

What does sustainable early childhood care and education mean?

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Sustainability has many meanings and definitions, including in the context of early childhood care and education (ECEC).

During the first year of the Creating Tools Together project funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Nordplus programme, we have organized multidisciplinary workshops, discussions and seminars to explore the different meanings of sustainability in the context of early childhood care and education.

Together with the Danish, Finnish, Icelandic and Norwegian ECEC researchers, professionals and authorities participating in the project, **we have identified three general meanings for sustainable early childhood care and education:**

1. Sustainable ECEC as incorporating environmental, social, cultural and/or economic sustainability in ECEC curricula and pedagogy
2. Sustainable ECEC as ECEC centres' day-to-day practices that aim to reduce waste, energy and water consumption, promote sustainable consumption and transportation, with or without a pedagogical/teaching component

While the first two are more traditional and have been widely discussed within early childhood education research and development, the third meaning identified in the Creating Tools Together project broadens its meaning from pedagogy and practice to the sustainability of the **whole early childhood care and education system when confronted with societal change:**

3. Sustainability in the ECEC context **as the system's ability to maintain service levels and quality amid changes** like public-private partnerships, privatization, demographic change, evolving expectations for ECEC services, new pedagogical approaches or societal crises.

Supervisory practices must be continuously development to ensure high-quality ECEC services

Many participants in the Creating Tools Together project agreed that the long-term ability of early childhood care and education systems to respond and adapt to societal changes and pressures, while maintaining high-quality pedagogy and care, is crucial.

This is important for not only ECEC teachers and workers but also to public and private service providers, authorities, and procurers. Since ECEC services in the Nordic countries are an important part of the overall education and social services system, high-quality services are also essential for families.

The most important stakeholders, of course, are children, who are also the first to benefit from a sustainable ECEC system that provides high-quality education and care despite societal fluctuations.

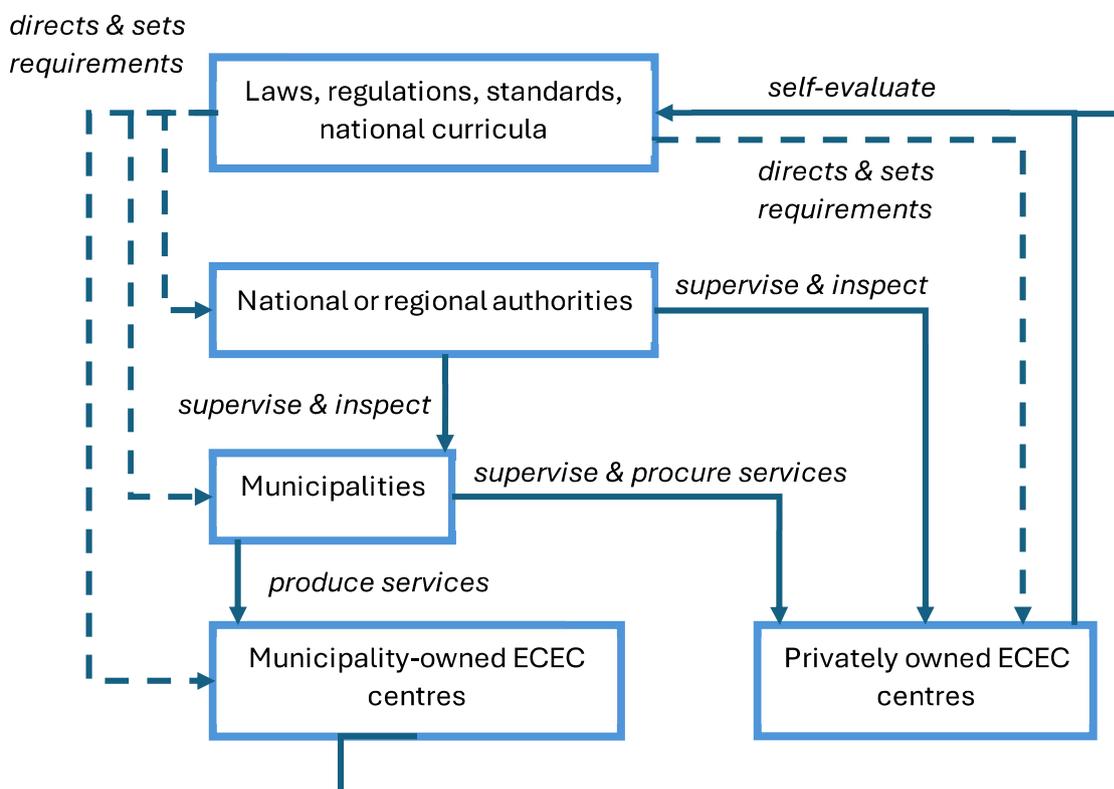
Nordic Early Childhood Care and Education Supervision and Quality Systems

Early childhood care and education services in the Nordics are usually produced by both private and public actors.

Private ECEC services may be entirely market-based, meaning new centres may be founded if there's sufficient demand and regulatory requirements are met. Private services may also be procured by public entities like municipalities and offered to parents and children as a part of the municipal ECEC system. Of course, some differences exist between countries.

Thus, municipalities may act as a) organizers of municipal ECEC care, b) procurers of private ECEC care, and c) supervisors or inspectors of private ECEC centres.

This complex web of procuring, supervising and organizing roles (see figure below) means that authorities must pay attention to their roles and responsibilities. Simultaneously, the multiple different roles that public actors have may also place stress on the whole ECEC system, especially in municipalities and regions that are growing quickly.



The above figure is a very general description of a regulatory supervision and service production system in Nordic countries. While differences between the countries exist and a thorough description requires more detail, the figure gives an overall picture of the quality assurance and regulatory inspection actors and relationships.

Sharing practices on how to support high-quality ECEC through regulatory supervision and quality assurance within the complex system is thus essential.

During the first year of the Creating Tools Together project, participants have met in workshops in Norway and Iceland (with workshops in Denmark and Finland to follow) to share knowledge, experiences and best practices on ECEC-related quality work and regulatory supervision.

This has provided opportunities for learning between the participants and has also resulted in Nordic research collaboration.

Although practices between the countries differ, the challenges are similar across the Nordic countries. Finding solutions, practices and frameworks that support a high-quality Nordic ECEC also in the future is a shared challenge.

Examining and sharing practices can support a high-quality Nordic ECEC also in the future is a shared challenge, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the system to provide high quality early childhood education and care.

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The Creating Tools Together project aims to examine, share and develop practices of regulatory supervision and inspection of ECEC services and centres in the Nordics. By organizing workshops and meetings among civil servants, authorities, public and private service providers and researchers from Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway, the participants explore how high-quality ECEC services can be ensured amid societal change. The project is coordinated by the Finnish Supervisory Agency, with other participants including the City of Lappeenranta, University of Vaasa, University of Bergen, University of Iceland, the Danish Center for Social Science Research VIVE, and the Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education.

More about the topic

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