

## **“Give Kids a Chance” Programme in the micro-region of Szécsény**

### Host Country Report

Hungarian Academy of Sciences,  
Centre for Social Research, Child Programme Office

## **Background and history of the “Give Kids a Chance” Programme of Szécsény**

### *Children’s rights and the EU.*

On 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1989 the United Nations adopted the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which was promulgated by the Hungarian Parliament in Act LXIV of 1991. According to this Act children are entitled to all human rights that are granted in international legal instruments, however, they need particular warranties and care in order to enforce such rights due to their physical and mental immaturity. The child enjoys special protection: the Member States acknowledge and make every effort to enforce the right of all children to a living standard that enables their physical, mental, psychological, moral and social development. The Acts adopted for this purpose must take, above all, the interest of the child into account. *Child poverty*, as a specific problem, has been put on the agenda of the international organisations subsequently, in around 1990. Hungary has always tried to follow the EU directives and priorities, especially after its accession in 2004. For example, in 2007, the European Commission and the Member States focused on child poverty and social exclusion as a central issue in the framework of the open method for coordination.

### *Child poverty in Hungary.*

For several years, the poverty rates of children and households with children have exceeded the average level of the country’s population. Based on the latest statistical data, 19-20% of children live below 60% of the median income. In terms of demographic groups at-risk-of poverty is the highest in families with three or more children and in single-parent families. Their poverty rate is approximately three times higher than that of the entire population. The key social factors leading to poverty are the low activity rate and educational attainment, the lack of vocational qualifications; poor living conditions, living in a depressed region; poor health, and belonging to the Roma population. The two most determining institutions and contexts of the inter-generational transmission (reproduction) of poverty are the family and the school. The lack of parental resources reduces children’s chances to develop their skills in time and in various directions. Insecurity and deprivation, as well as the deficiencies of the professional activity of institutions dealing with children limit chances for healthy adulthood and successful social integration. (Programme Against Child Poverty 2006, Darvas – Tausz 2006, Bass and colleagues 2007, 2008, Pataki – Somorjai 2007, Ferge and colleagues 2009, Better Opportunity for Children in Hungary 2010).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bass László – Darvas Ágnes – Dögei Ilona – Ferge Zsuzsa – Tausz Katalin (2007): Changes in poverty and social exclusion, 2001-2006. *Better Opportunity for Children booklets* 3. MTA KTI Child Programme Office, Budapest, Hungarian

Since the middle of the nineties, poverty has been increasingly segregated, it has been mainly shifting towards the marginalising and deteriorating parts of the cities, and even more to the villages. In Hungary, 66% of poor children live in villages or small settlements. This is coupled with the worsening chances of parents for work and continued education, of schooling opportunities of children, and the quality of institutions designed to serve them. For the past years we can see some 20-25% of young people getting 'lost' for society. Since they are not able to acquire competitive schooling, nor any marketable vocational qualification, most of them are unlikely to find a regular, well-paying job. As a consequence, they are incapable of self-sufficiency, and thus become dependant on social benefits and allowances, inevitably getting into the trap of social assistance and public work. Children growing up in poverty are less healthy and live shorter than their more fortunate peers, and their whole life is shaded by hopelessness and deprivation. Unless effective action is taken poverty will continue to be reproduced. This results in social tensions, burdens and huge public dues hindering economic growth, while a quarter or even a third of the citizens keep desperately struggling for life. It is crucial to take action.

*European background.*

In most EU Member States children are exposed to a higher poverty risk as compared to the total population. The only exceptions are the northern countries and Slovenia, where the poverty rate is not so high and the relative rate of child poverty is still low. The poverty rate of Hungary's total population is somewhat lower than the EU 27 average, however, that of children is far higher. Therefore, within the 25 Members, we are among those 5-6 countries where *the gap between the poverty of the population and children is the widest*, to the disadvantage of children.

---

Bass László – Darvas Ágnes - Ferge Zsuzsa (2007): Elaboration of the National Programme to Combat Child Poverty. Changes in the situation of people living in poverty between 2001 and 2006 – with special regard to children with families. In: *Strategic research 2006-2007*, MTA-MEH, Budapest, 2007, Hungarian

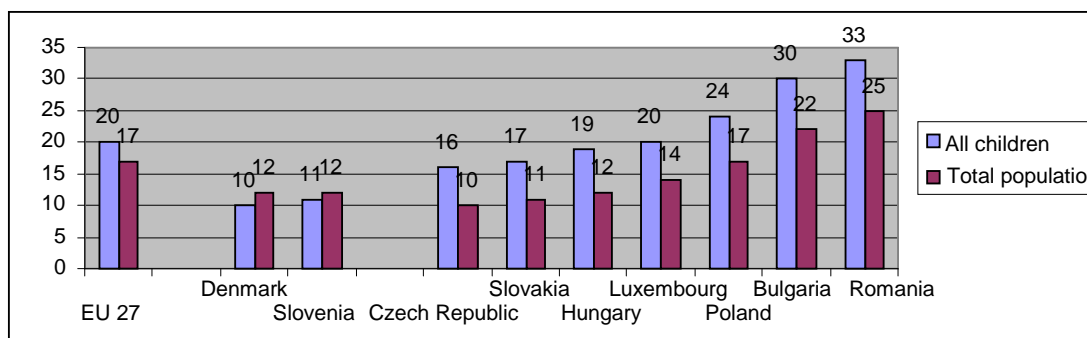
Darvas Ágnes – Tausz Katalin (2006): *Child Poverty*. DEMOS, Hungary, Hungarian.

