



From Social Innovation Project to Regular Service: The First Three Years. The Sure Start Children's House Service in Hungary

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Abstract. This study examines the development of the Sure Start Children's House service funded by the European Social Fund in Hungary. The topic has become relevant, especially as the Sure Start Children's House service has become part of the Hungarian social care and services system after almost 10 years of being a pilot and multi-cycle EU-funded project-based operation. The analysis in this article is based on the strategic documents, project content, and legislative changes relevant to the service. Over the past two decades, several strategy documents have identified the challenges and development tasks for Roma children with social disadvantages, especially during preschool years. The sustainability of projects for alleviating child poverty has been brought to the fore under several aspects as projects have progressed and terminated, which is why it is significant that the Sure Start Children's House has become part of the child protection system since 2013, building on previous project experiences. The integration of this service into the national care system took place at the same time as increased support from the central budget provided the opportunity for a social innovation project to become a sustainable service, thus maintaining the initial results.

Keywords: social innovation, disadvantaged children, child protection and care system, social service design, social service system

1. Introduction

The importance of early childhood programmes in alleviating the reproduction of social inequalities is indisputable. Early childhood, defined as the first years of life, has a profound impact on a children's subsequent evolution. The quality of these early years has an impact not only on the life of individuals but also on the functioning, capacity, and cohesiveness of the local and wider community.

Information on child development and the experience of various early childhood programmes, both international and national, shows that arrested development is easier to reverse in the early years than later in life. In Hungary's disadvantaged regions, the combination of the out-migration of better-off families and the higher numbers of children in the remaining families, along with their low-income situation, long-term unemployment, precarious housing conditions, as well as the lack of efficient, quality services and other socio-economic factors, increase the proportion of children at risk of poverty. A significant body of research shows that children living in deprivation are at a much higher risk of poverty than children from average economic backgrounds. Hungary's accession to the European Union has provided significant resources for social regeneration programmes. One of these is the Sure Start Programme, which provides regular support for children living in deprivation and their families. The aim of the programme is to improve the development chances of children living in poverty from birth, especially in disadvantaged regions and municipalities.

2. The Process of Social Innovation According to the Regulations of the European Social Fund

The Sure Start Children's House service has become part of the Hungarian service and care system after nearly 10 years of being a pilot and multi-cycle European Social Fund project-based operation. This service-type social innovation has addressed and reached families and children aged 0–5 years old in the most disadvantaged settlements.¹ One basic principle of social innovation is that it provides innovative responses to social needs. Social innovation can be viewed as a process, so its nature can be examined.² Interpreting it as a process also implies that the social need to which social innovation can respond needs to be identified as part of social innovation. According to Regulation (EU) 1304/2013/EU³ and Regulation (EU) 2021/1057,⁴ the concept of social innovation is also reflected in the concept of social policy experimentation and its relation to social needs. The broad scope of social needs can be narrowed down by the fact that social policy experiments can be linked to policy interventions, that is, they can only respond to those social needs that are identified by the policy. The following

1 Balás, Baranyai, Herczeg and Jakab, 2016.

2 Veresné Somosi and Balaton, 2021.

3 Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, pp. 470–486.

4 Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013, OJ L 231, 30/06/2021, pp. 21–59.

question may thus arise: how are social needs identified by policy? Strategic planning documents can provide the framework and direction for multiannual policy interventions. A strategy is a pre-planned, long-term series of actions that enables the achievement of one or more objectives by providing the resources necessary for their implementation.⁵ The adoption of national strategic planning documents is decided by Parliament or the Government. The need to prepare strategic planning documents may also arise from being a European Union Member State, from an international treaty or other international commitment, or from the decision of an autonomous regulatory body or the head of an autonomous public administration. A common feature of strategic planning documents is that they set out the situation and challenges relevant to their content and identify the objectives and lines of action based on these. The adoption of strategic planning documents by the National Assembly and the Government identifies societal needs which can form the basis for a social policy experiment. However, the following dilemma may arise: what happens if there is no adopted strategic planning document for a sector or area of intervention? The social need may still exist, but the main difference is that this need has not been set out by such a document. The need to create and adopt a strategy may not only come from within but also from the outside. An example is the Framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020⁶ adopted in 2011, which calls on Member States to develop their national Roma integration strategies in line with EU objectives,⁷ as well as make use of the EU initiative on social innovation, launched by the Commission in 2011 under the name European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.⁸ Regulation (EU) No 2021/1060⁹ lays down eligibility criteria for the efficient and effective use of EU funding. Eligibility criteria are horizontal and thematic for the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund Plus, and Cohesion Fund. The regulation identifies the policy objective, specific objective, designation of the eligibility condition, and criteria for fulfilling the eligibility condition. For the European Social Fund Plus, such eligibility criteria are identified in existing policy strategy papers covering the active labour market, gender equality, all levels of the education and training system, social inclusion and poverty reduction, Roma inclusion, health, and long-term care.

