PLACES TO GROW

Study Visit Report

THE NETHERLANDS/BELGIUM

20-24 MARCH, 2023

International Child
Development Initiatives

The 'Places to Grow' Programme is an initiative originated and funded by the Porticus Foundation to put inclusive Early Childhood Development high on the policy agenda and to support its quality improvement and system change in Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia.

The programme aims to:

- promote coordination among Early Childhood Development (ECD) services for children from marginalised communities and ethnic minorities (e.g., Roma),
- build knowledge of policy makers and the workforce for future greater focus on early childhood services,
- create evidence for reforms of financing of early childhood systems and follow-up advocacy at national and the European Union level.

International Child Development Initiatives - ICDI is a knowledge organisation that supports and develops initiatives in the field of ECD, child protection and wellbeing.

We aim to create rich, safe and nurturing environments for young children to live, grow and learn, especially for those who are most vulnerable.

International Child Development Initiatives

In this programme, ICDI's role is to:

1. Increase understanding, knowledge and skills of ECD service providers and local policy makers on how to catalyse whole child development through cross-sectoral cooperation.
2. Support cross-country capacity building and peer-mentoring in Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

During the Spring 2022 kick-off meeting of Places to Grow, thematic areas and collaborative projects were discussed with partner organizations from Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. The following six topics were identified as central for upcoming learning exchanges, training events, and study visits: Cross-sectoral cooperation, Importance of early years, Reflective practices and quality assessment, Intergenerational learning, Diversity and inclusion in ECEC, and Learning through play. ICDI aligned its activities with these topics and designed targeted exchanges, trainings, and study visits to cater to the needs and interests of partner organizations. The goal of these activities was to enhance competencies in providing high-quality and inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care services.

HIGHLIGHTS

From the 20th to the 24th of March (2023), the third study visit for the Places to Grow programme took place in Ghent, Belgium, and Leiden, the Netherlands. Representatives from Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, including NGOs, early childhood development practitioners, and government officials who specialized in ECD services, visited integrated Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service locations and met with various professionals. The aim was to explore cross-sectorial and interagency work in early years services and policy, and community-based inclusive early childhood education and care services that cater to vulnerable children and families in Ghent and Leiden.

BELGIUM | 21/MARCH

The study visit began in Ghent, Belgium, where participants visited the Nieuw Ghent Family Center and the Palmboom Childcare Center. These two locations provide various services to support parents, including answering questions about parenting, education, child development, and other difficulties parents might face. The Nieuw Ghent Family Center's Inloopteam can also refer parents to other family services, such as psychologists.

The study visit allowed participants to gain insight into the Palmboom Childcare Center in Ghent, where they were introduced to the manager, Hans Vervenne, and learned about their commitment to supporting vulnerable families. In addition to providing childcare services, the centre offers support and resources for parents.

Cassidy Mestdagh, a member of the Inloopteam and staff at the Wiedgwijs Family, also spoke to the participants about the KOALA program, which offers activities and workshops for families in collaboration with childcare centres and the Inloopteam. The program aims to strengthen parents' ability to access community services by providing events such as playgroups, communal meals, and educational workshops on topics like nutrition and dental hygiene.

In the afternoon, participants visited the VBJK office, which is ICDI's partner organization and the host and organiser of the study visit in Ghent. The Director of Childcare Services of the City of Ghent, Lieve de Bosscher, welcomed the participants. Senior researcher Hester Hulpia, an expert in quality ECEC at VBJK, presented their research on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in collaboration with the University of Ghent and the University of Louvain. She also discussed the pedagogical framework established in Flanders, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of ECD programs and the components that make ECD programs good quality. Later in the afternoon, Bjorn Martens, the project coordinator of Child Care Services in the City of Ghent, gave a lecture on the city's childcare system and the policies and practices that promote integration among family services.

At the end of the day, the participants reflected on their learnings and engaged in a discussion. This led to the emergence of a few interesting topics:

- Policy and practice differences between Belgium and participants' home countries.
- The importance of integrating research with policies and practice.
- the significance of evidence-based practices in ECEC services.
- The importance of the transition from childcare to formal education.

