



© dimitrisvetikas1969



25 years for
Early Childhood
Development

ANNUAL REPORT 2023

A network in action for young children

02 CONTENTS

WELCOME MESSAGE	03
ABOUT ISSA	04
ISSA Strategy 2024-2028	
The ISSA Community	
COLLABORATIVE IMPACT	10
Expert Interventions	
Large Scale Initiatives	
COLLECTIVE LEARNING	28
Connecting: convening, supporting, and influencing	
Galvanizing and Sharing Knowledge & Expertise	
ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION	34
ISSA Board	
FINANCIAL STATEMENT 2023	36

It is with great pride that we present the Annual Report for 2023, showcasing the ISSA Network's remarkable achievements. At the heart of our mission is a steadfast commitment to ensuring a brighter future for every child by advancing holistic early childhood development. We strive to strengthen the ecosystem by working locally and regionally with all actors across sectors to address key issues, establish equitable services, and build a skilled workforce. Throughout 2023, our network, partners, and generous funders again joined forces to drive meaningful progress on aspects of early childhood development, of which this report provides but a glimpse.

Our efforts are guided by a vision of inclusivity, innovation, and excellence. These include advocating for strategic public investments that prioritize early childhood development in public policies, the Europe-wide *First Years First Priority* campaign, and enhancing young children's well-being through the Health Systems for Early Child Development

Initiative. Our initiatives, such as Primokiz, Ukraine Response, REYN and the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, underscore our commitment to collective learning, capacity building, and fostering diversity and inclusion within the early childhood community and field. Further, through tailored, expert interventions, we have guided ministries and offered capacity-building support, driving positive change at local, regional, and global levels. As we navigate new opportunities and challenges, our refreshed strategy for 2024–28 reflects our drive toward transformative change and ensuring a brighter future for every child.

We are grateful to all network Members, partner organizations and supporters who contributed to our success. Your dedication and passion inspire us to push boundaries and continue towards a more just and equitable world for each young child. Explore this report and join us in celebrating the remarkable impact of our collective efforts.

Leiden, June 2024



Henriette Heimgaertner
Board President



Liana Ghent
Executive Director

HARNESSING EXPERTISE AND COLLABORATION: TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS FOR EVERY CHILD

Our vision is a society where all stakeholders – families, communities and professionals – work together to ensure that each child reaches their unique full potential and embraces values of social justice, equity and democracy.

ISSA is a leading international learning community and dynamic member association, powered by Europe's and Central Asia's foremost early childhood experts. Our shared, unwavering goal is to ensure that every child reaches their full potential. With a steadfast commitment to advancing early childhood development based on principles of inclusivity and equity, we champion holistic and integrated systems, policies, and high-quality services for all young children.

In fostering purpose-driven collaborations among members, partners, and supporters, ISSA creates a collective synergy that significantly amplifies our impact on early childhood development in diverse, dynamic, and multi-faceted environments. Our expertise lies in devising and implementing evidence-based solutions customized to meet distinct localized needs, distinguishing us for our ability to foster trust and resilience. Moreover, we excel in generating and sharing new knowledge and fostering innovations focused on transforming early childhood systems, thereby ensuring improved outcomes for all.



Mission

We are an international learning community powered by leading early childhood experts in Europe and Central Asia. We unite and support professionals and partners to deliver equitable, high quality early years services, that promote the development of the whole child across all domains. We constructively challenge existing knowledge and practice and co-construct more effective approaches and models.

Shared Purpose

ISSA is a network of 100 member organizations committed to sustaining and expanding a movement for inclusive, high-quality systems, services, and policies for children and their families to ensure that all children have the best start in life.



ISSA STRATEGY 2024-2028

In 2023, ISSA Members came together to craft a revitalized strategic vision. It emphasizes the power of our network to cultivate a resilient, inclusive, and dynamic ecosystem for early childhood development. This vision propels us to adapt and thrive in the face of evolving global challenges, ensuring every child's potential is nurtured and optimized.

Every five years, ISSA embarks on a strategic planning cycle to reflect on past impacts, lessons learnt, and to enhance the way we serve the early childhood development field. In 2023, we noted how ISSA was able to navigate global challenges, including the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, by leveraging the collective strength and adaptability of our network. Our participatory approach to strategy development fosters diverse insights and focuses on our core strengths: peer learning, distributed leadership, and strategic partnerships. This refreshed strategy, rooted in collaboration, reaffirms our dedication to equitable early childhood policies and services. It amplifies our collective impact and unites Members across Europe and Central Asia to work on improving the lives of young children.

What's new in our strategic direction

The strategic shift takes a two-pronged approach that both strengthens a network mindset at all levels and positions ISSA as an impactful network that promotes quality, equitable, integrated early childhood systems and services. This approach entails:

- empowering Members to leverage the network through distributed leadership and collaboration.
- emphasizing an ecosystem paradigm that promotes an integrated approach to policies and services.
- promoting geographic and thematic diversity among our membership.
- innovating by using cross-sectoral approaches to improve early childhood policies, programs, and services.
- building alliances and acting as a catalyst while participating in multi-sectoral initiatives and related movements to promote ECD regionally and beyond.

