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A Sure Start? Implementing Early Childhood Prevention
Programs under Structural Constraints

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Abstract

Early childhood prevention programs, fueled by the idea of social investment, have been the focus of policy making for a few decades in Europe and the USA. Amongst these, the Sure Start program in Hungary has evolved into a nationwide service incorporated into the child welfare system. The program aims to combat social exclusion and compensate unequal opportunities related to socio-spatial inequalities through providing assistance, developmental intervention, and social activities to families. The article examines the socio-spatial consequences of the program by bringing together an analysis of the current regulatory and financial framework and the everyday working of several Sure Start houses in different parts of the country. The analysis relies on the findings of two post-doctoral research projects (NRDIO PD 112659 and Premium PD 3300405), combining sociological and anthropological fieldwork in three settlements. The study reveals that the current institutional structure is based on structural deficiencies and institutional asymmetries characterized by the disproportionate allocation of resources and obligations for Sure Start houses. This results in large differences regarding the implementation of the program in different localities, which are largely influenced by the positionality of the settlements, as well as the resources that the maintainers of the service can draw on. The article argues that in its current form the program appears to strengthen rather than alleviate socio-spatial inequalities, as it is exactly the most disadvantaged remote rural places that lack the resources that would be needed to compensate for their multiple disadvantages.

Keywords: early childhood prevention, Sure Start, social investment policy, street-level bureaucrats, socio-spatial inequalities.

1. Introduction

The past decades have seen a growing interest in policies concerning children's well-being which have materialized in various national and EU programs (see e.g. 'Investing in Children – Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' Cohesion package 2014-2020; and 'Give Kids a Chance' Hungarian National Program 2009). In many countries, including Hungary, this has been paralleled with an increase in the importance awarded to early childhood development and prevention (see Danis et al., 2011). Consequently, early childhood education and prevention programs have emerged in various places as important measures for tackling social problems such as segregation, poverty, and unequal opportunities (e.g. Head Start in the USA, and Sure Start programs in the UK and later in Hungary). These have appeared particularly attractive to policy makers based on the premise that investing in early childhood development in the long term will cost less than other measures designed to correct problems at later stages of life (such as unemployment schemes, poverty alleviation programs, and criminal correction programs). Early childhood prevention has also become an important part of welfare provision in Hungary.

This study scrutinizes the opportunity structure that the existing institutional framework presents for Sure Start houses through a study of varying forms of implementation of the latter in three Hungarian settlements. It argues that the current institutional framework is weakly institutionalized and biased in ways that: lead to the allocation of a disproportionately small amount of resources for Sure Start houses compared to the tasks assigned them; systematically disinvests in welfare provisions; and constrains small settlements' capacities to mobilize resources. The weak institutional environment refers to the selective enforcement of rules regarding Sure Start provisions: qualitative standards relating to service provision are weakly enforceable, while administrative standards are easily enforced through bureaucratic checklists.

The study of these institutional aspects and how they can influence local implementations is expected to inform us about the fulfillment of the service's stated goals. By examining institutional constraints and opportunities both at the level of national regulations and local level of actual implementation, our study furthers current understanding of the complex effects of early childhood welfare service provisions. It does so by highlighting the importance of local actors (street-level bureaucrats) as well as the spatial embeddedness of policy making. While our analysis is informed by familiarity with numerous Sure Start houses that was obtained through shorter research visits over the past few years, the current article discusses the three chosen cases in more depth, drawing on extensive sociological and anthropological research in three settlements: a small village of 2000 inhabitants in one of the most disadvantaged districts of North-East Hungary; a sociologically and ethnically mixed district in Budapest with accumulated social problems; and the Roma segregated neighborhood of a small town of 5000 inhabitants located within the agglomeration of the capital. The cases represent three contrasting examples regarding the capacities of local service providers to guarantee high quality Sure Start services. Not only are the different localities positioned in the socio-spatial landscape of the country very differently (albeit

they are all considered disadvantaged to varying degrees), but the service is maintained by a different type of institutional provider in each settlement. Our analysis shows that both aspects significantly influence the opportunities of local implementers to navigate within the current regulatory and institutional frames, leading to large variation in the organization and quality of the service.

2. Conceptual framework

Since the turn of the millennium, the social investment paradigm has become the cornerstone of European social inclusion strategies and welfare state reforms. The new welfare state model has emphasized the need to change welfare systems from ex-post compensation schemes to 'ex-ante capacitating interventions' in response to the new social risks of the post-industrial age, such as precarious employment, youth unemployment, single parenthood and the difficulties of work-life balance (Hemerijck, 2018). Instead of *equality here and now*, social investment policies focus on equalizing opportunity structure and life chances and are thus directed towards the future and children (Esping-Andersen, 2015; Hemerijck, 2018).

