

Peer Review: Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty (Belgium, 13-14 January 2015)

Hungary¹

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1. Country context

Hungary's future economic, social and political development depends on how happy, healthy and well-educated children growing up today will be as adults, how safe and secure they will feel and how strong their self-confidence and self-esteem will be. The growing aging of society clearly indicates that it is necessary to maximise human resources; in other words, we must maximise the potential inherent in all children and must effectively handle the problems of poverty and exclusion.

The improvement of the situation of **disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children**², including Roma children, and the prevention of the intergenerational transmission of poverty are key issues in social inclusion.

In Hungary 43% of children live at risk of poverty and social inclusion, a significantly higher proportion than the population average, in spite of the fact that reducing child poverty has been a top priority within the Government's effort to lessen poverty and social exclusion. In 2013 the relative income poverty index of children was 23.2%, the severe material deprivation index 35%, and 14.4% of children live in households with very low work intensity. Children living in families with three or more children, or with lone parents are increasingly affected.

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² According to the Child Protection Law (1997. XXXI. law), a disadvantaged child or child of full age is, who is entitled to regular child protection allowance and meets one of the following requirements;

- the educational level of the parents or guardians is maximum elementary
- low employed parents or guardians
- bad living conditions (for example living in segregated neighbourhoods)

According to the Child Protection Law, the most disadvantaged child or child of full age is,

- who is entitled to regular child protection allowance and meets from the above mentioned paragraph a)-c) items at least two requirements
- who is in foster care
- who receives after-care allowance and has a student status.



Table 1³. Ratio of children under the age of 18 living in households that may be classified into the various categories of poverty, %

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Income poverty	19.7	20.6	20.3	23	22.6
Severe material deprivation	21.5	25.5	28.8	29.8	33.4
Extremely low work intensity	11.1	11.9	13.8	14.1	15.7
Poverty or social exclusion	33.4	37.2	38.7	39.6	40.9

More than 10% of children, some 200,000 children are registered by the guardian authorities as children at risk; the vast majority of them for financial reasons. However, the number of children at risk (for behaviour reasons) has been on the increase as well for a number of years now. In many cases, this is due to a series of school failures and family circumstances ridden with serious conflicts and crises. In the disadvantaged regions, the proportion of children at risk is 2 to 3 times higher than the „at risk” ratio of other regions. The number of children taken into protective custody is on the rise. In 2010 24,000, while in 2012 26,000 children were taken into protective custody. The number of children transferred to child protection care or placed with foster parents or in children’s homes due to serious exposure to risks has not decreased for years. The state of the families concerned which poses a serious threat to their children, the parents’ joblessness, the lack of incomes and the shortage of capacity in the child welfare and child protection care system are equally responsible for this situation.

There is limited nursery capacity for the day-time care of children under the age of three; 14% of children in this age group attend nursery despite the EU expectation of 30%. At the same time, between 2010 and 2012, the number of nursery places increased by 4,200, and the number of new institutions, too, increased by almost 40. Nurseries operate in some 12% of localities – more specifically, in 380 localities, 23 of which are the districts of the capital. This means that there are services of this type in only every eighth locality, and typically in the towns and cities. Due to the limited capacity, nurseries primarily admit the children of working parents. As a result, the multiply disadvantaged children of unemployed parents living in poverty do not always have access to care. Families living in poverty cannot afford the high fees charged by family-run day-care centres, and their children therefore cannot use this form of day-care service either.

The purpose of the „Let Children Have a Better Life!” National Strategy designed to combat child poverty and to create opportunities for children over a term of 25 years is to reduce the proportion of poverty among children and their families to a fraction of the figure recorded at present; to eliminate the extreme forms and manifestations of child exclusion and extreme poverty; to reform the mechanisms and institutions which re-generate poverty and social exclusion at present. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to promote the employment of parents, to provide better and more equal opportunities for the development of children’s skills and abilities and to reduce segregation; to improve the standards of social care and services provided for children and their families; to guarantee a healthier childhood; and to improve housing conditions and housing security. The reduction of ethnic and regional inequalities and segregation is a horizontal goal that covers all functional areas. In the interest of the implementation of the strategy, the Government is required to draft three-year action plans and to continuously evaluate and monitor the results. The first action plan covered the period of 2007-2010, while the implementation of the second, which was incorporated into the

³ Source of data: EUROSTAT data base.



action plan of the National Social Inclusion Strategy approved in 2011 as a specifically identified target, is on-going at present.