Through this approach, we also seek to yield benefits to our Members. These include synergy, peer learning, innovation, resilience, cross-sectoral collaboration, participation in regional initiatives, engagement with diverse Members, elevating ECD in governmental and other agendas, and driving systemic change. Visit the ISSA website for more details about the strategy, goals, objectives, and mechanisms we will use.

2024-2028 Goals & Objectives

Goals	Collaborative Infrastructure	Provide a strong collaborative infrastructure to empower members of our growing network in their work to strengthen early childhood systems with innovative approaches, noteworthy practice and cross-country learning.
	Holistic ECD	Engage with or lead initiatives to advance the network’s shared purpose around holistic ECD, competent early childhood systems which provide quality, equitable and integrated services for all young children and their families, and a well-trained, motivated and diverse workforce which offers high-quality services for children from birth to the age of 10.
Objectives	Convene, support and influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participate in order to lead (multi)sectoral initiatives and related movements to promote the importance of ECD. ▪ Provide opportunities for Members to learn, cooperate and innovate. ▪ Seek stronger diversity among Members and partners to be able to pursue a shared purpose.
	Mobilize and share knowledge and expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthen ISSA’s learning community of engaged and informed Members, with a network mindset. ▪ Strengthen the role of the ISSA Network Hub as knowledge broker/generator, facilitator and catalyst in (multi)sectoral and cross-disciplinary initiatives promoting quality and equity in the early years. ▪ Create opportunities for commercial and philanthropic propositions.
	Improve and grow capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthen skills for recruiting, retaining, and valorizing a diverse membership. ▪ Align the ISSA Network Hub’s communications competencies with the network’s needs and ISSA’s positioning. ▪ Strengthen the ISSA Network Hub’s entrepreneurial skills set and mindset.
	Ensure the delivery of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthen ISSA’s brand. ▪ Strengthen our resources for communications and program delivery.

THE ISSA COMMUNITY

As a membership association, ISSA is powered by the leading Early Childhood Development (ECD) experts in Europe and Central Asia. Members from 41 countries, mostly in Europe and Central Asia, are part of the ISSA community.

These member organizations represent a wide variety of actors in the ECD field – NGOs, professional associations, academic institutions, public bodies and international organizations. In 2023, ISSA welcomed 11 new organizations from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine and the United Kingdom to the Network, ending the year with 94 member organizations.

New members in 2023

- All Digital, Belgium
- Eurochild, Belgium
- Kali Sara – Roma Information Center, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Platform for ECD, Czech Republic
- Carpathian Foundation, Hungary
- Community Educational Foundation “School for All”, Kazakhstan
- NGO Open Hearts, Tajikistan
- NGO Nuri Hidoyat, Tajikistan
- Charity Fund Early Intervention Institute, Ukraine
- NGO Labor and Health Social Initiatives, Ukraine
- Think Equal, United Kingdom

Membership diversity

NGO	63
University/research	9
Professional association	8
Early childhood service provider	5
International organization	4
Governmental / public body	3
Private company	2
Total	94

ISSA's membership base at the end of 2023

	No of countries	Members
European Union	19	48
Rest of Europe and Central Asia	17	41
Other parts of the world	5	6
Total	41	94

Global footprint of ISSA members in 2023



Beyond the ISSA Secretariat's role for growing and maintaining the member association, we also advance early childhood development through strategic programmatic initiatives and expert consultancy services to create meaningful, systemic change across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Large-Scale Initiatives

We regularly engage in partnership initiatives, developing innovative, evidence-based solutions and practices that address the needs of early childhood development. Our collaborative efforts with policymakers, local organizations, international agencies and foundations, academics, and practitioners ensure that our initiatives are well-rounded and impactful. We design, facilitate, and implement interventions that drive meaningful change at national, regional, and global levels, focusing on building comprehensive, inclusive, and integrated systems that promote the well-being and development of all children. Key components of these initiatives include capacity building, advocacy, training, and the development of essential frameworks, guidelines, toolkits, reports, and other resources.

Tailored Consultancy Services

Our highly skilled team offers tailored consultancy services to members, partners, and other clients, delivering customized technical assistance to meet specific needs. We specialize in enhancing service quality, developing frameworks that promote inclusive policies, and creating customized training programs. Additionally, we support local governments with tools, capacity building, and targeted projects focused on early childhood development. By addressing unique challenges and opportunities, our place-based interventions are designed to be both effective and sustainable, empowering local actors and ensuring long-lasting benefits for the communities we serve.



TAILORED CONSULTANCY SERVICES IN 2023

With 25+ years of expertise in early childhood development, ISSA stands out as a premier service provider with a holistic, integrated approach to improving ECD systems. Our team of highly skilled experts delivers bespoke technical assistance and consulting services, enhancing service quality, developing inclusive policies, and collaborating with local governments. In 2023, ISSA partnered with various early childhood organizations to improve ECEC services in diverse contexts, demonstrating our ability to execute impactful, tailored interventions.

System-level capacity building

ECD Workforce

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, ABU DHABI EARLY CHILDHOOD AUTHORITY

Development of the Professional Development Tool (PDT), and the Guidelines for the usage of the Tool operationalizing the ECD competencies to foster self-improvement among ECD professionals and encourage professional growth.

