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**THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE
MIXED ECONOMY OF CHILDCARE: an Introduction**

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The opportunity to establish this international research Centre, ICMEC, offers excitement and hope, but it also imposes obligations.

The excitement relates to the opportunity to create a hub/clearing house aimed at enabling academics, policymakers, managers and practitioners from the North and the South to:

- a) make contact with each other;
- b) generate greater knowledge about the operation and impact of mixed economies of childcare; and
- c) develop an international and multi-disciplinary approach to the study of mixed economies of childcare.

These three aims are of course the new centre's very aims.

The Centre's establishment generates hope that working together will enable us to address many different aspects of mixed economies of childcare. This may include some of the emerging unintended consequences of childcare's rapid privatisation and marketisation in OECD member countries like the UK, Australia and The Netherlands. In countries of the South, childcare provision where it exists, tends to be dominated by the for-profit as well as not-for-profit private sector.

It is worth noting that in 2002, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child devoted its annual general discussion day to 'The role of the private sector in providing services and its role in implementing child rights'. Focusing primarily on the delivery of health, education and water, traditionally seen as state functions, the discussion highlighted both the risks and potential associated with public/private partnerships involving the for-profit as well as the not-for-profit sectors for the realisation of children's rights. The UN Committee formulated a series of recommendations, aimed at avoiding polarisation and optimising opportunities offered by these developments. The main question addressed was: 'How can we deliver appropriate services to all children?' This will obviously be a key question for all who work with and within the new centre. A children's rights perspective should inform the work we do there.

Finally, I believe that the establishment of ICMEC imposes some obligations. These concern the need to approach any work undertaken by the centre in an

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open-minded way. In the UK, two illustrious colleagues have recently published trenchant analyses of the functioning and impact of the mixed economies of health care and education respectively. In 2004, Allyson Pollock, Professor of Public Health at the University of Edinburgh, published *NHS PLC - the privatisation of our health care*. In 2007 Stephen Ball, Professor of the Sociology of Education at the University of London's Institute of Education, published *Education PLC - understanding private sector participation in public sector education*. Both authors have much to tell us about the operation of these mixed economies, but Ball in particular explores the ethical dilemmas that researchers in this area may face.

In our development of the work programme of the new Centre, I believe we should be guided by some of the principles for this kind of research put forward by Stephen Ball. Writing about the challenge of finding an ethical position from which to discuss privatisation of publicly funded services, he argues (2007: 15) that we should move beyond a simple public/private distinction. To do so requires us in our analyses to avoid four pitfalls:

... rhetorical condemnation, ...the taking up of simple positions, a false neutrality and a rush to closure.

(Ball, 2007: 16)

I am confident that you will agree that these are apt guidelines for the development of the work of the Centre which the Minister of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform is about to launch.