Ferge Zs. – Bass L. – Darvas Á. – Hadházy Á. (2009): The status of the national strategy for combating child poverty in times of budgetary restrictions and crisis. In: *Strategic research 2008-2009. Research reports*. MEH-MTA, Budapest 2009. Hungarian

Better Opportunity for Children in Hungary 2009, Report of the Evaluation Committee on „Let's make thing Better for our Children”, National Strategy 2010, Hungarian Programme to Combat Child Poverty – Annex 1: Some sections of child poverty: -Background Analysis, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Programme to Combat Child Poverty (MTA GYEP) 2006 [www.gyerekesely.hu](http://www.gyerekesely.hu), Hungarian

Pataki Éva - Somorjai Ildikó: Services against child poverty, *Better Opportunity for Children booklets 3.*, MTA GYEP, 2007, [www.gyerekszegenyseg.hu](http://www.gyerekszegenyseg.hu), Hungarian

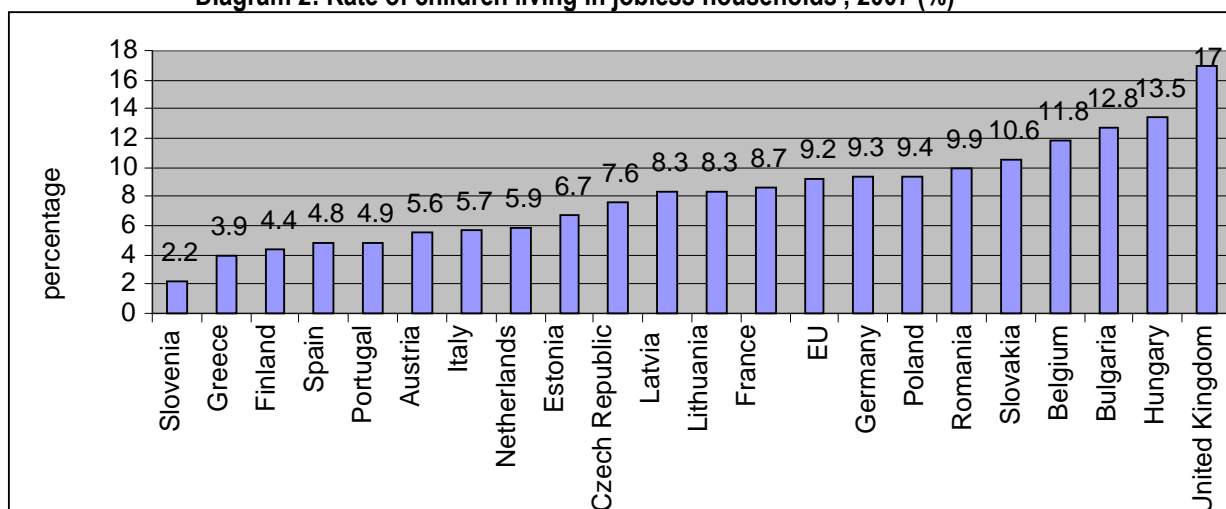
**Diagram 1: The poverty rates of children and the total population in some countries and the EU-27 average, 2006 (%)**



Source: EC report, Foreword

One of the key reasons of child poverty is the high rate of unemployment of parents. It is a well-known fact that the Hungarian activity rate is among the lowest in Europe. As a result, the rate of children living in jobless<sup>2</sup> households is relatively high. According to EU data for 2007 this rate is 14%, that is, the second highest in Europe.

**Diagram 2: Rate of children living in jobless households , 2007 (%)**



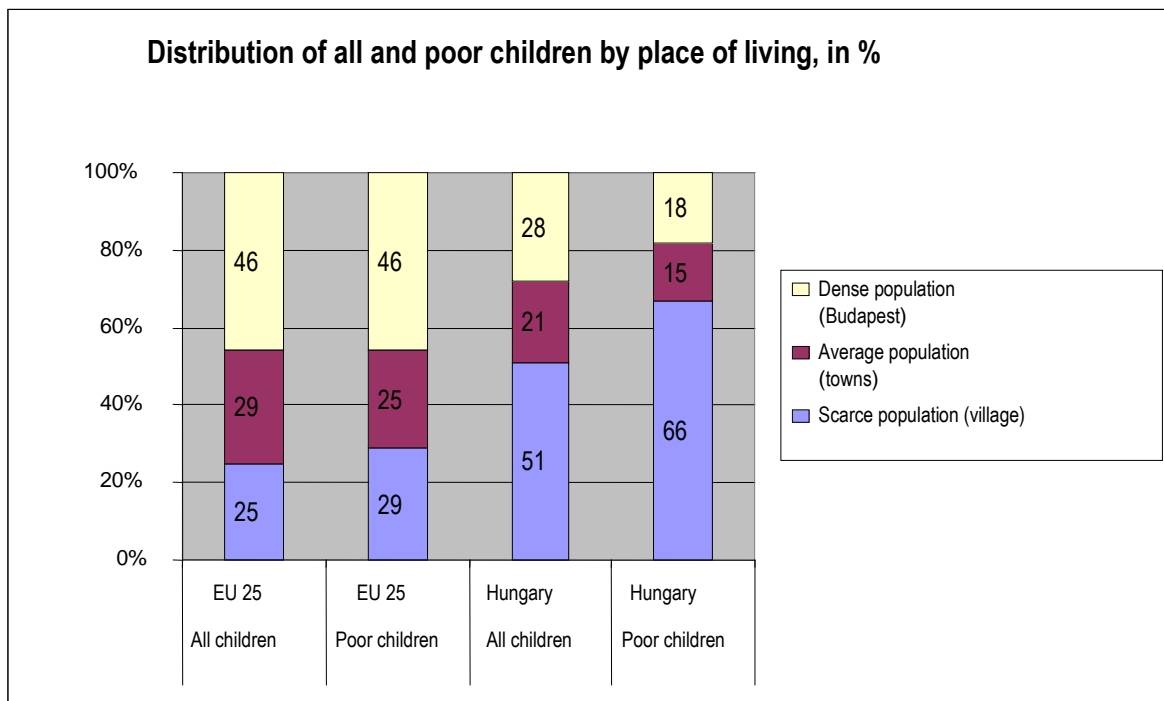
Source of data: Eurostat LFS (Labour Force Survey)

In a European comparison, poverty, particularly child poverty has been shifting to villages to an extremely high degree. A significant part of Western Europe is more urbanized than the northern,

<sup>2</sup> The proportion of people living in jobless households (no one has worked over the past 4 weeks), expressed as a percentage of all people in the same age group.

eastern, and some of the southern countries. In Hungary, twice as many children live in villages (according to the EU definition in 'sparsely populated' settlements) than the EU average (EU average: 25%, Hungary 51%), and while in Europe 29% of the poor children live in villages, this rate amounts to two-thirds in Hungary. (Diagram 3).

