in case of emergency. As a result, many kindergartens have closed, despite ECEC remaining a critical resource for children and families impacted by conflict and trauma.

Thanks to the flexibility and customization offered by modular construction approaches, Ukraine has opened a kindergarten with four classrooms, a playground and a bomb shelter in the Zhytomyr region.²² The modular kindergarten was designed, built and delivered within only 170 days, though site selection had begun earlier.²³ The kindergarten meets all standards required by the Ministry of Education, as well as the standards for reconstruction overseen by the Ministry of

Culture.²⁴ Solar panels reduce operational costs for the center and increase environmental efficiency. Pre-primary teachers, education managers and psychologists have all been trained to deliver services through the kindergarten.²⁵ The project has been supported by the Governments of Estonia, Iceland and Flanders, and the Estonian private sector. There are plans to add an additional four classrooms to the kindergarten to accommodate up to 160 children.

Opened in June 2023, it will be important to monitor demand for places in the modular preschool among families over the coming months and years. However, the short construction timeline, and potential for flexible design opportunities offered by modular preschools appear to make them a viable option for rapid reopening and recovery in conflict-affected areas, provided sufficient financial support is available.

A photograph showing three young children and an adult woman gathered around a table, engaged in a craft activity. The children are focused on their work, with one girl on the left wearing a white sweater and denim overalls, a boy in the center wearing a blue sweater with 'ROSE HUGO BOSS' printed on it, and a girl on the right wearing a white cable-knit sweater. The adult woman is partially visible on the left, looking down at the project. On the table, there are various colorful paper cutouts, including a yellow one with a black dot, a red one, and a blue one. The background is a bright blue wall with some framed pictures or posters. The overall scene is brightly lit and captures a moment of collaborative learning and creativity.

**Meeting the needs of
local populations through
community-based models
in Georgia, Kosovo, and
the Republic of Kyrgyzstan**

Community-based models can play a key role in reaching young children and their families with early childhood education and care services.²⁶ The name of the model reflects two defining features of the community-based approach: a) strong engagement of families and communities in the establishment and sometimes operation of the centre; b) a clear focus on providing contextually relevant services to communities in cases where the public system is not able to address local needs.²⁷

Despite some commonalities, community-based preschool models in Europe and Central Asia vary considerably in terms of their relationship to national or provincial governments, the source of their operational funds, and the extent to which they are considered to be formal or informal service providers. This case study captures some of the ways that this model has supported marginalized communities across the region and outlines examples of how the model has supported the attainment of broader preschool goals by exploring experiences of community-based preschool in Georgia, Kosovo,²⁸ and Kyrgyzstan.

Engaging communities in preschools in rural Georgia

In Georgia, 40 community-based early childhood care and education centres were established in remote and hard to reach areas in 2012. The project locations prioritized settlements for internally displaced people, villages without preschools, communities with high poverty rates and ethnic minority groups. The initiative was part of a collaboration between the NGO CIVITAS Georgia and UNICEF, and received funding from the IKEA Social Initiative Fund. The aim of the centres was to increase access to preschool by introducing an innovative half-day model of preschool as an alternative to a traditional full-day service. In addition to achieving the short-term goal of creating access in these areas, the longer-term impact of the community-based centres has been to raise the profile (visibility, awareness and demand) of ECEC in communities of focus, and to help establish a culture around the value of preschool for all.

Communities were actively engaged in the establishment of the centres. Site selection was informed by meetings with communities and parents, local municipalities, and demographic data. Municipalities provided unused physical

spaces, and while the supply materials were provided by the project team, communities renovated the spaces to make them safe and child friendly. Parents were encouraged to volunteer at the centres, which were staffed with trained teachers. To ensure sustainability, municipalities agreed to take over the funding of the centres, including teacher salaries once project funding ran out.

Since municipalities began to take over the operation of these centers in 2013, the law governing ECEC has changed, and the status and offering of community-based centres has changed to reflect this. After the new law was adopted in 2016, municipalities were no longer permitted to offer half-day services for 3-5 year olds. Some centres converted into full-day preschool services. Others converted into school readiness centres, which offer a half-day service to 5 to 6 year olds the year before they enter primary school.

