TOY to Share, Play to Care

604448-EPP-1-2018-1-NL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN

2019 - 2021

Work package 6: Impact evaluation and policy recommendations
Final report

December 2020

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Acknowledgements

This evaluation report is a documentation of a collective effort at many levels. As such, it very much represents what *TOY to Share, Play to Care* aims to provide. It is a space, both concrete and conceptual, for a coming together of minds, experiences, skills, aspirations and dreams with one shared goal: to work towards more just, equitable, and inclusive early childhood experiences for all children, regardless of the diverse and often disadvantaged circumstances they are born into. Like all activities in this project, the impact evaluation would not have been possible without the contribution of many. As a research team, we are indebted to all project participants, members of *Local Action Teams*, local project coordinators in their various locations across Europe, and the central project coordinators who freely gave their time to respond to our questions and engage in various activities suggested by us. Thank you for sharing your insights and perspectives, individually and collectively! Thank you, too, for providing feedback to our reading of your views and our (always preliminary) conclusions, and for listening with interest to our suggestions. You own this evaluation!

A special thank you to the team at ICDI for keeping it all together during challenging times that none of us predicted when we embarked on this project.

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Implementation and up-scaling of a successful model

TOY to Share, Play to Care[1] (Erasmus Plus, Key Action 3 – Social inclusion and common values) is a two-year project (January 2019 – January 2021) that builds on previous work undertaken by *International Child Development Initiatives* (ICDI[2]), a Netherlands-based non-governmental organisation. Specifically, it follows up on the project *TOY for Inclusion*, 2017-2019.

The *TOY to Share, Play to Care* consortium comprises ten partner organisations based in nine European countries.

The initial *TOY for Inclusion* project developed and piloted *Play Hubs*, i.e., low-threshold, community-based, and informal early childhood settings open to young children, their families, and community members of local Roma communities. *Play Hubs* offer toys for borrowing (toy libraries), stimulating activities for young children, opportunities for inter-generational encounters, and generally safe and welcoming spaces for everybody.

The follow-up project *TOY to Share, Play to Care* takes the existing *Play Hubs* as its starting point and builds on their experiences in order to scale up the model. Specific aims are to:

- Establish additional *Play Hubs* in the participating countries, under the mentorship of existing ones.
- Reach out to marginalised and 'hard to reach' communities beyond the Roma communities.
- Increase involvement and long-term commitment of local authorities.

Between 2017 and 2020, 16 Play Hubs were open in 8 EU countries (Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey). Through the Play Hubs' activities, over 10.000 children, 5.000 adults (parents and grandparents) and 1000 practitioners were reached.

Project evaluation

TOY to Share, Play to Care is a learning project that provides practice-based evidence for the development and implementation of inclusive, community-based and -embedded services for young children and their families. The project design includes a comprehensive data collection, monitoring and evaluation framework to enable shared learning from project experiences. The framework consists of three elements:

- Initial and continuous documentation and monitoring of local capacities and needs (*Stakeholder Mapping*), Play Hub usage, reach and activities (*Data collection* and *Monitoring* protocols and tools)
- Utilization-focused *Impact evaluation*, documenting participants' experiences and their views on what supports or constrains *making a difference*
- External evaluation of project conduct and achievement

The *Impact evaluation* (this report) focuses on three research questions:

1. What does impact/making a difference mean to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives i.e., this project? How do you know? For whom?

2. What do you envisage will help you make a difference to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?

3. What do you envisage will make it difficult to make a difference in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?

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[1] www.toy4inclusion.eu
[2] https://icdi.nl/

The research questions were explored using a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis.

Findings: Context matters but a shared framework is crucial

The findings of the impact evaluation indicate that, not surprisingly, participants' description of what *making a difference* entails are closely connected to their specific local contexts and situations. This is in line with the overall aim of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* to unlock the capability and resources of local communities to respond to local early childhood needs. As *impact* is specific and localised, so are the factors that facilitate or hinder success. However, combining the localised findings in a bigger picture allows us to map out commonalities and threads. We identify three dimensions of impact:

1. **Values**

   Overarching values such as a shared orientation towards **social cohesion** as a desirable outcome, **empowerment** of individuals and communities, and the recognition, respect and strengthening of children's individual and group **identity**.

2. **Relationships**, both internally and externally

   In the first instance, a focus on relationships with children and families (rather than a focus on the 'delivery' of a programme) is key to the success of all *TOY to Share, Play to Care* Hubss. It is the crucial factor that allows for differentiation as it recognises and embraces the *agency* of children, families and communities in the local interpretation of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* model.

   Second, but equally important, is the programme's focus on facilitating relationships between relevant actors (institutional and individual) in the locality. The ability to orient, for example, local schools, existing services and municipal administration towards a shared goal of reaching out to marginalised young children tends to be the key factor for the sustainability of the Hubss.

3. **Structures**

   Structures are a necessary complement to an approach guided by shared values and shaped by relationships with others. In the case of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* we found two structural elements that contribute to the success of both the Hubss and the overall project. First, at both individual and project level, a recognition and understanding of the *professional* structures within and around the Play Hubs. This starts with a clear understanding of one's own professionalism and qualification (an *informal* early childhood setting does not mean it is less professional). It extends to the recognition and understanding of the professional necessities, practices, potentials and constraints of those professionals and actors who are situated outside the Hubs but are crucial for its success. Second, at both local level and the level of the overarching *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project, questions arise of positioning in relation to the formal education system. A key success factor appears to be the capability of local Play Hubs to clearly define their identity as informal settings while, at the same time, relating their activities to the compulsory school system: preparation, transition, enrolment, retention, and educational achievement.

In summary, we found that *TOY to Share, Play to Care* is *making a difference* through shared values and orientations interpreted and put into practice in diverse ways in diverse contexts.

Despite overwhelmingly positive experiences at the local level, participants identified a number of obstacles. They told us that *making a difference* is made difficult by:

- **Lack of trust**, e.g., in professionals, administration, and generally 'the state' by members of marginalised communities.
- **Lack of clarity of aims**, e.g., between specific (local) and general (project level) aims in relation to the level of *formal* learning to be provided in an *informal* Play Hub, or between professionals and officials of different backgrounds.

- **Lack of access**, e.g., access to communities by Play Hub personnel due to location of settlements. More crucially, marginalised children and families' lack of access to services, transport, sanitation.
- **Lack of resources**, most importantly to make the Play Hubs sustainable beyond the project phase, and to ensure their continuation during crises and disruption, as exemplified by the covid-19 pandemic.

Policy recommendations: learning from *TOY* to build grassroots competent systems

Several lessons can be learned from the experiences made in the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project. They revolve around a central challenge–that is also an opportunity for more effective use of resources at local, national and EU level. The central question arising from the impact evaluation is:

How can we develop shared values, knowledge(s), and practices while embracing, enabling, and empowering diverse local (situated) creative inventions and interpretations of the shared framework?

Addressing this question from a perspective of policy points to the need for a conceptual and practical shift from policies that aim at traditional *implementation* of programmes to policies that enable *interpretation* and local *meaning-making* by all actors, and most importantly by early childhood professionals, children, families, and community members.

The shift goes beyond the need to fund local projects. It requires (and opens an opportunity for) systems of governance and decision making that are designed to continuously and systematically learn from the diversity of local experiences, as well as readiness to use these experiences to critically question and recalibrate overarching policy aims and approaches.

Policy making, in such contexts, will be cyclical, rather than linear ('top-down' vs. 'bottom-up'). Governance will be understood as an intrinsic rather than extrinsic; it recognises the *agency* of all (including children, families, communities, early childhood professionals) which it seeks to empower.

Aspiration and aim: to enable the growth of *Grassroots Competent Systems*

The policy recommendations drawn from *TOY to Share, Play to Care* assume an aspiration and aim to enable the growth of *grassroots competent Systems* for young children, their families and communities, and ultimately for society on the whole. They are presented in this report at three levels: *local*, *national* (or regional), and *European*. While each level has specific requirements and potential for change, the levels are connected and depend on each other as they come together to enable *competent systems*. The recommendations in this report are based on the analysis of the data gathered for the *impact evaluation* of this specific project. Nonetheless, they connect to policy recommendations drawn from a solid body of research evidence gained from previous projects over two decades.

Some policy recommendations are central; they are enablers for the entire set of policy recommendations in this report.

At the local level:

Provide spaces for systematic, dialogic, cross-sectoral encounters between stakeholders: community members, professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, policy- and decision makers

At the national level:

Combine national guidance (policy frameworks, strategies etc.) with equally strong support for regional and local democracy

At the European Union level:

Assume initiative and leadership–internally, towards member states and externally, towards international organisations and forums (e.g., OECD, G20)

1. Introduction

How do we know we are making a difference through our practice with young children, families and communities? And how can we ensure others can make the best use of our experiences to make a difference as they work to realise similar goals in the different contexts, locations, and roles in the complex system of early childhood development, education and care they work in? Reflecting on one's own practice in a specific project, and communicating the learning to others, are the two interconnected aspects that underpin the impact evaluation of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project documented in this report. While conducted in the setting of a project that, like most projects, has a distinct *lifetime*, i.e., a start and end date, the impact evaluation is oriented beyond the lifetime of the project: it aims at providing the immediate project participants with necessary evidence as they continue to work towards securing the project achievements and making them sustainable, and at providing others, most importantly policy-makers, with the necessary evidence of how to best support such initiatives at local, national and international level.

