
COUNTRY REPORT BELGIUM - FLANDERS



IAS - INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY OF INTEGRATED ECEC SERVICES TO SUPPORT ALL FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

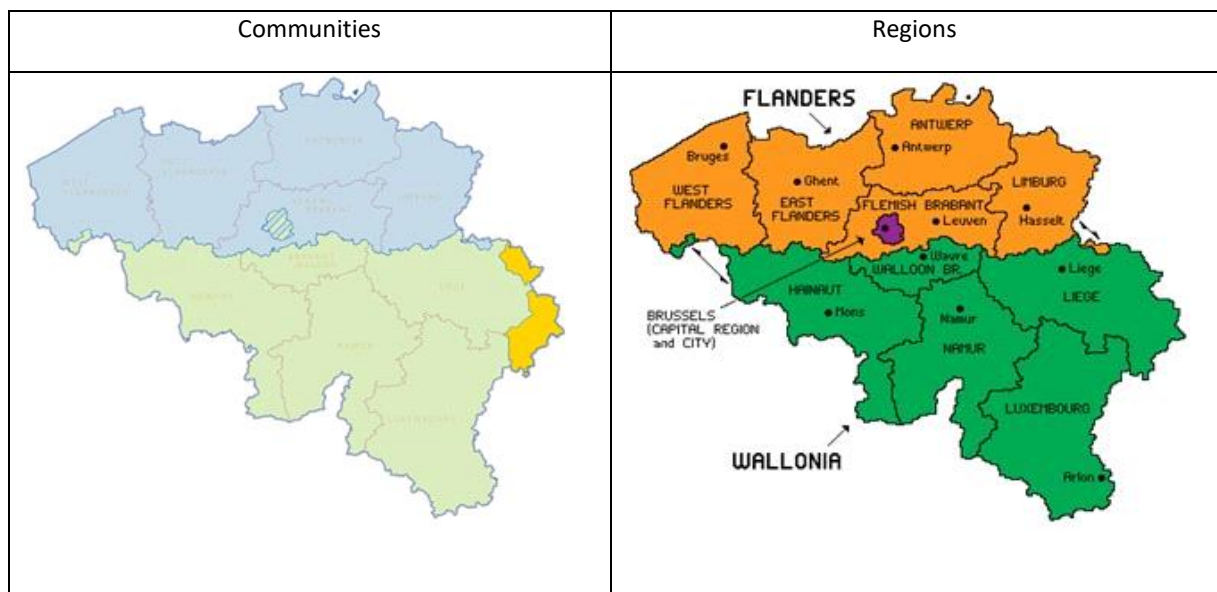
Introduction

This country report of Belgium documents relevant policy, research and practice of the organization of ECEC in Flanders (Belgium). In the first chapter, the structure of the Belgium federal state will be explained. As all Belgium IAS partners are working for the Flemish Community it is necessary to be able to understand this unique and complex political context and to be able to compare with the own national or regional context. Then, in the second chapter we'll briefly describe the tasks of the different partners, involved in the project. In the third chapter the focus will be on the material and (organization of the) immaterial support to all families with young children as it is organized in Flanders. Finally in chapter four and five, we'll focus on some challenges in society to deal with on the one hand, challenges in finding solutions through cooperation on the other hand. These challenges motivated us and we'll like to introduce them as subject of further discussion during the IAS project.

1 BELGIUM

Belgium became independent in 1830. Between 1970 and 1993, the country evolved into a more efficient federal structure. This occurred through five state reforms (in 1970, 1980, 1988-89, 1993 and 2001). As a result, the first Article of the Belgian constitution reads today: 'Belgium is a federal state, composed of communities and regions'.

The power to make decisions is no longer the exclusive preserve of the federal government and the federal parliament. The leadership of the country is now in the hands of various partners, who independently exercise their authority within their domains.



1.1 THE COMMUNITIES

The redistribution of power occurred along two lines. The first line relates to language and, in a broader sense, to everything related to culture. The result was several communities. The concept of 'community' refers to persons that make up a community and the bond that unifies them, namely their language and culture. Belgium sits across the fault line that separates German and Latin cultures. This explains why the country has three official languages: Dutch, French and German. As a result, Belgium today, has three communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. These communities therefore correspond with the population groups.

1.2 THE REGIONS

The second line of state reform was historically inspired by economic interests. The regions, which aspired to more economic autonomy, conveyed these interests. The establishment of the three regions was the result: the Flemish Region, the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region. Up to a certain level they can be compared with the American states or the German 'Länder'.

The country is further divided into 10 provinces and 589 municipal councils.

1.3 THE FEDERAL STATE

The Federal State nevertheless retains important powers, for example in the area of foreign affairs, national defence, justice, finance, social security, important parts of national health and domestic affairs... However, the communities and the regions also have the power to establish and maintain foreign relations.