In 2023, Georgia embarked on a Preschool Authorization Process, which aims to promote the quality of preschool services nationally. Although, the Government of Georgia recognizes the important role of diversification of ECEC for improved access to quality, inclusive ECEC services and is open to the system reforms necessary to achieve this, it is unclear whether community-based centers can comply with the comprehensive authorization standards and whether they will continue to provide ECE services in hard to reach villages.

Addressing urban disadvantage in Kosovo²⁹

In Kosovo, community-based kindergartens have been operating in Prishtina since 2015. They create extra capacity for preschool places in the capital city, positively impacting both access and teacher child ratios in an area where high population density can lead to overcrowding in classrooms. The model meets the needs of urban, low-income, minority ethnic, and/or single-parent families more effectively than public preschools, though enrollment is not restricted to these groups. The centres typically offer a full-day model and welcome children aged 0 to 6 years old.

Under this community model, parents form a non-governmental organization (NGO), or collaborate with an existing NGO, to deliver ECEC services



under an agreement with the local municipality. The cost of teacher salaries, food, and teaching and learning materials is met through fees provided by families. Local municipalities subsidize the centres by providing infrastructure and utilities, as well as covering the costs for eligible families unable to pay the fees.³⁰ A distinct feature of this community model is the cascading model of financial support to families under specific thresholds of aggregate household income, which is not accessible through public preschools. This support is provided with local government funding and is one of the key attractions of this model for many families.

In terms of legal status, these centres are not considered public, yet benefit from recognized municipal cooperation with the community. Community-based preschools are subject to the same regulatory requirements as public and private preschools, including child-educator ratio, programme hours and curriculum, infrastructure norms and standards, and monitoring. However, as non-state entities, they have freedom to raise additional funds and to allocate funding as they see fit, in contrast to public preschools which lack autonomy on budgets and spending.

Recognizing that different communities have varying needs, the Government of Kosovo, UNICEF, and partners also offer a different community-based

model, designed to meet the needs of families in predominantly rural areas. In operation since 2012, these community centres tend to offer a half-day model for 3-and-4-year-olds within the grounds of the local school. Many of these centres are adopted into the public system after a minimum of 12 months.

The two models described above, along with other models, are featured in the recently approved Law on Early Childhood Education. In line with its provisions, traditional and alternative models of preschool will be further defined and regulated with financing, sustainability, and quality standards through sub-legal acts that are in process of development.

Supporting semi-nomadic communities in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan

In the Republic of Kyrgyzstan's mountainous regions, seasonal community early childhood development centres known as *jailoo* kindergartens, were originally established in 2010 by semi-nomadic communities with support from the Aga Khan Foundation and Roza Otunbaeva Initiative International Public Foundation. Jailoo kindergartens

welcome children aged 2 and over, and typically offer around 3 hours of programming for 5 days a week. The jailoo kindergartens accompany semi-nomadic communities wherever they move, thereby increasing access for communities who were previously missing out on 4 to 5 months of preschool a year. Outside the migration season, many jailoo kindergartens continue to operate out of homes within the village, facilitating continuity of services.³¹

These kindergartens maintain a strong focus on respecting nomadic culture. A teacher is nominated by the community and trained by national teacher trainers to deliver affordable, culturally sensitive preschool services.³² For example, children may learn about the natural environment in the mountains, learn about traditional foods, play national games and learn about cultural traditions.³³ Teaching takes place within a yurt, which is maintained and transported by the local government authorities.

Legally considered to be non-state entities, jailoo kindergartens are not subject to regulation or quality assurance checks. They have flexibility in terms of the duration and dosage they offer, as well as

in how the curriculum is structured and delivered. The kindergartens collect a small fee from families, which is used to pay for snacks, educational materials, and stationery.