**Diagram 3: Distribution of all and poor children by place of living (%)**



Source: Eurostat, Gábos /2010)

*Political response to the challenges of poverty.* In Hungary, the inter-generational transmission (reproduction) of poverty has become such a serious and increasing problem that it requires social action and community intervention from the earliest possible stage of life:

- Deprivation suffered in early years has an impact on the entire life path.
- It is proven that interventions at an early age (their impact is preserved by further work) are much more efficient than the later compensation programmes.
- In the absence of intervention the economic consequence will be an unsustainable economy (lack of qualified labour, no source of pension and social benefits).
- In the absence of intervention the political and social consequence will be an unsustainable society (social tensions, dividing society, hopelessness, passivity, illness, crime and the relevant costs).

As a proposal for the solution of the above problems the National Programme for Combating Child Poverty was elaborated upon the Government's request in March 2006. (The document was prepared by the Child Programme Office – 'GYEP' – of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

(HAS), which started its operation as an ad hoc research group at the end of 2005). The programme contained recommendations aimed at the reduction of child poverty and the prevention of its reproduction; it drew up the main policies of a long term programme planned for at least one generation (for 25 years, from 2007 to 2032); and it provided a detailed description of the actions to be taken in the first three years. This served as a basis for the Government's 'Making Things Better for our Children' National Strategy for 2007-2032, which the Parliament adopted by Resolution no. 41/2007 (V. 31.) on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2007. The Strategy is a programme designed to reduce the poverty and improve the chances of children continuously over a period of 25 years. The programme would require a wide range of commitments and a great deal of domestic and EU funds. In the first stage of the programme these were only partially available. From the autumn of 2008 the global economic crisis and from 2009 the related governmental crisis made the situation even more difficult.

The monitoring of the Strategy is provided by the 'Making Things Better for our Children' National Strategy Evaluation Committee which was established on the basis of the relevant legislation in September 2008. The Committee consists of experts of nine non-governmental organisations delegated by the Government. According to the Government Decision the Committee is responsible, inter alia, for (i) monitoring and evaluating social processes relating to the objectives and priorities of the Strategy; (ii) providing their opinions on current issues concerning the situation of children, ensuring the extensive dissemination of information on the implementation of the Strategy towards the society; and (iii) taking an active part in the implementation of the 'Making Things Better for our Children' National Strategy 2007-2032 by formulating opinions and recommendations. We hope that this new form of cooperation between the Government, the experts and the NGOs and the publicity of this cooperation will redirect attention to the significance of the Strategy.

## **'Making Things Better for our Children' National Strategy**

### **Objectives of the 'Making Things Better for our Children' National Strategy**

- To significantly reduce the poverty rate of children and their families to but a fraction of the current rate, while approximating children's chances for continuing studies and their life prospects.
- To put an end to the exclusion of children and the extreme forms of intense poverty, to decrease the incidence of deviances that ruin their life chances;
- To fundamentally transform the mechanisms and institutions which currently reproduce poverty and exclusion. These institutions and services are required to do much more for the unfolding of children's abilities than today, so as to ensure that as adults they can participate in the life of society as full citizens.

### **The priority development areas of the strategy against child poverty**

The Strategy intends to take action in areas that most directly determine the life of children and families. It designates the following areas of development (which are also 'functional priorities'):

- Increasing the employment rate and labour market activity; developing the benefit system aimed at improving the financial situation of families with children,
- Improving the conditions, quality and safety of housing,
- Developing institutions and services that enhance the evolvement of abilities and successful school careers, reducing segregation,
- Developing personal and specialized services aimed at the assistance of families with children
- Ensuring a healthier childhood.

### **Horizontal priorities**

For each development area and goal there are priorities called horizontal objectives spanning all areas. The implementation of the first four horizontal priorities have a direct impact on deep poverty, while others link the reduction of poverty with the enforcement of rights and increased democratic participation. These will result in an improvement of the chances of all children. The priorities are as follows:

- Improving the situation of the Roma minority to a perceivable degree, eliminating their segregation and social exclusion.
- Improving the situation of children with disabilities and their families.
- Uncovering development opportunities in disadvantaged settlements and regions, reducing their disadvantages and exclusion.
- Improving the enabling work of the public service system also serving children (school, healthcare, cash benefits, community spaces, etc.).
- Strengthening rights and legal approaches, enforcing the rights of children more efficiently.
- Improving cooperation among professions, institutions, sectors, as well as governmental and local governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, churches and non-profit institutions.
- Increasing the participation of citizens, especially those concerned - the poor and the children - in all matters affecting them.

- Improving information and the dissemination of information to everyone, using the opportunities provided by information technology for alleviating poverty.

**Summary of objectives and priorities**

	Parents' work	Development, education of children	Social benefits and care services	Better health of children	Improved housing conditions
Priority of Roma children	<b>Reducing the rate and depth of poverty</b>				
Priority of disabled children					
Reducing settlement disadvantages					
Developing the social service systems					
Strengthening children's rights	<b>Reducing the rate of poverty, strengthening rights and participation</b>				
Cooperation among sectors and institutions					
Participation of citizens and children					
Dissemination of and access to information					

Implementation requires decades of continuous efforts. To begin these, a short term (3 years) programme has been worked out within the 25-year generation strategy (2007-2032), with some of its elements being included in the Government's 3-year action plan as well. The delivery of a part of the medium and long term tasks has been started in consistence with the New Hungary Development Plan (2007-2013).

Aiming at the further development of the programme and a better implementation of the 'Making Things Better for our Children' long term National Strategy, the experts working at the office of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences elaborating the *National Programme to Combat Child Poverty* (GYEP Office) launched the '*Pilot project of Szécsény*', and started its complex delivery in the micro-region of Szécsény, located in Nógrád county, which belonged to the most disadvantaged group of micro-regions in 2006. Since it was started, the pilot project has interacted with the leaders, experts and more and more citizens of the micro-region. Since November 2008 the programme has been financed by the 'Norwegian Fund', which has accelerated the implementation. An increasing part of the micro-regional work is performed by the Child Programme Office of Szécsény.