Reconciling regional and cultural identities within a federal structure is easier said than done. Yet, it has the advantage of taking the decision process closer to the population. The result is a more sharply defined political structure with a greater emphasis on the quality of life.

| Some facts and figures | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Population | 11.267.910 inhabitants (2016) |
| Surface area | 30.528 km ² |
| Federal capital | Brussels |

1.4 FLANDERS (GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION)

During the last few decades, policy domains and competences have been divided over the various levels of authority. Policy areas such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at community level.

The Flemish authorities consist of:

- the Flemish Parliament
- the Government of Flanders
- the Flemish administration.

The Flemish administration is subdivided into 11 policy areas:

- Public Governance and the Chancellery
- Finance and Budget
- Flemish Foreign Affairs
- Economy, Science and Innovation
- Education and Training
- Welfare, Public Health and Family
- Culture, Youth, Sport and Media
- Work and Social Economy
- Agriculture and Fisheries
- Mobility and Public Works
- Environment

Each policy area is composed of a department and several agencies.

- A department is responsible for the preparation and evaluation of the policy and regulations.

- The agencies implement the policy (for instance with regard to grants, taxes, public transport, road works).

Although the same kinds of services are offered to families in all three communities, different emphases or nuances do exist. The three communities of Belgium have a split system for ECEC. The childcare facilities¹ (*kinderopvang*) are the responsibility of the Department of Welfare, Public Health and Family, while pre-primary education facilities (*kleuterscholen*) are the responsibility of the Department of Education and Formation and are integrated into the system of elementary education (age 2.5-12 years).

2 FLEMISH PARTNERS OF IAS

2.1 KIND EN GEZIN, A GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY (CHILD AND FAMILY)

Kind en Gezin (Child and Family) is an agency depending on the department of Welfare, Public Health and Family. Kind en Gezin is an agency that works actively in 'Public Health, Welfare and Family' policy area. This Flemish agency focuses on preventive support and guidance of children and families geared to good outcomes in the actual situation and in the future. We work hard to enable children to achieve their full developmental potential, physically, mentally, emotionally and socially, with respect for diversity and children's rights. This principle holds good for all the different areas that we work in.

Kind en Gezin is responsible for

- optimal support for parents-to-be and parents with young children and the regulation of the organisation of high quality preventative family support from parents to be and parents with children up to the age of 24 years;
- regulation of high quality child care;
- the criteria that adoption agencies have to meet.

We closely monitor all changes in society regarding 'children'. The yearly report 'Kind in Vlaanderen' reports on the most relevant issues and numbers, relevant and inspiring to adjust the ECEC-services to the needs of families with children.

| Flemish Community – 2017 | |
|--|---------|
| Number of new born children | 65.992 |
| Child Poverty Rate – new born in poverty | 13,76 % |
| Children up to the age of 3 in single parent household | 7,6 % |
| Number of new born children - mother non Belgian nationality | 28,1 % |
| USE OF FORMAL CHILDCARE BY CHILDREN < 3 YEARS | 52,6 % |
| number of children up to the age of 18 | 19,8 % |
| NUMBER OF NEW BORN CHILDREN WITH AT LEAST ONE HOME VISIT DURING THE FIRST THREE MONTHS AFTER BIRTH | 94,4 % |

¹ Childcare for babies and toddlers (aged 0 to 3) and childcare for school children of pre-primary or primary school age before and after school hours and during school holidays.

The regulation of high quality child care carries out a number of duties with regard to childcare settings and with respect to families with young children. These duties are as follows:

- Checking compliance with the requirements for starting a quality childcare setting (and thus for obtaining a license, an accreditation or a certificate), in terms of safety and hygiene, as well as regards to the number and training of the employees.
- Granting a licence, an accreditation or a certificate and registering the childcare initiative.
- Monitoring, supporting and enforcing the activities and ensuring the payment of subsidies to childcare providers.
- Ensuring a balanced distribution of the budget released by the Flemish Government for the creation of new places and for the retention of existing places over the different regions/municipalities on the basis of objective parameters.
- Asking local authorities for advice regarding the development of childcare within the framework of the creation of new places, as well as supporting them in their local director's role in childcare.
- Giving advice in view of the preparation of the policy laid down by the Minister and implementing this policy.
- Monitoring and promoting the quality of formal childcare and advising the Flemish Government on the qualifications and competences for people working in formal childcare.
- Offering families information about childcare.

Kind en Gezin carries out these duties both for the care of the littlest ones (care for babies and toddlers aged 0 until they go to nursery school) and for the care of school children from nursery and primary school (2.5 to 3 years until 12 years) during out-of-school hours and school holidays (out-of-school care).

Kind en Gezin develops also scientific methods, in both social, educational and medical fields, to assist all teammembers and organizations in their work. They constantly adapt their services, so that they can offer every parent and every child the best support possible. This requires a continuously dialogue with parents (at every level) and partners in order to take their point of view into account.