The model is highly valued by families, reflected by high demand and the rapid expansion of the programme. Originally piloted in 21 communities in 1 province, the model has been adopted by over 100 communities in 5 provinces,³⁴ attracting financial support from local and national NGOs, embassies and the local private sector.³⁵ As it has scaled, it has evolved into a network of central and satellite kindergartens.³⁶ The Rozy Otunbaeva Initiative will provide continued support to local authorities to further replicate jailoo kindergartens.

Facilitating Sustainability of Community-based Models

Experiences in all three countries demonstrate that community-based services can play a critical role in increasing equitable access to quality services, by responding successfully to local needs. Despite offering significant benefits, there are risks inherent



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to most community-based models, which need to be managed if models are to operate sustainably:

1. **Community-based models require external support to scale.** While the service may increase access to quality preschool for local families, institutional support is required for effective models to be legally recognized, adapted and expanded to reach communities facing similar challenges in different locations, particularly locations that are rural and remote. External support should continue to centre the needs of each community in which the model is replicated.³⁷
2. **Quality of community-based services should be assessed and monitored by the relevant authorities.** Where regulation and quality assurance mechanisms are not mandated or implemented for community-based services, declines in quality of services may go unnoticed and unaddressed by authorities, negatively impacting outcomes for children. Quality assurance standards can be adapted to accommodate the reality of community-based models, without compromising quality of services. For example, community-based models may not need to meet the same infrastructure requirements as a preschool building, but expectations for quality of teaching and learning should remain high.³⁸
3. **Data on quality of community-based services should be routinely collected, reported and shared.**³⁹ Data on quality of services is often anecdotal and shared between families on an ad-hoc basis. While this can stimulate demand for services and support enrollment in the short term, systematic data on quality of provision can support accountability and transparency, unlock opportunities for state or non-state financial support, support quality improvements, and result in scale up of promising and/or effective practices.
4. **Teachers and workforce in community-based centres should have access to relevant trainings and be adequately compensated.**⁴⁰ Teachers in community-based services will eventually move on from their roles and may move on quickly if salaries are unpredictable or insufficient. If training is ad hoc, provided by NGOs or non-state agencies, and paid for through non-sustainable funds, this carries the risk that the replacement teacher is not trained and supported to develop the required competencies, and that quality will be negatively impacted.
5. **Support to the financial sustainability of community-based models should be considered through subsidies, salaries and in-kind donations.**⁴¹ Community-based preschools are dependent on the continued willingness and ability of communities, NGOs and other non-state entities to fund some or all operational costs. If funding is not available, centres are not able to provide services for children. While the service does not need to be fully funded by the government, it may be possible for the government to subsidize some critical costs temporarily or permanently.



From local to national: Scaling a diversified model of preschool in Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, a half-day preschool has been scaled nationally thanks in part to evidence demonstrating its impact on learning outcomes.

The original model was established in 2009 with funding from the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), Open Society Institute (OSI) and from UNICEF. It was designed to support remote communities where early childhood education care (ECEC) enrolment was lower than the national average because of lack of infrastructure, inaccessibility, and limited awareness about the importance of ECEC among communities. Since the half-day model was piloted, gross enrolment in pre-primary education has increased from 9 percent in 2009 to 15 percent in 2022. Enrollment in the half-day model, also known as Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers, now accounts for approximately 40% of the total preschool enrolment nationally. It predominantly serves children aged 6 years old, and operates in 2,111 centres nationwide, increasing from an initial pilot of 164 ECE centres in 2009.

The original centres offered a half day, community-based programme to children aged 3-6, the first of its kind in Tajikistan. The centres opened in schools, communities, or municipal buildings, with priority for site location given to unused classroom spaces. Where classrooms were not available, communities and municipalities identified and renovated a community space to become child friendly. Local government and development partners provided support to establish the physical infrastructure, and to provide capacity building for teachers and learning materials. The preschools were partially overseen by the local education departments and were usually supported through parental contributions. Fees were 2.5-3 dollars per month in comparison to 10-15 dollars per month for the traditional full-day model, which had been dominant up to this point.