The interconnection between critical reflection and development of future practices is reflected in this report. Building on what can be learned from the documented experiences of project participants, we are able to extract elements that we believe are critical for underpinning policy choices that lead to more sustainable, just, and equitable outcomes for all children and their families and communities. Evaluation and policy recommendations, in the perspective taken in this report, are manifestations of what Donald Schön (1983) refers to as the unit of *reflection IN action* and *reflection ON action*. Reflected practice and policymaking are inextricably linked as parts of a *system* that relies on the relationship between all its constituting elements and actors to deliver better outcomes for all children. The *systemic* perspective that underpins the approach to this evaluation is based on the conceptual framework of a *Competent System* (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012) that has influenced early childhood policy and practice at various European and international levels since its inception, including, for example, the *European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Council of the European Union, 2019) and the policy positions adopted by the Group of 20 in recent years (Think20, 2019, 2020; Urban et al., 2020a, 2020b; Urban, Cardini, & Flórez-Romero, 2018a; Urban, Cardini, Guevara, Okengo, & Flórez-Romero, 2019).

TOY to Share, Play to Care makes an important contribution to the further development of a now widely accepted systemic approach: it emphasises the necessity (and possibility) for policy learning at all levels that is grounded in evidence gathered in diverse practice contexts, thus offering an alternative to the still widespread understandings of policymaking and implementation as top-down processes. Instead, *TOY to Share, Play to Care* opens pathways for systematically connecting bottom-up and top-down processes and an example of an effective *Grassroots Competent System*.

2. The evaluation framework

TOY to Share, Play to Care is an example of a learning project. It aims at upscaling successful initiatives that have established low-threshold, community-based *Play Hubs* in participating countries. The well-documented approach has been developed in previous iterations of the project, i.e. *TOY for Inclusion*. *TOY to Share, Play to Care* builds on the experiences and expertise gathered in the original *Play Hubs* and uses them to inform and guide the setup of new Hubs over the lifetime of the project. To achieve this, at a first level, learning *from practice for practice* is systematically built into the project design. At a second level, *TOY to Share, Play to Care* encourages reflective learning *about practice*, with new participants and their questions and experiences enabling critical self-reflection of the earlier cohort. Finally, at a third level, the project, through its documented results and experiences, enables *policy learning* beyond the immediate *TOY* context, thus offering pathways for potential systemic impact on the future development of integrated and effective early childhood programmes.

TOY to Share, Play to Care involves many participants across a wide range of locations, roles and professions. It requires an approach to documentation and evaluation capable of capturing the complexity of the project and convey key messages both internally, to participants, and externally to a wider audience that is likely to be as diverse as the project itself. The approach taken to evaluate *TOY to Share, Play to Care* comprises three distinct but interconnected elements:

- A comprehensive data collection, monitoring and reporting structure, set up and operated by two of the project partners, the Open Academy Step by Step (OASbS), Croatia and Associazione 21 luglio (Italy)
- An *impact evaluation devised and conducted by Dublin City University, Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC)*
- An evaluation of project activities conducted by an external evaluator.

2.1. A comprehensive data collection, monitoring and reporting structure

This element of the evaluation framework comprises three core components: Work Package 3 of the project, under the responsibility of the Slovenia-based Educational Research Institute (ERI) focused on the *Identification of local resources and needs* as the foundation of all activities within *TOY to Share, Play to Care*. Additionally, Work Package 4, coordinated by Associazione 21 luglio in Italy, supported the partner organisations and Local Action Teams in all countries through training and mentoring. And, finally, Work Package 5, under the responsibility of the Croatia-based OASbS developed tools for continuous *Monitoring and evaluation* of the use and activities of the Play Hubs, in order to build a set of quantitative indicators that enable the tracking and evaluation of Hub development based on 'hard data'.

2.1.1. Stakeholder Mapping

A *Stakeholder Mapping* tool was developed for this purpose. The mapping was conducted in all participating countries and localities at the beginning of the project, from May to June 2019. Three project aims were realised through this activity:

1. To identify key organisations, institutions and individuals whose regular or occasional work and/or interactions have the potential to influence the life and social inclusion of young children and families, especially those with migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds and who, therefore, can be potential partners in the implementation of the Play Hubs. A subgroup of those identified would then be asked to be a member of the Local Action Team.

2. To create a database of all the actors that we intend to keep informed about the progress and results of the project. Dissemination has a key role in developing ownership at the community level and ensuring the sustainability of the project activities in the short and long term.

3. To gain a deeper understanding of the **needs of the targeted communities** and identify how the TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs can respond to them in an effective way

The *Stakeholder Mapping* identified families from marginalised, migrant, and minority communities, the presence (or lack of) formal and non-formal services for young children (e.g. ECEC settings, preschools, health centres, libraries, community development organisations, art centres), and explored whether local governments were prepared and willing to cooperate with the project and commit to supporting the activities during and beyond the project period. As an important outcome of the *Stakeholder Mapping* local actors were identified and recruited to join the *Local Action Team* (LAT) in their locality. Conceptual framework, methodology, and findings of the *Stakeholder Mapping* are available in a separate report[3], produced by Work Package 3.

2.1.2. Monitoring and evaluation

Based on the stakeholder mapping conducted under WP3, and taking into account the LATs specific local knowledge of their communities, WP4 designed a training trajectory for all partner organisations and LATs as well as a mentoring pathway with regular feedback loops and reports. At the same time, WP5 developed, designed and applied participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation tools over the lifetime of the project. The purpose of the tools is to support continuous process evaluation and monitoring and to provide detailed usage data to stakeholders including policy- and decision-makers at the local, national and EU levels.

Tools developed and provided by WP5 for this purpose include:

1. A *needs assessment* based on the use of the *Early Childhood Development Quality Assessment Tool* (ECD QUAT[4])

2. This multi-dimensional quality assessment tool provides a framework for shared discussion, reflection and documentation in the process of establishing a Play Hub.

3. An *administration system* to support the efficient establishment and operation of the Play Hubs. While some administrative documents were developed locally in response to specific local requirements (e.g. agreements between partners, regulations), others were standardised and shared across the entire *TOY to Share, Play to Care* setup. To this purpose, WP5 provided a number of data collection and documentation templates that enable local Hubs to track of available resources (i.e. *template for a list of toys*) and individual clients (i.e. *family names, information about the child/children attending*) and the community (i.e. *number of families from vulnerable groups*).

4. A *monitoring system* for continuous activities. This includes continuous documentation of *attendance* (children, families), *activities, participant evaluation* (including children), *mentoring meetings* and *regular* (6-monthly) *ECD QUAT sessions*.

The application of these tools by all Hubs, at regular intervals over the lifetime of the project, enabled WP5 to establish a solid database of project development. The data was made available to all project participants in a series of *Monitoring and evaluation reports* that document, among other relevant data and success factors, the steady growth of membership (children and families reached). Between 2017 and 2020, 16 Play Hubs were open in 8 EU countries (Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey). Through the Play Hubs' activities, over 10.000 children, 5.000 adults (parents and grandparents) and 1000 practitioners were reached. More detailed monitoring and evaluation data are available in separate reports[5].

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[3]   https://www.dropbox.com/s/mm7zn38k1crp6q0/Stakeholder%20Mapping%2C%20Challenges%20and%20Needs%2C%20Formation%20of%20Local%20Action%20Teams_final%20report.pdf?dl=0

[4]   https://www.dropbox.com/s/u7bd0m60p12pc3z/Handbook%20for%20ECD-QUAT%20facilitators_ECEC%20Play%20Hubs_revised%2012July.pdf?dl=0

[5] https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zz096piknlsr3j5/AAAsEzL-5BDdxcOwuSahumdLa?dl=0 This report covers up to July 2020. Anew M&E report will be published in February 2021 and will cover the remaining period August-December 2020.

Data collected and analysed in the context of the *impact evaluation* (this report) included participants' views on their experience with the protocols and tools outlined above. The focus of our analysis (see section 6.4) was how participants perceived and described their experiences *using* the tools, including their own amendments to the tools based on that experience.

2.2. Impact evaluation

WP6 designed, developed and conducted a *Utilization-focused impact evaluation* to document project participants' perspectives and extract recommendations for policy (this report). WP6 also provided input and feedback to the development of tools to WPs 3, 4 and 5.

2.3. External evaluation

A third–and crucially important–component of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* evaluation framework is an *external evaluation*, designed and conducted by an independent evaluator. Specific tasks were agreed for the external evaluation between the project coordination (WP1), all project partners, and the evaluator. They include a continuous assessment of:

- General compliance to what was promised in the application vis-à-vis the project developments;
- Correct implementation of the project activities including the timing of release and operational features;
- Monitoring of the webpage used for internal and external communication purposes as well as dissemination and exploitation of results and outputs;
- Efficient and effective management of transnational meetings with a special eye on the follow up;
- The effectiveness and scope of the action towards stakeholders.
- How the partnership is working, including internal dynamics and how these affect the daily project running

The external evaluator took part in all shared *TOY to Share, Play to Care* activities and gatherings, and engaged with all local partners individually. The findings of the external evaluation will be made publicly available in a separate report. In addition to providing the evaluation report, the external evaluator has been requested to engage in a cost-benefit analysis of the project[6].