Kind en Gezin also participates in national and international campaigns and projects: with boundless respect for every child (and his family) and for the rights of the child.

2.2 EXPOO

EXPOO (**Exp**ertisecentrum **Op**voedings**O**ndersteuning ²) is the Flemish Government's expert centre for parenting and family support. The decree on the organisation of preventive family support in Flanders provides for the establishment of such a centre under the umbrella of the agency of Child and Family.

EXPOO wishes to provide practical assistance to the field of parenting support and to this end collects, enhances and disseminates the relevant knowledge and know-how on parenting and parenting support.

EXPOO is set up as a demand based open network that benefits from the input of relevant partners. Indeed, Flanders has quite some expertise to offer when it comes to parenting support. EXPOO wishes to be a forum within which this expertise can continue to grow.

Under the provisions of the decree, the tasks of EXPOO are:

- promoting and organising an exchange of knowledge about parenting and family support (including *Huizen van het Kind*);
- offering education and training to professionals;
- organising seminars, congresses and conferences on parenting and family support;

² <http://www.expoo.be/english-pages>

- developing basic information about the parenting of children in various life stages and making this basic information easily accessible to all actors in the field of parenting support, including parents and children; (www.groeimee.be)
- organising awareness campaigns, including an annual campaign, on parenting topics;
- promoting networking and incorporating a warning system for relevant issues in the field of parenting support;
- provides assistance and inspiration to the workforce.

2.3 VBJK (WORKS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH KIND & GEZIN AND GHENT UNIVERSITY)

VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years) is an NGO and recognized as a research centre by the Federal Belgian Government. VBJK³ is an official partner of Kind en Gezin and works in close collaboration with the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy of the Ghent University.

VBJK focuses on the basic provisions for young children (0-12) and their families, such as ECEC (childcare and preschool), out of school care and preventive family support. VBJK always combines **theory, policy and practice** in its daily practice. This means, in coaching, product development (such as books, kiddo magazine, and movies⁴) or research, VBJK always connects all involved parties: children, parents, practitioners, researchers, policymakers and all possible relevant organisations.

VBJK IS SPECIALISED IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS.

Examples of **national projects**, relevant for IAS, are the support of Huizen van het Kind⁵ (e.g. in Brussels) and the publication 'Huizen van het Kind. In-Zicht'⁶

International projects, relevant for IAS, are the Erasmus+ projects INTESYS⁷ (Together Supporting vulnerable children through integrated early childhood services), but also the Start⁸ that focusses on how basic provisions can work together towards smooth and warm transitions (especially for vulnerable children).

VBJK is also specialised in **European policy research**. The centre was involved in the CoRE research (Competence Requirements in ECEC) commissioned by DG Education and Culture (2009-2011), the research on 'The role of ECEC in preventing early school leaving, also commissioned by DG Education and Culture (2013-2014) and the Eurofound systematic review on continuous professional development in ECEC (2013-2015). VBJK is also part of the NESET II Network (Network of experts on the Social Dimension of Education and Training), which provides reports for the European Commission on specific requested themes, and is currently working on a report on "Role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups, such as Roma."

VBJK has worked for years on **CPD** (continuous professional development) of ECEC staff, with specific attention to the link between theory and practice, through group reflection. A specific method (WANDA) has been developed by VBJK and Artevelde University College to support and realize group reflection in groups and teams and encourage a high quality, inclusive childcare for the diversity of children and families. Whilst the notion of reflexivity in professional practice is not new, finding ways to realise this reflexivity and concretely link it to transformation of practice is innovative⁹.

³ <https://vbjk.be/en>

⁴ Some of the VBJK materials are on <https://vimeo.com/vbjk>

⁵ <https://vbjk.be/nl/projecten/huizen-van-het-kind>

⁶ <https://vbjk.be/nl/publicaties/huis-van-het-kind-in-zicht>

⁷ <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/intesys>

⁸ <https://vbjk.be/en/project/start-a-good-start-for-all>

⁹ This tool has been rewarded with the ESF Ambassadorship. Thanks to additional funding it is now being used in Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia and Czech Republic (WANDA meets ISSA project). Through a project financed by Unicef, in 2016 WANDA has also been adapted to preschool system in the Albanian context. A Manual has been developed within these projects, which is now available in English, Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian, Czech and Albanian. Currently, VBJK is incorporating the expertise with the WANDA method in the SEED project (Erasmus+ project, led by ICDI). The SEED project utilise the group reflection process at the core of WANDA to support groups of practitioners to facilitate the healthy psychosocial well-being of young children and work in partnership with their families on this critical aspect of children's development and learning.

THE VBJK STAFF

The staff of VBJK consists of four PhD senior researchers, one specialist on diversity and professionalism in ECEC, one on parental support initiatives and leadership in schools, one on professional development and quality improvement in ECEC and one in diversity and inclusion in ECEC. Next to those senior researchers, there are 9 collaborators who specialise on different aspects of ECEC: leadership in schools, curriculum development, professionalism of teachers, accessibility, social inclusion, diversity, parental participation and transition to primary school. The researchers have the administrative and financial support of three administrative and financial collaborators.