Focus groups with parents indicated that the half-day, low-cost model was popular with parents in rural communities, who were the intended users. Parents noticed the positive impact of services on children's learning and development, and also appreciated that the service was only a few hours a day, which aligned with their preferences for children to spend time in the home with a parent, usually a mother, who was not working.⁴²

An evaluation of the model by AKF conducted in 2012 showed that learning outcomes of primary students improved after attending these ECEC centres.⁴³ The evidence generated by the evaluation

was shared with the Ministry of Education and Science, who recognized the great potential of the model of half-day groups to be scaled. The half-day model was legally recognized, and the Ministry of Education and Science worked with development partners, including UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including AKF, to expand the model nationwide.

As part of the scale up, the half-day model was integrated into national systems, and the scope revised to meet national preschool goals. Half-day preschools now focus on delivering services for 5-6-year-olds, and offer over 700 hours of preschool annually, per child.⁴⁴ Half-day preschools follow the revised ECEC national curriculum aligned with national Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS). They are subject to national regulatory frameworks and processes, though further investment in quality assurance is required to keep pace with the expansion of the centres. Teachers in these half-day centres receive equivalent salary and benefits to teachers working in full-day public preschools. Of the 2,111 centres currently operating, approximately 600 were established by AKF, UNICEF and OSI, with the remaining established by parents, local governments, and the private sector.

Successes from the scale up:

- The half-day model achieved its aims of increasing enrollment by adapting preschool to the needs and preferences of local communities. The replication of the model, in parallel with curriculum reforms, has increased equitable access to quality preschool services nationally.
- A results-based approach to policymaking was key to the success of the scale up. This includes needs-based planning, contextualized piloting of the model, costing and impact assessment to demonstrate cost efficiency and quality. These processes were underpinned by effective collaboration with local government institutions and strategic use of existing resources to ensure long-term sustainability.⁴⁵
- Of particular significance was data from the costing and evaluation exercise, which showed that the half-day model far was more cost efficient than traditional full-day model and provided quality and accessible early learning opportunities for young children, especially for the most disadvantaged. The Ministry of Education

was able to use data on cost and impact to confirm that the half-day model is an effective solution to the challenge of scaling quality preschool services rapidly and cost-efficiently.

- Data on centres delivering the half-day model is captured in the Education Management Information System (EMIS) and is integrated into education reporting processes to facilitate ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the model.

Lessons learned:

- **Scale reduces fidelity to original design.** The original model aimed to meet the needs of a particular community. To meet the needs of other communities, it may be necessary to adapt the design. As the design is adapted, there must be mechanisms in place to ensure that the quality of services is maintained, even as the model adapts and evolves.
- **As services expand, quality assurance systems must scale to keep pace.** While half-day centres are subject to national regulatory mechanisms, further investment is required to ensure that centres receive regular quality assurance checks and can access supportive supervision to continually improve services.
- **Mechanisms must be put in place to manage fees systematically and transparently.** As a fee-paying service, the half-day centers receive income, which should be recorded and reported, and expenditure tracked systematically. Implementing a financial tracking system supports centres to be accountable to service users, and increases transparency around household contributions to preschool, and enables local and national governments to direct fund flows to support quality and equity.

Next Steps

Under the framework of the national education reform towards transition to a 12-year education system, the Government of Tajikistan with UNICEF support has defined a phase-based plan to introduce one-year of preschool for children aged 6 years old before their official entry into primary schools, leveraging public, donor, and private sector funding. The scale-up of one-year of pre-primary education represents a unique opportunity for the Republic of Tajikistan to accelerate progress towards national preschool goals and SDG 4 targets and SDG 4 indicator 4.2.2 in particular.

To support the progressive universalization of one year of pre-primary education, the Government

of Tajikistan will continue to promote the half-day model and is exploring ways to standardize the curriculum and to expand into new spaces. In addition, the government is considering the potential of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to support the achievement of national and international targets for preschool in the context of limited public resources.

UNICEF will continue supporting the national government to develop a clear roadmap and resource mobilization strategy to support a roll out of 12-year education and further guide and inform policy/decision makers in scaling-up access for all children through diversified and inclusive provision of quality ECEC services.

