

Universal or targeted? Debates on school meal subsidies in Slovakia

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School meal subsidies in Slovakia used to be a measure aimed at poor children. In 2019, their coverage was extended to include all children in primary schools. However, in July 2020 the new government announced the cancellation of this measure in favour of increased child tax credits and a return to the pro-poor targeting. Debates on the pros and cons reveal interesting arguments about the role of social policy.



Description

In the early 2000s, as part of the radical welfare state reform, Slovakia introduced state subsidies for school meals for poor children in order to compensate for cuts in family and social benefits. As a result, poor children could benefit from free school lunches. The measure was targeted at children in low-income households, i.e. households receiving minimum income protection or with income equal to or below the level of the administrative poverty threshold (subsistence minimum: €535.35 in May 2019 for a household consisting of two adults and two children). In addition, it also covered all children in schools where at least 50% of the children were low-income children.

As of September 2019, the coverage of school meal subsidies was significantly extended to cover all children in primary schools and all children in kindergartens who are one year before compulsory school attendance age. Furthermore, pre-school age children also benefited from the subsidies. Eligibility was granted to children aged 2-5 years in kindergartens, living in low-income households, and all children in kindergartens where at least 50% of the children were low-income children.

The reasoning behind the shift towards more universal provision was that this removes social barriers among children and avoids stigmatising poor children; it also improves children's eating habits, and parents' financial situation. However, critics pointed to the following: schools are not prepared to manage the increased demand for school lunches, the quality of school

meals is not satisfactory, and the education system in general faces more urgent challenges than fees for school lunches (Slovak newspaper SME, 2018).

Extension of the coverage resulted in an increased number of children claiming school lunches. According to the statistics from the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, school meal subsidies were paid for 100,392 children in May 2019, compared to 501,587 children in May 2020. A survey carried out by the Ministry of Education and cited by a Slovak newspaper (Pravda, 2020) showed that after extending the coverage of school meal subsidies, the number of children covered by school lunches increased by one quarter in the first half of the school year 2019/2020. The highest increase was observed among households with three or more children.

However, when implementing the extended school meal subsidies, school founders – mostly municipalities – encountered difficulties caused by increased demand, a lack of infrastructure and staffing, a need for additional technical equipment, and an increased administrative burden. Indeed, the media reported that the state subsidy for school meals, which amounts to €1.20 per child per day spent in a school/preschool facility, does not cover the real costs of the food (SME, 2019). Facing increased costs of meal provision, some municipalities imposed co-payments on parents. As a result, "free lunches" could in fact become unaffordable for low-income parents in municipalities that decided to introduce such payments.

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In July 2020, the new government, formed after the March 2020 general election, announced that school meal subsidies for all children will be cancelled and replaced by increased child tax credits, while at the same time maintaining state subsidies for low-income children. The aim is to make more effective use of the public budget, through better targeting. Furthermore, an increase in the level of child tax credits is seen as a step supporting parents' freedom of choice on how to spend their income. These changes are expected to come into force as of January 2021.

Outlook and commentary

For a long time, state subsidies for school meals have acted as compensation, although small, for the very low level of resources provided by minimum income protection (Gerbery, 2019). The shift towards more universal provision brought several positive benefits. It helped to establish an inclusive environment, where all children are brought together, irrespective of their socio-economic background, and where children from poor households are not stigmatised. This has contributed to improving the legitimacy of welfare state policies in Slovakia. An increase in the number of children using the services of school canteens is also in itself an important achievement from a child health perspective, and helps to promote healthy eating habits. Finally, the reduction in educational costs, in particular

for households with three or more children, has positively affected non-poor households that struggled to make ends meet.

Even though there is evidence of problems with the implementation of the universal school meal subsidies, the main reasons for returning to the previous modus operandi are in fact based on other considerations. Targeting public support at the most vulnerable is a standard social policy solution. However, in the case of school meal subsidies it did not work. In 2018, when low-income households benefited from the subsidies, subsidised school meals were provided on average to 48,518 pupils in primary schools per month, i.e. 11% of all pupils in primary schools and 49% of primary school pupils at risk of poverty or social exclusion, measured according to the EU definition (Value for Money Unit, 2020). In the case of kindergartens, subsidised meals were provided on average to 5,036 children per month, i.e. 3.1% of all children in kindergartens and 30% of children in kindergartens who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This means that despite targeting the most vulnerable, there was a significant gap in the coverage.

Replacing school meal subsidies for non-poor households by increased child tax credits broadens the range of choices, but it undermines a cohesive social climate, pitting members of the lower middle classes, who do not receive the subsidies, against the most vulnerable groups in society. As Abel Ravasz (2020), the former

government plenipotentiary for Roma communities, points out, it may in particular affect the relationship between the majority and members of marginalised Roma communities.

Debates on the pros and cons of universalism and targeting in Slovakia may continue, as there are still other measures in place which follow a similar logic (e.g. free-of-charge train travel for all students).

Further reading

Gerbery, D. (2019): "[New reform of the minimum income scheme in Slovakia: slight improvements, but further steps needed](#)", ESPN Flash Report 2019/59, Brussels: European Commission

Pravda daily newspaper (2020): "[Obedy zadarmo: V školách jedáva o štvrtinu viac detí](#)"

Ravasz, A. (2020): "[Všetky deti by mali mať obedy za rovnakých podmienok](#)", Dennik N daily newspaper

SME daily newspaper (2019): "[Niektoré deti platia za obedy zadarmo viac](#)"

SME daily newspaper (2018): "[Remišová: obedy zadarmo sú nedomyslené](#)"

Value for Money Unit (2020): "Spending review on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion", Final Report, Bratislava: Ministry of Finance

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