

Hungary

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

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22.4%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019		7,072
Institutions for children with disabilities		2,247
Institutions for children 0-6	75 (including 37 general residential homes, 16 specialised homes for young children under 6, and 22 small group homes for specialised homes for young children under 6)	304
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2019		13,018 2,256 (children 0-3)

Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Develop the guidelines and provide training for teachers and other professionals on distance and online teaching methodology and safety on the internet also with attention to children in vulnerable situations;
- Make online education accessible to all children with special attention to children in vulnerable situations by providing technical and personnel support;
- Provide guidance and training to professionals and other service providers to cope with the pandemic;
- Increase the resources for family support services and provide technical support for professionals on how to handle the crisis while also protecting themselves and their families;

- Publish child-friendly materials to explain the pandemic to families and children;

- Consult with children on all measures aimed at children.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Provide high quality services: supervision, developing digital literacy for all, access to digital learning for children in vulnerable situations with special attention to children with disabilities, Roma children and children in care;
- Increase the financial and in-kind support for families in need;
- The local community should be supported to be able to secure all services based on universal and targeted care provisions: health care, education, early childhood education and care, and social services.

Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:

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Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:

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2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:

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Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:

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Government's protection of children's right to participate:

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Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Negative developments

There was no clear guidance from the authorities. As a result, the Hintalovon Foundation and the Family, Child, Youth Association struggled to provide advice on the parent's visits and other issues while providing pro bono legal services (dealing with family cases such as child custody). The financial recession experienced by both families and service providers has not been translated into concrete measures for poor families.

It was an extra strain for NGOs to maintain their activities such as providing personal assistance or training for professionals to fulfil their commitments. Financial sustainability has become a great challenge for most NGOs.

The Family, Child and Youth Association notes that there is a very low level of digital literacy among school teachers in Hungary. They lack basic information i.e. on the age limits to access different online platforms, usage of the content filtering software, and tools to prevent online bullying. Therefore, it has become a new advocacy objective for the Family, Child and Youth Association that was not planned strategically in their annual advocacy plan for 2020. Disruptions in education and a worsening of educational performance were observed.¹

There was a need for extra training, technical support and supervision for social workers working with families at risk that remained unmet. To some extent NGOs filled that gap, but access to health and social support has decreased substantially in many places.

Children living away from their family have been facing extreme challenges, such as lack of

professional staff, closure of the residential homes, ban on parental visits and children's visits to their families, no going out, etc., lack of digital devices - problems with digital education. There was also a moratorium on accepting newly referred children.

Children with special needs have not got access to the necessary services. Children with special educational needs have also been deprived of the necessary services.

Government measures

The government introduced an Action Plan to protect the Hungarian economy² that includes few measures referring to families e.g. a moratorium for family debts or extending the deadlines for financial support. The Family, Child and Youth Association suggests those are limited economic measures and that there is a lack of other aid for families and children in vulnerable situations. Apart from this Action Plan, no other policy was implemented.

¹ Internet usage during the pandemic.

² Magyarország. 2020.: Évi Nemzeti Reform Programja.

Examples of good practice

- The Hungarian Child Rights NGO Coalition put together a list of initiatives and resources³ developed during the pandemic.
- Hintalovon Foundation conducted a survey on children's experiences on internet, digital education, etc. during the pandemic.
- Some NGOs active in the most deprived regions and localities managed to increase and adjust their activities, for example: the Igazgyöngy (Real Pearl) enhanced its direct support and educational help to families and children⁴ and the Vanhelyed Foundation has expanded its activities to support Roma families and children⁵.
- Eötvös Lóránd University tested and introduced distance learning for students with disabilities.⁶

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

There is no strategy addressing child poverty but there is a social inclusion programme for Roma people and for people living in deprived regions of the country.⁷ According to government statements this programme represents a national anti-poverty strategy.

Since child poverty is above the EU average and the level of deep poverty is extremely high and continuously increasing in Hungary, the Family, Child and Youth

Association calls for the adoption of policies such as a national child anti-poverty strategy.

Another negative development is a regression in the protection of children's rights in Hungary. As the Family, Child and Youth Association outlines, the current government ignores the respect and promotion of human and child rights, and children's rights are not featured in any policy.

EU influence on national developments

The EU has insufficiently influenced the government to implement child-centred legislation.

To be more efficient the EU should provide better independent monitoring of EU-funded projects to prevent corruption and inefficiency in the implementation of the financial support and make the government accountable not claiming the money back from taxpayers' money.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations for Hungary only partially reflect the main challenges, recommending social assistance and quality education for all. The Family, Child and Youth Association note that the recommendations are mainly economic in nature and fail to address the most vulnerable groups including children (disabled, poor, living away from their family, unaccompanied minors, etc.).

³ Programok a Gyermekjogi Civil Koalíció ajánlásával.

⁴ The Work of Real Pearl Foundation During The Pandemic.

⁵ VanHelyed Foundation.

⁶ Good practices on equitable access to distance education.

⁷ „Jelenlét”; „Felzárkózó települések”. 1404/2019. (VII.5.) Gov. Reg.

Access to financial resources and services of high quality

Since 2006 the situation has worsened substantially, due to the crisis in 2008 and following the change of government in 2010 and the consequent shifting of political priorities. All this has led to the impoverishment of the poorer and marginalised families. As neither the minimum pension, nor maternity allowance or family allowance has been increased since 2006, it has affected a fast growing number of families. Many of those have lost their properties due to unpaid mortgages. There has been financial austerity with no adequate resources for health care, education and social support. As a consequence, there are fewer services in the precisely the areas where most of the children and families in vulnerable situations live.