HOW VBJK WORKS

Innovation, always in relation

- VBJK works in a participative way, looking into the perspective of everyone involved, including children and families who participate directly or indirectly. We carefully search for ways to reach partners and target groups.
- We cooperate with partners in an open and respectful way and attentive to transparent dialogue. We always look for a common ground and equivalence.
- VBJK informs policymakers, on request as well as proactively, based on careful monitoring of evolutions in practices and research – including internationally – as well as our own projects and research.
- Nationally and internationally, we keep track of relevant trends in practice, research and policy.
- In every project we aim for co-ownership of stakeholders. By building solid support, we always try to go for change on a structural level.

Innovation by reflection

- Critical reflection is the key to innovation and change. Professionals ask themselves: why do we do what we do in our work with children? VBJK often takes position as critical friend: as a supportive friend, we want to fully understand the work of practitioners, we want to value it and at the same time question it. Alongside the partners we analyse the practice, research and policy (deconstruction) and then build new practices, policy and research: reconstruction in co-construction.
- The work of VBJK is methodically and scientifically substantiated: we build our work on theories of change, work with models in which we approach actors of change, use validated techniques of group reflection (i.e., intervision and supervision). The same scientific basis is used in our own research, be it focus groups, literature reviews, action research, case studies or quantitative analysis.

Innovation in a structural way

- VBJK works towards building and strengthening competent systems, in which not only the individual, but also the team, the organisation, the policy level and (international) networks have their role to play. Only through solid cooperation and quality requirements for all these actors, every level can continually develop and grow. The different roles and responsibilities of all actors are at the focus of all our guidance projects, policy work and research.
- At VBJK, we want to take the time needed to facilitate innovation and to give our partners tailored support, advice or research.
- VBJK always aims at broad and structural change in the long term.

3 MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES WITH (YOUNG) CHILDREN

3.1 MATERIAL / FINANCIAL SUPPORT

3.1.1 PARENTAL LEAVE: A RIGHT TO ALL EMPLOYEES

Employees who are soon to be parents are entitled to leave to care for their child. There are different rules for mothers and fathers, for birth or adoption:

Maternity leave: A mother is entitled to fifteen weeks of maternity leave (nineteen if it's a multiple birth). Part of this is used up before the birth (at least one week of prenatal leave) and part thereafter (postnatal leave). She will receive a maternity allowance from health insurance fund.

Paternity leave is granted to the father (or co-parent) when his child is born. He is entitled to ten days of leave – all at once or spread out – within the four months following the day of the birth. The first three days, they receive their full salary from the company. The following seven days the employee will receive an allowance from their health insurance fund.

Adoption leave is given to employees adopting a child. He or she then has six weeks of adoption leave if the child is younger than three years of age and four weeks if the child is between three and eight years of age. If the child has a disability, the leave is doubled. The first three days, they receive their full salary from the company. The following seven days the employee will receive an allowance from their health insurance fund.

Parental leave: Employees with children are also entitled to parental leave if the child is younger than 12 (or 21 in the case of a physical or mental disability of at least 66 percent on the Official Belgian Scale). Paternity leave entails

- a maximum of four months of full-time work, consecutively or split up into periods of at least one month;
- a maximum of eight months of part-time work, consecutively or split up into periods of at least two months;
- a maximum of twenty months working 4/5, consecutively or split up into periods of at least five months.

The allowances for parental leave are paid out by the National Employment Office.

3.1.2 CHILD ALLOWANCES

The system of child allowances is proportionated universal. It is a set of financial incentives that the Flemish Government provides for each child in each family. The new systems are characterized by an universal flat rate complemented by social supplements targeted to certain vulnerable families, i.c. based on special needs or income. In Flanders the school grant and a participation grant for child care is integrated in the system.

In terms of poverty, the impact of the reforms seems neutral in Wallonia, and positive in Flanders. This new design can be seen as a step forward to targeted universalism; however, in order to have an impact (or, in Flanders, a stronger impact) on child poverty, the total amount targeted to poor families must be increased. The question confronting the new regional governments in 2019 is therefore whether additional, targeted measures can be taken in the domain of child benefits and/or school grants, in order to enhance financial support for poor families.

Besides the allowances, there are also tax deductions for childcare costs for children up to the age of 12.

3.2 ECEC IN FLANDERS

ECEC is a right of every child. Therefore, Flanders aims to render ECEC as a universal provision with a focus on preventive support (medical, psycho-social and educational support) to all children and their parents on the one hand. On the other hand it covers stimulation, support and control of ECEC services.