## The “Give Kids a Chance” Programme of Szécsény (SZGYEP Programme)

### Background to the selection of the micro-region – the situation in 2005

The micro-region of Szécsény is situated in the Northern Hungary region, in Nógrád County. It lies in the Palóc region near the Cserhát Mountains, in the area around the Ipoly Valley and the town of Szécsény. It has 13 settlements, some of them very small or dead-end villages. The road network is incomplete, national main roads do not reach the region. A part of the houses are in a poor condition, one-quarter of them have no degree of comfort. At the end of 2005, a total number of 20,446 people lived in the thirteen settlements, including 4,288 children below the age of 18. The educational level of the adult population of the micro-region is far behind the national level.

**Table 1: Educational attainment of the micro-region’s population, 2005**

Name of the settlement	Ratio of those with not more than 8 elementary classes among the 15-x population 2001 (%)	Ratio of those with secondary education among the 18-x population 2001 (%)	Ratio of those with higher education among the 25-x population 2001 (%)	Name of the settlement	Ratio of those with not more than 8 elementary classes among the 15-x population 2001 (%)	Ratio of those with secondary education among the 18-x population 2001 (%)	Ratio of those with higher education among the 25-x population 2001 (%)
Ludányhalászi	73.5	35.2	3.6	Magyargéc	79.5	33.7	2.8
Szécsény	49.0	55.9	11.6	Nógrádszakál	74.7	29.4	5.1
Piliny	66.8	43.7	2.7	Rimóc	74.1	35.0	3.2
Nógrádmegyer	80.9	33.7	2.6	Varsány	68.1	38.3	4.4
Nógrádsipek	57.1	41.4	2.1	Szécsény-felfalu	63.2	40.2	1.7
Nagylóc	66.9	37.3	3.3	Hollókő	54.1	36.7	3.6
Endrefalva	89.8	23.3	2.6				

After the change of regime the situation of the micro-region deteriorated to a significant extent. Agriculture and local industry collapsed, the big firms of neighbouring towns closed down. By 2005 this area had become one of the 42 most disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary.

Undoubtedly, the most urging problem of the region is the low level of employment and the high unemployment rate, as well as undeclared work. At the end of September, 2004, 14% of the economically active population of Nógrád County were unemployed, representing the third highest rate among all counties of Hungary. Within the county the micro-regions of Salgótarján and Szécsény were hardest hit by unemployment.

**Table 2: Unemployment and employment in the micro-region of Szécsény, 2004**

Name of the settlement	Number of active population, 2005	Registered unemployment rate (%), 2005	Rate of jobless households, 2001	Name of the settlement	Number of active population, 2005	Registered unemployment rate (%), 2005	Rate of jobless households, 2001
Ludányhalászi	987	9,4	50,8	Magyargéc	538	19,3	49,3
Szécsény	4 369	8,9	35,5	Nógrádszakál	374	18,2	62,8
Piliny	402	12,9	48,8	Rimóc	1 098	11,0	54,6
Nógrádmegyer	1 073	24,4	51,6	Varsány	1 125	13,3	45,2
Nógrádsipek	446	12,8	56,9	Szécsény-felfalu	270	18,1	56,2
Nagylóc	995	11,7	59,2	Hollókő	209	10,0	65,0
Endrefalva	777	27,0	51,2				

The ratio of the Roma population is increasing. At present, about thirty percent of elementary school students are Roma, with a total number of approximately 700 children. In ten schools out of the 13 of the micro-region the proportion of Roma students exceeds 50%. In the individual settlements segregation appears in different depths: ranging from full segregation to integrated schools applying the open-approach method.

### ***Objectives of the local programme***

The objectives of the local programme are identical with the national goals, however, the scale of implementation is much smaller both in terms of quantity and quality. Also, it is necessary to apply different methods of action. Binding legislation is not a local affair and local funds are scarce in the disadvantaged areas. However, the opportunities of personal services and personal influences are much greater, and it is actually possible to involve civil society - whether they are stakeholders or not - in the actions. Basic local goals: to improve the living conditions of children and families with children, to provide a better basis for the emotionally and mentally harmonious and healthy physical and psychological development. More specifically: an enforceable aim also at the local level is *to reduce child poverty, decrease social exclusion and segregation, and change the approach of institutions and their colleagues*. In fact, the content and relative importance of certain goals change when we interpret them at a local level.

#### *Reducing poverty, as a local objective.*

The key instruments, legislation and the appropriation/allocation of common sources are held by the central government and operate at a national level. Nevertheless, in the case of this objective, sources of funding have such a significant role that it would be difficult to achieve results without access to central funds (national or European). The possibilities of local governments are limited. They have a certain degree of freedom in reshuffling funds received from the central budget, organising publicly financed local services, making decisions about social assistance and raising funds via grant applications. According to the results of local surveys, there is a wide variation in the ways in which local amenities and the above mentioned freedoms are utilized, in the ways they approach people living in poverty and children. The efficiency of actions to combat child poverty is largely dependant on these alternatives. Since several forms of deep poverty can be mitigated only at a local level, the cooperation of local governments in this area is of key concern.

*Decreasing social exclusion and segregation, reducing deep poverty as a local objective.*

There are some lucky countries where appropriate housing, educational and other policies have been successfully implemented to avoid the exclusion and segregation of poor immigrants or ethnic minorities, thus preventing the evolvement of immigrant ghettos or segregating schools, for example. In Hungary, there had not been a conscious and comprehensive anti-segregation policy until a few years ago. In the absence of such policies, inequalities had been rapidly growing. The always existing, but sometimes only latent segregating-excluding efforts are now getting increasingly strong and conscious. They have already reshaped the map of the country and the settlements. Settlements and even micro-regions inhabited only by Roma people have appeared. The spontaneous reasons why the poor had moved to villages (impossibility of maintaining their urban homes) were coupled with the conscious role of local governments. Whether mild or fierce, the application of pressure and sell-outs are means that have already been used by several districts of Budapest and rural towns as a successful attempt at 'replacing the population'. The well-known old method of school segregation has resulted in the appearance of 'pure Roma schools' by now. In the micro-region of Szécsény, this type of educational segregation, as well as housing segregation is characteristic of a majority of the settlements. One of the villages is almost exclusively inhabited by Roma. The change has been going on for 20 years. The relation of the Szécsény "Give Kids a Chance" ('SZGYEP') Programme to public education is made more difficult by the fact that there are various conflicts of interest arising in the course of school reorganisations. The requirements of equal opportunities would necessitate the integration of Roma and non-Roma children in a form that is refused by better-off (Roma and mostly non-Roma) families. The administrative measures compelling teachers and families, that is, the 'forced integration' was received with nationwide indignation and proved to be ineffective in most cases. At the same time, the survival of segregated small schools deteriorates the opportunities of children. We are now looking for a solution to this contradictory problem together with the local people.