Home-visitation systems

TURKMENISTAN, UNICEF

In cooperation with the consulting group, Curatio Sarl, we conducted an assessment of existing home-visiting services in Turkmenistan, created home-visiting cards to guide home visits, formulated a home-visiting training package, trained professionals, and contributed to the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Training of professionals

Step by Step methodology

BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA, ISSA MEMBER CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES, STEP BY STEP

The Regional Training on Child-Centred, Democratic Classrooms was delivered to ISSA Members from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia. The training session was hosted by the Center for Educational Initiatives, Step by Step, in October 2023.

Crisis response

SLOVAKIA, ISSA MEMBER SKOLA DOKORAN

A master training program, *Engaging parents and fostering outdoor play*, was provided for staff members from six non-formal Play Hubs that opened in 2022. Financial support came from the UNICEF country office in Slovakia. The program was aimed at supporting the workforce serving young refugee children and families who had fled the war in Ukraine.

LARGE SCALE INITIATIVES

PUBLIC INVESTMENT FOR THE EARLY YEARS

The First Years First Priority Campaign

Ensuring a fair start for every child in Europe

Launched in 2020 across Europe, many policies across various sectors can significantly impact upon young children's development and well-being. *The First Years First Priority* campaign advocates prioritizing young children and their families in public investment and measures in Europe. It looks specifically at the youngest children (from birth to the age of three) and the ones in the most vulnerable conditions. These include Roma, migrants and refugees, those at risk of poverty and in alternative care, and children with disabilities. The campaign aims to ensure these children with the best opportunities to thrive through integrated and comprehensive approaches.

Participating ISSA Members

- For Our Children Foundation, Bulgaria
- Trust for Social Achievement, Bulgaria
- Ensemble pour la Petite Enfance, France
- Centro per la Salute del Bambino, Italy
- Centrul Step by Step, Romania

first years
first priority

ISSA Partner



Associate partners



Contact

Francesca Colombo,
Program Manager, ISSA
fcolombo@issa.nl

Our intervention

Evidence gathering and development of advocacy tools

Building on the previous year's achievements, ISSA in 2023 conducted desk research and collected positive practices from the campaign's National Coordinators. This was done in close collaboration with Eurochild and allied networks. It resulted in the production of **three new thematic papers** focusing on young children and their families who face particular and intersecting exclusion, disadvantage and discrimination: [young refugee and migrant children](#), [young children with disabilities](#), and [young Roma children](#).

Advocacy events and actions

The *First Years First Priority* campaign partners participated in a [high-level meeting](#) of Child Guarantee National Coordinators that led to the Valencia Declaration, aimed at combating child poverty and early childhood inequalities.

Shaping policy

The *First Years First Priority* campaign reached a significant milestone when the European Parliament adopted the '[Children First – strengthening the Child Guarantee, two years on from its adoption](#)' resolution, incorporating numerous recommendations from campaign partners on the critical importance of investing in early childhood. This achievement not only validates the campaign's efforts, but also sets a powerful precedent for future advocacy work in early childhood development across Europe.

Impact in 2023

- 11 National Coalitions
- 5 ISSA Members
- 3 Thematic papers
- 2 Position Papers
- 1 Policy Briefing
- 1 Manifesto for EU elections



RESPONSIVE LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Primokiz

*Promoting comprehensive early childhood services
in highly challenging circumstances*

Launched in 2019, Primokiz is an evidence-based program licensed to ISSA from the Jacobs Foundation. It enhances the local capacity of municipalities to strategically build and sustain local early childhood systems that are well-coordinated, intersectoral, comprehensive, inclusive and responsive to the communities they serve. In 2023, the ISSA Network actively contributed to sustaining and strengthening communities and local systems of ECD in the face of adversity through the implementation of the Primokiz approach.

Participating ISSA Members

- Partners Hungary Foundation, Hungary
- Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland
- Centrul Step by Step, Romania
- Wide Open School, Slovakia
- Step by Step Centre for Quality Education, Slovenia
- Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, Ukraine

**Funder****Contact**

Mihaela Ionescu,
Program Director, ISSA
mionescu@issa.nl

Our intervention

The ISSA Network's intervention has focused on strengthening the capacity of local governments in multiple countries to strategically design and deliver services for young children and their families by transferring know-how to Members and sub-licensing them to use the Primokiz approach.

Knowledge transfer

Leveraging past experience implementing the Primokiz approach in Romania and Slovenia, ISSA organized a [workshop](#) in February 2023 in Bucharest to transfer the license to ISSA Members in four countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine). This workshop emphasized the importance of an integrated, responsive, and cross-sectoral approach to ECD services at the municipal level, including health, education, and social services.