Together these three elements form a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework, of which the impact evaluation is an integral part. This report documents the design, conduct and findings of the impact evaluation, and the policy recommendations drawn from it. This report should be read together with the reports on the two other components of the evaluation framework and other project documentation and publications.

3. Conceptual approach to the impact evaluation

The impact evaluation was designed and carried out as *Work Package* 6 (out of 8) of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project. Over the lifetime of the project, WP 6 focused on a number of activities and steps that built on each other. Each step was designed keeping in mind a) the overall progress of the project and b) the goal of providing policy recommendations at various levels (local, regional, national, EU) as a key outcome of the project. Considering the complexity of the project, with a multitude of actors and stakeholders in markedly different locations in Europe, the character of the impact evaluation was necessarily processual, allowing for adaptation and adjustment as the project evolved. The challenge was to keep a firm eye on the overall aim of the project while striking a balance with the inevitable unpredictability and uncertainty that characterises all learning in and from evolving and complex situations.

We consider *unpredictability* to be a potentially productive force of a project like *TOY to Share, Play to Care*. Therefore, we have oriented the design of the impact evaluation towards the *desired impact* as stated in the project description as well as the *unintended* and *surprising* experiences that we expected to occur in order to make them accessible for more generalised policy and practice learning.

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[6] https://reyn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Cost-Assessment-TOY4Incl.pdf

3.1. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for the impact evaluation builds on a combination of elements of two internationally well-established approaches to programme evaluation: *Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilization-focused Evaluation*. Both approaches, as applied in this project, draw on Argyris and Schön's concept of *Double-Loop-Learning*.

3.1.1. Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment Evaluation is an approach originally developed in the US by David Fetterman (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996). It has been used widely by agents including the National Aeronautics and Space Agency and the US Department of Education, and in diverse context including community health initiatives in South African townships, Native American peoples and Schools in academic distress (Fetterman, 2001, 2013; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015; Fetterman, Rodríguez-Campos, & Zukoski, 2018; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005).

> *Empowerment evaluation is an evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self- evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization.* (Fetterman, 2013, p. 30)

3.1.2. Utilization-focused Evaluation

Developed by Michael Quinn Patton and team from the 1980s, *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (UfE) systematically draws attention to the uses of programme evaluations by internal and external stakeholders of an organisation. The premise of Utilization-focused Evaluation is that any evaluation should be judged by its utility and actual use, and that any evaluation design and process should take careful consideration of *how everything that will be done, from beginning to end, will affect use*. UfE insists that the actual use of an evaluation is not necessarily the same as elements that are common to most evaluation processes, i.e., production of reports and dissemination. Accordingly, these are separate activities in the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project. Use, according to Patton et al, does not occur naturally or automatically; the groundwork for it has to be carefully laid. UfE, as a fundamental orientation, applies a five-step framework to the evaluation process:

1. Identify primary intended users
2. Gain commitment of key stakeholders
3. Decide on evaluation options
4. Analyze and interpret findings, reach conclusions
5. Disseminate findings.

(Patton, 1986, 1997, 2001, 2008)

3.1.3. Theory of action and *Double-Loop Learning*

Empowerment evaluation and Utilization-focused evaluation both draw on theories of action and organisational learning that emphasize the necessity – and capacity – of organisations to adapt to critical developments in their context. Most prominently, this has been expressed by Donald Schön and Chris Argyris in the concept of *Double-Loop learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Most organisations regularly engage in what Schön and Argyris call *Single-Loop Learning*: they ask what they need to do in order to better achieve their stated goals. While useful to some extent, such activities often take the organisation's goals or mission for granted, therefore carrying the risk of ignoring crucial developments and changes in the organisation's wider context and environment (think Nokia's response to Apple's invention of the smart phone). *Double-Loop Learning* involves a pro-

cess of asking critical questions about the taken-for-granted assumptions the organisation or programme is based upon, enabling re-adjustment and re-invention.

3.1.4. Evaluation standards

Both approaches to evaluation are well-established internationally, and recognised, for example, within the standards of the American Evaluation Association (https://www.eval.org/), the European Evaluation Society (https://www.europeanevaluation.org/), and influential national evaluation associations including the German Evaluation Society (https://www.degeval.org).

3.2. Intended (desired) impact of *TOY to Share, Play to Care*

The original proposal for *TOY to Share, Play to Care* outlines three areas of *intended impact* for the project:

- *Increased access of harder to reach* children and especially migrant and ethnic minority children (0-6) to inclusive and quality ECEC settings through the upscaling of the *TOY for Inclusion* approach
- *Increased knowledge and skills* on how to implement effective community based inclusive ECEC services, amongst educators, leaders of educational institutions, practitioners of the health sector, carers and local policy-makers
- Inclusive and quality community-based ECEC services are embedded in local educational policies.

The three target areas are interconnected and point to the potential groups of *users* of this report beyond immediate project activities and have informed the choice of including *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (Patton et al) into the evaluation framework.

3.3. Impact evaluation (WP6) products and deliverables

As specified in the project proposal, the team based at DCU Early Childhood Research Centre carried out a number of activities over the lifetime of *TOY to Share, Play to Care*:

Deliverable	Completion date
Design the impact evaluation guidelines and tools	March 2019
Inform project partners and LAT partners about impact evaluation approach and process	May 2019
In connection with the team responsible for WP5, engage in data collection for impact evaluation at local and project level	Phase I: May 2019 Phase II: March 2020
Draft preliminary impact evaluation based on initial data analysis (phase I)	December 2019
Draft the impact evaluation report on the TOY for Inclusion approach and its upscaling against the project's objectives and EU policies	September 2020
Draft recommendations for policy and practice at local, regional, national, and EU level	November 2020
Final impact evaluation report including policy recommendations	December 2020

Table 1: Deliverables

4. Methodology and data collection

Building on the initial proposal for the impact evaluation and following introductory discussions with project coordination and project partners at the kick-off meeting in Rome in March 2019, our approach was to centre the evaluation on the perceptions of local stakeholders. In consequence, the general term *impact* is framed in this evaluation as *making a difference in the locality* in relation to the overall aims of *TOY to Share, Play to Care*. In keeping with this overall focus, we organised the collection, analysis and interpretation of data according to three main research questions:

1. **What does impact/making a difference mean to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives i.e. this project?**

    a. **How do you know?**

    b. **For whom?**

2. **What do you envisage will help you make a difference to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?**

3. **What do you envisage will make it difficult to make a difference in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?**

In keeping with the conceptual framework and overall research design of the Work Package–*Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilisation Focused Evaluation*–the type of data that was collected was judged by its potential utility and actual use in the project. To facilitate *Double Loop Learning,* timely feedback was given to partners engaging in the Stakeholder mapping process and partners with responsibility for the development of the templates for monitoring data in the project. In addition, preliminary findings were presented in an interim report that was shared with all partners for comments and feedback.

4.1. Data collection: Phases 1 and 2

The first phase of data collection took place in May 2019 at the *Training of Trainers* event in Sisak, Croatia. During this three-day event, we undertook observations of the training events, conducted semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and task-based interviews with participants. Participants included:

- Project partners from participating countries: Croatia, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey

- New and experienced Local Action Team Co-ordinators

- External evaluator for *TOY for Inclusion Phase II*

- Overall Project Managers

- Communications Officer on *TOY for Inclusion Phase II*

- Trainer

- Romani Community Cultural Mediators

Figure 1 (below) gives examples of the data collection, including documented focus group discussions and task-based activities at the Training of Trainers project event in Sisak, Croatia, in May 2019.

Figure 1: Data collection activities, Croatia, May 2019

Phase 2 of data collection was originally scheduled to take place in March 2020, at a project meeting in Kosice, Slovakia. However, due to the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic the face-to-face meeting had to be cancelled and moved online. As a result of this change, Phase 2 interviews with coordinators of the newly established LATs were conducted online, using Zoom videoconferencing software. For both face-to-face and online engagements with participants, the following data handling protocol was adhered to:

- To increase the reliability of the interview data, interviews were audio-recorded and conducted by the same researcher with a note-taker present. Recordings were transcribed and examined and verified against written notes in order to ensure the validity of participants' responses. This was particularly important due to English being the medium through which the interviews were conducted and many participants having English as an Additional Language.

- The same rigour was applied to the focus group data. Note-takers were present in all focus groups and the data was examined immediately after the focus groups, to assure the accuracy of the representation of responses.

- Task-based interviews and activities were conducted to examine the stakeholder mapping, peer mentoring and monitoring paperwork. This data was organised immediately after the activities in order to increase its reliability.

- Observation data was collected by all researchers through field notes during the training event.

- All data was entered into *QDA miner* qualitative data analysis software to facilitate coding and in-depth analysis across varied data sources.

Table 2 below provides a summary of data collection:

	Experienced LAT co-ordinators	Partners & Others (Romani cultural mediators, trainer etc.)	New LAT co-ordinators	Communication Officer Project Manager External Evaluator	All participants at Training event
Semi-structured Focus Group	√	√	√		
Task-Based Interviews (Stakeholders, Peer Mentoring & Monitoring Data)	√	√	√		
Observation Data					√
Semi-structured Interviews			√	√	

Table 2: Summary of Data Collection and Participants

5. Data analysis and interpretation

The data analysis in this impact evaluation is qualitative and interpretative by design, to ensure the appropriate level of depth required for a complex context like *TOY to Share, Play to Care* (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2006). The research analysis was guided by the conceptual framework of *Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilisation-focused evaluation*, and an inductive process was employed whereby the analysis was driven by the data itself. *Empowerment evaluation* provides participants with opportunities to self-evaluate (Fetterman et al, 1996) and *Utilisation-focused Evaluation* considers how the process of a project from being to end will affect use (Patton, 1986).

A qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, (QDA Miner) was used to assist in the thematic data analysis process. CAQDAS software facilitates data storage, retrieval, coding, comparison and making connections (Patton, 2002). Such software packages enable researchers to develop an accurate and transparent picture of the data whilst also providing an audit of the data analysis process as a whole. Vigilant systems of data collection are required to enable rigorous analysis.

QDA Miner software was used, therefore, to facilitate re-reading, sorting and retrieval of codes and themes to ensure high levels of inter-reliability among the research team. Coding is one of the significant steps taken during thematic analysis to organize and make sense of textual data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data. The analysis was completed, drawing from the six phases of thematic data analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012):

1. *Familiarisation of the data*: The research team immersed themselves in the data emerging from the semi-structured focus-groups, post-it data, the workshop data, the task-based interviews and the observation data (day to day) initially. The interview recordings were re-listened to and transcriptions were read and re-read.

2. *Generating initial codes:* Initial codes of the interview data were developed.

3. *Searching for themes:* The researchers then engaged in a process of 'reflecting upon their actions and values during research...and the effects that they might have' (Robson, 2002, p. 551). The team generated proposed themes and a corresponding codebook was developed.

4. ***Reviewing potential themes:*** The team then worked in pairs and the codes were then applied across all the data (post-it data, semi-structured focus-groups, workshop data, task-based interviews, observation data and semi-structured interviews).

5. ***Defining and naming themes:*** The dataset was further analysed and the codebook further refined.

6. ***Producing a preliminary report:*** Finally, coded and categorised text was exported to Microsoft Excel to allow for coding frequency and selection of illustrative examples. See Figure 1 below for a table demonstrating coding frequency and its variation form Phase 1 to Phase 2
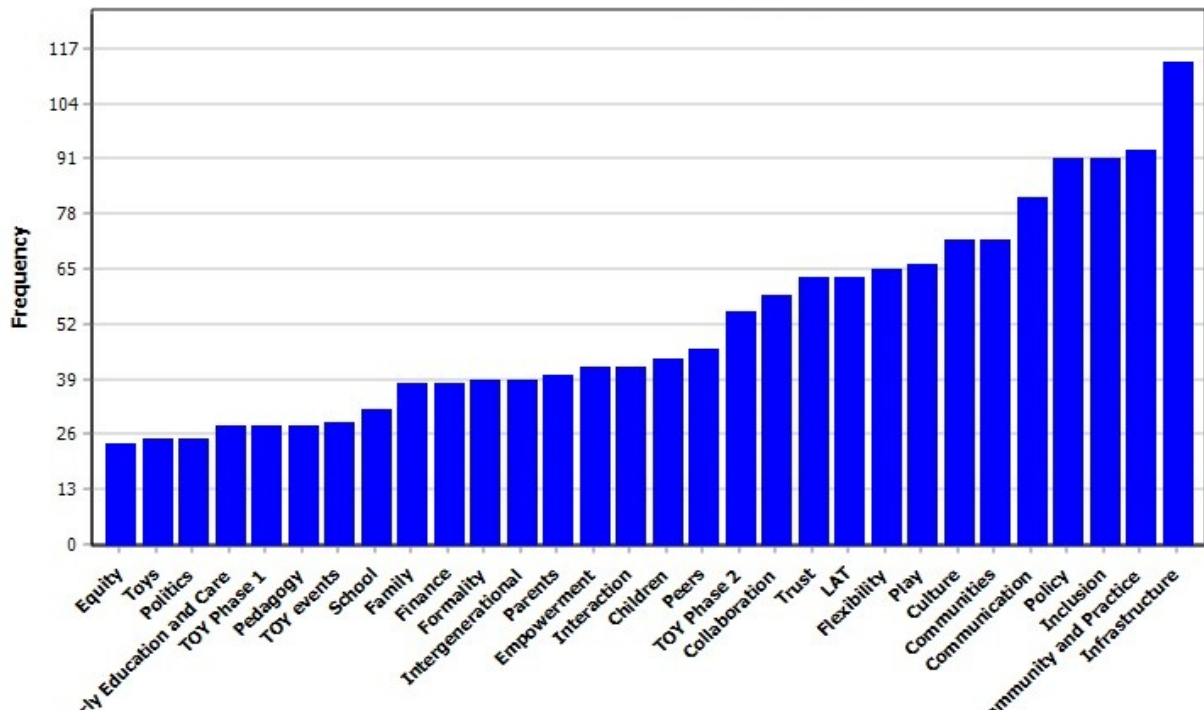
Figure 2: Distribution of initial codes (frequency), May 2019
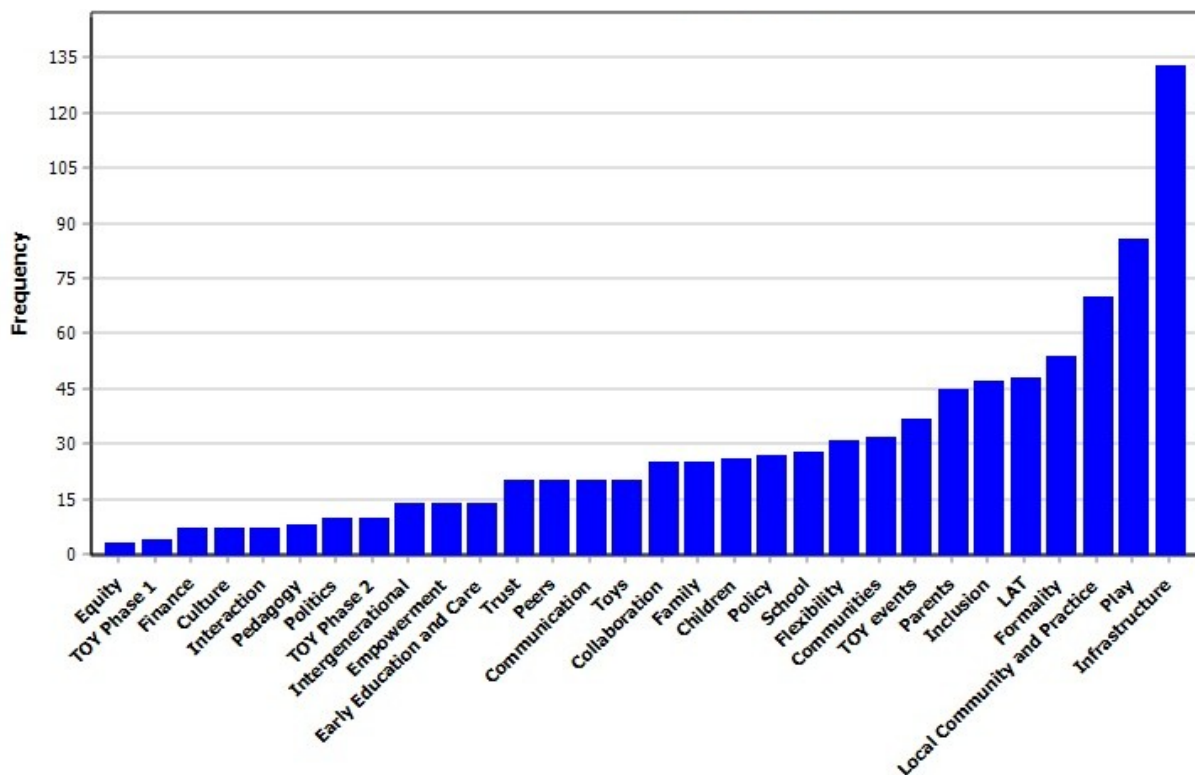

Figure 3: Distribution of initial codes (frequency), March 2020

To illustrate the initial thematic analysis, the most frequent theme in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 is 'Infrastructure'. The theme of Infrastructure refers to the following initial codes: *Space/location, resources, human resources, facilitation by municipalities and policy-makers, transport, access to Play Hubs/communities, routines and 'rules' of Play Hub, operation of Play Hubs*. Beginning with the initial analysis of data collected in Phase 1, this coding was applied across all data sets and identified 114 separate mentions, emerging from 5 data sets. The following are examples of what emerged from those 114 responses during the initial analysis:

Data set	Response
Post–it Data	"People with energy and will."
Semi-structured interview	"Our Play Hub is located in an integrational board department."
Day to Day 1	"LAT team meets once a month. All skilled and all professionals."
Focus-group	"The location is important."
Workshop data	"Cooking pot: Bowl represents LAT team/Play Hub with ingredients such as members, school, teachers, parents, Roma, health sector, social, volunteers."