5 Torma *et al.*, 2022.

6 European Commission, 2011.

7 Ibid.

8 European Union, 2011.

9 Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down the common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy, OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, pp. 159–706.

The strategies to be adopted as a condition for eligibility should include a situation analysis, as well as setting out the social needs in the concerned area. Overall, strategy documents, regardless of the origin of the need to draw them up and adopt them, provide a strong framework for identifying social needs on the basis of which a social policy experiment can be launched. The definition of a social policy experiment was first set out in Regulation (EU) 2021/1057, but the concept was also included in Regulation (EU) 1296/2013. The socio-political experiment was one of the specific objectives of the Progress, as a way of developing and implementing methods for testing and evaluating innovative solutions as to improve them. According to Regulation (EU) 2021/1057, recital (34):

Social experimentation is a small-scale project testing which allows gathering of evidence on the feasibility of social innovations. It should be possible and encouraged for ideas to be tested at local level and for those ideas that are feasible to be pursued on a wider scale, where appropriate, or transferred to other contexts in different regions or Member States with financial support from the ESF+ or in combination with other sources.

The policy rationale for social policy experiments has been explained above. In addition to soundness, two elements of the definition need to be highlighted: (1) the social policy experiment is small-scale and (2) social policy experiments must be designed in advance so that their effects can be later measured.

The evaluation of social policy experiments can aim to identify the causal effects of interventions and answer a simple question: what works? Evaluation can gather evidence on whether European Social Fund interventions actually change the circumstances of participants and the outcomes that result from these interventions.¹⁰ Subsequent extensions are only justified for social policy pilots that really work, that is, are more efficient and effective than the traditional approach. The European Commission's publication, based on the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, provides an approach that balances the need for evidence with innovation, identifying five different levels of evidence for social policy pilots.¹¹

At the first level of evidence, project implementers articulate why social innovation is important (i.e. why it is needed), but they cannot yet systematically describe how it works. Further evidence gathering (e.g. control group studies, subsequent external evaluation) shows not only that positive change has taken place but also that change has been brought about by the intervention. At the fifth level of evidence gathering, documents, procedures, and operational systems are in place to allow social policy experiments to be run and extended by other

¹⁰ European Commission, 2013.

¹¹ Puttick, Ludlow, 2013; Barnett, 2020.

implementers elsewhere while continuing to have a positive and direct impact on the outcome and remaining financially viable.

The aim of implementing and expanding social innovation is to enable policies to respond more effectively to social change. The European Social Fund Plus regulation provides the possibility for innovations based on social policy experimentation to be pursued on a wider scale (including other locations, regions, Member States), with financial support from the European Social Fund and other sources. The process of social innovation under the European Social Fund Regulations is illustrated in *Figure 1*. However, it is necessary to add a capacity building element to the figure to help illustrate the process. Capacity building for testing social policy experiments, social and labour market policy innovations is included in the specific objectives of the Progress strand.