A photograph of two young children, a girl and a boy, smiling and looking towards the camera. They are positioned in front of a large, green and white striped sailboat model. The sailboat has a green lattice structure on its sail and a small sail with a colorful pattern. The background is a bright blue sky. The children are wearing white shirts. The girl in the foreground has blonde hair and is wearing a white top with a colorful pattern. The boy in the background has brown hair and is wearing a white t-shirt with a black graphic.

**Embedding diversification
across the five core functions
of an effective ECEC system:
Serbia's journey**

In Serbia, systematic diversification of preschool gained traction in 2012 when it was endorsed as a strategic measure within an overarching strategy to improve access to quality and inclusive services.⁴⁶ This was the first step in a series of reforms which have spanned more than a decade. Although diversification in Serbia has been progressively integrated across the full spectrum of ECEC services for children aged 0-6, this case study focuses on diversification of preschool services for 3-6 year olds, in alignment with the report *Diversification of Preschool in Europe and Central Asia*.⁴⁷ This case study briefly contextualizes the trajectory of diversification in Serbia and captures how diversification is reflected across the core functions of Serbia's preschool system.

Adopting diversification as a strategic measure

In 2012, diversification was identified as one of several strategic measures which could increase the quality of services, and positively impact equitable access within Serbia's ECEC system. Four years previously, in 2008, preschool enrolment became compulsory for children the year before entry to primary school.⁴⁸ Despite its mandatory status, enrolment in preschool in Serbia did not become universal. This was partly due to the fact that supply of preschool services was insufficient to allow all children to enroll in authorized programmes.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education was in dialogue with expert stakeholders about how to enhance quality of preschool services. These stakeholders included academic institutions under the lead of the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, the State Institute for Education Quality Development and the State Institute for Quality Evaluation, the National Association of Preschool Teachers,⁴⁹ the National Association of Nurses Working in Preschool the National Association

of and the Association of Experts Working in Preschools,⁵⁰ among others.

Through the process of diversification, the Government of Serbia aimed to increase equitable access to preschool by introducing a range of high quality, efficient, contextually relevant, preschool programmes in local communities to meet the needs of all families. The government planned to develop and test models which could deliver a high quality preschool service while altering an aspect of service delivery which would increase the appeal for families, for example by piloting a half-day model. By increasing the capacity of the preschool system to welcome more children while diversifying the range of models in which children could enroll, the government planned to increase access to services for children:

- in rural communities where service provision was scarce;
- in urban areas, where demand outstripped supply;
- from underserved families or marginalized groups.

The adoption of models is an iterative process, with strong engagement of local stakeholders. As per the Rulebook on Diversification preschool institutions can propose the introduction of a diversified programme, where they perceive a clear need. The preschool must design and implement a programme in collaboration with individual experts or local institutions taking into account needs and requirements of families and children, and the preschool's capacity to implement the proposed programme. The draft programme and accompanying justification are shared with the preschool Parents' Council and the Preschool Governing Board.⁵¹ The Governing Board makes final decisions about which programmes can be implemented, based on the recommendations of the Parents' Council. Preschools are reporting on diversified programmes in their Annual Reports. Programmes are jointly evaluated by all participants.

Increasing system capacity to integrate diversified models of preschool

Diversification of ECEC in Serbia has progressively impacted all five core functions⁵² of an effective ECEC system: planning and budgets, curriculum, workforce development, quality assurance, and engaging families and communities.



Planning and Budgeting

One of the first steps towards diversification was ensuring that diverse models could operate. Legal documents and frameworks were developed based on the small number of existing alternative models, such as traveling teachers, with inputs from a range of professional organizations and academic institutions.

The Government of Serbia actively supported the design and piloting of diversified models. Local governments were supported to develop preschool models to meet the needs of all children and families in communities with low enrolment. This process was supported using a series of manuals which guided the development of preschool models.