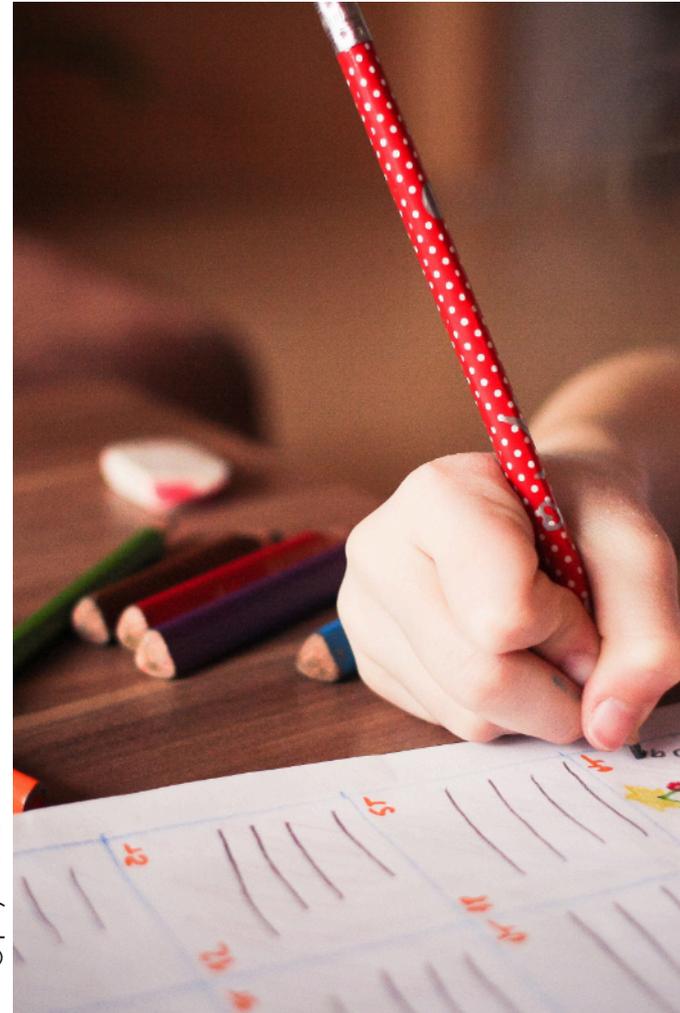
Piloting

In 2023, ISSA piloted the Primokiz approach in eight Hungarian municipalities, with significant results. It unlocked community potential, fostered cross-sector collaboration and coordination, enhanced social dialogue, promoted understanding of ECD, and improved local ownership and sustainability. Additionally, it elevated the professional recognition of ECD, enhanced inclusion of vulnerable groups, and implemented integrated early childhood strategies.

Impact in 2023

8 New pilot municipalities in Hungary

6 ISSA Members licensed



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Romani Early Years Network Initiative (REYN)*Spotlighting the needs of young Roma children*

Launched in 2012, the Romani Early Years Network (REYN) facilitates learning, sharing, knowledge creation, advocacy, and collaboration on various issues affecting young Roma children. To address the lack of evidence on young Roma children in Europe and to better understand their status and needs, REYN partnered with the University of Barcelona in 2021 to launch a unique research project. This comprehensively examined the situation of young Roma children and their families in 11 countries.

Participating ISSA Members

- Kali Sara – Roma Information Center, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Trust for Social Achievement Foundation, Bulgaria
- Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia
- Partners Hungary Foundation, Hungary
- Associazione 21 luglio, Italy
- Kosovo Education Center (KEC), Kosovo
- Association of Pedagogic Assistants, Serbia
- Wide Open School, Slovakia
- Educational Research Institute (ERI), Slovenia
- Transcarpathian Regional Charitable Foundation "Blaho", Ukraine

Contact

Aljosa Rudas,
Program Manager, ISSA
arudas@issa.nl

**ISSA Partners****Funder**

Our intervention

Building evidence for informing policy

In 2023, the REYN Early Childhood Research Study (REYN Study) was launched to collect evidence on the status of young Roma children in Europe and to support responsive and transformative policies and programs. The Study has not only provided comprehensive insights, but has also fostered valuable partnerships, paving the way for an increased focus on the early development of Roma children and the development of resources for them.

Data on key areas impacting Roma children's development

The [REYN Early Childhood Research Study](#) entails a European analysis of 11 countries and offers a comprehensive understanding of the multi-layered and intersectional nature of the challenges faced by young Roma children and their families.

Informing and inspiring transformative actions that prioritize young Roma children

- [Unlocking the Potential of Young Roma Children in Europe](#), hosted by Dr Milan Brglez, Member of the European Parliament during Roma Week in Brussels, organized by ISSA, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Eurochild, and the Minority Initiative.
- [Inclusion of Roma children in Early Childhood Education and Care](#), an online event aimed at local governments and municipalities, recognizing their role in enhancing opportunities for marginalized groups, including Roma. This event was organized by Eurocities and UNICEF.

Impact in 2023

11 Countries

10 ISSA Members

9 Partnerships

1 multi-country research study



DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Diversity+

Fostering inclusive and respectful early childhood education and care practices

Launched in 2020 with the belief that high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care is an essential foundation for **every** child's successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development, and future employability. The three-year Diversity+ project is dedicated to strengthening early childhood care and education (ECEC) services, fostering accessible, inclusive, bias-free and respectful diversity practices.

Participating ISSA Member

- Wide Open School, Slovakia



© Alexas_Fotos

**ISSA Partners****Funder**

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

**Contact**

Zorica Trikić,
Senior Program Manager, ISSA
ztrikic@issa.nl

Our intervention

Capacity building and collective learning

In partnership, ISSA has generated new learning tools and facilitated knowledge sharing in varying formats to develop governance, benchmarking, recognition and professionalization tools within ECEC. The partnership was awarded a 100/100 score from the Italian Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE for outstanding efforts in promoting diversity and inclusion.