Table 3: Example of initial data analysis

Following the initial analysis of data collected in Phase 1 (May 2019) and Phase 2 (March 2020), we moved from first-level analysis (e.g., frequency of mentions) to second-level analysis. This involved re-visiting the initial coding and moving to a deeper analytical interpretation of *meaning* and underlying discourses. This enabled us to elicit is how the thematic nodes connect to the main research questions guiding the impact evaluation (see above). This allowed us, for instance, to show the relationship (and possible difference) between values held by the TOY consortium and partners (e.g., children's rights, participation, inclusion) and hands-on priorities arising from the task to set up and/or scale up a community-based early childhood programme under often difficult conditions.

Following transcription of all material (audio-recordings, observation notes, 'post-it notes' generated in task-based activities) and initial coding (see above), the material was condensed into 109 pages for second-level coding and detailed analysis. Figure 4 below gives an example of the template developed and used for this phase of analysis.

Contents

Step 1: Detailed Thematic Analysis

Code	What does impact/making a difference mean to your locality *in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives i.e. this project?* **How do you know?** **For whom?**	What do you envisage will help you make a difference to your locality *in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?*	What do you envisage will make it difficult to make a difference *in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?*
Infrastructure: Headlines: Having a Place Outreach Sustainability Governance/municipality Local needs assessment Online templates HR/Training/Roma Med	**Having a 'place':** the place where somebody will look for the child; they have a place to talk' 'play hubs a good place. A meeting place where for example comes different professionals from social dept., they help to fill documents' Croatia 'in this 2nd phase, the physical space of the Play Hub, and the concept of the kind of relationships we like to have here' 'you can do TFI approach in a mobile Play hub for example' M	**Outreach**: 'they went to Roma settlement, which is a few kms away, we didn't want to do that too often' because Roma settlement is a few kms away, we are always thinking about how to bring them here without car for example now city of Sisak offer that they will pay a bus to bus them from the roma settlement to play hub once a week' 'for first time just give information that play hub exists' Croatia Some LATs have people who are ROMA and that is significant bridge. Starting from what you	**Outreach**: 'they don't know about project' Croatia 'There are many areas that are difficult to reach' 'unidirectional' – rain can get in the way! 'winter was a bit more quiet because of the weather, but by the spring is coming the number of visitors are increasing' 'Non-communication between the two groups, if

Figure 4: Template for detailed thematic analysis

Taking this approach enabled us to clearly link the data, via the two levels of thematic analysis, to the initial re-search questions. The findings of the analysis are summarised in the next section.

6. Findings

As outlined above, we have organised the data and analysis in a way that allows us to connect back to three initial research questions:

1. **What does impact/making a difference mean to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives i.e. this project?**

   a. **How do you know?**

   b. **For whom?**

2. **What do you envisage will help you make a difference to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?**

3. **What do you envisage will make it difficult to make a difference in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?**

We believe the advantages of this approach are twofold:

First, it allows for critical reflection *within* the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* community, to revisit their own processes and make use of it for future adaptations both at local and overarching project level.

Second, linking the analysis to the three clearly defined questions enables interpretation of the findings for *external* use. We address this in the *implications for policy* at the various policy levels for which this project provides relevant learning opportunities.

6.1. Making a difference: stakeholder perspectives

The first research question addresses stakeholders' own views and perceptions on what *making a difference* is all about. Responses to the question frame topics that dominated the conversations in anticipation of the setting up of new Play Hubs (new participants) as well as the reflection on previous experiences (participants from existing Play Hubs). Topics (thematic nodes) that emerged in relation to this first question include:

- **Social cohesion**

(reference to inclusion, exclusion, segregation, desegregation whereby a socially cohesive society is deemed to be one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy)

- **Political impact and policy discourse**

(professional, political governance and policy discourse at local, national and international level)

- **Educational outcomes / school readiness / transition to school**

  (the educational outcomes in the context of early childhood education and primary school children, informative for parents)

- **Varying degrees of formality**

  (Formal and informal structures and processes that aligned with the varying educational settings such as the varying degrees in the formality of the educational activities provided in the Play Hub)

- **Play as informal context for learning and development**

(Play to support learning and development, the benefits of play outside of the context of the Play Hub)

- **Community led / local community involvement**

(Local community and the development of communities of practice within the local community, integration and linkage of community services)

- **Recognition of communities' identity**

(Ethnicity, diversity, minorities, nationalities and cultural values and acceptance)

- **Empowering communities**

(Responsive to local community needs and 'voice' by providing supports and resources to enable transformative, agents in their community)

- **Providing community space**

(An inclusive space for all users/communities in the form of the Play Hub)

- **Strengthening family relationships**

(The outcomes for children in terms of their relationship with their siblings, single parents, parents, grandparents)

- **Safe space**

(For all users in the form of the Play Hub)

- **Sustainability of project**

(Factors that promote the development and maintaining of an inclusive community by providing a community space)

Table 4 below displays some excerpts from the raw data that exemplify these thematic nodes:

What does *making a difference* mean?
The main difference is that parents are spending [time] and playing together with their children. But we don't use [internet], we play together, talk together and I think that they change everything and it's very positive changing
The Play Hub [is seen] as informal, inclusive, community-based that encourages participation in early childhood educational activities... equally for parents as it is for children
Enrolment of children in school with friends in the community
Proactively engaging with policy-makers. TOY for Inclusion [is seen] as a pedagogical approach
…we're stimulating a love of learning in its broadest sense in this Play Hubs. Not learning - just reading, to write, or learning how to count 1-10, we're thinking about a love of learning, a love of reading, a love of story, a love of play.
The place where somebody will look for the child; they have a place to talk
A meeting place where for example, comes different professionals from social department. They meet with families, with parents. They help for example, to fill different documents which is necessary.
I think we probably had to do was put more emphasis on what we were achieving was going to have a positive effect on school education outcomes
We believe that by addressing inclusion in this way children were more likely to have positive school outcomes, measurable school outcomes, success at school, school retention
So many more Roma children were registered in primary school this year or staying in school
The core of our project is the composition of this Local Action Team, which is basically a multi-stakeholder group that is created within the selected communities and is composed by all the actors that are concerned or involved in the promotion of the health, education and wellbeing of young children of any background.
Influence of local politics and authorities in decision making and resourcing
…we have parents that are giving ideas. They want to be active in the Play Hubs.
Children who are not integrated, included in preschool and kindergarten are starting to come in here

Table 4: Stakeholder perspectives on 'making a difference'

6.2. Making a difference: supportive factors

The second research question focuses on supporting factors that, in the perception and experience of participants, contribute to the success of the *Play Hubs*. Reading the data, we identified the following themes (thematic nodes):

- **Outreach**
  (Physical location of TOY project near to and within minority communities, e.g. Roma settlements; Mobile Play Hubs; easy access, e.g. provision of transport to Play Hub)

- **Empowerment**
  (Recruitment of LAT leaders/Play Hub volunteers from within minority groups; parents within Play

Hub offering wider professional services; parents and children being active members of Play Hubs with responsibility for decision making)

- **Trusting relationships**

   (Mutual trust between professionals and community members; professionals' trust in families; families' trust in professionals)

- **Local needs assessment / stakeholder mapping**

   (Play Hubs providing services on local needs-based assessment, rather than wider culture-based assumptions; clear identification of critical stakeholders prior to establishment of Play Hub)

- **Breaking down of stereotypes**

   (Use of cultural mediators from within minority groups; personnel embedded in communities)

- **Language**
   (Can be a barrier to participation, but can also be solution; importance of mastery of local language; translation of materials into all local languages; adapting key goals of the programme to suit audience, e.g. policy-makers, parents)

- **Events to provide focus**

   (Local publicity, e.g. radio; EU events)

- **Engagement with schools/Association with educational settings**

   (Wide acceptability of school as setting; some LAT leaders are education staff; familiarity to parents and children; sustainability physical infrastructure)

- **Integration with community services / municipality**

   (Support from local municipality, e.g. financial; provision of physical space)

- **'Social standing' of personnel**

   (Seen as 'professionals')

- **Professional development**

   (Opportunities for upskilling of volunteers)

- **Influencing local politics / local decision making / flexibility**

   (Decision-making, resourcing; Influence of local politics and authorities in decision making and resourcing)

- **Monitoring templates useful**

   (Usefulness; how templates are used by Play Hubs and LAT)

Included in the thematic nodes listed above are themes that refer to the use of resources that were developed by the project: *Local Needs Assessment / Stakeholder Mapping* (WP3) and *Monitoring Templates* (WP5). They are discussed in a separate section (6.4).