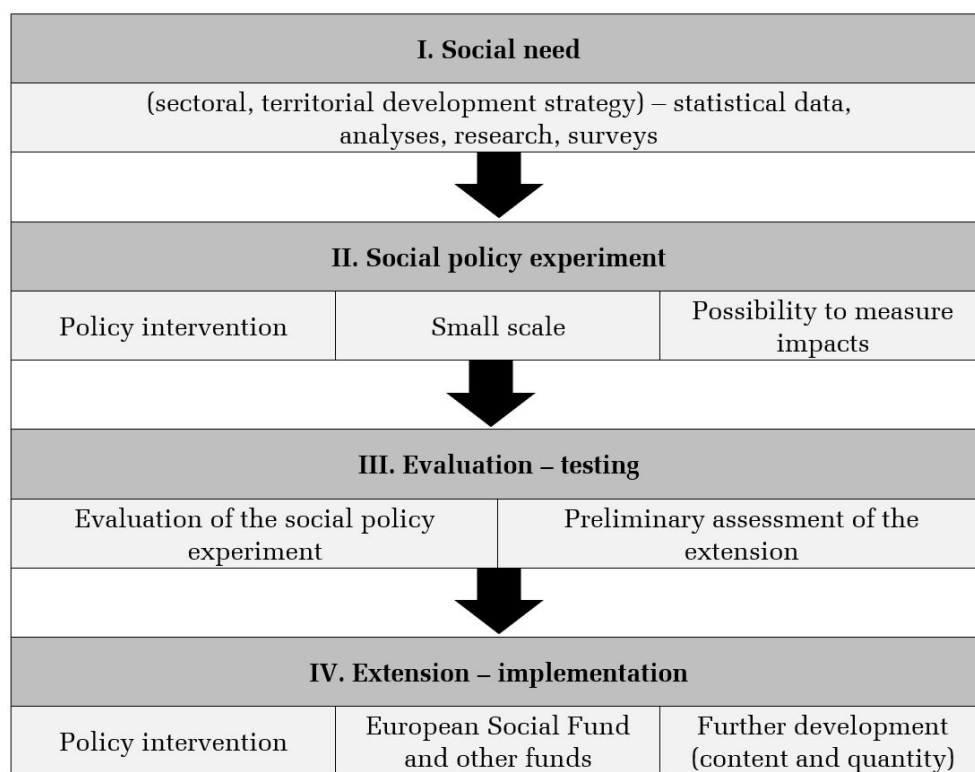


Figure 1. *The process of social innovation according to European Social Fund Regulations* Note (table elaborated by the author)

The social innovation policy process described above can be traced back to recent European Social Fund regulations. The description of the social innovation

process in the legislation appeared more than 10 years after the launch of the Sure Start Programme, so it may provide an interesting basis for examining the extent to which the Sure Start Programme as a social innovation has followed a similar or different path to the process described above.

3. The Sure Start Children's House in Hungarian Strategy Documents

In this section, the strategies formulated in Hungary over the past 20 years and the challenges they have identified, as well as proposals for the development of Roma children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, will be introduced, with a focus on the pre-primary school period. I first present what these documents and strategies specifically refer to regarding the Sure Start Children's House concept. As previously indicated, strategies provide a framework and direction for policy interventions over a number of years in the form of strategic planning documents. Sectoral, horizontal strategies play a key role in shaping policy processes and planning multi-year actions.¹² Four relevant strategies were identified in the analysis of this topic: the Decade of Roma Inclusion adopted in 2007, the 25-year 'Better for Children' National Strategy, and the Hungarian National Strategies for Social Inclusion adopted in 2011 and 2021.

3.1. The Decade of Roma Inclusion

The Decade of Roma Inclusion is an international initiative to strengthen the socio-economic situation and social inclusion of Roma people in European countries with a significant Roma population that brings together governments, NGOs, and intergovernmental organisations. This programme focuses on the priorities of education, employment, health, and housing, and draws attention to the need to combat poverty and discrimination. The Programme was launched at a conference in Budapest in 2003, which resulted in the signing of the Decade of Roma Inclusion Declaration by the first eight participating Prime Ministers in February 2005. Twelve countries participated in the programme: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain. The Decree on the Strategic Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion (hereinafter the Plan) was adopted by the National Assembly of Hungary in 2007. The aim of the Plan was to create conditions for the social and economic integration of the Roma, improve their living conditions, improve Roma access to public services, and reduce and, in the long term, close the gap between the living conditions of the Roma and

12 Kocziszky, 2021.

the non-Roma populations. The Plan sets further sub-objectives in the areas of expanding integrated education and raising the level of Roma education in general, promoting Roma integration into the labour market and increasing their employment level, improving housing conditions, improving the health status of the Roma, and reducing discrimination against the Roma. The tasks set out in the Plan identify the most important and complex long-term measures to ensure the real social and economic integration of the poorest, including a high proportion of Roma, based primarily on the territorial concepts of disadvantaged areas, municipalities, and social aspects (e.g. deprivation, long-term unemployment, low educational attainment), or their intersection. However, only those objectives and measures that focus specifically on the development of children in need, including Roma children aged 0–6 years old (including pre-primary education), are relevant for this study.