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On Wednesday, participants traveled by train to Leiden, Netherlands for the next part of the study visit. Despite the winter weather, they enjoyed a boat tour of Leiden's canals, followed by a dinner at a local restaurant. This break provided a refreshing pause in the study visit and helped participants return to learning the next day with renewed energy.

THE NETHERLANDS | 23/MARCH

Thursday was a day full of learning and exploration for our participants. They visited "Het Gebouw" in Leiden, a cultural, social, and educational center for the local community. The Alderman of the Municipality of Leiden, Abdelhaq Jermoumi, welcomed participants and emphasized the importance of inclusivity in child development. Ingrid Kraenen, a coordinator at CJG in Leiden, gave an overview of the involved services for youth care, focusing on the development of the whole child. Participants also learned about the child and youth care center from specialized youth care doctors, who presented on preventive care at both individual and community levels, such as creating a smoke-free generation by 2040. Laura Li and Mirjam van der Steen, part of the Youth Teams, shared their experiences supporting parents. Overall, it was an innovative and informative day that broadened our participants' understanding of child and youth care services in the Netherlands.

During the lectures, the participants were impressed and inspired. When it was time for questions and discussions, many interesting topics were raised, including:

- How to reach and interact with different kinds of families.
- How to ensure that all parents are reached, given that participation in the program is voluntary.
- Differences between the program in this location compared to those in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

Pieter Penning and Arianne Heeringa, who work with a playgroup service, provided an overview of the organization's approach to early childhood education and care, including play care, daycare, and out-of-school care. They explained that they offer three types of ECEC programs: regular, anthroposophical (Rudolf Steiner), and Montessori. Pieter demonstrated how they work and collaborate with parents, primary schools, and other stakeholders, highlighting the challenges they face with internationalization, particularly in communication.
Participants then had the opportunity to tour "Het Gebouw.". Lunch was provided by Movens, an organization that supports individuals with psychological difficulties in their efforts to reintegrate into the labor market.
The second half of the day started at the library, where participants browsed a multilingual collection of children's books. They also got a glimpse of the library bus, which drives to neighborhoods with limited library access.

Back in the green room, the participants were given the assignment to collect something from nature outside. They collected many different things such as sticks, flowers, and grass, and one person even joked about trying to catch a duck. Another participant picked a flower bud to represent the early stages of childhood and its delicate state. Someone else had a stick and showed its magnificent engineering and the patterns on its surface. This fun activity was linked to the presentation by Janneke Hagenaar from Groen Cement (Green Cement) about the importance of linking child development to nature.

The last presentation was from Catarina Alves (ICDI). She presented ICDI's newly developed ECEC materials: the "Play for Inclusion" Handbook, for non-formal services supporting young refugee children and their families; the "Toolkit on Inclusive Community-based ECEC"; the "Home Visiting Toolkit" - Making the first 1000 days count!; and the "Mobile Play Hub" Operating guidelines and activity cards. The participants also tested two activities from these new materials. First, they made a chain of strengths, showcasing each individual's strengths brought into their work: empathy, kindness, singing, positivity, commitment, capacity to reach the target group, and strategic thinking. The second activity tested was "the wacky walk", which the participants did outside and served as a nice way to close the day of lectures.

The day culminated with a reflective assignment, facilitated by Maxim Dedushkov, the founder of Holis. Participants were tasked with noting down their main takeaways, a take-home message, and feedback for future study visits:

- Main takeaways: cooperation between stakeholders; integration of services; the importance of nature; responsibility of the municipality.
- Take-home messages: the new materials and resources from ICDI and other diverse topics.
- Feedback for future visits: longer breaks (possibly with a walk); more opportunity to connect; decision/policymakers from the municipality; more exercises.

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On the final day of the study visit, participants visited the Speel-o-theek, a toy library in Leiden. The volunteers there gave a captivating presentation about the library's work and purpose. The Speel-o-theek offers an extensive range of toys, including movement toys, fantasy toys, outdoor toys, expression toys, board games, and more, all available for lending.

