

No child left behind?

**Study on Early Childhood Development (ECD)
and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) interventions
(with focus on the Hungarian-Slovak border area)**



Kárpátok Alapítvány-Magyarország - Carpathian Foundation - Hungary

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¹ The title refers to the US Act named No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

Executive Summary

As part of the Interreg project “Chance for Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds” implemented by the Carpathian Foundation–Slovakia and the Carpathian Foundation–Hungary, **two national studies were conducted in order to present and analyze the current situation of early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and programs in Slovakia and in Hungary.**¹ The studies focus on the national characteristics and aim to describe the main standards, legal frameworks, target groups, approaches, methods, and interventions regarding ECD and ECEC. The papers also intend to share the experiences, results and dilemmas of state-run and civil interventions as good and/or adaptable practices in Slovakia and in Hungary. They are based on similar methods and sources. The Slovak experts and the Hungarian expert drew upon relevant research and numerous studies, acts and other regulation, databases and figures in order to analyze the characteristics of ECD and ECEC. As concerned Interreg border regions (target regions) with several economic and social drawbacks, the Kosice Region in Slovakia and Northern Hungary and the Northern Great Plain in Hungary are in the focus of the studies.

The joint starting points are the international definitions determined by the European Union and world-wide organizations such as the UNICEF, the WHO and the World Bank. They strictly highlight the importance of interventions in the early years, especially in case of **children aged between zero and eight**. The organizations particularly emphasize the significance of early interventions targeting disadvantaged and marginalized children. Therefore, **the target group of the papers is the defined age group**, especially those who belong to the Roma minority and/or live in poverty and social exclusion.

Slovakia and Hungary have a significant Roma population (approximately 7-9 percent of the total population), and many of them live in the target regions. The problems affecting Roma people such as income poverty, material deprivation, residential and school segregation, and wide-spread discrimination are well-know. Moreover, as the studies highlight and analyze, a significant part of Roma children do not access (quality) services, which highly weakens their future chances. That is why ECEC and ECD interventions are acutely needed in these regions in order to improve the chances of these (Roma and non-Roma) children.

Main definitions and interpretations of ECD and ECEC

In the international context, **early childhood development (ECD) primarily refers to a concept, an approach.** According to the WHO, it is based on the fact that “the early years are critical, because this is the period in life when the brain develops most rapidly and has a high capacity for change, and the foundation is laid for health and wellbeing throughout life. Nurturing care – defined as care that is provided in a stable

¹ The Hungarian and Slovak studies were written as part of the project “Chance for Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds”, FMP-E / 1901 / 4.1 / 015, funded by the European Union, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund with support from the Slovakia-Hungary Interreg V A Program Small Project Fund.

environment, that is sensitive to children's health and nutritional needs, with protection from threats, opportunities for early learning, and interactions that are responsive, emotionally supportive and developmentally stimulating – is at the heart of children's potential to develop". **Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to the system of interventions**, the public and other institutions, services and programs targeting young children to complete the goals of ECD's approach. According to the European Union's definition, it "refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the EU. It includes centre and family-day care, privately and publicly funded provision, pre-school and pre-primary provision. Quality early childhood education and care can lay the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability, and social integration, and is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds." EU leaders have defined **ECEC as one of the fundamental rights of European citizens**. One of the 20 key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that "children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality". It emphasizes the fact that "children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities".

The main characteristics of ECD and ECEC institutions and services in Slovakia and in Hungary

In Slovakia, ECEC can be divided into two different stages depending on the age of the child. Children from birth to the age of six months are considered to be cared for by their mothers or foster parents as the state sets the maternity leave for working mothers up to six months from birth (in general). Also, **nurseries** (or Facilities for children under three years of age) are available from the age of six months. Nursery is considered to be a social service provided mostly to help mothers to return to work. Nurseries are more widely available in district towns and are mostly owned by non-public providers. The necessary qualification for caregivers in facilities for children under three years of age is a high school diploma or an accredited course.