*Improvement of approach, as a local objective.*

There have always been governmental attempts at the equalization of opportunities and desegregation. However, these have been implemented only partially due to the weakness of political will and the lack of funds on the one hand and, on the other hand, *because most of the relevant practices can be applied only at a local level*, in a specific institution or a concrete settlement (or part of a settlement). One of the conclusive issues in this context is how local actors accept the modern approach to children's rights which is based on the principle that the 'best interests of the child is paramount'. Approving this view also means accepting public responsibility. Another similarly significant question is how tolerant or prejudiced the local community is: are there any people who belong to the Roma minority, and what is the attitude of the 'majority society', that is, the non-Roma population towards them; are there any people living in poverty, and to what extent does the local community think that they are responsible for their own situation; are there any people with disabilities, and how are they accepted by the local society? Also in the micro-region of Szécsény we can experience prejudice against the Roma and indifference towards children living with disabilities both from the part of professionals and the population. It is difficult to promote modern views with respect to children. *Child-oriented, non-excluding practices require institutions and their personnel, as well as all stakeholders and the entire social environment to have a scale of values, mentality, approach and attitude that are up-to-date, tolerant and understanding with children.* Unfortunately, this mentality is far from being

common in Hungary. There are already a lot of schools which have the right attitude and feel committed to the multi-dimensional development and good social coexistence of children, but this has not yet been characteristic of the majority. That is why it is necessary to change attitudes and mentalities. It is regrettable that there is an increasing number of (market-oriented) training and counselling services promising a change in attitude and personality the efficiency of which are rarely controlled. The manipulating potential of mass communication is also growing at a high rate. Changing the present operational methods and approaches in a way that meets the interests of children is obviously a lengthy and difficult process, which requires a number of methods and tools as well as various external resources and impulses. To reduce prejudices, and for many other reasons (building relationships, strengthening cooperation and professional development) we have organised *training/attitude changing programmes* for experts from the beginnings.

### **Key tasks of the “Give Kids a Chance” Programme of Szécsény’ (SZGYEP):**

- To implement developments in accordance with the objectives and principles of the National Strategy Against Child Poverty.
- To continuously assess the need for services and funds required for the developments.
- To improve the situation of families with children living in the micro-region, to facilitate the establishment of necessary services and benefits.
- To support the acquisition of human resources required for the establishment and operation of the services.
- To prepare and support programmes aimed at implementing the National Strategy at the micro-regional level from professional and methodological aspects.
- To monitor the experiences of micro-regional implementation and ensure the feedback of conclusions into local plans (action research character).

### **Characteristics of the SZGYEP Programme:**

- Local programme: its delivery targets all settlements of the micro-region, the entire micro-regional population and its development in close cooperation with the local society. Services are planned to be developed in consideration of local (settlement) requirements, the need for creating a micro-regional identity and aspects of economies of scale.
- Comprehensive programme: although in certain areas the programme creates clearly defined services whose scope is widening, they are related to each other to make a coherent whole. While targeting different groups they are aiming at the common objectives and may operate at the same site.
- Characterised by a substantial increase in human resources: the dense and active network of services (service boom or bang) is a basic requirement in the initial period of

programmes aimed at improving the situation of disadvantaged groups. Another significant element of complex micro-regional programmes is the series of long term, coherent processes and, parallel with that, a change in local conditions and approaches. This requires appropriately prepared experts who are often not available in poor regions. The need for services other than basic ones and compulsory local governmental tasks (e.g. children's houses, school coordinators, study halls, interbranch workshops, community developers, etc.) require the constant presence of several external local experts. This need for experts cannot be fulfilled without an appropriate programme and support.

- Action research: the starting point was the so-called short (3 years-long) governmental programme against child poverty. The first interventions were planned on the basis of this. The programme which has been going on for more than three years is characterized by continuous evaluation and rescheduling, including the tailor-made development of the scope and content of services. A continuous monitoring of the changes occurring in the situation of children, youth and their families forms part of the process.
- Programme, not project: its activities are relatively flexible, free of the usual restrictions of projects (short duration, difficulties in changing in the meantime, lack of complexity), and are continuously adjusted in response to the changing needs of the local society. (Flexibility is continuously endangered by the fact that additional funds are, in most cases, only available via strictly regulated project proposals. This constantly disturbs the progress of the programme.)
- Experimental/model character: it must be suitable for elaborating the professional, methodological and educational bases of further similar programmes and for sharing experiences.

### **The first three years and some experiences of the programme**

#### *Starting out with a lack of funds.*

In 2006 the micro-region of Szécsény in Nógrád County had belonged to the most disadvantaged group of micro-regions despite being endowed with great historical and folklore traditions and significant natural values. The pilot project appeared to be feasible because the microregion covered a relatively small area, it was relatively near to Budapest – with which we had planned close cooperation initially – and because according to our preliminary survey there were a number of excellent experts working in the region. The Mayor of Szécsény, who is also the president of the Multipurpose Cooperation of the Local Governments of the Micro-region of Szécsény quickly recognized the importance of the programme. In the autumn of 2006 the Micro-Regional Cooperation, the local governments and the Child Programme Office of the HAS (MTA GYEP) formed a consortium and elaborated an application to the “Norwegian Fund” in order to deliver the local programme. The decision about the grant application took three years. until the end of 2009. From the time of the preparation of the programme though, great expectations have been raised in the micro-region. Since they could not have been revived after a pause of 2-3 years, we started the work in the micro-region on a low key. In the three-year waiting period the

operation of the programme was financed from some re-shuffled funds of the Child Programme Office and from minor and quicker project proposals mostly supported by the government. To get started, we had to agree with the Norwegian Fund that the expenses incurred in the three years could not be subsequently financed from the Fund and also that the achieved results could not jeopardize the independent existence of the programme. The preparatory period was, all in all, a useful learning experience.

