

Realignment public policies for greater effectivity in early childhood

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Executive Summary

This brief aims to support a decision about Early Intervention in Childhood (ECI), essential to ensure the healthy development of children with special needs or at risk of developmental delays. We want to contribute to the development of public policies that strengthen System EIC. Existing scientific literature demonstrates the first years of life are crucial for child growth and development, impacting the entire life cycle. An adequate intervention, at the right time, can neutralize inequalities and difficulties, regardless of their ethology.

Recommendations

- (1) Strengthen the ECI Workforce;
- (2) Strengthen Infrastructure and Material Resources;
- (3) System functioning and Accessibility;
- (4) Raise Public Awareness (Professionals, Family and Community Engagement);
- (5) Monitoring and Evaluation tools.

Recipient(s) of the policy brief

National Early Childhood Intervention System (SNIPI); Minister of Health; Minister of Work, Solidarity and Social Security; Minister of Education; Municipalities and Municipal; Local Health Units; Non-governmental organization (NGO's)

Introduction and Problem Statement

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is essential to promote the healthy development of children with special needs or at risk of developmental delays. Scientific evidence demonstrates that early interventions can mitigate developmental difficulties, foster inclusion, and reduce social inequalities (Britto et al., 2017; Engle et al., 2007; World Health Organization [WHO] et al., 2018). At the European level, EIC is recognized as a policy priority. It was highlighted in the Hélios II Programme (1993–1996) (European

Commission, 1996) and in the 1998 European Agency report on the state of the art of EIC across Europe (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 1998). Foundational documents such as the Euryloid Manifesto (European Association on Early Childhood Intervention, 1991), provided crucial guidance on the theoretical, political, and practical development of EIC, proposing measures to improve its effectiveness and equity. In Portugal, despite significant progress in recent decades, challenges remain, including

regional inequalities in access, limited resources, and difficulties in coordinating health, education, and social security services (Report on Children in Need Across Europe, 2022). The National Early Childhood Intervention System (SNIPI) plays a central role in providing early support for children with developmental risks or difficulties. However, structural, regional, and operational barriers still hinder its effectiveness. In 2023, SNIPI provided support to 27,819 children and families through 155 Local Intervention Teams (ELI) and 1,664 professionals, but with marked regional disparities. Strengthening interministerial collaboration and adapting to the new Local Health Units framework are crucial to ensure equitable and efficient service delivery nationwide (SNIPI, 2024) (Table 1).

Regarding SNIPI (2024), the number of children awaiting intervention, in relation to the total number of children referenced, a total of 3,517 (32%) (at the national level) were waiting for intervention. Of these, 36% were waiting for the first contact on December 31st, 30% waiting for the evaluation to be completed and 34% waiting for direct and regular intervention (SNIPI, 2024, p. 18). An observational study conducted in 2025 with ELI teams in Portugal shows that professionals perceive the same response-related problems previously identified, underscoring the need for continued improvement in service delivery (Costeira et al., 2025; manuscript in preparation).

SCR	N.ºELI	Children Supported	Total Referrals in the Year	Direct Intervention	Monitoring	Referral	HR	FTE	Average Cases per FTE	Missing FTE	Cases Waiting for Regular Direct Intervention	Referrals Waiting for Intervention	PS (%)
North	40	7399	3241	5491	1908	2364	394	254.44	21.6	168.36	515	1287	60
Center	42	4279	1697	3813	466	1268	381	179.28	21.3	65.24	220	500	63
LTV	36	11756	4024	7875	3880	3120	476	332.57	23.7	339.20	242	1008	50
Alentejo Region	32	2594	1040	2278	316	885	276	190.57	12.0	-42.34	70	352	129
Algarve Region	5	1791	893	1491	300	572	137	52060	28.3	49.74	148	370	51
Total	155	27.819	10.895	20.948	6.870	8.209	1.664	21	580,2	1.195	3.517	1.664	64%

Legend:
 SCR – Regional Coordination System
 No. of ELI – Number of Local Early Intervention Teams
 Children Supported – Children Supported
 Total Referrals in the Year – Total Referrals in the Year
 Direct Intervention – Direct Intervention
 Monitoring – Monitoring
 Referral – Referral
 HR – Human Resources
 FTE – Full-Time Equivalent
 Average Cases / FTE – Average Cases per FTE
 FTE Missing – Missing FTE
 Cases Waiting for Regular Direct Intervention – Cases Waiting for Regular Direct Intervention
 Referrals Waiting for Intervention – Referrals Waiting for Intervention
 Service Standard (PS) – Service Standard

Figure 1 – Early Childhood Intervention / SCR 2023

Fonte / Source: https://snipi.gov.pt/sites/default/files/2024-09/Relat%C3%B3rio%20de%20Atividade%20SNIPI%202023.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Analysis / Key Findings