The Plan identifies the challenges in the pre-primary education for children in need and Roma children, in particular their low participation in pre-primary education. According to the Plan, 88% of children aged 3–5 attend kindergarten nationally, but only 42% of Roma children. Data for the 2007–2008 school year show that 323,000 children were attending kindergarten in the year the Plan was adopted. Under the 1993 Public Education Act in force in 2007, although kindergartens are educational institutions from the age of three until the start of compulsory schooling, their attendance is not compulsory from the age of three. Compulsory pre-school education starts from the age of five as follows: in the year in which the child reaches the age of five, he or she must attend pre-school education for four hours a day from the beginning of the school year. One of the aims of the Plan is thus to ensure that Roma and severely disadvantaged children are included in pre-school education from an early age.

One of the identified challenges is a lack of places. The Plan identifies the need to provide access to pre-school services and to increase the number of places in settlements where the number of pre-school children is expected to increase, especially in the most disadvantaged settlements (with a higher density of Roma).

According to the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy, more than 60% of Roma live in rural areas, mostly segregated areas, in very poor housing conditions. In settlements of between 1,001 and 3,000 inhabitants, 41% of Roma kindergarten-age children are found in rural areas, while the proportion is 66% in settlements with less than 3,000 inhabitants.¹³ The Plan does not mention the pre-primary period, nor does it consider the importance of this period for children's development, the related institutions, professionals, regulatory and funding areas, and the overall challenges of the functioning of this institutional system specifically affecting Roma and disadvantaged children. Following the

13 Babusik, 2003.

adoption of the Plan, the Government adopted a Decision on the Government Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion Strategic Plan for 2008–2009.

Government Decision No 1105/2007 (27.12.2007) on the Government Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion Strategic Plan for 2008–2009 I. Point 1 of the tasks in the field of education specifically refers to the Sure Start Programme. According to the decision, at least five programmes should be launched under the Sure Start Programme to support pre-school children aged 0–5 years old and their families in the most disadvantaged localities and municipalities, break the cycle of deprivation, and implement early skills development. The results of the programme should be taken into consideration and the programme extended nationwide.

3.2. The ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy

The ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy is a 25-year programme adopted by Parliament in 2007. Its immediate antecedent is the work of the Research Centre for Social Sciences against Child Poverty of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, prompted by the increase in poverty after the regime change, especially the growing poverty and inequality of children. Set up in 2005 at the initiative of the Prime Minister, the Child Poverty Programme Office was mandated to develop a strategic programme to reduce the number of children living in poverty. The basic principle of the programme is that child poverty reduction became a priority in the government’s efforts to reduce poverty and social exclusion. One of the core objectives of the ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy is to gradually but significantly improve the situation of Roma people, in particular the opportunities for Roma children.¹⁴ This National Strategy is based on three main reasons: (1) all poverty causes suffering, but child poverty is intolerable; (2) the need to break the cycle of poverty; and (3) the interest of all in the sustainable economic and social development of the country. While the ‘Strategy recognises that Hungary has a well-established institutional system with a network of child protection services, nurseries, kindergartens, and public education, which could provide opportunities to counteract the disadvantages of children living in poverty, it is precisely the most disadvantaged families and children who are excluded from care and forced into the least comprehensive and least effective care. Moreover, the lack of daycare services in many places and the fact that the most disadvantaged are the least well provided for makes it difficult for parents with young children to work. This is why the ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy specifically addresses socially vulnerable children aged 0–5 years, their parents, and the related institutional system. The lack of daycare for children undermines both parents’ but especially women’s chances in the labour market and children’s integration in school and subsequent social