3.2.1 PREVENTIVE FAMILY SUPPORT

3.2.1.1 FAMILY SUPPORT OFFERED BY THE LOCAL TEAM OF KIND EN GEZIN

During the pregnancy and the very important first few years of the baby's life, we are sure parents have plenty of questions. This is a time when they can count on Kind en Gezin (Child and Family). The local team (nurses, family supporters, social workers, pedagogical workers, doctors, volunteers...) of 'Kind en Gezin' aims to offer the parents, their child and their family the best possible level of support.

The team monitors the baby through home visits and appointments at the clinic. They check how both the child and the parents are doing. Volunteers weigh and measure the baby. The doctor or nurse will check to see that the child is developing well. He/she checks the things baby can do and how he/she does them. The baby is given its vaccinations, and the nurse performs a hearing test and an eye test. And all this is free of charge.



Nurses, family supporters, doctors,... listen to all the questions of the parents and give them tips and advice about (breast)feeding, care, education, parenthood, etc. always taking the needs and possibilities of the family into account. Parents can join in a range of activities. Some parents would rather have an extra home visit or a walk-in time, other parents want to contact via social media, and still others like to come together in group to talk about a certain topic and exchange their experiences.

If possible and certainly when necessary, the families will be referred to other services in order to broaden their formal and informal social network and possibilities on the different domains of life such as housing, health, education,...

3.2.1.2 FAMILY SUPPORT OFFERED BY OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Since the Belgian governmental structure is complex, different partners are involved in offering support to families with (young) children. The decree on the organisation of preventive family support in Flanders provides the regulation of the organisation of high quality preventative family support from parents to be and parents with children up to the age of 24 years.

Regarding the aim of the project focusing on the accessibility of vulnerable families, we'll describe here the most relevant partners that are regulated (recognition and/or financial support) by the Agency of Kind en Gezin, such as the 'Inloopteams', 'Spel – en ontmoeting', different projects where parents and children can meet,...

Inloopteams (Walk-in Teams)

Inloopteams provides support to pregnant woman and families with young children (till the age of 6) in a difficult life situation. At regular intervals activities for parents and children are organized. There are parent groups, games and welcome moments, day trips, information sessions, ... The services of a walk-in team is free of charge. In Flanders are 13 walk- in teams.



Spel – en ontmoeting (open meeting places)

The “spel – en ontmoetingsplaatsen” welcomes all young children accompanied by a parent or other responsible parenting. Parents get there the place and the time to take a breath and to establish contacts with other parents. Babies and toddlers can discover the world, in total safety and in the proximity of their parents. At the same time children can meet other children and learn to play together. Parent are also stimulated to meet each other. The contact is easy because anyone out there, has a common topic of conversation: the young children for which they provide.



The coordination and networking is crucial for the effective provision of ECEC services.

3.2.1.3 HUIS VAN HET KIND: THE LOCAL NETWORK FOR DIVERSE PARTNERS PROVIDING FAMILY SUPPORT

While Flanders does have a wide range of services in the field of family support not all of these are as accessible as they should be for all families and not all of these have been closely linked or integrated. That is why new legislation in 2014 introduced the concept of family centres, the ‘Huis van het Kind’ (House of the Child) as a new approach¹⁰.

The goal is to stimulate inter-professional collaboration between local actors to provide a range of family support services in an integrated and accessible way and attuned to the local needs. The decree points out some principles and goals, but at the same time leaves quite some margin as well to partners on the local level to shape their own ‘Huis van het Kind’ to best fit the local context. This way, cooperation is stimulated and facilitated rather than obligatory. “Huizen van het Kind” are being developed and set up throughout the Flemish part of Belgium.

- In Flanders, the “Huizen van het Kind” are local networks of local services providing preventative family and educational support and preventive health care for young children and their families. These networks can cover different services and organisations, such as education, youth care services, child care, youth services, social welfare services and local health services, libraries, cultural organisations,... They consist of partnerships between local authorities and local actors.

¹⁰ <http://www.expoo.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Huizen%20van%20het%20Kind%20-%20Basiskader%20-%20Engels.pdf>



- The main mission of “Huizen van het Kind” consists in offering preventative family support and to create equal opportunities for all children and their families. “Huizen van het Kind” have to contribute to health equity in the broadest sense of the world, which is considered of great social importance.
- “Huizen van het Kind” aim at all families and pay special attention towards families in need. The basic point of departure is proportional universalism. “Huizen van het Kind” offer a wide range of universal services for all families, children and youngsters. These services can vary in intensity – depending on to the needs of the family or children/youngsters concerned. One of the key elements is the

possibility for parents and children to meet one another, as it is considered as the most powerful way to support parents in parenting from a preventative point of view.

- The idea emerged from the conviction and the experience that strong cooperation between services will enhance the possibilities to meet the needs of parents and children, will lead to lower thresholds for families and a greater accessibility, will improve the quality and the effectiveness and will lower the costs.
- They are inspired by recent developments in the area of integrated services for families. Currently there are networks working in 71 % of local communities and cities in Flanders, i.e. 213 of them. On the 1st of January 2019 there will be 221 Houses of the Child in 288 communities, a coverage of 96 %.