The **Diversity+ Toolkit** is a [set of tools](#) to strengthen ECEC professionals in diverse early childhood education settings. The toolkit was downloaded more than 800 times and translated into six languages with growing requests for translations to additional languages. It includes:

- [Diversity+ Serious Game](#), an innovative online game-based tool with a set of 30 scenarios to help ECEC practitioners in their professional development, solving practical challenges related to diversity inclusion and working with children on recognizing and addressing biases, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion.
- [eBook](#), and [Charter](#), a set of minimum requirements that ECEC services have to meet to accommodate different types of diversity.
- [Footprint Assessment Tool](#), an interactive digital tool to support ECEC officers to assess current services and understand the necessary steps to make their provision more inclusive.
- [Diversity+ Ambassador in ECEC environments](#), profiles the key knowledge, skills and attitudes that an ECEC practitioner needs to respond to the individual and group needs of children from different backgrounds.

Curated and disseminated content through various channels including blogs, social media, newsletters and [YouTube playlists](#) (201 videos shared).

Impact through 2023

800+ Downloads

16 Blog Posts

7 Partners

6 Countries

5 Tools in 6 languages

CRISIS RESPONSE

The Ukraine Response

Providing support to Members and communities in times of crisis

Launched in February 2022, when the war in Ukraine started, the ISSA Network has initiated a wide range of collective actions in response to the needs of young children and their families affected by the war in Ukraine and countries receiving refugees. Through strategic partnerships, capacity-building initiatives and knowledge sharing, the ISSA Ukraine Response has focused on empowering the early childhood workforce to provide psychological first aid to young children and families experiencing trauma and distress. At the same time, ISSA has supported its Members on the ground to set up non-formal services for young children and families and to assist local actors in adopting responsive solutions to the crisis.

Participating ISSA Members

- For Our Children Foundation, Bulgaria
- Partners Hungary Foundation, Hungary
- Step by Step Educational Program, Moldova
- Comenius Foundation, Poland
- Centrul Step by Step, Romania
- Wide Open School, Slovakia
- Transcarpathian Regional Charitable Foundation "Blaho", Ukraine
- Ukraine Step by Step Foundation, Ukraine



ISSA Partners



Funders



Heartedly thank you
to individual donors

Contact

Francesca Colombo,
Program Manager, ISSA
fcolombo@issa.nl

Our intervention

Equip ECD practitioners to respond effectively to trauma

Despite and because of the challenges posed by war and displacement in Ukraine, ISSA has built the capacity of the early childhood workforce to address the psychosocial needs of impacted young children and caregivers. Moreover, by integrating self-care and resilience components into training programs, ISSA has helped ECD professionals and practitioners prevent and manage burnout, overstress and trauma.

Foster learning exchange across countries

Cross-country learning sessions have been convened among trainers who have benefited from the capacity-building program provided by the ISSA Network Hub.

Strengthen local capacity and expertise at the municipal level

ISSA has empowered its Members in Ukraine and neighbouring countries with the necessary competencies to assist municipalities in developing needs-informed early-childhood strategies to support refugees and internally displaced young children and families.

Establish non-formal services for early learning and family support

In close partnership with local municipalities, ISSA Members in several countries have set up community-based non-formal responsive services: Ssynkas in Poland; PrimoHubs in Romania and PlayHubs in Hungary and Slovakia. In Ukraine, centres for young children and families have been established and existing kindergartens and shelters have been completely refurbished and equipped with educational materials. In the Western part of Ukraine, ISSA has supported a Station of Hope, welcoming internally displaced and Roma children and families.

Impact through 2023

18 000 Young children and
10 000 parents
helped*

14 000 Professionals
reached*

190 Master trainers in
21 countries

12 Peer-learning sessions

11 Coaching sessions

8 Translations of
Resource package

* Based on data available at the end of 2023, the reach reflected here was assessed across four countries where the training was held. The total expected reach is anticipated to be significantly larger.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative

Empowering the early childhood workforce across ECD Regional Networks

Launched in 2016, the [Early Childhood Workforce Initiative](#) (ECWI) has focused on addressing critical early childhood workforce issues. Initially dedicated to enhancing global knowledge and country capacity, ECWI has expanded its efforts to raise awareness about specific workforce-related concerns such as competence gaps and staff shortages. Since 2023, the Initiative has welcomed the following Early Childhood Regional Networks as core partners, alongside ISSA and Results for Development: the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC); the Arab Network for ECD (ANECD); and the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN)

EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE INITIATIVE

ISSA Partners



Funder



Contact

Zorica Trikić,
Senior Program Manager, ISSA
ztrikic@issa.nl



Our intervention

Promoting the well-being of the early childhood workforce

ISSA focuses on the mental health and well-being of early childhood staff. The aim is to embed these themes in the pre- and in-service training of ECEC staff and to provide country-level support for scaling up such professional-development programs.

Cross-regional Learning Workshop

[Capacity -building programs for early childhood educators on social emotional learning and mental health](#), co-hosted by ISSA and ARNEC.

Impactful training initiatives

- [Embracing Diversity Programs Training](#): based on ISSA's licensed program of the same name, the in-person training was attended by 28 trainers from 13 ISSA Members in 13 countries. It focused on addressing exclusion and discrimination issues within early childhood settings.
- [Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices with young children and their caregivers](#): designed for trainers working with caregivers and practitioners working in challenging contexts. ISSA ran a three-day online training session attended by 30 trainers from 17 ISSA member organizations in 15 countries.