*Local integration of the programme.*

The pilot programme of Szécsény was launched from an exceptional status: almost no one had heard of the programme in the micro-region before, so it had no legal or institutional background. The programme entered the life of the micro-region from 'outside'. The dissemination of Information and local awareness-raising were started by colleagues from the Child Programme Office of the HAS and experts participating upon the Office's request. This 'introductory' stage lasted for some four months. Subsequently more and more local experts joined the programme. In 2007 the Child Programme Office of Szécsény was set up in cooperation with local experts and civilians, and is gradually taking over the role of the expert team of Budapest. The dissemination of the first achievements of the programme took place via several media events, a website, printed newsletters published for some time, as well as three professional conferences. By 2009 the local recognition of the programme led to the emergence of a micro-regional child committee whose elected leaders were experts from the micro-region. The dilemma of local identification with an 'outside' initiative could only be gradually settled by the programme, and the reappearance of resistance is certainly not excluded.

*Local integration and the Roma.*

The programme was "colour-blind" from the very beginning in the correct sense of the word. It created integrated workplaces where Roma and non-Roma people cooperated. Roma and non-Roma work together in all the institutions (children's houses, study halls) created by the programme, among the school and IT mentors, and in the Szécsény office. One of the leaders of the Szécsény office is Roma as well as one of the teachers in the training programmes. This cooperation creates a unique situation in the micro-region which – hopefully – carries a message. The programme established good contacts with the "Roma local authorities". These exist in all the localities with Roma population. They are bodies elected by self-declared Roma but deal mainly with local-cultural issues. (They have no funds and few rights.) We involved them as far as possible in the design and implementation of the programme from the outset. They participate also in some parts of the programme, for instance in the rehabilitation project of Gécz village. Unfortunately there are no Roma civil organisations in the micro-region (and not many non-Roma, either). The goal of the programme is to promote desegregation in schools as well as in other fields of life, and to empower the Roma (essentially via community work and job-creation, mainly in the co-operative) so as to become equal members of the community.

*The necessity and difficulty of improving services.*

A key issue in launching local programmes is to have a sufficiently extensive, high standard and cooperative service providing system. In the micro-region – similar to all other disadvantaged areas of the country – this has been only partially available. Services (partly due to the inadequate central regulation) hardly meet local needs. Experts are overloaded, there is no possibility for supervision, the threat of burn-out is substantial, and there is no cooperation

between health, education and social professional staff dealing with children. In most cases local governments are the employers themselves which sometimes makes the enforcement of professional standards difficult. On the other hand, it is not easy for local people to acknowledge the need for change encouraged from outside. To improve the standard, SZGYEP has provided supervision, and organises interbranch meetings and training courses.

*The difficulties of complexity.*

Since child poverty is a multiply complex phenomenon, this complexity must be taken into consideration both in planning and implementation. The main tool for this is cooperation. Child poverty can be successfully reduced only if all concerned institutions, professions and adults dealing with the children are able to cooperate with each other, and if they can reach consensus with respect to the values affecting the children's present and future. The experience of the Programme of Szécsény is that at the beginning only a part of these conditions exist. In addition to the complexity of planning and the programme, great emphasis should be laid on complexity based on the cooperation of professions and on the familiarization of cooperation techniques. There are a huge number of factors that make comprehensive development difficult. There are some areas, for example certain training programmes, for which it is relatively easy to find sources. In other cases – for example the installation of water pipes in houses or the construction of pavements – few opportunities to apply for project or central funds will be available in the forthcoming years. A different type of hardship is the multiplication of conflicting interests. This problem can only be resolved by involving the stakeholders, promoting various dialogue processes and ensuring transparent publicity.

*How to plan a social experiment.*

The pilot project of Szécsény is, in fact, an action research programme. According to definitions 'Action research, in its simplest form, is an assessment of the social system and, at the same time, an attempt at changing the system'.<sup>3</sup> Obviously it is necessary to be aware of the purpose of the pilot project and the set of available tools serving to implement it, as well as with the expected costs at the very beginning. However, the plannability of a social process is limited due to the changes in circumstances, the 'law of unintended consequences', the emergence of new needs or the articulation of already existing needs and, on the whole, due to the characteristics of human actions and reactions. Therefore the planned interventions have to react flexibly to these impacts which necessarily modify the original plans to some extent. Action research also relies on changes to be implemented as a result of feedbacks. Despite flexibility, the originally outlined objective should be accomplished at the end of each period. This task is not easy to accomplish if the majority of funds are assured by rigidly planned projects.

*The dilemmas of sustainability.*

The local adaptation of the National Strategy requires substantial sources of funding. In addition to external – central governmental and project – funds, an increasing amount of local, internal resources is also needed. Internal resources may include financial, human or intellectual resources or may result from the cooperation of the community. However, no matter how successful the mobilisation of internal (human, professional) resources proves to be, external

---

<sup>3</sup> Troppe, Marie: *Participation Action Research: Merging the Community and Scholarship Agendas*. 1994, Providence.

funds are needed, too. At present, budgetary sources are scarce in Hungary. We have already mentioned that current regulations make difficult certain actions, For example very few projects offer opportunity to improve housing and environmental conditions. In other cases the local programme can be operated successfully only together with national institutions. If for instance the priorities of public education are shifting away from those of the programme, compromises may have to be worked out. One of the key objectives of the strategy and the pilot project is 'to fundamentally reform the operational method of institutions and services which currently contribute to the intergenerational transmission (reproduction) of poverty and social exclusion...'. At present, the governmental funding of social and child welfare personal services is altogether insufficient and declining. An even greater problem is that norms of providing services are uniform across the country disregarding the differentiation of local needs. Given the radically varied situation of micro-regions and settlements normative state subsidies should be adjusted to local needs (for instance to the regional or local poverty rates). Also there is a need for particularly intensive financing at the start of the programmes. Grants are very much needed to complement scarce central resources. We briefly mention again the related difficulties. The uncertainties of fund raising are hard to reconcile with the planned complex processes, the short term approach of projects with interventions designed to span over generations. Furthermore, the restricted, usually single-purpose topic of projects does not serve comprehensive programmes properly. The pilot programme plans or hopes to supplement and partly replace external funds by a social cooperative that, over and above meeting community needs and offering some jobs will ultimately be able to produce profits serving the programme. (See below)

### **A brief description of the areas of action of the programme**

(Please find quantitative data in the Appendix.)