14 Ferge, 2006; Darvas and Ferge, 2012; Albert, 2014.

integration. The National Strategy notes that there are significant capacity gaps in the provision of care for young children under the age of 3 in Hungary, especially in smaller settlements. The most common institutional form is the *crèche*, but it does not operate in smaller settlements, and the institutional integration which provides both nursery and *crèche* care in a more cost-effective way has not spread. Children from families with multiple disadvantages are more likely not to start kindergarten at all or start it much later (at the age of 5–6). The ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy identifies several key priorities for reducing child poverty, such as ensuring that all families with children have access to healthcare and information on care systems and services. Reducing the spatial disparities in care would significantly improve access to services, thus reducing health inequalities. The 0–3 years old age group should be a priority target group, as the quality of life and early development provided at this age have a fundamental impact on the child’s further development, health, mental health, and life chances. The ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy mentions the Sure Start Children’s House programme, which was launched in the 2000s in one place only and not as a regular service, referring to early childhood development.

3.3. Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy

The Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy for the period of 2011–2020 (HNSIS) was adopted by the government in 2011 to comply with an EU obligation. The HNSIS and the policy of inclusion aim to reduce the proportion of people living in poverty or social exclusion, lower the social disadvantages of children, weaken the tendencies of poverty transmission, reduce the social differences between Roma and non-Roma populations, and improve the situation of Roma women. By adopting the HNSIS, the government also aimed to integrate into the catching-up policy the strategies concerning children living in poor families, Roma issues, and disadvantaged areas, such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the ‘Better for Children’ National Strategy, and strategies and concepts for specific problem areas relevant to poverty. The HNSIS has been prepared in the light of the Commission Communication on the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies adopted in 2011 (mentioned above). The HNSIS comprises three major units: situation analysis, objective, and measures. The three-year action plans for the measures related to the HNSIS are adopted by government decision, indicating the government body responsible for the measure and the budgetary resources that can be allocated to it. The HNSIS has a separate chapter on child wellbeing and emphasises the need for the early identification of differences in physical and mental development, early intervention, and early childhood care and education (under 3 years), especially in service-poor settlements. On the one hand, the HNSIS 2011–2020 already refers to the Sure

Start Children's Houses as innovative early childhood services that, following EU development, have become an integral part of the care system by being integrated into the Hungarian child protection system. On the other hand, a further objective is to expand the network and range of services of the Sure Start Children's Houses in disadvantaged municipalities and districts, also with EU funding. According to the Central Statistical Office, there were 58 Sure Start Children's Houses in 2013 at the end of the first EU development cycle, and EU development has increased the number to more than 110 in 2014.

The HNSIS 2030 strategic plan was adopted by the Government in 2021 and sets the direction for the catching-up policy until 2030. The strategy adopted in 2021 is essentially unchanged from the one adopted in 2011. Its areas of intervention cover the same areas as the previous strategy, but with greater emphasis on certain areas. HNSIS 2030 underlines that the basic aim of child welfare services, child development services, daycare, and many other child welfare measures in Hungary is to ensure that children of nursery and of kindergarten age receive quality early childhood education, development, social, health, psycho-social, and mental health support that creates the conditions for healthy development. It also stresses that the development of children from families living in poverty can be seriously delayed since the early years, even during the mother's pregnancy. The lifestyle of expectant mothers, physical and psychological stress, and harmful addictions can all affect the development of the foetus. In addition, premature birth and low birth weight are in no small part due to social factors (lack of income and poor housing conditions). One of the main risk factors for a low birth weight is the young age of the mother. In the context of the Sure Start Children's Houses, the HNSIS 2030 also recognises the importance of increasing the number of services and sets the objective of expanding these on a territorial basis. It assigns a specific number and a deadline to this objective: according to the Central Statistical Office, 185 services were operational in 2022.

In summary, all strategies and related action plans reflect the importance of pre-school development and of support for socially disadvantaged, including Roma, children, as well as the need to improve the institutions and service systems that deliver it. The existing strategies identify the Sure Start Children's Houses as a pilot project to be developed and as a service to be expanded based on legislation.

4. The Sure Start Children's House Service in Hungarian Legislation

If you search the Hungarian legal directory for the term '*Biztos Kezdet Gyerekház*' (Sure Start Children's House), you will find numerous (27 as of February 2024) pieces of legislation, including laws, government and ministerial decrees, and

government and ministerial decisions. The search does not include legislation repealed since 2012. The legislation thus provides for the purpose, definition, basic operating and funding rules of the Sure Start Children's House, as well as the responsibilities of certain government institutions in relation to the service, resource content, links to strategic plan documents, status of staff working in the service, and the awarding of professionals who have been recognised for their outstanding work in relation to the service. This list alone shows the wide-ranging legislative work that has been carried out since the first Safe Start for Children Act.