Table 5 (below) shows some examples of the raw data underpinning these themes

What helps *making a difference*?
Close to where families with young children live
We will go to the Roma village with this lady which is with us and they will come to the library with Roma kids'
Hub 3km from Roma village, bus provided and contact with school. Local authority funds bus
For a follow-up children's attendance to our kindergarten as well because it's so easy. It provides us to reach them so easy
We cooperate with other projects
Different nationalities are represented by different members of the Play Hubs.
When you do something at local level, the municipality is more or less involved somehow, the local government
Language is … a solution as common language is important if you can speak the language
Welcome from school principal, Dept. of Ed representation from local municipality
One of them is member of parliament and the other one is also working as a representative in metropolitan municipality
…co-operation with institutions such as schools
…the diversity of the partners, and the context comes in, so what works in a flat complex in the outskirts of Rome may not be what will work in the rural area of northern Croatia, and what will make sense there. There is that flexibility and openness
People with energy and will
Trust was important in allowing the families to use the toys
Stakeholder mapping network was a really good process; it offers opportunities - it needs to happen before each co-ordinator is appointed
Some LATs have people who are Roma and that is a significant bridge. Starting from what you have and who is involved

Table 5: Stakeholder perspectives on supporting factors

6.3. Making a difference: obstacles

Research question three aimed at gathering information about factors that impede and hinder local impact. As with research questions one and two, the topics (thematic nodes) emerging under this heading are based on participants' perceptions and own experiences. Thematic nodes relating to research question three include:

● **Fear / distrust**

(Fear of national institutions; fear of filling forms; fear of punishment if toys are lost; poor relationships between communities; language barriers)

● **Stakeholder aims different from community aims**

(Lack of understanding of the aims of each with the need for relationship building and clear communication)

- **Parents difficult to work with / not wanting their children to mix**

(Acknowledgement that parents can be a hard group to involve; need to understand that stereotypes develop over time, must be challenged and that all parents to feel welcomed)

- **Sustainability**

(Ensuring the Play Hubs continues; the accessibility of the Play Hubs space and importance of outreach - some very segregated families do not want to come to the Play Hubs; both giving information and ensuring that people actively participate)

- **Variation of local contexts**

(All Play Hubss are different in different localities; what worked in the original Play Hubss, may not necessarily work in a different community; the composition of LATs may be different depending on the individual needs in a city versus in a rural community)

- **Access to policy / decision makers**

(Municipality support essential; local government may be elected and may not want to know/make unpopular decisions; needs to be something in it for the municipality; communication key)

- **Cultural understandings**

(Some cultures may be hierarchical, one person may obstruct the work, therefore project staff must be of the community; understanding that there are different beliefs; staff must be knowledgeable about specific cultures, diversity and inclusion; anti-bias education essential)

- **Finance**

(General budgeting of the Play Hubss; budget is restricted; accessible locations are expensive; human resources - requirement for monitoring)

- **Culturally specific resources**

(The images and symbols in the Hubs must reflect the community, e.g., if engaging with the Roma community there is a need for Roma music, poetry and language)

- **Balancing formal and informal education**

(A shared vision among project staff not to become a 'formal' institution (as in full preschool/kindergarten). If the Play Hubs is too strict, then it becomes too formal. The Play Hubs, while a professional service representing something akin to preschool, provides learning through play experiences and offers an entry/exposure/potential to preschool)

- **Staff turnover**

(Adapting partnership membership [people not working out] and the need for flexibility in the composition of LAT with consistency in project staff)

- **Understandings of professionalism**

(Different perspectives from staff, parents and children, individuals seeing things differently)

- **Lack of clarity of goals in relation to families**

(Lack of clarity of achievable goals between those delivering the project and TOY goals, which are to motivate and interact with families)

- **Time**

(It takes time to establish a Play Hub - in some communities, impact is not achieved immediately; time commitment to establishing and meeting LAT; tight schedules in project delivery)

Table 6 (below) provides examples from the raw data underpinning these nodes.

What makes *making a difference* difficult?
They don't know about project
They are not borrowing toys. They think they will break them and that they will be punished
Parents not happy to have children mixing… need to work on stereotype … children are not born with these they develop them over time
There are many areas that are difficult to reach
We would definitely like to engage parents more, and we would really like them to feel welcomed into Play Hub … parents are very hard group to involve
'Unidirectional' – rain can get in the way!
Facilities (lack of them) / there is a struggle for space / the right space and place / location is important / importance of finding a neutral space
Stakeholders aims [are] different to the community / there should be more focus on the relationships and communication between the stakeholders / often asking the same questions, repetitive and tedious
But also you need to be careful that if they [LAT members] are too busy… people might come and go… So instead of having empty meetings it is better then you acknowledge the fact that people might not want to be engaged anymore for any reason. And you manage to be flexible in the composition of the LAT
A few times, they went to Roma settlement, which is few kilometres from here. We didn't want to do that too often because it is also ... / You're always thinking, is it segregated, the community? Or it is not? If it will be all the times that you are coming there, then they will stay there and we wanted them actually to be with others in the Play Hubs
Sustainability / If I think only to this project, for example to this project perspective, it will be one, one and a half year more or less, one year of Play Hub. That's probably this, you will have less this problem. But if you think on a longer perspective, beyond this project. Which I hope they will do because otherwise it was like a lot of wasted resources for me

Table 6: Stakeholder perspectives on impeding factors

6.4. Perceived usefulness of the monitoring framework

As outlined in section 2, this report is part of the comprehensive evaluation framework of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project. Within this framework, the *impact evaluation* focuses on participants' perspectives of what entails *making a difference* for young children, their families and communities in their various contexts represented in the project, including supporting and impeding factors. Included in the data collected with participants are their perspectives on the internal structures set up to support and document the development of the local *Play Hubs*. Within the overall *TOY to Share, Play to Care* context, tools were developed for *Local Stakeholder Mapping* (WP3) and continuous *Monitoring and Documentation* of the activities of the *Play Hubs* (WP5). In line with the aim and conceptual orientation of this *impact evaluation* (Utilization-focused Evaluation) we analysed the data for perspectives on the *use* and *usefulness* of these instruments. That means the *impact evaluation* is interested in documenting whether (or not), and how, the instruments provided by WPs 3 and 5 support project participants in their main goal of *making a difference* and, with a view to extracting possible policy lessons from the project, how their experiences can be put to use for future projects with similar aims.

In general, participants expressed positive views on the monitoring frameworks and the templates provided by WPs 3 and 5. There was an overall agreement that it was useful to have a shared framework to document activit-

ies of the local Hubss, and the templates that were provided for recording attendance and other usage data were welcomed. Repeatedly, participants expressed that collecting and reviewing the monitoring data had been 'revealing', and 'foundational in the development of services'.

However, some critical aspects emerged over the course of the project, as well as suggestions for change and improvement. Participants reflected on the monitoring framework both from a local perspective (usefulness for the development and operation of own *Play Hubs*) and with reference to the overall *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project.

6.4.1. Positive experiences with the monitoring framework

Positive statements about the monitoring framework tend to centre around *planning, organising, communicating and reviewing on one's own practices* and on *reporting local developments to the project coordination and contributing to the evidence base of the overall project*.

Table 7 below shows a selection of quotes that support the usefulness of the monitoring framework.

Monitoring framework: positive aspects
I definitely see it is important and useful because then I put my …. thoughts and LAT thoughts on a paper, and I can look more in depth. So it's definitely helpful for me
But also when I'm writing the monitoring report and evaluation […] I think this is very useful to make some kind of summary overview
You can really extract the visitors, the members, the vulnerable groups, the toys, the accompany-ing adults. You can really extract all the needed data. But then again, it's not too complex. So I think so far it's good
We use this template, and we transform it into an online survey. This way it was very user friendly for us because we got all the data into one Excel table, so it was really a relief. It was really revealing for us to have data in this way
The list gives us an overview and we know what's and when things are in place or lost, it's nice
It's very useful for her, especially when somebody asks were those children there, their headmaster or some leadership in the school, she can confirm that they were visiting, present she shares it on a Google folder and uploads to FB page
We transform it into an online survey. It was very user friendly for us and we got all the data into one Excel table. It was really revealing for us to have the data in this way
We have been collecting data on a three-monthly basis, on a quarterly basis for one year. And we've seen things progressing, dynamics changing and improving, and in some locations the Hubs were serving a very multi-cultural and diverse community
Not only targeting Roma/non-Roma, but already migrants, long-term migrants, new migrants, vulner-able children in general. And we saw from the data that the Play Hub model was actually working for all these different targeted groups and not only for the Roma/non-Roma

Table 7: Positive views on monitoring framework

6.4.2. Critical views on the monitoring framework

Despite the overall positive perspective on the monitoring framework some critical views emerged. They are mainly related to two aspects: 1. Time and workload demands created by both the collection and the analysis of data, and 2. Some more fundamental questions about how (and by whom) the data would be used. Table 8 be-low provides a selection of statements.

Information about families who move away are not being captured in the monitoring tools
I think we should document this to know the family and the children. The children are at least all in one place. And yes, we see how many children have this family and maybe just to support, to offer some as activities or when we see is the age and we do some activities, to get in touch, to think about also is the age of the children not only small, but to combine, to make an activity for all ages.
Large turnover project staff and LATs membership
I have to admit [we] are currently […] really looking into it how to make solid financial construction to hire an assistant for monitoring because now this is really challenging
Fear of Roma community of national institutions
A lot of data being required. Informants {parents] want to know WHY data is being collected. Who is it for? Who will have it? Issue of trust
The need to work on building trust, first before asking more sensitive questions such as: numbers from

different groups
Data about nationalities of students are protected and are not available to us [specific issue in one country]
We don't use this template. A list of members because there are a lot of fear to fill in the lists. Some kind of privately sensitive and because we are start-up phase
You will probably never be told directly […] even here in [location] you need to talk to them quite extensively to get to know that. For example, the Roma community is kind of bossed by one or two men who are deciding what to do and what not to do and their community, those that belong to their community, should do or should not do. All these things, they are not apparent and you need to dig a little bit to discover them. But they affect a lot

Table 8: Critical aspects of monitoring framework

6.4.3. Suggested amendments

Based on their experience with the monitoring framework and tools, participants suggested (or implemented) a several amendments. They are generally pragmatic changes to the way data was recorded with the help of the initial templates provided by the project. Table 9 below provides some examples.