Early childhood workforce-related resources disseminated

Over 50 curated and shared resources on the latest evidence-based and advocacy papers and tools.

Development of professional development tools

[Parent Support Workforce Needs Assessment Tool](#), published by Results for Development and ISSA, with the support of Van Leer Foundation, aiming to help governments support caregivers of children under the age of three.

Impact through 2023

120 Participants from
10+ countries

57 Trainees from
15 countries

50+ Resources curated

2 Training Programs

1 Cross-regional workshop

HEALTH & DEVELOPMENT

Health Systems for Early Child Development

Building Brighter Futures: Transforming Health Systems for Early Child Development in Europe and Central Asia

Launched in 2021, the brand-new and innovative [Health Systems for Early Child Development Initiative](#) strives to enhance the well-being of young children by accelerating efforts in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) to build more ‘developmentally oriented’ and family-centred health systems and services.



ISSA Partners



Contact

Zorica Trikić,
Senior Program Manager, ISSA
ztrikic@issa.nl



Our intervention

Capacity building and collective learning

Throughout this project, we have supported key stakeholders in strengthening their advocacy efforts to improve healthcare systems, disseminating up-to-date evidence-based guidance, resources and expertise, and facilitating a learning community to support sharing and joint learning.

- [7 webinars hosted](#), connecting hundreds of practitioners and policymakers across continents, underscoring the global informational demand for this new approach of looking beyond the physical health of the child.
- [50+ evidence-based and expertise resources curated](#), significantly contributing to the dialogue on early childhood development-oriented health systems.
- [15 thematic blogs posted](#), covering thematic areas such as early childhood development, support for children with complex needs, developmental monitoring, home visiting, and facility-based healthcare
- [Anniversary video produced](#), showcasing the achievements of its transformative first year and outlining the path forward for enriching healthcare systems across regions.

Development of knowledge resources for stakeholders, including:

- Two new modules for the package [Supporting families for Nurturing Care: Resource Modules for Home Visitors](#), to better equip them on prenatal visits ([Becoming a parent: Prenatal visits to families](#) and [Using Telehealth in Home Visitation](#));
- [Elements and Pathways to Establish Professional Learning Communities for Early Childhood Professionals](#), a guide to support professionals in the health sector;
- [Brief: Integrating Mental Health and Early Childhood Development in Emergency Health Responses](#)

Impact through 2023

13 300 Website views

5963 Registrants from
95 Countries

1750+ Video recording
views

7 Webinars Hosted

4 knowledge resources
created

3 Partners

CHALLENGING SOCIAL NORMS

Engaging Men in Nurturing Care

Promoting gender-equitable caregiving in Europe

Launched in March 2023, Engaging Men in Nurturing Care (EMiNC) is a multi-year initiative focused on men's vital role in their children's lives and consistently involving them from the earliest pre-natal stages and throughout their child's upbringing, addressing a persistent gender imbalance in caregiving. The initiative aims to achieve:

- sustained gender-balanced practices in early childhood services and at home;
- alliances across societal actors (private/public);
- policies at the EU and country level that incentivize paternal uptake;
- shared public understanding on the importance of fathers' engagement and gender-balanced approaches to caregiving in Europe.

Participating ISSA Member

- Centro per la Salute del Bambino, Italy



ISSA Partners



Funder



Contact

Mihaela Ionescu,
Program Director, ISSA
mionescu@issa.nl

Our intervention

Evidence gathering, capacity building, and advocacy

The intervention under this initiative champions policies and programs enabling a father's engagement in their young child's care and development alongside mothers, primarily at the city level in three countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain). It includes:

- data collection on fatherhood and caregiving in the early years;
- advocacy for enabling policy measures;
- pre-service training programs across early childhood profiles;
- in-service training programs across early childhood professionals;
- programs targeting fathers and father-to-be;
- alliance and partnership building at the city, national and EU level.

Currently, programs promoting gender-balanced environments in the home, in services and communities are being implemented in three pilot cities: Barcelona, Coimbra and Naples. Additionally, a compendium of best practices is being compiled, to be released in 2024.

Impact in 2023

- 5 Partners
- 3 EU Countries
- 3 Municipalities in 3 Countries



CONNECTING: CONVENING, SUPPORTING, AND INFLUENCING

ISSA catalyzes synergy and connectivity among Members, partners, and other regional networks. This is to enable collaborations and professional and organizational development opportunities, continuously enriching and advancing the early childhood development field.

Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund focuses on the workforce

In 2023, under the umbrella of the philanthropic initiative Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund (ECRN Fund), ISSA joined forces with three other early childhood regional networks: the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN); the Arab Network for Early Childhood (ANECD); the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC). The focus has been on supporting strong, resilient and

representative networks to work together in advancing early childhood development. The fund is hosted by the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation and supported by Oak Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, Porticus, the Human Safety Net, and the Two Lilies Fund. The first regional network collaboration focuses on the early childhood workforce, under the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative

(ECWI), led by ISSA and Results for Development. Our diverse and robust expertise, connections, and knowledge of in-country contexts and developments, uniquely position us to bolster and support the early childhood workforce in the global, regional, and national arenas. The Initiative will function as a platform for knowledge sharing, learning, and advocacy across continents.