Welfare reforms aimed at equalizing life chances have historically considered schools and public education as a means of promoting social mobility (Esping-Andersen, 2015). Extensive research in cognitive psychology, economics, and sociology has however called attention to the fact that the shadow of family background is cast over even the most equitable educational reforms, and high-quality pre-school services are far more effective at equalizing the opportunity structure (Esping-Andersen, 2015). By the time children 'reach' public education (i.e. at six–seven years old), discrepancies between children of different socio-economic background regarding their learning capacities and social skills can be so substantial that not even the best prepared schools with a value-added pedagogical background can *equalize* them (Esping-Andersen, 2015; Heckmann, 2000). This calls attention to the decisive role of early childhood development in educational attainment and life chances (see Esping-Andersen, 2015; Heckmann, 2000). According to Heckmann's *learning begets learning* model, the first three years of life are momentous in terms of the development of learning capacities (2000). Since children do not choose their parental homes, providing equitable opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds is a community duty implemented through the provision of equitable public services. Early childhood care, educational services, and healthcare and education programs are important building blocks in children's wellbeing as these programs can develop their capabilities and strengthen their individual aspirations (Sen, 1999; Evans-Heller, 2012; Evans-Huber-Stephens, 2014).

Social investment studies have also diverged from previous welfare studies in their emphasis on the *quality* of social spending rather than its *quantity* (Korpi, 2004; Palme, 2006). Attention has shifted towards studying the institutional design of welfare systems, their qualitative differences, and policy effects (see Palme, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2015). Institutional readings of the social investment state argue that qualitative differences in the design of the regulatory framework of welfare systems play a fundamental role in policy effectiveness (Palme, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2015). By way of specifying entitlements and rules for resource

distribution, institutions can be biased and generate structured constraints and opportunities for particular groups of actors in terms of their choices and actions related to accessing resources and public goods. They can affect actors' capacities directly by limiting their choices for action, and indirectly by increasing only one group of actors' capacities to access resources without actually constraining others. Such asymmetrical empowering takes place without actual coercion, but it still reshapes the sets of alternatives that are available to actors, endowing one group of actors with more capacity than another (Heyman, 2004; Knight-Farrel, 2003; Lukes, 2005; Scott, 2001; Kolpi, 2004; Palme, 2006).

In a generally weak institutional environment in which rules change repeatedly and rule enforcement is low, actors thus endowed with more capacities enjoy broader *de facto* discretion in applying regulations flexibly when they mobilize resources. The behavior of actors who enact rules at ground level can either reinforce or weaken asymmetrical and weak institutions. Street-level bureaucrats – teachers, policemen, social workers, and nurses, amongst others – represent one concrete group of such actors who, through their everyday interactions with clients, put policies into practice (Lipsky, 1980). In his seminal study on street-level bureaucrats Lipsky (1980) argued that policies are not primarily made through laws and regulations, but through the everyday practices of the frontline workers who control access to services/benefits and can practice a high level of discretion in the application of regulatory prescriptions. The possibility to exercise such power arises from the fact that regulations are vaguely drafted, policy goals are not clearly defined, and frontline workers are relatively free from organizational control, while they need to respond to complex cases that cannot be reduced to formulae. However, their work is largely influenced by the conditions in which they operate, such as a situation of inadequate resources, ever growing demand for their services, and vague or conflicting organizational expectations, amongst others. As a result of their discretion and the pressures of working conditions, street-level bureaucrats can end up *making policy* in unwanted or unexpected ways that sometimes contradict the stated goals of policy directives and their organizations. Several studies have further complicated the understanding of this phenomenon by highlighting the different forms and degree of discretion street-level bureaucrats can have in varying contexts and institutional conditions (e.g. Evans and Harris, 2004; Wastell et al., 2010; Durose, 2011; Ellis, 2011).

We join these pieces of work by pointing out the varying opportunities and constraints local implementers have to mobilize extra resources and make choices about different aspects of service within the current institutional framework. A recent working paper on Sure Start houses in Hungary (Németh, 2018: 24) also highlighted the importance of staff, their professional expertise and experience, and their frequent fluctuation and local acceptance on the quality of service provided by the houses. Our study, however, goes further by highlighting the structural opportunities and constraints they navigate within and the sphere of movement the different providers can access in these frames. We show that the institutional structure can influence the degree and kind of discretion that street-level bureaucrats can exercise. By degree of discretion, we mean how much room is left for the discretionary decisions of street-level bureaucrats and whether and to

what extent these are limited by policy circumstances (e.g. scarcity of human resources) in terms of resource mobilization. By kind of discretion we mean what kind of leeway the former have to mobilize resources.

