

CASE *study*: HUNGARY



Sure Start Children's Houses and Early Years Programmes

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This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

first years
first priority

**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

BACKGROUND

Sure Start Children's Houses¹ originated in England in 1999², as a service for families with young children, providing a friendly and inviting environment where parents and children can spend time together. They are also a place where families can wash and eat, where parents can meet with professionals who can support them and help improve their parenting skills, and where they can look for a job. The programme aims to foster inclusion and reduce the risks associated with social disadvantage and isolation³. The Sure Start programme has been recognised as best practice by the EU and WHO⁴.

SURE START CHILDREN'S HOUSES IN HUNGARY

Sure Start was introduced in Hungary in 2003, when the British Embassy and the Hungarian Ministry of Health, Social and Family Affairs set up a working group which launched several model programmes⁵ with the help of the Norwegian Fund. By 2006, 51 Sure Start Houses had been set up in 13 counties across Hungary in the most disadvantaged sub-regions. In 2009, the European Union stepped in and a Network of Sure Start Children's Houses⁶ was built using EU funds⁷. From 1 January 2013, Children's Homes have been incorporated into the Basic Child Welfare Services Act⁸, securing national support and a domestic budget. By 2017 there were a total of 112 Children's Homes operating throughout the country⁹, with that number being maintained in 2020.

TARGET GROUP

The Sure Start Programme focuses on children under seven years old, with particular emphasis on those up to the age of three and their families.

There were many discussions before the first pilot in Hungary on the possible target audience. In Hungary most mothers (in some instances fathers or grandmothers) stay at home until the child is three years old, thanks partly to an allowance introduced in 1967. However, very few services have been provided for them and there have been very few grassroots initiatives for community based programmes, like mother-and-baby clubs, toy libraries, play groups, etc. Mothers with young children risk high levels of isolation, although there is very little data available on maternal mental health.¹⁰

Because of this lack of services for young mothers, some felt the Sure Start programme should have been targeted at a wide audience. It was also argued that attracting families from all social groups in society could have helped early inclusion and the prevention of the segregation and discrimination of children from vulnerable groups in kindergarten and in school.

1 In the following case study, the terms 'Children's Home', 'Children's House', 'Children's Club' and 'Home' refer to the Sure Start Children's Homes.

2 Rostás, József. "Sure Start Children's Homes in the Southern - Transdanubia Region". EPHA, July 2019, p.5

3 Mayer ed.: Vademecum for Sure Start Children's Homes. Directorate-General for Social and Child Protection, Budapest, 2018, pp. 14-27.

4 [Sure Start - investing in early childhood](#). World Health Organization Website. Available in English

5 'Service and Organizational Model of the Network of Sure Start Children's Homes'. 2009. p. 4. Available in Hungarian

6 Balas ed. et al.: Impact Assessment of Sure Start Programme. Hétfá Research Institute, Budapest, p. 23

7 Balas ed. et al.: Impact Assessment of Sure Start Programme. Hétfá Research Institute, Budapest, p. 23

8 [Act XXXI](#) on the Protection of Children and Guardianship. Available in Hungarian

9 Balas ed. et al.: Impact Assessment of Sure Start Programme. Hétfá Research Institute, Budapest, p. 22

10 Családpolitika más-más szemmel- eltérő nézőpontok, megközelítések, változó gyakorlatok a hazai és a nemzetközi családpolitikában, (2010) (Family Policy from different perspectives, Changing approaches and practices in the Hungarian and International family policies, Danis, I, Herczog, M, Suranyi, E (eds), Gazdsági és Szociális Tanács, Budapest,

It was decided however that the funding provided would serve the most disadvantaged sub-regions and settlements exclusively, thereby narrowing the target population. Some attempts were made in the first years of the programme to encourage families from all segments of the local community to participate.

The targeting of funding, attitudes and the lack of sufficient effort to enhance inclusion and integration locally has led to a situation where almost exclusively Roma or poor families attend the programme. It has become compulsory for those at risk to attend regularly at certain centres.

According to the principles of the programme, however, it takes a community based approach to establish strong networks of parents, professionals and local institutions to foster a stable and vibrant community, where healthy children can develop and go to kindergarten and school¹¹.