Two donor-supported programmes were critical to testing models: 1) the EU-supported project IMPRES; 2) Kindergartens without Borders, a project implemented in cooperation with UNICEF and civil society organization Center for Interactive Pedagogy. The pilots generated evidence about the impact of the models in rural and urban areas, among different communities. The government used the evidence-generated by the pilot to inform strategic decision-making to achieve the goals of the preschool system. UNICEF supported financial analysis of the models implemented under IMPRES and Kindergartens without Borders, which demonstrated cost-efficiency of both models.



Curriculum

To inform the development of the models under Kindergartens without Borders 2, the Faculty of Philosophy at University of Belgrade developed theoretical foundations for diversified alternative programmes called Kaleidoscope. Kaleidoscope emphasized learning through play, and project-

based learning, which were relatively untested at the time. Implemented for approximately four years, Kaleidoscope became the basis for the new national preschool curriculum framework (PCF). The PCF was piloted between 2016 and 2018, after which it was progressively implemented nationwide between 2019 and 2022. The PCF now serves as the basis for all preschool programmes.



Workforce Development

When the new models were introduced in 2012-13, preschool teachers and staff in pilot preschools received additional training to enhance their competencies to support learning through play and project based learning. A series of manuals and guidelines were developed to support training of teachers, and to support implementation of the new models in preschools.

To support the implementation of the new national preschool curriculum from 2019, a comprehensive capacity building programme was developed and rolled out nationally. It included blended trainings, mentoring support, horizontal learning and development of communities of practice. Preschool teachers and staff received training in the conceptual framework of the national curriculum, built the competencies and pedagogical techniques to deliver learning through play and project-based learning, and were trained in new monitoring and reporting procedures.

As the system continues to evolve, supportive supervision practices such as mentoring are being introduced for teachers across a range of models to support continuous professional development. Mentoring by External Advisor Associates is coordinated by the Regional School Administrations of the Ministry of Education and their support can be organized from the central/regional level, or requested by the preschool based on the assessed need for support.

Initial teacher training is being adapted to ensure that graduates are equipped to deliver high quality services in the full range of models.



Regulation and Quality Assurance

A series of Rulebooks regulate the preschool sector. The Rulebook on Preschool Curriculum Framework is applicable to all models of preschool.

The Rulebook on Diversification regulates diversified models specifically. The Rulebook on Diversification includes definition, scope, types and beneficiaries of diversified programmes and forms of work and procedures for introducing and implementing new programmes. The Rulebook on Documentation regulates how the diversified programmes are documented and evaluated.

Preschool quality assurance standards have been adapted to ensure that all models are aligned with the primary curriculum framework, and that quality is measured appropriately, according to the models' various aims and scope.⁵³ The standards focus on 4 areas: i) direct work with children, ii) support to children and families, iii) professional learning community, iv) management and organization. Full-day and half-day preschool models are subject to the full set of quality assurance standards and indicators. Models which offer shorter-duration project-based learning or complementary ECEC services are required to demonstrate alignment with key elements of the quality assurance framework but are not required to meet the full range of indicators which govern the full and half-day models. This approach allows the government

to maintain oversight of the quality of all types of ECEC provision, and to keep the learning and development of all young children at the heart of services.



Engaging Families and communities

Diversification has elevated the perception of preschool among communities, strengthening engagement among parents and caregivers. Increased access to services, and increased choice of services has helped to reshape the narrative around preschool. As a result, the long-held view that preschool is primarily a daycare facility for working families is shifting, and preschool is now more widely perceived as an integral part of education services.

Diversified programmes also offer free parenting programmes to families to enhance the quality of the home learning environment and increase knowledge and awareness of how to support their child's learning and development.

Lessons learned:

- Diversification is likely to have contributed to increased enrollment in preschool since 2012.⁵⁴
- The perception of the value of preschool has been elevated among parents and families. This may have contributed to continued demand for preschool services despite increased financial pressure on households during two economic crises.
- Quality of services has improved and learning through play has become central to preschool provision across all models.
- Key resources have been developed in terms of capacity building programmes, guidebooks and rulebooks and more, which supports the sustainability of a diversified preschool system.

