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Abstract title: Un villaggio per crescere (A village to thrive): a project aimed at improving parenting skills in at risk population groups

Background: Educational poverty (EP) is a worrying phenomenon In Italy, being one of the strongest determinants of the early onset of social inequity. “Un Villaggio per crescere” is a country-wide project supported by the Fund to fight educational poverty) established in 2015 by the Italian Government with the Support of Bank Foundations. The Fund is aimed at improving accessibility and quality of early child education (ECE) services in economically and socially disadvantaged communities, where ECE services are difficult to access or not available. We describe how the Fund’s overarching aim was translated into programmatic features.

Method: The design of the project was informed by a children’s rights approach, the early interventions concept and the ecological theory applied to child development (1,2) and based on the evidence of long lasting benefits of quality parental time and development-focused practices (3-5). The key strategy is to provide parents and their young children with opportunities for engaging in activities, such as reading, play, music, gardening, art and incorporating them in home-based activities.

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Results: The project was established in 10 different communities in 10 municipalities and planned to reach and engage up to 4.000 families by the end of the third year. Each center operates for an average of 10 hours per week and is served by 3 to 4 educators specifically trained. Child development, parental competences, communities’ involvement are monitored as a basis for impact evaluation, ensured by an independent authority. Strategies to reach out for families and ensure retainment include home visits, social networks and networking across all sectors, including public, private non profit and private for profit.

Discussion: The project responds to the international call for testing innovative approaches to nurturing care (5). It offers parents and children in disadvantaged communities the opportunity to be introduced and get engaged in a combination of activities, all of which have been proven as effective in fostering child development and parent-to-child relationships. Rigorous

independent impact evaluation and plans for ensuring sustainability over time are part of the design and represent its greatest challenges.

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