METHODOLOGY

During the EU funded pilot period a core group of experts developed the conceptual framework, the protocols and regulation of operation, the training programmes for the staff members, and published a two-volume handbook covering all possible areas of early years development, including the theoretical background, research, and the methodology of working with specific groups of children and families, the history of Sure Start and similar programmes and its aims.¹²

Early support and community based co-operation is seen as the key. The Sure Start team welcomes parents with young children in an open and safe environment allowing them to spend time together and with other families with young children. The team creates partnerships with parents, and builds strong cooperation with local service providers, including kindergartens, child welfare services, family help centres and health care professionals. Recently it has also been carrying out family visits.¹³

11 See more about the 'Principles of the Sure Start Programme' on '[Service and Organizational Model of the Network of Sure Start Children's Homes](#)'. 2009. p. 4. Available in Hungarian.

12 *Génektől a társadalomig (From genes to society)* (Danis, I, Farkas, M, Herczog, M, Szilvasi, L eds), Budapest, 2011, <https://mek.oszk.hu/14800/14803/14803.pdf>, *A koragyermekkori fejlődés természete: fejlődési lépések és kihívások – A gyermekek fejlődésének lépései fejlődési területenként (The stages of early years's development, steps and challenges of the development)*, (Danis, I, Farkas, M, Herczog, M, Szilvasi, L eds), Budapest, 2011, <https://mek.oszk.hu/14800/14806/14806.pdf>

13 Balas ed. et al.: Impact Assessment of Sure Start Programme. Hétfá Research Institute, Budapest, 2016. p. 2.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND INTER-SECTORAL COORDINATION / FUNDING

Following the pilots and the end of the EU and Norwegian Fund funding, in 2013 the government incorporated the Sure Start programme into its child welfare system as a preventive, early support provision¹⁴. The programme is now funded from the state budget, allocated annually for the operation of each Sure Start Children's House. This covers the wages of two employees: a manager and an expert on early childhood development, such as a nurse. However, most of the Children's Houses also fundraise within the community and accept donations. Whilst the programme is state-run, the local municipality is responsible for setting up the House, in some cases with church organisations, as the funding is very limited and does not cover a range of activities and needs¹⁵. This approach is very different from the original concept, according to which the staff should preferably include local mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds, like Roma women. The programme has also aimed to encourage volunteers to support the work of the Sure Start Houses.

The skills training developed by the **SZMI (Child Support Project)**¹⁶ was designed with these tasks in mind. At the end of the basic training, the professional portfolio helps to develop daily practices and routines in the work of the Children's House workers.

The Sure Start Houses provide several services for the families that use them. There are bathrooms and washing machines, as many of the families attending do not have running water or a bathroom at home. The kitchens make it possible for the parents and staff to cook together, prepare healthy food and celebrate holidays, birthdays and name days. Computers are available for the parents for job seeking or finding opportunities for vocational training or any other information they might need.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected outcome of the services provided by the Sure Start Children's Houses is to prevent developmental delays or help to catch up, ensuring better opportunities for all children, by supporting parents to learn about the developmental needs of young children and providing professional support.¹⁷

14 Mayer ed.: Vademecum for Sure Start Children's Homes. Directorate-General for Social and Child Protection, Budapest, 2018. p. 49-54

15 Mayer ed.: Vademecum for Sure Start Children's Homes. Directorate-General for Social and Child Protection, Budapest, 2018. p. 85-86

16 Sure Start Children's Homes Complex Skills and Competences Training. Available in Hungarian.

17 Balas ed. et al.: Impact Assessment of Sure Start Programme. Hétfa Research Institute, Budapest, 2016.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

T-Tudok Inc¹⁸ evaluated the performance of Sure Start Houses in terms of the programme's impact on the development of children and parents' satisfaction. An additional review¹⁹ provided insights into the services and the experiences of the participants. The focus of the research was on exploring the services of Sure Start Children's Houses, finding the differences and similarities, and analysing whether there are programmes to promote the social inclusion of the Roma population. The study focuses on the Roma minority living in Hungary as a service user. The research has a territorial, public health and Roma focus and aims to collect good practices from the beneficiaries. Particular relevance is given to European Public Health Alliance's (EPHA) and the European Commission's National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) assessment.

