

ACCESS: Cottonera Community Resource Centre

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The focus of the Peer Review is the community based project, ACCESS, which is a concrete example of effective social inclusion policies, and of an effort to break the cycle of poverty. The guiding questions we are to respond to in this paper refer to “policy”, the elements of which are not defined within this context, therefore, following the line of thought in the discussion paper, we chose to focus on the issue of alleviating child poverty, as a way to fight against social exclusion.

1. Relevance of the policy to Hungary

The issue has relevance in Hungary. Child poverty exists, even though measures have been taken to alleviate it.

In 2005, there were 2.2 million dependent children and young adults under 20 years of age. 420000 (19%) live under the poverty line. 650000 have less than the amount of the minimum pension to live on. 850000 (40% of all) live under the poverty line calculated by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. 15% of all live in families where none of the adults has work.

Child poverty is most common among the Roma population, families living in disadvantaged parts of Hungary, lone-parent households, and families raising children with disabilities.

The government set out to ensure the fight against child poverty by two major measures: the “Legyen Jobb a Gyermeknek” National Strategy (formerly called the National Program Against Child Poverty), and the II. National Development Plan (2007-2013).

The “Legyen Jobb a Gyermeknek” National Strategy was adopted by the Parliament some weeks ago and covers the period between 2007-2032. It aims to achieve three major goals:

- to substantially decrease the ratio of children and families living in poverty, thereby to increase the educational opportunities of children;
- to radically reduce the extreme forms of exclusion, segregation and poverty among children;
- to change the philosophy and thinking behind service provision, in order to support the development and skills of children much better.

The first 3-year action plan on the implementation of the strategy is under development right now and the Government is expected to adopt it late summer.

The II. National Development Plan aims to secure European funding for fighting poverty, besides other goals.

In addition, Sure Start (“Biztos Kezdet”) has been piloted in several locations in Hungary.

2. Similarities/differences of the policy with the experience of Hungary

In Hungary, the Act No. XXXI. of 1997 on the protection of children and child welfare administration regulates the provisions and services for children, such as child welfare services, childcare, respite care, and the provisions, which are parts of the child protection system. Its philosophy is based on the concept of working together. Child welfare services have the duty to work together with other services (childcare, health, social and educational) in order to help families with children in difficulties and at risk. It is their duty to organize case conferences, and to also help families by referring them to specialists and other services when needed. The legislation also stipulates the duty to involve parents. Since the implementation of the Act in 1997, other laws (education and health) have also incorporated the duty for all - related to children in need - to work together.

So, the philosophy and the principles are similar to those of the Maltese program.

3. Potential transferability of the policy

In the above sense, the concept of Maltese ACCESS ("as a one-stop shop for social welfare services") is transferable. However, there is an essential difference. In Hungary, most, if not all the so called "basic" services (child welfare, childcare and respite care) are provided directly by local authorities and earmarked funding, covering part of the costs, is ensured by the central government. It is possible to contract non-governmental agencies/organizations for service provision but the number of such cases is very small. The reasons are mainly due to the regulations for financing.

Directly provided services make it easier to help those in need. Local authorities ensure free meals in the services for children from those families which have more than 3 children, or which are disadvantaged. Receiving child protection benefit makes families eligible for free or reduced-fee meals.

Sure Start – a similar program – has been piloted. Its evaluation has been going on, its transferability will be assessed.

4. Questions raised and debated in Hungary

Most of the debates and questions in Hungary are tied to financing (funding) also. The normative (earmarked) funding provided from the central budget for the services covers less than half of the costs in most cases. With the exception of the cost of the meals, which are paid by the families, the rest needs to be contributed from the local authorities' budgets. The non-profit or for-profit providers might be more flexible to meet the needs of families, but their funding is different. Also, they have to be able to provide the additional funding (that is ensured by the local authority in the case of directly provided public services).

So, on one hand, the system has built in preferences for local authority direct provision and the requirement for all services to work together. On the other hand, non-profit and for-profit providers have difficulties to raise enough funding, although their services might be more flexible.

Often, it is debated, how well the legislation is implemented on the local level. That is, do all local authorities meet their duties?

5. Potential contribution of such a policy to Hungary's National Strategy Reports

The basis of such policy is already included in Hungary's National Development Plan. Fighting child poverty is one of the key priorities of the NSR 2006-2008. The NSR contains reference to all kinds of child welfare, early development, childcare and early education services, which can be found in the country. For example, a recent change in the Education Act, aims to ensure the inclusion of children in kindergartens from socially disadvantaged families.

6. Key issues and main questions proposed for the debate at the review meeting

- Issues about scaling up emerge. How can you ensure that a small program can be effectively developed to be offered nationwide? Questions of financing, qualified workers, training needs and capacities arise.
- Transferability needs to be assessed both nationally and cross nationally. In both cases the question of setting up parallel structures might arise.
- The question of willingness of professional groups to be involved arises also. What is a group is not interested/willing to participate?
- And finally, but not least, the question of guarantees comes up. What kinds of guarantees can be set up for parents if the services/programs are not provided by trained personnel.

7. Measure of success of policies in Hungary

Developing different indicators for measuring and evaluating success is an ongoing process in Hungary. A comprehensive monitoring system (based on EU-SILC data inter alia) connected to the National Strategy is under development. When these will be fully implemented, they will provide a good basis for reliable evaluation. Until then, the data collected by the Central Statistical Office (either survey or administrative data), and research results can be used for such purposes.