*Early skills development, Sure Start Children Houses.*

Sub-programmes: Operation of Sure Start children houses, preparation of integrated developments in early childhood, improvement of the early development of children with disabilities and facilitation the transition of children to day care in kindergartens.

Children may use the services of Sure Start children centres on their own, but it is an important goal to involve parents. The institutions ensure the early skills development of children, offer special services relating to early development, provide an opportunity for parents to acquire parental competences, and help parents to get back to the labour market. The staff of the children houses participate in a continuous learning process to be able to carry out the new tasks. At children houses the availability of computers and the internet enables parents to look for working opportunities and access job placement services. At present, children houses are being qualified as employment information points and the services are being extended. Colleagues at the children's houses offer parents help to get back to the labour market, easing administrative requests like the registration at job placement services. The basic idea behind the philosophy of Sure Start children houses is the harmonized cooperation of the specific professions aimed at improving the quality of personal services offered to families with children. To this end, we endeavour to ensure the continuous presence in the children houses of the collaborators.

*Integration in public education, development of public education.*

Sub-programmes: Public education development sub-programme: operation of a network of school coordinators and study halls, school and extracurricular programmes and services, further training for staff, education-related developments held outside class and the academic year.

The programme identifies with central efforts aimed at integration and equal opportunities. It focuses on two large areas. One goal is to promote desegregation and integrated education in the micro-region, and the other is to modernise the pedagogical programme and work. The programme includes elements such as reducing truancy, the dropout rate and enriching the lives of children and youth. The programme offers a diversity of services.

- Since the autumn of 2008 we provide further training courses and teacher mentoring with the involvement of pedagogical experts of high professional prestige. This can help the renewal of pedagogical methodology at schools in a number of ways – offering examples of good practice, open discussion of methods, etc.
- It provides teachers with various opportunities for meeting, further training, and acquiring external experiences.
- Two settlements have opened a study hall offering open tutoring and rich after-school activities and clubs for pupils.
- The programme organises summer camps and summer day care centres, helps in summer day care catering, and aims to organise programmes and travelling opportunities outside the settlement.
- The six school coordinators employed by the programme can alleviate the scarcity of labour force in schools to some extent. They are trained and assisted by the experts. Their responsibilities include – depending on their qualification and the requirements of the school – giving assistance in class work, building a bridge between the family and the school, including family visits and information-sharing discussions with families, aiming to reduce truancy, representing parents at the school, etc. The other group of tasks includes the organisation of extracurricular, leisure activities. They take part at events – both as organisers and attendants – when children, who hardly have any opportunities to travel even outside their own settlements, are taken to excursions. In addition, as an indirect effect of their activity, they contribute to the acceptance of social work relating to kindergartens and schools.
- The Norwegian fund provides further out-of-class services and development experts for the schools of the micro-region. According to plans, children studying at the secondary level will be assisted by a mentor teacher programme which will help them cope with the problematic times of adolescence. The mentor teachers will not only help children in their studies, but also in their career choices.

*Youth development.*

Youth sub-programmes: assistance to early school-leavers based on individual plans, youth clubs, youth programmes.

In the micro-region there are about 2300 young people between 11 and 19 years. About one-third or one-fourth of them do not attend school regularly or have dropped out. There were practically no youth institutions, programmes or professional assistants in the micro-region. Out of the 13 settlements only two had youth clubs. According to our surveys, there are very few opportunities available to adolescents/youths for spending their free time in a useful way and for making relationships.

With regard to the above, the programme has a dual objective. On the one hand, it applies various methods in order to find early school-leavers and facilitate their reintegration. In this context, they are given expert help in elaborating and realizing individual life plans. The other objective is to increase the number of leisure programmes and opportunities through community spaces, youth clubs, micro-regional child and youth meetings and programmes offering other experiences.

*Development of the information society.*

IT sub-programme: development of digital literacy, operation of an IT-mentor network, maintenance and operation of IT points.

In the micro-region of Szécsény the IT network coverage, access to computers, as well as the indicators of computer and internet use were far below the national average. The development strategy was adjusted to the financial capacities of the local population. The IT sub-programme of GYEP is primarily focused on the establishment of community spaces, on ensuring access to computers and the internet, as well as on training IT mentors and extending the services provided by them.

The IT points (e-points, telehouses, community internet access points) are open regularly (at predefined hours). IT mentors offer a wide range of e-services to the local population of the micro-region, including information search, access to the World Wide Web, organisation of IT training courses, electronic library, virtual presence, office services (photocopying, desktop publishing), e-administration, job-seeking and placement, etc. About half of the visitors are children.

*Healthier childhood.*

Health care sub-programme: regular screening, improvement of access to health care services, development of the system of public catering, programmes enhancing health- and environment-conscious behaviour.

In the area of child health care, priority is given to improving the assessment of the health status of children and promoting the adaptation of services to the relevant needs. As the first step of this complex programme, access to the currently scarce dental screening and dental treatment will be improved in the micro-region. Another area of high significance is the work relating to adolescent parents, the alleviation of the problem of early pregnancy possibly by means of new

methods. Another task is the content (healthy nutrition) and formal (eating conditions) development of public catering, as well as its interlinking with the local economy. Programmes relating to nutrition target parents and children also outside the institutions. The objectives of the health care programme include the dissemination of local best practices at a micro-regional scale, as well as the assistance of initiatives and programmes aimed at the development of health- and environment-conscious behaviour at schools. By providing training programmes we raise the awareness and sensitivity of experts and assistants for these problem areas.

*Social and community work.*

Sub-programmes: strengthening of individual and community social work in settlements with colony-like housing environments, introduction and continuous extension of debt servicing, training, supervision, psychological counselling, expansion of social services.