The role of early childhood education and care institutions (Sure Start programme):

The Sure Start programme, placed in recent years on firm, sustainable, local financial foundations, serves to foster the abilities of young multiply disadvantaged children, including Roma children, based on favourable experiences. The programme, which is run with the involvement of the parents, provides a chance at the earliest possible age for children under the age of 5 years living in poverty who do not have access to quality services due to the shortage of family funds or because they live in disadvantaged regions or for any other socio-cultural reasons. By 2014, 115 Sure Start Children's Houses have started to operate in Hungary (49 operate in the local, Hungarian financing system, 66 in the framework of EU funded project (Gyerekesély, TÁMOP (Social Renewal OP) 5.2.3/A).⁴ In the framework of the measure Integrated Regional Programmes⁵ to fight child poverty (TÁMOP 5.2.3.) at least two Sure Start Children's Houses must be established in every region. From 2012 on, after the end of ESF/Norwegian Fund financing they receive further state financing for 3 years, which is a significant achievement and good practice. Sure Start Children's Houses are listed now even in the child protection law among basic services for child welfare.

In Hungary the concept behind Sure Start and that of early childhood education and care does not have wide acceptance, the majority of people including a number of professionals still believe that it is best for the child to be at home with his/her mother at least until they are 3 years old. However, as time goes by, more and more kids start to use the service at a younger age, especially where the service has been available continuously for the longest periods and has frequent contact with parents. The second child is often taken to the House at a very early age which facilitates a more successful intervention.

2. Cooperation of various services involved in the fight against child poverty

The differences in the standards and available capacity of services and the fact that services are least available in the areas where they would be most in demand present a major problem. The development or establishment of quality services in these areas is extremely important as they would significantly improve the living standards of those living in the regions concerned. The services and institutions of the child welfare and child protection care system, too, are compelled to face maintenance problems, a shortage of specialists and extreme workloads, in particular, in smaller localities.

Due to the shortcomings of the institutional and service system, not all children have equal access to quality care best suited to their needs in every locality. In some localities, the parents likewise have no access to appropriate assistance with the resolution of their child raising and lifestyle problems which significantly deteriorates the social chances of children living in poor families. Some elements of

⁴ Most of them are „classic“ Children's Houses but a few operates in e.g. 2 settlements: 2 days a week in one, 3 days a week in the other.

⁵ The Integrated Regional Programmes to fight child poverty are complex programmes launched in 2009 in the intervention areas of the “Let it be better for Children” national strategy and started in 5 most disadvantaged micro-regions. It was slightly modified in 2011 and included another 6 micro-regions. In 2012 another 12 most disadvantaged micro-regions joined in with the worst indices related to child poverty. The above programmes receive methodological support from measure 5.2.1. of the Social Renewal OP.



the system that are designed to provide temporary care for children (substitute parents, temporary children's homes) are not available throughout the country, and some of the temporary homes for families struggle with a shortage of capacity.

In Hungary the cooperation of various service providers is quite bad and it has an esp. negative impact on disadvantaged children, but programmes are to be launched to enhance cooperation between various services.

3. Monitoring and evaluation

According to the Social Inclusion Strategy, the State Secretary for Social Inclusion reviews the implementation of the three-year action plan of the strategy annually and prepares reports for the Government.

In the interest of tracking the implementation and social effects of the goals identified in the Social Inclusion Strategy and the tasks determined in the action plan, we developed a monitoring system as well as the necessary administrative framework and reporting system in cooperation with the National Roma Self-Government by relying on our programmes serving to develop a set of instruments for our social inclusion policy and the effective contribution of the Türr István Training and Research Institute. We thereby created the conditions for the regular, systematic monitoring of the measures that serve the implementation of the strategy.

By relying on the monitoring system designed to keep track of the implementation of the programmes, the State Secretariat for Social Inclusion prepared its first report in December 2012, the second in May 2013, and finally the third report on the implementation of the action plan of the Strategy in October 2013. In these reports, we render a detailed account of the environment, conditions, schedule, manageable risks, anticipated results and cooperation and coordination needs of the governmental interventions identified in the action plan of the NSIS.

The strategic documents that may also be regarded as the predecessors of the NSIS, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the Decade of Roma Inclusion and the „Let Children Have a Better Life!“ National Strategy, too, treat the measuring of the social progress of measures and interventions and the use of indicators as a priority. However, there was no comprehensive evaluation system with a set of coherent indicators attached to any of these strategies, even if the Roma Steering and Monitoring Committee of DRIP, and in particular, the Evaluation Committee of the „Let Children Have a Better Life!“ National Strategy made some fundamental progress in this field, and comprehensive research, methodological materials and annual reports were prepared in conjunction with the strategies also in the past. Based on the experiences of these and the new governmental strategic steering environment, a standard, overall indicator and monitoring system was developed as part of the governmental action plan drawn up for the implementation of the NSIS in the years 2012-2014. The target and indicator system of the NSIS is attached to the plans identified in the Europe 2020 strategy as far as the main goals are concerned, and the most important indicators also reflect the EU undertakings. The other chief indicators serve the monitoring of the interventions and measures in accordance with the priorities of the strategy and the specificities of problems.