Financial constraints and the availability of trained professionals may create instability and pose a threat to the continuation of the programme. However, the positive effects of the services are already being observed in some kindergartens, with children showing improvement in social skills, adaptability, vocabulary and mobility. In addition, many parents have developed their parenting skills, including collaboration, adaptability and problem-solving, and have enlarged their network of relationships²⁰. More research and evaluation would be needed to measure the outcomes based on the changes in the programme, namely the decreased opportunities to attend voluntarily and the fact that many families where children are considered at risk are obliged to visit the Sure Start Houses at least three times a week.

Lessons learnt and recommendations

- 1. The environment:** Children's Houses should be well equipped with good quality toys and development tools. The purchase of equipment is facilitated through open tendering, donations and help from the local community.
- 2. Location and accessibility:** The local community agreed that the best location is near the targeted community but not far away from the centre of town or village. All participants agreed on the importance of improved public transport to facilitate the transportation of children, parents and professionals. Lack of public transport has created difficulties.
- 3. Quality of services:** The quality of the work is significantly determined by the approach, attitude, skills and experiences of those working in the Houses. It is crucial to attract and retain professionals in remote, isolated areas.

In conclusion, the Sure Start Children's House programme in Hungary has proved the importance of providing community based early childhood development opportunities for the population of disadvantaged micro-regions facing many challenges.

18 T-TUDOK Inc. is TÁRKI-TUDOK Centre for Knowledge Management and Educational Research Inc. Website. Available in English

19 Rostás, József. "Sure Start Children's Homes in the Southern - Transdanubia Region". EPHA, July 2019, p.14

20 Ibid., p.8

ROMA AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN HUNGARY

The approximately 700,000 **Roma living in Hungary** (7.05% of the population)²¹ are amongst the most affected by poverty and social exclusion. A quarter of the Roma population in Hungary are children (26%)²². Worryingly, Roma are also becoming more segregated and deprived of social and health care²³. For Roma children, growing up in disadvantaged segregated families is a serious problem as low education and unemployment are passed from generation to generation²⁴. Efforts to bridge these gaps as early as possible can have a significant impact and positive implications for the educational attainment of Roma children and the Roma population in Hungary.

Education in Hungary is predominantly public and currently administered by the Ministry of Human Capacities²⁵. A limited number of nurseries are available for children from birth to three, mostly in larger cities.²⁶

Public education starts at the age of three, as kindergarten has also become compulsory.

This in principle could help prevent developmental delays for children in vulnerable situations²⁷. Parents have to pay for meals, but 70% of children are entitled to a price reduction or a free meal²⁸. This provision has got some controversial elements though. As kindergartens have become part of the public education system, children have to spend at least four hours daily there, with some exceptions. The local notary, based on the advice of the welfare agencies, can give permission for non-attendance. In many instances this is based on disability or the resistance of the local community, so many children in need have no access to early childhood education and care (ECEC).

On the other hand, many kindergartens are severely overcrowded and understaffed, especially in those regions and settlements where most children in vulnerable situations live. The move has also increased segregation at this early age as better off parents are taking their children to better equipped kindergartens in nearby cities. Twenty one per cent of Roma children attend pre-schools that are nearly completely Roma²⁹ and 29% of local municipalities have no kindergartens available in areas with Roma majorities³⁰, while there are government provisions to provide subsidies to Roma families³¹.



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OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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21 [The European Union and Roma – Factsheet Hungary](#). 4 April 2014

22 [Central Statistic Bureau](#) – the populations of settlements Pécs, Gerényes, Teklafalu, Dombóvár, Gilvánfa, Hegyszénmárton, Dencsháza, 2011

23 Rostás, József. “Sure Start Children’s Homes in the Southern – Transdanubia Region”. EPHA, July 2019, p.12

24 *Ibid.*, p.13

25 [Ministry of Human Capacities Website](#). Available in English

26 [Act XXXI on the Protection of Children and Guardianship](#). Available in Hungarian.

27 [Country information for Hungary - Legislation and policy](#). European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Last updated 05/04/2018. Available in English

28 [Óvodai, iskolai, kollégiumi közétkeztetés „Gyermekeitkeztetés” 2019](#). Available in Hungarian.

29 *Ibid.*, p.12

30 Bennett, J., [Roma Early Childhood Inclusion: RECI Overview Report](#). Budapest: Roma Education Fund, Open Society Foundations, UNICEF. 2012, p. 51

31 Vajda, Roza and Csaba Dupcsik. ‘Country Report on Ethnic Relations: Hungary’. EDUMIGROM Background Papers. 2008, p. 16

The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).