Next steps

Programmes which have demonstrated sustained success over a multi-year period will be documented, to inform future learning and scale up. An external formative evaluation of preschool reform is due to take place in 2023-24. Diversification will be one of the subjects of the evaluation, and lessons learned are expected to inform future preschool strategies.



**Simulating the cost of
delivering diversified
models of preschool in
Ukraine**

In 2023, Ukraine drafted a new law on ECEC which, once adopted, will allow a range of models to operate for the first time. While diversification of preschool, and ECEC services more broadly, has been under discussion for some time, the war in Ukraine has accelerated the diversification agenda. Reestablishing and facilitating access to quality, inclusive, preschool services for Ukrainian children has been identified by the Ministry of Education as a key priority. Diversification of services will

create flexibility and resilience in the system, which will allow services to adapt in response to political and social changes, during wartime, and as Ukraine looks to rebuild post-conflict. As part of the diversification agenda, the Ministry of Education will be supported by UNICEF through an Early Childhood Development investment case including a cost simulation of a range of diversified models of preschool and ECEC.

Box 1: Impact of War on Preschool Services

- 1) **Displaced families.** Since February 2022, 5.1 million people have been displaced within Ukraine, while a further 6 million have left the country.⁵⁵ In areas which are hosting IDPs,⁵⁶ the capacity of preschool services must increase rapidly to accommodate new arrivals.
- 2) **Displaced workforce.** Preschool teachers and staff are among the displaced, resulting in an uneven distribution of trained teachers within Ukraine. As a result, additional teachers must be trained.
- 3) **Shifting role of preschool workforce.** Children and their families are likely to require additional psycho-social support, and support to create a positive home learning environment in a context of conflict and displacement. Where teachers are delivering this support, additional training will be required to allow them to perform this role effectively.
- 4) **Damaged infrastructure and teaching and learning materials.** Approximately 104 preschool education institutions were destroyed, and 1096 institutions were damaged since the start of the war in February 2022. As a result, many preschool facilities are no longer safe or suitable to welcome children.

In anticipation of the law being adopted, the Government of Ukraine commissioned a costing simulation to estimate the cost of establishing and delivering preschool and ECEC services through approximately seven different models.⁵⁷

Costing simulation tools provide evidence-based estimates of the cost of delivering services, which can inform strategic planning, and support advocacy for sufficient budgetary allocation to achieve ECEC goals, among other aims.⁵⁸

As part of a costing simulation model, a range of factors is usually considered including: a) goals for service coverage (e.g., net and gross enrolment rates, disaggregated); b) type of service provider and share of the market (e.g., public, private, community-based etc); c) planned changes to learning environment (e.g., pupil teacher ratios, focus on a specific age group etc); d) changes in workforce or human resources (e.g., salaries, training etc); e) infrastructure needs.⁵⁹

Common inputs to costing simulation tools include demographic data such as population growth and census data, system level data such as enrolment rates and repetition or dropout rates, data on the available workforce including teachers and caregivers, data on the volume of preschool classrooms and supply of materials, education financing trends over time, and more.⁶⁰

In a context of conflict reliable data on the status and conditions of students, teachers, and infrastructure can be challenging to access,⁶¹ and political and economic uncertainty adds to the challenging of projecting needs and costs.

Ukraine's costing simulation must reflect the uncertainty of the environment, while producing costs which are as accurate as possible. It aims to project the cost of universalizing preschool by estimating the cost of several preschool models, considering the evolving needs and conditions of children and their families.

Lessons Learned:

- While costs for some models could be based on known costing data generated by existing programmes or pilots, others were completely new offerings. To address gaps in data for new models, proxy costs were identified from programmes which were similar, even if these were delivered in other sectors. For example, to cost mobile modalities of preschool, the financial estimation will draw on data about existing mobile service such as home visiting to cost the various components including transportation, salaries, cost of materials and equipment. The costing takes also into account the variability of costs across Ukraine through municipalities' previous expenses on budget lines pertinent to each preschool model.
- Costing simulations require demographic data, which is shifting. Data on the location of young families and teachers is captured on an ongoing basis. However, further shifts are likely as families within Ukraine and abroad make decisions about where to settle based on the evolving military, political, and economic environment. To address this, the Government of Ukraine and UNICEF will rely on population estimates produced by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to form the basis of demographics estimations.