A fundamental condition for generating the relevant indicators is the availability of the required data on the basis of research, data gathering and administrative processes. Following from the nature of the social problems intended to be addressed by the strategy, there are a number of difficulties in this area. In order to obtain adequate information on the determinants of the situation and the earning and living conditions of the most disadvantaged social groups, we need highly



carefully planned large-sample data surveys that appropriately respond to the specific difficulties of data gathering (identification, accessibility and monitoring of these social groups). Large-sample data surveys:

- Census (Central Statistical Office) Labour Survey (CSO);
- EU-SILC local survey (CSO);
- European Population Health survey („EPHS”, CSO);
- Household Monitor (TÁRKI);
- Career research;
- Research pillars of the SOROP 5.4.1 priority project – Roma research (National Institute for Family and Social Policy);
- National competence survey;
- PISA survey (Office for Education).

4. Involvement of stakeholders

The institutions of governmental consultation

The Evaluation Committee of the „Let Children Have a Better Life!” National Strategy, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Social Inclusion and Roma Affairs, the Roma Affairs Council (CET) and the Roma Coordination Council (ROK-T) play a major role in the monitoring of the implementation of the strategy and the annual review and triennial revision of the strategy.

Local equal opportunities plans

The obligation of drafting local equal opportunities/inclusion plans is a means for the horizontal enforcement of the inclusion policy and equal opportunities. On a local level, this means the consistent enforcement of accountability for the preparation and implementation of local equal opportunities/inclusion programmes by local governments, with the involvement of independent experts, as prescribed in the relevant legal rules. The approval of a local equal opportunities/inclusion programme has been a condition of eligibility for local and EU funds since July 2013 and allows local governments to manage the locally emerging employment, health care, educational and housing problems in a complex manner, through the professional planning of the available resources, thereby enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of developments. During the course of the allocation of funds, the programme guarantees that the multiply disadvantaged population, in particular, the Roma, the disabled and women have equal access to development funds, which is crucial to their social integration.

Relevance of the Belgian consultation platforms under review for your country

As the host country paper refers to it, the European Recommendation ‘Investing in children’ recommends the Member States to strengthen coordination between the different actors involved; to streamline their policy in all relevant areas; and to promote stakeholder participation and exchange best practices, which is a relevant suggestion in the Hungarian case as well.

In Hungary cooperation between service providers and other actors is very limited, often non-existent, so it would be very necessary to foster this cooperation at all levels. For this, both additional human and financial resources should be provided, as well as an institutionalised framework would be very useful. That is why we find the Belgian pilot project very interesting. From the Hungarian perspective a very



important added value would be a much more efficient system to help children living in poverty (and their families) through a coordinated effort of various actors.

In Hungary, there is a child protection signalling system in operation, created under Act No. XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of children and on guardianship administration, with the aim of securing the early perception and prevention of the child endangerment factors, which is a fundamental pillar of the system of Hungarian child protection. All those social, health or public education service providers and authorities who in carrying out their activities may, potentially, perceive the endangerment of a child are members of the child protection signalling system. These service providers and organs shall signal to and cooperate with the child protection system where they receive information about the endangerment of a child. At settlement level the child protection signalling system is operated by the Child Care Service. Bodies carrying out victim support tasks and dealing with mitigation of damages were involved in the signalling system under a 2006 amendment of the Act on the Protection of children. Still, the operations of the system should be significantly improved so as to fulfil its original ambition. Thus from 2015 the signalling system will be strengthened and in the future there will be legal consequences of not reporting a problem. Co-operations between district nurses, teachers and other relevant professionals should also be strengthened in the future.⁶

In Hungary Sure Start Children's Houses, operating in several most disadvantaged micro-regions, at the local level, aim to enhance the cooperation of various service providers, as that would be essential in their holistic approach. In 2015 114 Sure Start Children's Houses operate in the disadvantaged regions of Hungary. Currently available data cannot answer yet whether over the past years existing attitudes and modes of co-operation could have been significantly changed by the programme. One of the lessons learnt so far was that it takes time, at least 5 years for such a programme to start working really well, partly because it has to achieve a change in attitudes of both professionals and community members as well as in the target group.⁷ As the programme should and can enhance and facilitate the cooperation of local actors, esp. various service providers, it has to play an active, initiating role in such co-operations - plus funds should be available for this purpose (to make of for the "holes" in service provision).

⁶ <http://www.orientpress.hu/136076>

⁷ A detailed evaluation of the programme thus far including quantitative and qualitative data analysis: Szomor Éva – László Noémi: A magyarországi Biztos Kezdet Program alapelvei és működése a kezdetektől napjainkig. Összefoglaló tanulmány. 2014. (prepared in the framework of TÁMOP 5.2.1. measure).