Children from the age of three to six can be admitted to **kindergartens**. Kindergartens in Slovakia are not compulsory and places for children are not guaranteed. Attendance is encouraged by the free education of five-year-old children before the start of elementary school. Therefore, children have the opportunity to be educated in the state language and also to be prepared for primary education. The education of kindergarten teachers in Slovakia is implemented on two levels. They are either graduates of complete secondary vocational education in pedagogical school or in the field of teaching for kindergartens and education or they are graduates of higher education in the relevant pedagogical field. In general terms, kindergartens are founded and financed by local municipalities from their budgets. The foundation of facilities depends on the demand and the financial possibilities of the municipality. Parents are obliged to pay some fees except in the last year before compulsory school attendance. Five-year-old children are admitted preferably to younger children.

Children with special needs, that is, children with disabilities or children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or children with talent, can but do not have to be admitted. Their needs are being met mostly by programs financed by the EU grants.

Compulsory **elementary school** attendance starts when a child is six years old and lasts for ten years. As ECEC targets children up to the age of eight years, it covers the first two grades. In general, there is no special approach to facilitate the transition between kindergarten and first grade. However, each school applies some methods to help children cope with new situation. In the first four years of primary education, teachers have more flexibility to adjust the curriculum according to the needs of their classes. However, this method is not frequently used and schools can be rigid in fulfilling the standard teaching procedures. Children with special educational needs face difficulties in this area as the inclusiveness of most Slovak schools is inadequate. There are a few initiatives dedicated to helping children succeed such as assistants of the child, teacher's assistants, zero grades and preparatory grades. Preparatory grades and zero grades are already included in compulsory school attendance. Primary schools are founded by municipalities or churches and are free of charge. Currently all children receive a lunch donation (1,20 Euro) as part of state social support program.

In Hungary, early development means special development interventions in the case of children with special needs, that is, those who are behind in their development or progress. They have different levels of learning, speech, hearing, visual or other physical and mental disabilities. The disadvantages or disabilities must be diagnosed by specialized professionals.

The notion of **early childhood skills development** was introduced by the Sure Start approach and its local programs in 2004. It refers to early interventions intending to decrease socio-economic disadvantages. The Sure Start model applied in Hungary is based on the Sure Start Program established in the United Kingdom in 1998. The initiative targeted parents and children under the age of four years living in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Sure Start projects deliver a wide variety of services which are designed to support zero to five- year-old children's learning skills, health and well-being, and social and emotional development. In Hungary, the first pilot programs started in 2004. Since then, several so-called Sure Start Children Houses have been established in disadvantaged settlements and segregated areas. In 2019, 2150 families and almost 2400 children were involved in this kind of service.

The Hungarian system of early childhood education and care is divided into two stages. The first stage includes children aged zero to three years (nursery) and the second stage lasts from the age of three to school starting age. But according to the current studies' interpretation based on international terminology, ECEC includes institutional services targeting children aged from zero to eight years. The optional **children's day care system including nurseries** is regulated by the Child Protection Act (1997). In pursuance of it, children's day care provides daily services, supervision, care, rearing and institutional meals for children whose parents work or study, or because of their illness or other reason are not able to look after their children. In the nursery provision, complex services must be provided from the age of 20 weeks to the age of three. In 2019, 46 500 children were enrolled at different types of nurseries (including day care for children). Services are not compulsory, and parents must pay a regular fee and the meal costs (depending on the family's income). In 2017, 66 percent of enrolled nursery children were entitled to have free meals.

Most of the nurseries are municipality-run: 90 percent of infant nurseries and 62 percent of mini infant nurseries are maintained by municipalities. The nursery staff includes an 'infant and early childhood educator' with at least a bachelor's degree and a nurse with the relevant qualification.