The findings reinforce the importance of continuing to invest in research and public policies that enhance and expand ECI, aiming not only to improve individual outcomes for children but also to promote a more equitable and inclusive society. Based in ECI, several fundamental aspects can be synthesized as

main findings: (1) Strengthen the ECI Workforce; (2) Strengthen Infrastructure and Material Resources; (3) System Functioning and Accessibility; (4) Raise Public Awareness (Professionals, Family and Community Engagement); (5) Monitoring and Evaluation tools

Policy Options and Recommendations

In Portugal, public policy for the ECI context must prioritize the following points:

(1) Strengthen the ECI Workforce:

- ⊕ Ensure equal access to standardised, high-quality training programmes for all professionals involved in early childhood Intervention (ECI) system, regardless of region or sector.
- ⊕ Promote continuous professional development through regular, updated training courses for health, education, and social services professionals, focusing on evidence-based practices, family-centred approaches, and multidisciplinary collaboration.
- ⊕ Create digital courses for professionals and families on child development and intervention strategies.
- ⊕ Improve workforce stability by offering incentives that encourage professionals to remain in underserved or remote regions. This may include stable employment contracts, competitive salaries, career progression opportunities, and additional benefits for working in priority areas.
- ⊕ Strengthening supervision and professional support by creating structured systems for mentoring, peer interdisciplinary team meetings to enhance practice quality and reduce burnout.
- ⊕ Promote research and innovation by supporting partnerships with universities and research centers, enabling professionals to contribute to and benefit from ongoing studies in early intervention.

(2) Strengthen Infrastructure and Material Resources:

- ⊕ Invest in technological and material resources, ensuring all teams have access to adequate software, hardware, and digital tools that support assessment, monitoring, communication, and inter-agency coordination.
- ⊕ Implement a centralised digital system to facilitate the sharing of information among health, education, and social security

sectors. This national digital platform should be enabled to share information among professionals and services, ensuring the development of integrated intervention plans.

- ⊕ Expand the use of digital technologies to provide services in remote areas (i.e., videoconference).

(3) System Functioning and Accessibility:

- ⊕ Simplify administrative referral pathways across health, education, and social services to ensure that families can access early intervention support quickly and with minimal bureaucratic burden. This includes facilitating early identification, timely referrals, and seamless coordination between agencies, allowing all relevant stakeholders to refer to new cases.
- ⊕ Strengthen interagency coordination mechanisms to ensure consistent referral pathways, timely assessments, and effective case management.
- ⊕ Expand the use of digital technologies to provide services in remote regions.
- ⊕ Offer financial support for transportation, treatments, or necessary equipment for children and families with low incomes.
- ⊕ Encourage collaborations between local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and health Units.
- ⊕ Fund studies on the long-term impacts of early intervention in Portugal, encouraging the development of new evidence-based approaches.

(4) Raise Public Awareness (Professionals, Family, and Community Engagement):

- ⊕ Launch national campaigns to educate teachers and families to identify early signs and refer children to appropriate services.
- ⊕ Launch national campaigns to inform families about the benefits of early intervention.
- ⊕ Develop parenting programs to help families recognize early signs of developmental delays.

- ⊕ Involve local communities in childhood support programs (increase compassionate communities in early intervention) or volunteer networks or support groups to assist families with children in early intervention.

(5) Monitoring and Evaluation tools:

- ⊕ Define clear and cross-sector performance metrics to assess the impact of early childhood intervention services, including indicators related to child developmental progress, family well-being, service accessibility, and interagency coordination.
- ⊕ Promote regular audits and external evaluations to identify best practices, monitor compliance with national guidelines,

and systematically address areas requiring improvement.

- ⊕ Systematically document family feedback, ensuring that families' experiences, perceptions of support, and satisfaction levels are central components of service evaluation and continuous quality improvement.
- ⊕ Implement continuous data collection systems that allow local, regional, and national stakeholders to monitor outcomes over time and support evidence-based decision-making.
- ⊕ Develop standardized reporting tools to ensure consistency, comparability, and transparency across different regions and sectors.

Conclusão

The enhancement of SNIPI in Portugal is not only a matter of social justice; it is a strategic investment in the country's future. Ensuring fair access and more efficient service delivery in the early years can help reduce long-term inequalities and improve outcomes for children and families.

The evidence highlights several areas where change is needed: workforce capacity, resources, service organization, public awareness, and monitoring. Progress in these

areas would contribute to a more coherent and responsive national system, aligned with European priorities such as the European Child Guarantee.

Further analysis of the financial implications of these measures is essential to support a well-informed policy decision. Even so, the opportunity to strengthen ECI in Portugal is clear, and timely action could make a meaningful difference in the lives of thousands of children.

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