These are being developed in different ways, considering local characteristics such as e.g. demographic factors and the services, organisations and partnerships already active. Within the dialogue among these actors, the partners explore how their “Huis van het Kind” should function in order to respond to the needs of the families: on the level of a municipality, or rather at inter- or intra-municipal level, by offering a set of services at one place (all services under the same roof) or in several places and/ or combined with outreaching services.

- In many places a “Huis van het Kind” is a building or a campus housing the different services who joined the network. In some places they are linked to child care and/or pre-school activities.
- The “Huizen van het Kind” are in general financed by public funding, but from various domains (welfare, youth, culture) and levels (regional, local) as they are at the first place local networks of different services working together for families and children. In many cases they are depending from the municipality for the housing, coordination and their place in the local social policy.

3.2.2 CHILDCARE

Childcare is a collective term indicating the different types of care available for babies and toddlers¹¹. These children mostly need to be in childcare because the parents have to go to work. However, there may also be other reasons, for instance to give parents time to follow a training course.

¹¹ Childcare is also used for ‘care’ during out-of-school hours and school holidays for children attending nursery or primary school.

With formal childcare the Flemish Government seeks to provide a service to families:

1. that has an economic, pedagogical and social function:

- 'Economic' because childcare allows parents to go to work and earn an income. Formal childcare itself also employs a large number of people.
- 'Pedagogical' because a good childcare setting not only nurses young children and makes them feel safe, but also stimulates children in their physical and psychological development. Children meet other people there and learn to deal respectfully with each other from a young age onwards.
- 'Social' because childcare can counter the exclusion of disadvantaged groups and help promote their integration. The social function of childcare first and foremost implies fighting exclusion mechanisms and increasing accessibility for families which currently have difficulty in finding their way to childcare due to all kinds of thresholds. However, its social function encompasses more than just enhancing accessibility for disadvantaged groups and tackling obstacles. Accessible childcare allows parents to follow training, to apply for jobs to find work, etc.;

2. which is qualitative, available, affordable and directly accessible for every child without any distinctions, in addition to the upbringing of the child within his/her family, with respect for the child's capacities, his/her home environment and the family's freedom of choice;



Therefore the development of a pedagogical framework helps to realise the mission of Kind en Gezin, which is “to create as many opportunities as possible for every child, no matter where or how it is born and raised”.

The present pedagogical framework¹² is a concise vision text on quality childcare. It clarifies what childcare means to children, families and society. The framework offers direction, a firm basis to be committed to. The dialogue about it with all parties involved, results each time in different practices, customised to the local context. This cooperation ensures that all parties involved inspire each other in shaping pedagogical quality. The present pedagogical framework contains a best efforts obligation for childcare facilities, which is a commitment to work along the lines of the vision set out in the present framework. One is expected to make efforts to get going with the present framework. This does not imply a obligation to achieve results. Quality will not be judged by measuring children's development or by examining to what extent one works together with families and external parties.

3. which can be a meeting place for all parents, with respect for diversity between parents and between children. In a childcare setting parents can ask all kinds of questions and meet other parents as well.

As long as the number of places is insufficient, the Flemish Government decides, depending on the accessibility, which groups are given **priority** to use the provided places for which the provider receives a subsidy¹³. Formal childcare does not combat disadvantage, but makes a difference through **progressive universalism**. This means that additional attention is devoted to vulnerable families within a universal offer. It implies, among other things,

¹² <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/pedagogische-raamwerk-engelseversie.pdf>

¹³ Only applies to formal childcare for babies and toddlers.

that formal childcare oriented towards vulnerable families is supported in terms of content and finances, and that the development of formal childcare for children with special care needs is stimulated.

However, one is expected to make an effort to that end. The pedagogical framework does not prescribe what one 'should' do in everyday practice. It is not a manual. The use of this pedagogical framework depends on the environment in which one operates, the vision of the childcare facility, the neighbourhood, the parents' preferences, etc.



3.2.3 ADOPTION

The Flemish Central Authority is responsible for the preparation of prospective adoptive parents, for social study in which gives its opinion to the family court on the suitability to adopt, for mediation, the follow-up and aftercare. This authority is embedded within 'Kind en Gezin' (Child and Family).

Belgium has ratified the Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (The Hague Convention). All Belgian and Flemish legislation has been adjusted accordingly. The Convention came into effect definitively on 1 September 2005.

Adoption is a child protection measure. It is a measure to help children who cannot grow up with their own (biological) family. To ensure that each adoption is in the interests of the adopted child as much as possible, the Flemish government closely monitors every step in an adoption process.

4 CHALLENGES IN SOCIETY AND HOW TO COPE WITH IT

4.1 DEALING WITH INEQUALITIES: PROPORTIONAL UNIVERSALISM

Society is responsible for creating the conditions which allow young children to grow up and develop to the fullest and which enable parents and other legal guardians to realise the commitment they have made towards young children. Investing in the environment of young children, (expectant) parents and families indeed implies that this environment offers sufficient opportunities and resources for each and every one of them.