© AlisaDyson

Harnessing the power and potential of networks to create impact for young children

Inspired by the findings of the [Network Advantage](#) (Network Impact, 2020) report, ISSA has organized the Power of Networks, a two-part series for its Members to explore how network mechanisms bring about positive change for children, families and ECD professionals. Matthew Spencer of [Converge](#) led sessions on the potential of networks to positively impact children. The first session sparked lively debate among ISSA Members about how crucial networks are in a world of uncertainty and

in a field as complex as early childhood development. Our discussion reflected the extent to which the network mindset is deeply embedded among ISSA Members, whether through leading advocacy alliances, connecting across sectors, or supporting learning communities among practitioners or learning centres. Later in the year, Members reconvened for an enriching workshop during ISSA Connects for Learning 2023. Discussions continued on the challenges and solutions specific to networks in the

early childhood development field, exploring such topics as:

- advocating the necessity of networks for collaborative impact;
- harmonizing between individual or organizational interests and communal goals;
- identifying leadership and bolstering its equitable distribution within a network;
- safeguarding network efficiency and sustaining the engagement of Members.

ISSA Network's representation at the European Commission's Working Group on ECEC

ISSA contributed its expertise, knowledge, and resources as a member of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC WG), established by the European Commission to support European countries in improving the quality of ECEC systems. Throughout 2022–2023, the ECEC WG focused on monitoring and

evaluation (M&E) quality in ECEC and developed several [reports](#) providing guidance and examples of participatory multi-tiered M&E mechanisms, processes and tools for ECEC systems from various European countries.

Recognizing that qualified early childhood education and care professionals are key to providing

high-quality education and care to all children, the Working Group identified ECEC staff shortages as a major challenge in most European countries. It explored the causes and consequences of this, and the measures needed to address them in a policy brief, [Staff shortages in early education and care, published in December 2023 in 24 languages.](#)



ISSA Connects for Learning

Hosted in the picturesque city of Opatija, the ISSA Connects for Learning event marked a significant milestone in our quest for inclusive, high-quality early childhood systems and services. **More than 130 Members and partners from across Europe and Central Asia** gathered to affect positive change for young children, especially those in adverse contexts. The theme, *Striving for Quality Early Childhood Services for Children Experiencing Adverse Contexts*, guided our discussions on innovative approaches, methodologies, and initiatives aimed at enhancing the lives of children and their families, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable, including Roma and Traveller children. The event included the following sessions.

Explore more resources on the [ISSA Connects for Learning 2023](#).



GALVANIZING AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE

For decades, ISSA has cultivated a dynamic learning community powered by a remarkably resourceful and innovative network of Members. Together, we produce high-quality early childhood knowledge, practices, and services, and facilitate learning exchanges, all with the ultimate aim of enhancing the quality of life for young children and their families.

Mobilizing Expertise

ISSA fosters cross-border collaboration and collective learning on shared interests among ISSA Members to significantly increase all our collective impact in the field of Early Childhood Development. In 2023, ISSA facilitated and co-funded member-led initiatives in multiple formats, including Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) and Joint Learning Labs (JLLs).

Peer Learning Activities

27 ISSA MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS | 143 PARTICIPANTS
17 COUNTRIES | 5 PLAs

Since 2016, ISSA has enabled learning exchanges through Peer Learning Activities (PLA), a platform for sharing and learning in mutually collaborative ways. In 2023:

- **five Member-driven PLAs** were attended by **27 ISSA Members** from **17 countries** on varied topics, including early childhood intervention systems, the TOY for Inclusion approach, Persona Doll method, and on how to support a better representation of Roma professionals in the early childhood workforce;
- **a two-session PLA on Ukraine response was hosted**, focusing on informal services in early childhood education and care, and Psychological First Aid training.

Peer Learning Activity in Focus

The ISSA Member Trust for Social Achievement (TSA) in Bulgaria organized a PLA to share best practices from their decade-long experience promoting Roma professionals (Roma models) in ECD. The PLA included:

- discussions on challenges, innovative solutions, and success factors;
- a site visit offering first-hand insights;
- opportunities to collaborate, network, and exchange information on how to enhance the Young Roma Teachers program.

Joint Learning Labs

12 ISSA MEMBERS | 11 COUNTRIES | 20 PARTICIPANTS

2 JLLs

Since Joint Learning Labs (JLL) began three years ago, their format and content have evolved to meet Members' needs in specific thematic areas with the goal of fostering group learning, professional discussion, and the co-creation of knowledge. In 2023, two JLLs were held, featuring:

- the Persona Doll methodology;
- a quality framework for non-formal ECED initiatives.

Joint Learning Lab in Focus: Persona Doll method

In 2023, the Personal Doll method JLL was expanded to four additional ISSA Members from three countries over six sessions after being initiated in 2022 by ISSA Member Partners, Hungary. The JLL was initially established to offer training, exchanges, and mentoring on the [Persona Doll Method](#), a useful tool to increase awareness around diversity and equity among ECD educators.