Next steps

- A multisectoral committee representing key social sectors and the Ministry of Finance will be installed to coordinate the methodology and process of the costing exercise. The committee will facilitate the operations of costing by supporting access to data and stakeholders, and will formulate recommendations based on the results of the costing study.
- UNICEF has facilitated a primary mapping analysis of early childhood development services included in the study. Under the steer of the national committee, this mapping will serve to determine the package of services that will be costed in detail, and which will form the core of essential early childhood services to be promoted in Ukraine.



Key Takeaways

- 1. Diversification is an ongoing process to create flexible systems:** diversification of ECEC is the process of making systems more flexible so that a range of models can operate, in order to meet the diverse needs of families, without compromising on equity, inclusion, quality or sustainability of service provision.
- 2. Diversification is not a new process:** it is an approach which has emerged organically and is already under implementation across Europe and Central Asia, and likely beyond.
- 3. Diversification strengthens ECEC system to be responsive:** diversification can be actively harnessed to strengthen systems by increasing system capacity to respond to new and emerging challenges such as increasing inclusive access to quality services, supporting financially sustainable preschool provision, and meeting the evolving needs of parents in a context of social, political, economic, and technological change.
- 4. Diversification is not linear:** experiences across Europe and Central Asia demonstrate that there is no one way to diversify and multiple entry points exist for governments to begin or progress their diversification journey.
- 5. Diversification can enable equity:** diversification should meet the needs of all children, including children with disabilities, and impacted by other factors of marginalization or vulnerability.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems; Council Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care Dec 2022
- 2 UNESCO (2022) Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education 16 November 2022
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- 5 See full report for further details about each model.
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- 20 Carter, J., and D. Kastrati. Using Modular Kindergartens to Scale Up ECEC. Briefing Note. UNICEF ECARO, May 2023.
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- 28 All references to Kosovo should be understood in reference to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.
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- 37 See Hayden and Wai (2013) for a full discussion of the risks of imposing external priorities on community-based models.
- 38 For an example of the quality standards required for community-preschools supported by the Comenius Foundation in Poland, see Comenius Foundation (2009) A Good Start: How to introduce alternative early childhood education services in communities, Comenius Foundation for Child Development
- 39 For a summary of the importance of collecting data on all models in an ECEC system see Bruckauf and Hayes (2017)
- 40 For further details about strengthening the preschool workforce, see UNICEF (2019) Pathways to strengthen the pre-primary workforce in low and middle-income countries.
- 41 For further details about simulating the cost of preschool interventions, please see UNICEF (2023) ECE Accelerator Toolkit Tool 3.3 Tips, Checklist and Examples ECE Simulation Models <https://www.ece-accelerator.org/toolkit/section-3/tool-3-3> accessed Sept 14th 2023
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- 49 Represents teachers for 3-6 year olds.
- 50 Represents psychologists, speech therapists, and pedagogical experts for all subjects
- 51 Preschool Governing Board consists of representatives of preschool, local-self government and parents.
- 52 UNICEF 2020 Build to last A framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education
- 53 Serbia's Quality Assurance framework was first implemented as diversified models were introduced and was subsequently updated to align with the new preschool curriculum framework adopted in 2018.
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Through national and regional and global commitments, governments across the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region have committed to universalizing access to quality, inclusive preschool to support holistic development and to provide every child with the opportunity to thrive.

Diversification is recognized as a transformative strategy to advance early learning due to its potential to rapidly expand access to quality preschool and meeting the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable.

The process of diversification has emerged in Europe and Central Asia as a response to policy challenges. Yet knowledge and evidence about this process have not been captured systematically.

Drawing on experiences within the ECA region, *Diversification of Preschool in Europe and Central Asia: Report and Case Studies* explores how diversification of preschool is understood within the region and documents some examples in order to reflect on lessons learned and propose recommendations for governments and partners.