For young children this environment should at least be inviting, participatory, qualitative, child-friendly, and have a focus on relationships. For parents, this environment is characterised by a whole range of material and immaterial resources in several areas of life and by opportunities for shaping their own social support network.

Therefore a proportional universal basic service provision and basic facilities constitute an important societal response to remedy social inequalities or to help create equal opportunities. In this case, the basic service provision will have a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage or social inequalities. Services are therefore universally available, not only for the most disadvantaged, and are able to respond to the level of presenting need.



Approaches to addressing inequalities have fallen into three broad categories:

1. A focus on improving the position of the most disadvantaged groups.
2. A focus on reducing the gap between the best and the worst off.
3. A focus on reducing the entire social gradient.

Proportionate universalism has been described as a hybrid approach which combines the first and third approaches above. The principles of proportionate universalism are already in existence. An alternative definition of progressive universalism is often used in relation to children's services. 'Progressive universalism – a universal service that is systematically planned and delivered to give a continuum of support according to need at neighbourhood and individual level in order to achieve greater equity of outcomes for all children'.

Proportionate universalism is the resourcing and delivering of universal services at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need. It is a challenge in the organization of ECEC to develop a diverse offer, that is locally embedded and gives opportunities to all families, especially to the most vulnerable.

4.2 TACKLING POVERTY

Flanders develops (Decree 2013) a policy which prevents and tackles poverty in an effective and sustainable way, and this happens with the involvement and participation of people in poverty. This requires an integrated governance and a well-coordinated action plan with the contribution of the different ministerial departments.

However, due to social inequalities young children and their families do not have equal access to the necessary opportunities and resources. This means that basic facilities or basic services should realise two things at the same time. It is about being equally accessible to everyone up to a certain point, preferably as efficiently and easily as possible, and about concentrating more on those who start with fewer opportunities or live in less favourable circumstances.

Child and Family gives in their services special attention to disadvantaged families with young children. To be able to evaluate this offer, and to develop further, it is necessary to have a permanent view on the number of families with young children and their living conditions.

Child and Family makes in every family an estimation of the risk on deprivation on different domains of life: monthly income of the family, educational level of the parents, the stimulation level of the children, the labour situation of the parents, housing and health. When a family is at risk on 3 or more criteria, we speak about children who are born in poverty. In Flanders, this number doubled in the last ten years: from 7,4% in 2007 up to 13,8% in 2017.

Example of inspiring practice: working with Family Supporters

To anticipate well-coordinated on the support questions and to 'connect' the services with the needs of socially vulnerable families, Child and Family introduced in 2004 working with Family Supporters - experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion as well as intercultural mediators - as a particular and meaningful perspective in the implementation of the preventive family support.



*The **core function** of the family supporter is 'to connect'. The existing gap between socially vulnerable families and the society, is echoed in the service of Child and Family among others by reciprocal mis- or no understanding of needs, values, proposals or recommendations. Here the family supporters who have themselves the experience of poverty and exclusion, plays an important role. They can support the families by paying attention to the social and complex situation of deprivation, migration or exclusion. Furthermore they contribute - by their function-specific training and their personal experience - in a unique manner to insert the perspective of poverty and thereby to bridge the gap.*

It is a challenge to be continuously aware of the impact of deprivation on the development of (young) children. Therefore it is necessary to work together with policy, research and practice on ambitious anti-child poverty masterplans covering the full range of competences and investing sufficient resources that can be expected succeeding in the fight against poverty.

4.3 EMBRACE SUPERDIVERSITY

Migration is changing our society. Flanders can now – comparable as in the whole of Europe - be characterized by 'super-diversity,' a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the region has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade. Outlined here, new patterns of super-diversity pose significant challenges for either policy, research and practice.



Example of Inspiring practice – Child in pictures

The growing multilingual society requires for instance an approach adjusted to bridge the language gap in order to increase the ‘comprehensibility’. Language is a ‘vulnerable’ but a ‘crucial’ element in order to increase accessibility of services in a multilingual environment.

Child in picture shows key messages of different topics explained with pictures: care, nutrition, development, childcare and education,...

Superdiversity challenges the services no longer to think in outdated target groups related to different cultures, not to think in a we-and-they-distribution,... but to look and overlook every service offered or action taken from different and diverse perspectives, to deal with a the complexity of the reality and to answer on the diverse needs of participants.

5 CHALLENGES ON INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT IN ECEC SERVICES

5.1 COOPERATE INTER – AND CROSS SECTORAL

A Huis van het Kind is a collaboration among a number of organisations that provides multidisciplinary, integrated and appropriate services in support of (future) families with children and youngsters. The challenge that prompts partners to come together at a Huis van het Kind is: “How can we together support (future) families as well as possible?” On top of coping with the challenges in society, it is also a huge challenge with many possible answers to work together in their local context.