The sessions were tailored to members' needs, covering topics such as behaviour issues, resilience and wellbeing, tackling racism, addressing bullying and empowering voices using the Persona Doll method. Throughout, participants engaged with educational materials, analysed scenarios, shared experiences, and produced a collection of valuable case studies.

Knowledge sharing and hubs

ISSA leverages the strengths and expertise of Member organizations and partners to create valuable resources and curate the latest materials to share in ISSA's region and beyond. We currently host **600+ resources** and practices developed by Member organizations and partners, curated in five online knowledge hubs focused on specific areas of expertise. In 2023, ISSA continued to foster the generation of knowledge within the network and to facilitate its dissemination through its hosted websites and channels.

- [ISSA Knowledge Hub](#)
- [Resources for the Ukraine Response](#)
- [Romani Early Years Network Knowledge Hub](#)
- [Health Systems for Early Child Development Knowledge Hub](#)
- [Early Childhood Workforce Initiative Knowledge Hub](#)



ISSA BOARD



Henriette Heimgaertner, MA

Board President
Co-founder & Managing Director of the Berlin Early Childhood Institute for Quality Development, Germany



Dr. Cornelia Cincilei, Phd.

Board Treasurer
Director, Step by Step Educational Program, Moldova



Jeroen Aarsen, Phd.

Board Secretary
Senior Education Consultant, the Netherlands



Deepa Grover

Special Advisor
Senior Advisor, Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority



Carmen Lica

Board Member
Director and founder of Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (CEDP) Romania.



Prof. Dr. Michel Vandebroek

Board Member
Head of the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium



Dr. Sarah Klaus

Honorary Board Member
Senior Advisor, Open Society Foundations, London, UK



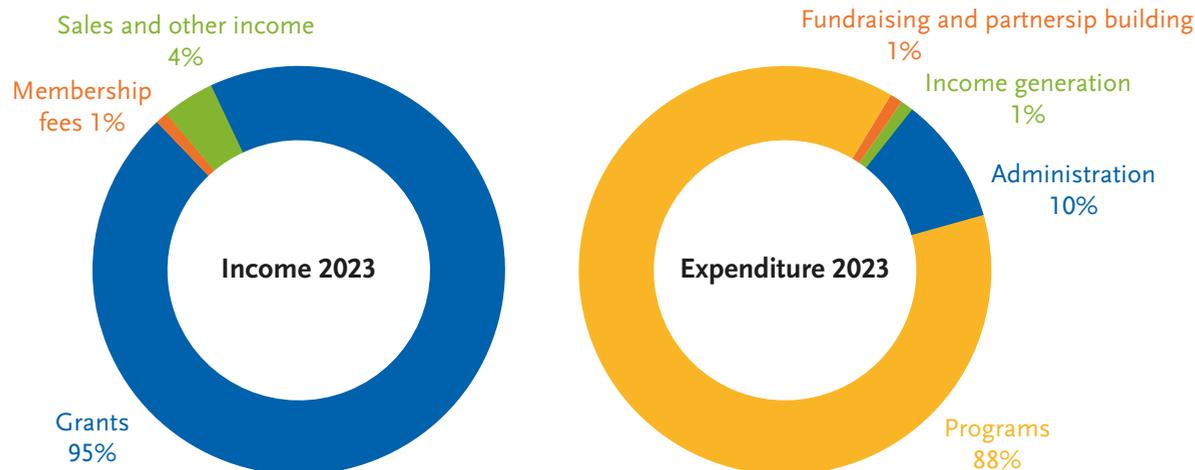
Liana Ghent

Non-voting Board Member
Executive Director, ISSA

2023 FINANCIAL STATEMENT (EUR)

The balance sheet and the income statement are derived from the audited annual financial statements, which are drawn up in accordance with the Guideline for annual reporting C1 'Not-for-profit organizations' of the Dutch Accounting Standards Board.

ASSETS	2023	2022
Tangible fixed assets	12 082	19 318
Grants receivable	1 139 270	1 208 295
Other receivables	236 146	2 539 971
Debtors	22 836	24 894
Liquid assets	1 164 592	1 691 282
Total	2 574 926	5 483 760
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	2023	2022
Association capital reserve	58 148	255 589
Deferred revenue	2 296 350	4 899 282
Taxes payable	36 898	75 923
Creditors and accrued expenses	183 529	252 966
Total	2 574 926	5 483 760



INCOME AND EXPENSES	2023	2022
Grants	2 556 070	1 777 098
Membership fees	29 086	21 666
Sales and other income	96 841	173 034
Donations-in-kind	2 476 539	4 867 983
Total income	5 158 536	6 839 781
Administration	511 504	288 416
Programs	4 746 369	6 463 845
Fundraising and partnership building	64 171	52 290
Income generation	56 351	60 525
Total expenditure	5 378 395	6 865 076
Net operating income	-219 859	-25 295
Interest Income	23 058	1 179
Exchange differences	-640	70 864
Net Result	-197 441	46 748

SUPPORTERS

We would like to thank our supporters, central to making our work possible throughout 2023.



International Step by Step Association (ISSA)

Child Rights Home
Hooglandse Kerkgracht 17-R
2312HS Leiden,
the Netherlands

www.issa.nl

[ISSA on Facebook](#)

[ISSA on Twitter](#)

[ISSA on LinkedIn](#)

[ISSA on YouTube](#)