Children experience higher deprivation rates compared with the

rest of the population. The severe material deprivation rate among children (15.2%) and families with three or more children (22.0%) was among the highest in the EU, well above the EU averages (6.4% and 6.7%). Deprivation, including housing deprivation, is among the reasons for a relatively high share (1.3%) of children under state care, which indicates a need to strengthen prevention.⁸ In 2019, close to half of Hungarian Roma (43.4%) faced severe material deprivation, and around four in ten people suffering from it were Roma⁹.

Limited childcare provision for under 3 years old, is one of the reasons for the gender employment gap and low fertility rate in Hungary. The share of children under the age of three enrolled in childcare increased from 13.8% in 2017 to 16.5% in 2018, but it is still well below the EU average of 35.1% and the Barcelona objective of 33%. The government's nursery development programme plans to increase the number of crèche places to 70,000 by 2022 from the

48,000 in 2018. Moreover, in the past nine years, Hungary has not made progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. The three years paid maternity allowance has created a strong belief that mothers should stay at home in any circumstances.

The adequacy of the social safety net has weakened over the past decade. Social transfers reduce the poverty rate in Hungary by 48.8%, which is one of the highest in the EU. This is mainly driven by family benefits during parental leave. The poverty-reducing impact of other benefits is low. The minimum income allowance has been unchanged since 2012 and now, at 15% of the minimum wage, it is one of the least adequate in the EU.¹⁰ The public works wage also decreased relative to the minimum wage, from 77% in 2013 to 55% in 2019. Social protection for casual and seasonal workers is limited. Labour shortages strongly affect social services too, affecting service

provision and restricting support to families in need.

Educational outcomes are below the EU average and large differences remain. By the age of 15, basic skills are significantly below the EU and regional averages and have decreased over the last decade. The impact of pupils' socio-economic background on their educational outcomes is one of the strongest in the EU. Schools are increasingly characterised by the similar socio-economic background of their pupils, with concentrations of disadvantaged pupils in certain schools. The share of schools with over 50% of Roma students increased from around 9% in 2008 to around 14% in 2018.

Public spending on health is low, and a high reliance on out-of-pocket payments restricts access for poorer households, exacerbating disparities in access to care. Although the authorities started addressing the problem of health workforce shortages, regional disparities

⁸ Statement of the ombudsman, 14 December 2017.

⁹ Poverty and social exclusion show strong territorial concentration: In the least developed districts, where one in ten Hungarians live, the average income per taxpayer was hardly above the minimum wage. A quarter of the population in South Transdanubia, North Great Plain and North Hungary was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Residential isolation of Roma is one of the highest in the EU. (European Commission)

¹⁰ According to the benchmarking exercise on minimum income in Social Protection Committee. (European Commission)

remain an issue. Strengthening primary care remains a key condition for improving effectiveness and equity of access to care.

Following the above mentioned analyses the Child, Youth and Family association considers the Hungarian

government has made no effort in ensuring adequate resources and services to families and children in need, only the well-off families.

Children's participation

- There has never been any serious consideration of children's participation, despite the ratification of the international treaties. Both within families, in the education, health care

system or social protection, children's participation – or even the participation of parents and professionals – in decision making has always been very low and it has worsened with the current conservative politics and policies.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

In residential homes contact between children and their biological family members was suspended. Children were not allowed to leave the institutions either. Participation in online education was weak due to limited access to the internet, lack of computers and carers' teaching and technical skills. Other challenges included overstretched staff (high child-staff ratio), lack of separation opportunities and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). There were no guidelines for the staff nor the children, which

increased tensions and violence substantially, particularly in institutions.

The pandemic has made it even more clear how inadequate residential facilities are for ensuring the well-being of children. Children with diverse needs and without proper professional plans were placed together in the same small group home. A wide age range often led to abuse (older children often harassing the younger ones). Even in normal times there is a lack of properly trained and supervised staff due to a high turnover and low salaries. The quality of care is inadequate in many settings.

In foster care there was no guidance on how to proceed in the event of the illness or infection of any family member, likewise there was no plan or services to tackle those situations. There was also a lack of access to proper education for many children in foster families because they did not receive any assistance to participate in online education.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The Family, Child and Youth Association is of the view that many policies and practices have increased the risk of child-family separation such as compulsory

kindergarten attendance where the absence of the child might lead to taking a child out of the family. 35%¹¹ of children enter alternative care due to poverty and social exclusion. Local community-based services for families at risk are missing or are very limited. The Family, Child and Youth Association estimates that approximately 150,000 children will enter the child protection system in the upcoming period as a consequence of the pandemic.

Progress on child protection reforms

There is no deinstitutionalisation reform going on in Hungary, the

11 Erőforrásokat a megelőzésre és az alapellátásra: az ombudsman a gyermekek családból való, elsődlegesen anyagi okból történő kiemelések gyakorlatáról

Family, Child and Youth Association highlights. Moreover, social workers and professionals, including civil society organisation staff, lack supervision and better organisation since they need to cover many child-protection cases. The system has become more bureaucratic and the individual interests of children are not taken into account.

Civil society organisations protecting children and families are often left out of consultations and decisions. For example, a report from a home for children with challenging behaviour in Kalocsa, revealed abuse of children by caregivers, and among children themselves there was prostitution and drug abuse.

EU funds

The transparency and accessibility of EU funds are the main challenge in Hungary.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org