Amendments to monitoring tools
We have an extra chart, because I'm writing the report and I'm summarizing the data, and it's much better for me to calculate the numbers in Excel
And actually, that's also I think a practical thing, that [name] is working in [location] where the Play Hubs is located, and I visit regularly her and the Play Hubs, but I'm sitting in [location], in the office
It's much easier to share an Excel chart than to share those papers, and I think it's very important to record on paper what, who are there and register the people, but when you have to add up the numbers, then it's easier to do it in Excel
And she's using A3 for the big events, but sometimes she cannot record all the names
I think it would be nice to set up a registry, a unified registration for the members
A kind of membership card with basic information about the families, which you can use for handing out the toys
Add a column that says discarded toys because during the play some toys get broken or simply used, so some kind of track
We have created our own Excel tables based on the template A2 and we make our own statistics and compare them about the number of visitors during the last month, the age groups, the numbers of kids
[Name] has a membership form for moms and that is for the same evidence as the toys
[Name] puts it with the pencil next to it with the toolkit so you can't miss it. It's there and you just have to sign, so it's very good…so each time she has the membership list

Table 9: Amendments to monitoring tools

7. Disruption, crises, and resilience: Covid-19

From March 2020, the fast-developing Covid-19 pandemic had serious implications for the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project. As it became impossible to host face-to-face project activities, the gathering of all project participants scheduled for March 2020 in Kosice, Slovakia had to be cancelled and transferred to an online-only event. More importantly, all local activities were severely affected and by mid-March all *Play Hubs* were closed. While effects on local teams and Hubss varied widely between countries, all Local Action Teams de-

veloped creative and innovative responses to the new reality. Local responses to the crisis are documented in a detailed report compiled by the project, beginning in March 2020 (reference / link).

Transcending the specific local responses to the pandemic were a number of fundamental realisations that the *Play Hubs* shared with early childhood in any country affected by the pandemic. In many countries and regions of both the global south and global north, the pandemic compounded existing inequalities and often created new ones. The effects of these inequalities regularly play out in early childhood services, and they severely impede the health, well-being, and realisation of the rights of young children. Regularly, young children, their families and communities are affected by structural inequalities including *lack of access to services, financial resources, healthcare, food and clean water*. None of these inequalities are caused by early childhood programmes, nor can they be resolved by them. In many areas of education teachers and schools did their very best to replace face-to-face teaching with online supports and classes for students. The transition to online supports proved particularly difficult for those working with the youngest children. It is near impossible to provide meaningful early child-hood education and care without physical presence. Instead, early childhood programmes in many countries worked to develop supporting resources for parents, encouraging and enabling them to engage with their chil-dren in fun, interesting and stimulating ways. In the case of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* Hubss this soon re-vealed another layer of inequality: many of the families who are at the centre of attention of the project lack ac-cess to the technology and devices needed to engage with online activities. Digital inequality, that already exis-ted before the pandemic, became a major obstacle for the most marginalised children and their families.

All affected countries realised that early childhood education and care is an essential part of society's critical in-frastructure, the collapse of which has immediate and serious implications for children, families, and the entire society[7]. However, it also became apparent that there are factors that contribute to the resilience of early child-hood programmes and enable them to better cope with disruption. While some of these factors are systemic (i.e. high levels of policy integration at national and regional level, universal and public services, comprehensive, disaggregated data), others are local characteristics of services and their embeddedness in local communities (Guevara & D'Alessandre, 2020; Urban et al., 2020b). In the case of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* the local *Play Hubs* were well placed to extend supports to families and community, demonstrating the value and effectiveness of situated, community-based approaches to early childhood development, education and care. Being embedded in the local communities and oriented towards a shared set of values, *Play Hubs* were able to

- identify urgent needs and prioritise where necessary

- quickly develop creative, flexible and effective support for children and families

- coordinate support with other services and professionals

While the connection with the local community is a general advantage of the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* ap-proach, its effectiveness 'on the ground' depends on external factors as well. Most prominently whether or not the local authority and relevant local actors in the municipality were prepared to proactively seek support from the Hubs.

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[7] In recognition of the critical role of early childhood development, education and care services the T20, one of the official engagement groups of the 'Group of 20' issued a statement titled 'Promoting Social Cohesion during Pandemics'. It emphasizes three critical infrastructure pillars that enable societies to cope with the pandemic: 1. Healthcare, 2. Social Welfare, 3. Early childhood development, education and care (https://t20saudiarabia.or-g.sa).

8. *Making a difference*: what do the findings tell us?

8.1. Making a difference is specific, situated and contextualised–but common dimensions exist

The purpose of this impact evaluation is to document what *making a difference* means from the perspective of project participants in their diverse and specific locations, and in relation to the children, families and communities they serve. The approach is reflected in the guiding questions that explore three interconnected aspects of perceived impact: what does *making a difference* look like? What supports *making a difference*? What makes *making a difference* difficult? The underlying assumption for this approach is that *impact* and *agency* are neither neutral nor universal categories. On the contrary, they are always and inevitably tied to the situations in which participants exert their agency. *TOY to Share, Play to Care* is complex project. As the context for each local Hub is different and unique (in the overall frame of the project), so are participants' perspectives on what matters, what counts, helps and hinders.

However, while different and unique, activities in the Hubss are oriented by a shared framework of values, principles and inclusive practices. This has two main implications:

1. Across the diversity of local interpretations of these principles (the *situatedness* of practice), we can identify common dimensions of impact, or *making a difference*

2. This, in turn, enables the sharing of experiences across differences, and beyond the immediate context of *TOY to Share, Play to Care*.

8.2. Dimensions of impact

The key message from our reading of the data is that the achievements of the local Hubs, and of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* on the whole, rest on three specific but interconnected areas:

Values

First, the dimension of guiding and, most importantly, shared values that can be communicated internally and externally. A clear orientation towards *social cohesion, empowerment*, and *identity and belonging* that underpins all project activities helps to orient and evaluate own practices (i.e. existing Hubss), bring others along (i.e. new Hubss), and communicate a coherent message about the project to external audiences (i.e. policy-makers at various levels).

Relationships

Second, the success of the project unfolds in it focus on relationships, both internally and externally, or *within* the project and *between* actors in the community and beyond. At one level, *TOY to Share, Play to Care* activities are designed to build and nurture relationships with children and families, offering safe and welcoming spaces for everybody. At a second level, project activities quite literally take on the role of Hubss in local networks and relationships *between* actors (institutions, services, professionals) in the community. These typically include schools (the institution or manifestation of the formal education system) and the municipality (the site of policy making).

Structures

The third dimension of critical success factors relates to the structures within which the first two–values and relationships–develop and thrive. Relating to structural factors, two critical elements stand out:

- The ability to maintain a high level of collective professionalism in providing largely informal and low-threshold early childhood services in teams with a wide range of professional backgrounds and levels of formal qualification

- The ability to relate non-formal, community-embedded early childhood education and care activities to the formal education system, i.e. local schools

- The ability to successfully engage with, and get support from, the local municipality and national policy-makers

8.3. Systemic factors

When brought together in one picture, the above dimensions and elements point to a number of systemic factors that either support or hinder local impact. Both sides are present in the *TOY to Share, Play to Care* project (as expressed by participants in the evaluation); they should and can be kept in mind for both future directions the project may take and for the policy lessons that can be learned beyond this specific project (see section 9 below). They include both *soft* (relationships, trust, clarity) and *hard* (resources, access, skills) aspects, with *professionalism* appearing to be key in successfully negotiating the factors.
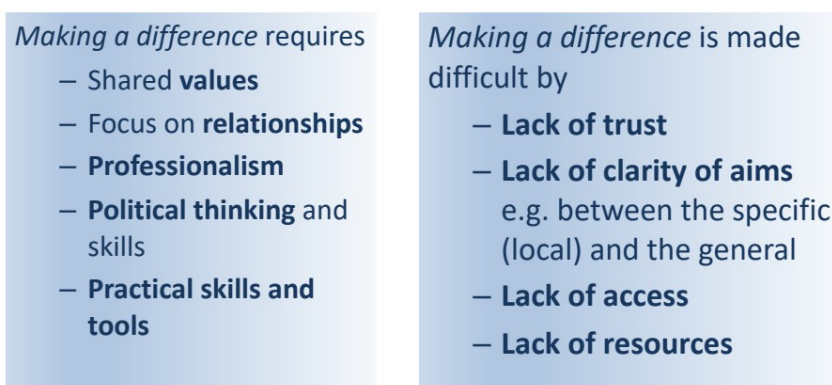
Making a difference requires
- Shared **values**
- Focus on **relationships**
- **Professionalism**
- **Political thinking** and skills
- **Practical skills and tools**

Making a difference is made difficult by
- **Lack of trust**
- **Lack of clarity of aims** e.g. between the specific (local) and the general
- **Lack of access**
- **Lack of resources**

Figure 5: Systemic factors

9. What can we learn from *TOY to Share, Play to Care?* Implications for policy

The experiences of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* point to an array of implications that we believe are highly relevant for policy and practice beyond the immediate context of the project. We outline them here as they form the basis for the policy recommendations in the following section.