This section is not intended to provide a detailed description of the legal environment of this service but rather to set out the main stage in this respect. In particular, it examines the professional and financial regulatory environment of the service and its changes.

In Hungary, the Sure Start Children's House as a service was not legally established for almost 10 years after the programme was launched in 2003. The Sure Start Children's House programme was initially launched on a pilot basis in seven municipalities, initiated and funded by the then Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. The continuation and development of the programme was made possible by the EEA and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2004–2009. The continuation and dissemination of the programme has also been enshrined in government strategy documents such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion Programme or the Better for Children National Strategy. The EEA and Norwegian funded project aimed at developing services for children and families with children in 13 municipalities of the Szécsényi microregion having a population of 20,000 people in 2005, of which more than 4,000 minors.¹⁵ The Szécsényi microregion is located in the disadvantaged north-eastern part of the country, characterised by high unemployment, a high proportion of Roma settlements, and socially disadvantaged people. In 2009, the first two European Social Fund calls for proposals were launched to roll out Safer Start programmes focusing on early intervention. The aim of the two calls was to establish and run Safe Start Children's Houses that provide regular care for children aged 0–5 living in poverty, monitor children's development and detect possible developmental disorders, encourage healthy eating, and help parents prepare for having and welcoming children, including childcare and education. The two calls for proposals differed not in content but in territorial focus, ensuring that part of the resources available for this purpose were specifically targeted at the most disadvantaged localities.

The application guidelines defined the Safer Start activities, which focused on the children, parents, professionals working with them, community of the municipality, as well as the creation of the material environment and purchase of equipment related to the related professional tasks. The tender specifications also

15 Fresno, 2010.

included requirements regarding the regularity of services, the number of children who could be involved in the project, the professional skills of the implementers, and the infrastructure and the material conditions of the Sure Start Children's House. From an infrastructural viewpoint, the programme was expected to be implemented in a dry, well illuminated space of at least 70 m², with outdoor access and a room of at least 30 m² for the children's activities, a small room, a bathroom, a warming kitchen, and a hall. The projects would take 2–3 years to complete. An important feature of the programme is the voluntary involvement of the target group and the voluntary commitment of the service provider.

The sustainability of projects against child poverty has been highlighted under several aspects during the progress and closure of the projects. Sustainability is not only related to the long-term availability of resources but also to the ability of projects to integrate into existing institutional and service structures once they have proven to work well and contribute to improving the situation of the Roma.¹⁶

The application documents referred to in this section, despite the fact that they are not legislation but application principles, provided the basis for the development of the content of the Sure Start Children's House that can be enshrined in legislation. With the closure of the tenders for the development of the Sure Start Children's Houses, the need to develop the regulation of the Sure Start programme, which has been tested and developed over several project cycles, has been strengthened.

The concept of a Sure Start Children's House was introduced in 2012 by Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and Guardianship Administration. At that time, the Act did not contain a definition of the service but an enabling provision allowing the Minister to regulate its professional tasks and operating conditions by a decree. According to the Act, the purpose of the Sure Start Children's House is to provide preventive services to support the healthy development of children with socio-cultural disadvantages, especially disadvantaged or multiply disadvantaged children, to compensate for their developmental delays, strengthen parental competences, and ensure social inclusion for parents and children under kindergarten age. In addition to defining the purpose of the service, the law also provides that the Sure Start Children's House would cooperate with child welfare services, child protection services, nurseries, other children's institutions, and, if necessary, other members of the social protection signalling system to ensure the successful social integration of the child and the family.

The detailed technical rules for the service are laid down in a ministerial decree from 2013. The provisions of NM Decree No 15/1998 (IV. 30.) on the professional tasks and conditions of operation of child welfare and child protection institutions and persons providing personal care for children, which also apply to Sure Start Children's House, entered into force on 8 March 2013.