We furthermore highlight the importance of spatial differences that also influence the opportunities of bureaucrats. State policies are embedded in spatial processes (Brenner, 2004) and the *positionality* of places strongly affects the local implementation of policies (Sheppard, 2002). As Sheppard (2002) argues, the prospects and opportunities of localities depend on place-based processes that both shape and are shaped by the regional, national, and global territories in which they are embedded. Furthermore, state policies often have important (intended or unintended) spatial effects that can alleviate, but also reinforce, existing spatial inequalities or create new ones (see e.g. Jessop, 2002; Costa-Font, 2010; Kovács, 2010; Moulbourne, 2010). Such spatial embeddedness influences the possibilities and constraints that local bureaucrats face in their everyday decisions when they implement regulations and policies. It largely determines the resources they can draw on during their work, as well as the social tensions and relations they need to accommodate (Schwarcz and Szóke, 2014).

Thus, we argue that only by studying the institutional aspects and regulatory context along with the local decisions and implementations of street-level bureaucrats and their spatial embeddedness can we fully explore the effects of various policies and state programs. In other words, policy effects can be understood as the interplay between structural pressures and agency, knowing that the latter depends on who the actual agents are, and how their action is influenced by varying degrees and kinds of structural and spatial constraints. In the following sections we first present the main characteristics of the institutional environment, pointing to features of the selective institutionalization and asymmetrical resource supply of the weak regulatory framework of Sure Start provisions. We then turn to an analysis of two aspects of institutional constraints – financing and human resources – in more depth by discussing the constraints and opportunities of local implementers when organizing their services in the differentially positioned settlements.

3. Methodology

The article draws on extensive sociological and anthropological research conducted within the frames of two post-doctoral projects. Sociological research applied in the post-doctoral project 'First steps towards integration: institutional variations in providing access to crèche service' (NRDIO PD 112659) relied on mixed methods to study institutional mechanisms that constrain disadvantaged children's access to early childhood care services in crèches, beyond variables associated with spatial location and employment-based entitlements. The settlements for the qualitative research were selected through multi-stage sampling with an eye to the proportion of disadvantaged children in the local crèche and whether the settlement had an extensive network of early childhood services, including crèches, Sure Start houses, networks of nurses, and family and

child welfare services.¹ Four settlements were selected from a sample that included a high vs. low proportion of disadvantaged children using cross-table analysis of data provided by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. The four rural towns in the final sample – two from each sample group – represent similar cases in terms of their demographics, the number and size of surrounding villages, and their institutional background as defined by their geographical location and spatial positionality. In this vein, two of the towns were located within the agglomeration of larger urban centers, while the other two were situated at the geographical periphery of the country. All four towns had an extensive network of early childhood services, which enabled the research to analyze the complete institutional systems and policies of early childhood provisions in these localities. The qualitative part of the research project included 40 semi-structured interviews with local professionals involved in early childhood provision and representatives of local governments. Prior to field work and interviews, extensive document analysis was conducted, covering research into the national regulatory framework of early childhood policies and the demographics and institutional and policy systems of the localities.² In addition to local field work, 13 expert interviews were also conducted with representatives of the state-level agencies overseeing the institutional development and coordination of early childhood care and education policies in Hungary.

Within the post-doctoral project ‘A Sure Start? The effects of early childhood welfare programs on parenting practices, social belonging and spatial inequalities’ (Premium PD 3300405), 12 months of ethnographic research was conducted in three locations in Hungary from February 2018 to February 2019. As explained earlier, the locations were chosen to reflect the different positionalities of the settlements within the current socio-spatial structures of Hungary. One of the main goals of the project was to examine the way such positionality can influence the local practices and organization of early childhood welfare services. During the research daily observations were undertaken in three early childhood welfare institutions in each location: the child protection/welfare service, the network of nurses (*védőnő*), and Sure Start houses. In the current article, however, we only draw on the material collected about Sure Start houses. Within the project, regular visits were conducted by one of the authors (Szóke) for a period of three months in the three houses under analysis. The author spent from two to four hours in each house, three-four times per week. These visits usually took place during the public opening hours of the houses, usually focusing on the

¹ Having crèche services as the focus of the research strongly limited the number and type of settlements in disadvantaged rural regions compared to those in urban areas. Before 2017, the maintenance of crèche services was mandatory only for settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants. Partly as a result of this legislation, but also due to women’s employment activity in urban areas, demand for crèche services was mainly limited to the urban middle class. Act 223 of 2015 made the establishment of crèche services mandatory for all settlements in which at least five families stated a demand for such services, or where the number of children of less than three years of age was higher than 40. The post-doctoral research on crèches began in 2015, therefore sampling did not consider the new types of crèche services established after 2015.