Following the presentation, participants and volunteers from the Speel-o-theek engaged in an insightful discussion. Participants shared their countries' perspectives and the challenges they face with ECEC services. For instance, in Slovakia, they don't work extensively with volunteers, while in Hungary, they struggle with funding and maintaining activity in their existing Play Hubs due to lack of financial support and increasing energy prices.

Finally, the volunteers from Speel-o-theek shared some of their current challenges and engaged in a discussion with participants on possible solutions. These included the lack of volunteers and how to attract them, addressing the issue of parents' careless behavior towards toys, and reaching out to low-income families while avoiding stigmatization.

In the afternoon, participants gathered at the Kinderrechtenhuis, where ICDI has its own office, to attend a lecture given by Dr. Mihaela Ionescu from ISSA. The lecture focused on the recent EU policies regarding young children and summarised key milestones in early childhood development, including the Barcelona targets (2022), the Toolkit for Inclusive ECEC (2020), the Nurturing Care Framework (2018), and the First Years First Priority Campaign. Participants found the lecture informative and appreciated the opportunity to learn about the latest developments in the field of ECEC policies.

After attending the lecture by Mihaela Ionescu, participants left feeling informed and inspired. Notable accomplishments were highlighted, such as the increased focus on ECEC services and the start of discussions on legal entitlement to ECEC. However, it was noted that there is a lack of formal reference to formal service settings and parenting support systems. The presentation also underscored that there are still many countries to engage in and many ways in which parents and children can be supported to thrive.

The final presentation of the day was given by Marissa Verbeek from JES Rijnland, which focused on the home environment and its importance for ECD. Participants were encouraged to think about how educating parents and offering them the necessary support within their homes can immensely contribute to healthy child development, according to JES.

Many programs are developed precisely for young children, which focus on:

- stimulating a supportive family environment
- increasing the educational opportunities for children
- increasing parental involvement
- educating parents on the importance and relevance of play at home and for long-term learning and development.

The day ended with closing words by Maxim Dedushkov and an interesting activity to relax and entertain the participants. Together, everyone reflected on the past week and all the given presentations in both Ghent and Leiden.

FINAL REMARKS

The third study visit of the Places to Grow Programme took place over a week, with 22 ECD professionals, NGO representatives, and policymakers from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary exploring ECEC services in both Ghent and Leiden.
This study visit provided a unique opportunity for participants to learn about the variety of ECD services available in Belgium and the Netherlands, and to understand how these services collaborate with one another to provide a holistic approach to child and family support. Through visits to childcare centres, family centres, toy libraries, and integrated community centres, participants gained valuable insight into the different ways in which ECEC services can be delivered. In addition to the site visits, participants also had the opportunity to learn from experts in the field of ECEC during several lectures. These lectures covered a range of topics, including the importance of the home environment, recent EU policies on young children, and the benefits of using evidence-based practices in ECEC.

One of the key takeaways from the study visit was the importance of cooperation between stakeholders. Participants learned that when ECEC organisations collaborate and share resources, they are better able to provide comprehensive and effective support to children and families. The study visit also highlighted the importance of integrating ECEC services to ensure that children and families receive the support they need in a coordinated and efficient manner. Another important takeaway was the need to make ECEC services accessible to marginalised and vulnerable families. Participants discussed strategies for reaching these families, including strengthening parenting support and providing targeted services to families in need.

Overall, the study visit provided a valuable opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and expertise on ECEC practices and policies, and to learn from one another. The insights and takeaways from the study visit will be used to promote the integration of ECEC services in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, and to ensure that ECEC is more inclusive to everyone.

SPECIAL THANKS GO THE VBJK ORGANIZATION, CITY OF GHENT AND HET GEBOUW, AS WELL AS ALL THE OTHER INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THIS STUDY VISIT.

The Study Visit in Belgium/The Netherlands was the third of a total of three Study Visits planned within the Places to Grow programme and organized by ICDI.

PREVIOUS STUDY VISITS

Slovakia, 21-22 September 2022

Hungary, 10-11 October 2022