Kindergarten is part of ECEC, and at the same time it is the first level of the Hungarian public education system. Therefore, the system providing institutional full-day care for three- to six-year-old children is regulated by the Act on National Public Education (2011). According to the act, kindergartens accept children from the age of three to their school age, and gradually prepare them for school education. In the 2019/2020 school year 330 500 children attended these institutions. Parents do not pay a fee for compulsory kindergarten, but they have to cover the meal costs (depending on the family's income) and several additional costs. Detailed data is not available, but due to an expansion of institutional free meals in 2016, altogether approximately 90 percent of nursery and kindergarten children eat free of charge. Most (81 percent) kindergartens are maintained by municipalities. A bachelor's degree is required to hold professional positions in kindergartens, and nurses need to complete an adult education course.

Children start **primary/elementary school** at the age of six. They have to complete eight grades by the age of fourteen. The Act on National Public Education declares that primary/elementary schools must provide elementary education based on national standardized requirements and outcomes. Schools must follow the strongly centralized guidelines and programs defined by the national curriculum and do not have effective opportunities to implement their own curricula. In the 2019/2020 school year more than 720 thousand pupils attended primary/elementary school, and 13 percent of them studied in the first grade. Mandatory public primary school is free of charge, but parents have to pay numerous additional costs and the meal costs (depending on the family's socio-economic background). In 2018, more than one fifth (21 percent) of elementary school students were entitled to get free meals. The proportion was significantly higher in 2010 (29 percent). Most (77 percent) of the primary/elementary schools are maintained by school district centers as part of the state administration. Further 15 percent of the institutions are operated by churches and their organizations. Primary/elementary school teachers must have at least a bachelor's degree.

Target regions and difficulties, problems regarding marginalized children

The Slovak target region, the Kosice region belongs to the second group of regions where the poverty rate is slightly higher than the Slovak average. The Kosice Region has more than 800 thousand inhabitants and the largest number of the Roma live here in Slovakia. According to estimates, more than 126 thousand Roma people live in this area (that is, 16 percent of the total population). In 2013, there were more than 11 thousand Roma children up to the age of six years in the Kosice Region. The at-risk-of-poverty rate in the region was 16 percent in 2017. Many of the families and children live in poor conditions with deficient inclusiveness at schools. These children's right to proper education can be endangered.

Access to ECEC services for children from marginalized Roma communities is difficult due to different needs of parents living in generationally reproduced poverty and to insufficient capacities or the geographical distribution of the facilities. However, there are programs aiming at the care and education of children from the age of zero to three years who are at risk of exclusion and tend to be disadvantaged in the educational process. These programs are initiated only by local organizations or Community Centers as special social services.

Zero grades are often attended by children from marginalized Roma communities to learn basic self-maintenance, hygiene, state language etc. Zero grades and preparatory

classes are the “borderline” in the education system, as they are focused on children who did not reach a school maturity till the age of six years. Both are to be cancelled and replaced by compulsory kindergarten attendance from the age of five. The start of this reform is still open. In primary education there are voices for inclusiveness much stronger but it is necessary to reform the whole education system as it is indicated by numerous studies such as PISA surveys.

The Hungarian target regions Northern Hungary and the Northern Great Plain have altogether almost 2.6 million inhabitants (27 percent of Hungary’s total population. Among the eight Hungarian regions, the relative poverty rate (at-risk-of-poverty rate) is the highest in the Northern Great Plain (16 percent) and the third highest in Northern Hungary (14 percent). The ratio of severe material deprivation is also the highest in Northern Hungary (15 percent) and the third highest in the Northern Great Plain (12 percent). The number of children aged between zero and eight is more than 226 000 in the two target regions (27 percent of the corresponding total age group). Detailed data on Roma children is not available, but it is known that more than half (55 percent) of disadvantaged and 72 percent of multiple disadvantaged children live in the two target regions. A significant part of them is Roma.

The regional distribution of active nursery places and enrolled children is unequal. In 2019, almost 30 percent of the active places and enrolled children were in the capital, and only 13-14 percent of them could be found in the Northern Great Plain, while the proportion was not more than 7-8 percent in Northern Hungary. The most of marginalized Roma (and non-Roma) children, especially those who live in disadvantaged areas of Hungary, do not have a chance to attend nursery.