First, it is pertinent to underline the challenge and possibility of the approach taken and successfully demonstrated by *TOY to Share, Play to Care*. It lies, we argue, in the ambition to develop and realise shared values, shared knowledge, and shared practices that come together in a collective and recognisable project identity, while at the same time enabling, embracing and empowering diverse (i.e. situated) local interpretations and creative (re)inventions of these shared orientations. As a result, no two *Play Hubs* are the same (each one responds to their specific local context), but all share a recognisable collective identity.

Such diversity can become the source of internal tensions, and often traditional project approaches have tried to prevent or eliminate them by applying strict implementation controls. However, attempts to suppress diversity (local interpretation and adaptation) rarely work and have created a conundrum for those interested in the scalability of project approaches: there is convincing evidence that projects are effective when they are embedded in local communities with their diverse situations, capabilities and needs. Traditionally, this has been seen as an obstacle to the scalability of locally and culturally appropriate solutions. However, the experiences made by *TOY to Share, Play to Care* contribute to a growing body of evidence showing that not only can diversity of local solutions be achieved within a shared framework, but it does indeed increase the impact and sustainability of the project.

It is becoming increasingly clear that in order to be successful, projects that combine local diversity in a shared framework of values and principles require a specific approach to critical reflection across all elements of the project. In an evaluation of early childhood development programmes carried out for the Bernard van Leer Foundation ('The effectiveness initiative') Leonardo Yanez stated that the most effective programmes are those that have space, time and resources for critical reflection built into their approach (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2001). While reflection has long been acknowledged as a critical factor for the success of projects, *TOY to Share, Play to Care* indicates the need for an advanced understanding of the role of critical reflection. While necessary, it is not enough to require project participants to reflect on their own, local practices (or evaluate the 'implementation' of centrally devised programmes at local level). Instead, the project has to introduce measures that ensure learning from local experience is systematically fed back and used to critically question, reframe and recalibrate the assumptions that orient the overall project. Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to this as *double-loop learning* (see section 3 'conceptual approach'). Another way of putting it is to shift the focus of reflection from the question *are we doing things right?* to *Are we doing the right things?*

Both the challenge *and* the possibility for a project like *TOY to Share, Play to Care* arises from this necessary shift from approaches that seek to *implement* programmes to approaches that actively encourage local *interpretation* and situated *meaning-making.*

To systematically learn from these processes will support the development of highly effective *grassroots competent systems*.

Beyond the project context, some obvious challenges for policy-makers arise from such systemic re-orientation of approaches. They include a radical rethinking of *governance* as distributed, something that is intrinsic to the system and all its actors, rather than top-down regulation, steering or control. *Implementation* (of policies and programmes), in scenarios of distributed intrinsic governance, transforms into *interpretation*–i.e. actors exerting judgement and *making sense* of policies and programmes based on their own expertise. This, in consequence, requires approaches to governance and policy implementation that are grounded in *trust* in the creative power, competence, and professionalism of all. Central to achieving this transformation is the systematic introduction– and resourcing–of critically reflective cycles (*double-loop learning*) at all levels of the system including the sphere of policy making.

10.   Policy choices and recommendations

Any attempt to extract general recommendations from the impact evaluation of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* has to be approached with a note of caution. The conclusions we draw from the project are grounded in robust analysis of the data. However, keeping in mind the overall aim of the impact evaluation, they are based on the perceptions of project participants. The impact evaluation has documented these perceptions with an understanding that they are well-informed by participants' professional expertise, knowledge of local situations, and own experience–but remain subjective nonetheless. It is precisely this level of contextualisation that allows for *learning with each other* in the shared frame of *TOY to Share, Play to Care*.

However, there is value in the conclusions we can draw from the evaluation, not least because they support a growing body of evidence that emphasises the importance, effectiveness and sustainability of systemic approaches to early childhood development, education and care services that are locally embedded, culturally appropriate, community-based, while sharing a set of common values of inclusion, children's rights and professionalism. The findings of this evaluation project do not stand alone. Rather, they gain meaning in the context of a solid and growing body of research evidence and policy insights from fields of practice and research including early childhood development, education and care, and systems- and governance theory. The past two decades have seen the emergence of a broad international consensus on the need for systemic thinking and practice (i.e. 'whole-systems approaches'), grounded in local contexts and orientated by shared values. It can be traced back to the first OECD *Starting Strong* reports on early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001, 2006) and resonates with the EU *Quality Targets* (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996) and the more recent *EU Quality Framework* (Council of

the European Union, 2019). The effectiveness of systemic approaches–Competent Systems–has been made evident by the CoRe study (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011; Urban et al., 2012) and has been acknowledged in policy recommendations adopted in the context of the Group of 20 (Urban et al., 2020a, 2020b; Urban, Cardini, & Flórez-Romero, 2018b).

TOY to Share, Play to Care builds on this body of evidence, and adds to it. Considering this wider context for the project, and in consequence its impact evaluation, we put forward a set of recommendations for consideration by policy-makers and professionals engaging in the policy process. The recommendations should be read as pointing towards *policy choices* faced by those engaged in individual and collective decision-making processes. This is to emphasise that while we are faced with similar challenges–e.g. how to address marginalisation and exclusion of young children, their families and communities–our responses to these challenges are never self-evident. They are always the result of choices we make (or allow other to make) and hence *inevitably political*.

We present the following sets of policy recommendations focused on three policy arenas: the local (municipality), the national (also regional or territorial, for instance in federal countries), and the European Union. Yet, they should be read together. Only in conjunction can they connect to effective *grassroots competent systems* that help to deliver more just and equitable outcomes for all children and their families.

Considering the systemic nature of the policy choices there is no hierarchy of recommendations (first do this, then do that…). However, for each policy arena–local, national, EU–we highlight one aspect that, if addressed, will open pathways to realising the entire set of recommendations.

10.1.   Policy choices to be addressed at local level

- Ensure early childhood development, education and care is recognised as priority across municipal departments and agencies

- **Provide spaces for systematic, dialogic, cross-sectoral encounters between stakeholders: community members, professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, policy- and decision makers**

- Consider developing a municipal early childhood strategy, based on local implementation of children's rights and sustainable development goals

- Prioritise, facilitate, resource, and document these processes as integral part of mandatory local (municipal) planning

10.2.   Policy choices to be addressed at National / (federal state) level

- Ensure early childhood development, education and care is recognised as priority across government departments and agencies

- Consider developing a national, whole-of-government, early childhood strategy based on children's rights (UNCRC), the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the right to high quality early childhood development, education and care services for all ('progressive universalism')

- **Combine national guidance (policy frameworks, strategies etc.) with equally strong support for regional and local democracy**

- Resource local processes and local capability building as part of a national strategy

- Introduce and maintain data collection, monitoring and evaluation system that ensures all stakeholders are heard and provides disaggregated data (e.g. on minority and marginalised groups) for forward planning

- Ensure local experiences and solutions are not only documented but systematically evaluated and used for continuous policy and strategy review at national level ('double-loop learning' / cyclical policy-making)

10.3.   Policy choices to be addressed at the level of the European Union

- Focus on integrating fragmented early childhood policy responsibilities (e.g. across Directorates General) encompassing children's rights and well-being, social cohesion, early childhood development, early childhood education and care and infrastructure. A European Union *whole-systems approach* will be particularly important to realise the ambitious *child guarantee* for the European Union.

- **Assume initiative and leadership–internally, towards member states and externally, towards international organisations and forums (e.g. OECD, G20)**

- Prioritise an integrated EU early childhood development, education and care strategy

- Refocus funding streams on shared learning across sectoral, disciplinary, professional boundaries: E.g. multi-dimensional networks of community representatives, local and regional decision makers, practitioners, researchers

- Encourage and resource (fund!) systems research

11.   Concluding remarks

TOY to Share, Play to Care is a project whose time has come. It addresses some of the central questions of our time in relation to the urgent–and broadly acknowledged–need to develop better services for ALL young children. Taking a big picture perspective, the project sits within a global effort to achieve more just and equitable outcomes for all young children, as expressed in Sustainable Development Goal 4.2. Within its remit, and with limited time and resources, *TOY to Share, Play to Care* participants have made a significant contribution to achieving SDG4.2. In addition, experiences from the project add to an emerging and critical consensus: that sustainable and equitable early childhood development, education and care programmes of high quality are **enablers**. They are critical for the success or failure of the entire SDG framework; their existence (or absence) has huge implications not only for young children, but for entire communities, societies, and ultimately the survival of humanity in the face of self-inflicted crises. Seen from an ethical and philosophical perspective, the project is concerned with questions of equity, social justice, and rights. From a systemic perspective, questions of governance and the interrelationship between policy making and practice have framed project development and project activities. Most of these critical issues are being addressed in various forums in different ways. The unique contribution of *TOY to Share, Play to Care* is that it approaches them with a clear intention of changing children's lived experiences, on the ground, and driven by local actors and professionals that share common values despite their specific and widely diverse local contexts. We believe that documenting their perspectives on what *making a difference* for young children, from birth, is about can make an important contribution to a discussion that has only begun to reach the attention it deserves by the public and by policy. The critical value of that contribution, we are convinced, lies in its concreteness: early childhood professionals and advocates reporting and *making sense* of their own experiences.

> *"Different tomorrows are possible. The struggle is no longer reduced to either delaying what is to come or ensuring its arrival; it is necessary to reinvent the future. Education is indispensable for this reinvention."*
> Paulo Freire

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