16 Fresno, 2010.

NM Decree No 15/1998 (IV. 30.) regulates the mandatory and non-mandatory tasks of the Sure Start Children's House, its opening hours, the scope of service users, the number and qualifications of its staff and its relationship with the child welfare service and the public health nurse. It also provides for the regulations on the location of the services and the equipment to be used by the children. The Decree has been in force for 5 years; although certain sections have been amended, its content remained essentially unchanged.

Regarding professional regulation, the major change occurred on 1 January 2019, when the Sure Start Children's House was regulated together with the Kindergarten Service in Act XXXI of 1997 in a new subchapter, the Children's Opportunity Services. The reason for the amendment is as follows:

The Sure Start Children's House is a service that has been the result of a development process across government cycles and is gradually becoming an integral part of the child welfare system. The Children's Houses, which have completed EU development, have received central budget support since 2012 and the service has been included in the Act XXXI of 1997 since 2013. As a new form of care, the Sure Start Children's House needs to be specifically named among the basic child welfare services. However, unlike other child welfare services, the operation of the Sure Start Children's House is not a compulsory municipal task. The specific functioning of the Sure Start Children's House reflects the fact that it does not fall under all the general rules applicable to basic child welfare services (e.g. voluntary use, no fee expected from the target group, no need to operate an advocacy forum, etc.). It is also necessary to change the purpose of the Sure Start Children's House service, as the compulsory kindergarten education has made the target group children and their parents who are not yet in kindergarten. In order to define the target group more precisely, it should also be specified that it includes primarily children in receipt of regular child protection benefits and their parents. The inclusion of children and their parents eligible for regular child protection benefits as a target group instead of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children is appropriate because disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children under the age of 3 are rarely identified as such, but the eligibility for regular child protection benefits is.¹⁷

Following the amendment of Act XXXI of 1997 in 2018, the detailed professional content of the Sure Start Children's House and Study Hall services was issued in a new ministerial decree. Namely, EMMI Decree No 40/2018 (XII. 4.) on the professional tasks and operating conditions of children's services to improve

¹⁷ Translation by the author.

opportunities regulates the professional tasks and operating conditions of the Sure Start Children's House. The professional rules have been amended several times over 10 years, but the original purpose and professional content of the service has not changed. It remains a service of prevention and social inclusion for socially deprived children of pre-school age and their parents.

The first national budget funding for Sure Start Children's Houses became available in 2012, under which 41 services received support. In 2024, the number of supported services was set to be 173. In 2012, the central budget allocated HUF 183 million to support the operation of 41 services. As the number of services has grown, the amount of funding allocated has steadily increased. The central budget for the Sure Start Children's Houses stands at HUF 1,829.4 million under Act LV of 2023 on the Central Budget of Hungary for 2024. This document does not allow for a description of the legislative changes concerning the financing of the service. However, it is necessary to state that the funding of the service has changed over the last more than 10 years so that it has created a stable basis for the predictable operation of the service, including the continuous increase of the subsidy, support of the annual salary compensation of the staff, and continued operation of the new EU-funded Sure Start Children's Houses from the national budget.

5. Conclusions

On 13 December 2023, the Deputy State Secretariat for Social Inclusion of the Ministry of the Interior organised an event titled '10 Years of the Child Protection Act – National Meeting of Sure Start Children's Houses'. The aim of the event was to celebrate the fact that the Sure Start Children's House service became part of the child protection system under Act XXXI of 1997 since 2013. After 20 years, the social innovation pilot programme became a legally established service. A key role in launching this process was played by the reinforcing social science work that grounded and strengthened the local work and its wider context.

The importance of early childhood programmes was already articulated at the strategic level by the government in its early years, which provided the basis for allocating resources to the task. The development of the Sure Start Children's House service has been supported by EU funding over several cycles, namely 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. The sustainability of the results of project-based developments is key, which is why it is essential that an initiative that starts as a pilot programme continues to operate as a service in a stable legal and funding environment based on several years of policy development.

According to data from the Central Statistical Office for 2022, more than 24,673 children under the age of 3 are in receipt of regular child protection benefits, of whom 9,028 face multiple disadvantages; of the latter, only 1,883 are in daycare.

The number of children receiving regular care in Sure Start Children's Houses was 2,407 in 2022 according to the Central Statistical Office. The question is: What can be done to ensure that children aged 0–3 who are not reached by services can also receive help that strengthens their chances of adequate development?

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