There have not been sufficient resources to radically improve individual and community social work in the micro-region. Significant initiatives could only be started in some areas. In the village of Magyargéc we launched a colony rehabilitation programme to make housing conditions better (a series of in-depth interviews with stakeholders to map their needs, interviews with decision-makers, representatives of services and institutions and civilians, detailed situation analysis, technical assessment of buildings, settlement of proprietary relations, administration of personal documents, preparation of a colony rehabilitation project, intensive individual and group social work, and community development programmes). After the appropriate preparatory work and training we managed to launch the debt management service (assessment of debts, conclusion of agreements with public utility service providers, preparation and reconciliation of draft decrees, acquisition of required qualifications), but only in one settlement for the moment. Two other settlements are getting ready to join. From a longer perspective an important step forward is the strengthening of cooperation between the professionals of various child services: these intersectoral, interprofessional discussions have become regular.

*Encouraging the employment of parents.*

Sub-programmes: besides developments aimed at the better day care of children, the preparation of job-creating projects, feasibility studies and business plans mostly relying on the cooperative.

A main pillar of our programme is enhancing and increasing employment. The (qualified) labour advisor of the programme provides assistance in unemployment registration, performs individual key competency tests, draws up individual development plans for long-term unemployed people, generates job-seeking clubs and organises entrepreneurial forums. We participate in the preparation of local public employment plans, the work of social roundtables, as well as the implementation of the 'Passway to Work' programme (national programme for social assistance recipients to fulfil public work). According to our vision, alongside market-oriented enterprises, there is a great need for applying the community model of the social economy (see below).

*Improving housing conditions.*

Sub-programme: Preparation of programmes aimed at the improvement of housing conditions.

The complexity of the programme requires the improvement of *housing and its environment* at least to an extent that the housing conditions of the family are safe and the children can grow up

under socially acceptable housing conditions and environment. The proportion of unfulfilled needs is substantial: in 2008, there was no running water in 10% of the homes, 16% of them were overcrowded, and 25% were not connected to the sewer network. The lack of funds and the ban on construction of most tenders puts a serious obstacle in the way of drawing up systematic plans for the improvement of sub-standard, comfortless houses and the rehabilitation of the deteriorated parts of settlements. We hope that the EU's new approach which provides access to EU funds for such purposes will help in managing this problem. While our contribution to the improvement of housing was limited to map the situation and the needs it may be mentioned that the debt service and the colony programme also aim at the improvement of housing conditions.

*Developing the social economy.*

Sub-programme: Creation of a social cooperative for the purpose of developing new forms of sustainability and creating jobs.

Hungary is not making use of the potential of the social economy, more specifically, of the modern social cooperative. A 'social cooperative' (taking foreign examples into account) is an economic unit that is business-oriented but does not operate with the purpose of maximizing profit. Its goals include the safe subsistence of its members on the basis of employment, the fulfilment of local needs with a new method, as well as the dissemination of democratic, community practices. Over a year long preparatory process (several local forums, recruitment of members, elaboration of business plans) a micro-regional social cooperative was founded late 2008. The 'eMulticoop Social Cooperative' has already started two business branches (waste collection and IT), and has submitted proposals for the support of three job-creating projects.

## **Nationwide extension**

The Child Programme Office of the HAS has been continuously involved with the New Hungary Development Plan (NHDP) in all instances related to child poverty. There is a methodological programme operating since 2008 under the ESF funded Social Renewal Operational Programme (SROP) which aims at preparing the nationwide expansion of complex micro-regional child programmes. The Child Programme Office takes part in this programme as a consortium partner and it will support 11 disadvantaged micro-regions to implement similar complex child programmes as in Szécsény until 2014. They provide methodological and training materials, experienced experts and carry out surveys to identify needs in the new regions. Building on the pilot programme of Szécsény the complex children programme will be launched in 2010 in five, in 2011 further six heavily disadvantaged regions, supported mainly by European funds.

Another sub-measure supported by ESF under SROP is sub-measure 5.2.2. the nationwide extension of Sure Start houses providing early development services for disadvantaged small children (0-5 years of age) and their parents in order to promote the children's successful integration in pre-school and school. This programme can also build on the pilot programme of Szécsény. Under sub-measure 5.2.2. of SROP 36 Sure Start children houses were set up between 2008-2009 and in 2010 a new call for applications will be launched aiming at creating further 80 children houses in the country.

## Appendix

### “Give Kids a Chance” Programme of Szécsény

#### Services provided on a regular basis

#### Situation in March 2010

(preliminary data )

Services, programmes	regular	Number of services/ number of settlements	of	Frequency of operation of the service/programme	Average number of children/families/youths/ staff/experts, etc. taking part monthly /stakeholders/....	Number of staff working in the service (one colleague may fulfil functions in several services)
Sure Start Children Houses		5/5		Every weekday	75 families/ 100 children/ 5-10 experts	15
School Coordinator Network		6/8		Every weekday	Mainly children in the lower grades of elementary school, amounting to a total of approx. 200 children	6
Extracurricular activities	school	8/8		Several times a week	20-25 persons per location	7
Study Halls		2/2		Every weekday	40	8
‘Second Chance’ youth programmes (for drop-out children)		4/4		Several times a week, in one settlement continuously on weekdays	45 young people	10
IT points		7/6		Szécsény – six days a week, other settlements – 4 days a week	The total number of visitors is close to 800 a month	7
Individual social work		1/1		Every weekday	15 families/30 adults/55 children	3
Community social work		2/2		Every weekday	15 families/30 adults/55 children	3
Community House		1/1		Every weekday	15 families/30 adults/55 children/	5
Psychological counselling		4/4		One day in each settlement	The service has just been started	1
Labour market counselling		6/6		Every second week	120 job-seekers	1
Interbranch meetings of settlements		8/8		Every second week	8-10 experts in each settlement	5
Sub-committees of the Child Committee		5/Micro-regional level		Every 2-3 months	8-10 persons per sub-committee	5
Micro-regional committee	child	1/Micro-regional level		Every 3 months	15-20 persons	3
Training		5/Micro-regional level		Every second week	20 colleagues and local experts	-