There is no significant difference between the rate of Roma and non-Roma children provided by pre-school education. Roma children’s lagging appear later, in the upper classes of primary school, and mostly in secondary school, and becomes significant as well as often irreversible. (In 2018, the Roma young people’s early school leaver rate was 68 percent, while the ratio was only 9 percent among the non-Roma youngsters.)

At the same time, remarkable disparities can be experienced in the field of kindergartens’ qualities by regions and settlement types. Alarming phenomena are the pre-selection and selection processes in kindergarten, which aim at the segregation of Roma children. School segregation has been a significant characteristic of the Hungarian education system for several decades. Although segregation affects both disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma pupils, it definitely has a strong ethnic characteristic. The number of so called Roma schools, where the ratio of Roma pupils is more than 50 percent, increased from 247 to 359 between 2007 and 2016.

Interventions, initiatives – problems and dilemmas

The Slovak education system needs many reforms especially in the field of the social inclusion of children with special educational needs. The discourse is connected to compulsory school attendance and inclusive pre-primary education is still not a priority. The first steps have already been taken. In 2019, the Education Act was amended, which will significantly change the current situation in the future. The most important change will be that it will no longer be possible to postpone the start of compulsory school attendance.

The initiative that will replace canceled systems is the so-called compulsory pre-school preparation from the age of five years. Experts in Slovakia clearly perceive this step positively, but only subsequent practice will show reliable results. (For example, some kindergartens have already announced that they do not have sufficient capacity to fulfill this obligation, etc.) Positive results are also expected in the case of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Their primary school results are anticipated to improve significantly, also the negative effect of zero grades such as creating ethnically homogenous classes should be eliminated (children from zero grades tend to attend the classes with other children from zero grades who are usually children from disadvantaged backgrounds).

In Slovakia, there are several programs dedicated to children whose development is not secured by the education system. Many of these programs are organized by NGOs. Omama, for example, trains Roma women in ECEC to visit households and help mothers educate their children and also themselves. For Roma children, Community Centers often cover the insufficiencies of the kindergarten system. At the same time, they help with afterschool programs, train mothers, and support networking, while also advocating for inclusiveness in education. NGOs like People in Need, ETP Slovensko and Childhood to Children educate young mothers and children in their localities. There are many programs to help kindergarten teachers improve the skills of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These include providing assistants of teachers, special training to teachers or technical equipment. But this is not enough to secure access to quality ECEC services for every child. A financial arrangement relying not merely on EU grants, common professional guidelines and proper training for teachers including sensitization to the issue of children from disadvantaged backgrounds are all needed. Less fragmentation in the pre-primary education system is also more than essential.

In Hungary, Sure Start Children Houses can be determined as good practices because they intend to involve marginalized Roma and non-Roma children together with their parents. But in practice several problems, lacks and challenges can be identified regarding their operation and their fluctuating quality. The regional and territorial distribution of nurseries is highly unequal. Furthermore, nurseries are mostly urban institutes and they do not aim at including marginalized children, especially those who live in disadvantaged small settlements.

The differences and inequalities between Roma and non-Roma children deepen in primary/elementary school and most of these disparities stem from disadvantaged socio-economic background and the lack of (quality) early childhood services. Early childhood care and education should be responsible for reducing socio-economic disadvantages and for establishing adequate conditions in order to decrease social inequalities and to improve children's chances. But in practice, most of these institutions are not able to meet these requirements. The Hungarian public education system is dysfunctional, since it increases inequalities and does not improve the chances of social mobility.

Non-governmental, non-state-run organizations have a remarkable role in the field of early childhood services. Their initiatives can decrease socio-economic disadvantages and improve children's opportunities and chances. But in fact, non-governmental interventions cannot substitute for or compensate the lacks and failures of state-run services and institutions, the lack of central social investment in children and families, especially in those who live in social exclusion. In turn, adequate and extended early interventions would have significant social and economic impact on not only the target groups, but on society as a whole as well.

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