Thus, the crucial question is how can a variety of organisations create added value together? The goal is not collaboration for the sake of collaboration. The goal is a collaboration whereby diverse partners strengthen one another making their own contributions in order to create a stronger whole. In other words, there must be an added value for families, first and foremost.

In addition to the intersectoral support, Belgium has a split system concerning care and education. There is a division between ‘care’ for children (until the age of three) and ‘education’ from the age of three. This means that several ministries are involved, but, considering that each ministry has its own rules and implements its own policies, they do not often coordinate their actions, which leads to a limited integration. In practice, education and care still function as separate services, but requires a cross sectoral cooperation.

There is a need for a warm transition from home or childcare towards preschool, with equal attention to learning and for care ('Educare'). Childcare and preschool can strengthen and inspire each other. The involvement of parents in this process, is crucial for the development opportunities of children and the well-being of parents and children. Especially for vulnerable families is being recognised as a parent with individual concerns,

questions and expectations essential. Preventive family support, childcare and education can, especially on neighbourhood-oriented basis, work together to support parents through the different transitions¹⁴.

It challenges to work on a warm transition in cooperation with concerned departments and agencies (Education and Training, Welfare, Public Health and Family, Integration). The cooperation involves different actions to realise continuity on structural cooperation, pedagogical frameworks, professional support, in cooperation with parents and their broader context.

5.2 GUARANTEE PROVISIONS FOR ALL CHILDREN, YOUNGSTERS AND FAMILIES

Child and Family choose to develop their own services and their recognized and subsidized facilities as basic provisions for all children, youngsters and families. These play an important role in the realization of the rights of children and families.



Non-take up of available social services and benefits remains a challenge. Even when people are aware that they have rights, many of them do not know on which they are entitled. Only qualitative information and/or social work support access to improve rights. Providing correct and complete information as well as the way in which information is provided are essential elements of the quality of services. Local municipalities must be able to actively reach out to vulnerable families with children and address

their problems in an integrated way, in cooperation with the Huizen van het Kind (in Flanders), the local education community, the child care sector and social services in general¹⁵.

They have to stay close to the diverse needs of children and parents. A huge challenge is the question of how to enhance the accessibility of integrated services for all families, especially those who are most in need of qualitative services, which are vulnerable families and children like migrant children, poor families,... because these basic provisions should be in line with and contribute to the principle of proportional universalism.

The aim of IAS is to exchange ideas and inspiring practices between policy, practice and research on improving accessibility of integrated services for these (vulnerable) families with young children. Challenges on raising the accessibility or lowering the threshold and cutting the barriers can be explained in terms of availability, affordability, accessibility, usefulness and comprehensibility (see Discussion text vision and framework IAS).

5.3 DEVELOP COMPETENT SYSTEMS

We want to develop our basic provisions to competent systems. Tutors, teachers, youth workers, animators, volunteers and trainers play an important role. Investing in children and young people is therefore always investing in the people who work with them and in the circumstances in which they work. A competent system supports employees and volunteers and allows them to develop their capacities. This gives shape to a pedagogical practice that meets the needs of children and families in rapidly changing societal contexts. The competent system develops through reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, groups, institutions and the broad social and political context.

At the level of the individual practitioner, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional knowledge, practice and develop and show professional values. Although 'knowledge' and 'practice' are critical, practitioners and teams also need reflective competences as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts. Therefore a competent

¹⁴ Vandenbroucke F., Guio A. (2018). Armoede en deprivatie bij Belgische kinderen. Een vergelijking van risicofactoren in de drie gewesten en buurlanden. Rapport Koning Boudewijnstichting, Brussel.

¹⁵ idem

system requires possibilities for all staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection. This includes sufficient paid time for these activities. A competent system includes collaborations between individuals and teams, institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families...) as well as competent governance at policy level¹⁶.

For example “Reaching out” is labour intensive, and organizations and municipalities that develop such policies need support: Regional Governments should consider a specific subsidy mechanism for municipalities that invest in outreach to poor families with children and thus enhance the efficacy of service delivery. Such a subsidy mechanism could be the cornerstone of an “alliance to fight child poverty” between local and regional/community authorities, based on agreed objectives and instruments¹⁷.

In short, competent systems in Early Childhood Education and Care do not emerge out of aspiration alone. If competence is to unfold in reciprocal relationships between actors at all levels of the system, certain conditions need to be in place across the entire system. This remains a huge challenge.



¹⁶ Urban, Vandenbroeck et al. (2011). CORE Competence requirements in childhood education and care. London.

¹⁷ Vandenbroucke F., Guio A. (2018). Armoede en deprivatie bij Belgische kinderen. Een vergelijking van risicofactoren in de drie gewesten en buurlanden. Rapport Koning Boudewijnstichting, Brussel.