

Childcare as a catalyst—Portugal's bold step ^[1]

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It might seem that the obvious answer to unequal access to childcare is to exempt the poorest households from childcare fees. Yet in Portugal this was found not to improve accessibility significantly. The service providers are mainly private, non-profit organisations. They receive government funds to cope with overheads but the resources are not sufficient to cover all expenses. So these providers tend to attract higher-income children whose households can pay more, and thus to establish facilities in economically advantaged areas.

To address these challenges, the government of António Costa last year introduced Law no. 2/2022, with the aim of progressively extending free childcare. The legislation mandates that all such services be made free for all children, with the government fully funding the costs.

This move will provide sufficient incentives to encourage providers to operate in the most marginalised areas, thereby reducing inequalities in access. Furthermore, by ensuring universality of access, the policy has gained widespread support, including from the middle class and opposition parties, thus strengthening the long-term sustainability of the investment.

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