² This part of the qualitative research relied on integrated settlement development and the equal-chance strategies of the local governments, as well as the local governmental decrees on crèche-, kindergarten-, and child-welfare services of the past five years.

busiest periods which varied between the houses. During the visits, participant observations were undertaken about the daily running of the house as well as the relations between the professionals and the attending parents. Thus, observations focused on: the organization of the daily programs and regular activities, the approach of parents to these activities and their actual participation in them, the ways in which staff tried to induce participation, the ways that staff dealt with resource-related problems (e.g. through creative ideas for daily activities), the ways that staff tried to offer advice about parenting and lifestyles to the attending families, and the relations of staff to the families. During these observations, informal data was collected as staff and families commented and reflected on different aspects of the daily life and activities of the house. Sometimes this took place naturally without intervention from the researcher, while other interactions were induced using directed questions or the researcher instigating discussion. At the start of these observations, formal consent was secured from the Sure Start staff and informal consent was received from all participating families, to whom it was explained what type of information would be collected, for what reason, and how this would be used. Field notes were written after every observation concerning the above aspects and following ongoing conversations and informal talks with staff and attendants.

In addition, at each house semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the Sure Start house employees as well as the other professionals who regularly visited the houses about their jobs, activities, changing conditions and changing participation, as well as their views about parenting and the circumstances of the families. The first interview with each professional was usually more formal, semi-structured, recorded and transcribed, while the follow-up interviews and informal talks that took place during day-to-day participation were only documented through notes and were less structured in style. Finally, semi-structured (mostly unrecorded) interviews with 40 families were undertaken in each location that were written down in detailed note form directly after the interviews.

4. The institutional environment of Sure Start houses in Hungary

Child welfare reforms conceived within the conceptual framework of social investment have abounded in Hungary in the past 15 years. Hungary's National Social Inclusion Strategy (NSDS) which summarizes the principles of the domestic child welfare system emphasizes the significance of early childhood care and education for improving disadvantaged children's educational attainments. More concrete policy reforms have followed in this vein, including the introduction of mandatory kindergarten attendance from age three, extending crèche services to settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, institutionalizing Sure Start houses as one of the basic services provided by Act 31 of 1997 on Child Protection, and providing funding for the latter from the central state budget.

The Hungarian Sure Start Program (*Biztos Kezdet* program) was adapted from the British model in 2003 with the goal of providing access to early childhood care and education and child welfare services for disadvantaged children living in disadvantaged localities before they enter kindergarten (at the age of five, and

since 2015 at the age of three),³ as a way of compensating for socio-spatial disadvantages. The Hungarian Sure Start Program initially began as a pilot project in six deprived localities in Hungary, and in 2009 was extended to other localities financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). Since 2013, Sure Start houses have been incorporated into the nationwide state-run child welfare system. Sure Start houses thus became public services funded by the state through local implementers using an annual per-capita funding rate of approximately €20,000. Currently, 113 Sure Start houses exist throughout Hungary, although most have been established in disadvantaged remote rural areas or segregated urban neighborhoods. Sure Start houses are maintained through two types of maintainers: by the local government (or a local government; typically a nursery), or by a religious charity organization. According to data based on our interviews in 2017, around 80 per cent of houses are run by local governments.

The overall objective of the Sure Start program has been to remedy spatial inequalities in early childhood service provision by decreasing segregation in public services, and to modernize the child welfare system by enhancing cooperation among child welfare professionals. Sure Start houses provide a range of services, including early prevention sessions, speech therapy, movement therapy, and pediatric counseling with the active involvement of parents whose parental competencies were expected to be strengthened. Families living in disadvantaged settlements do not have access to these child welfare services and/or the quality of accessible child welfare services is low. Based on the EU principle of *explicit but not exclusive*, Sure Start houses were created to operate in settlements with high unemployment and poverty rates and, as a low-threshold provision, to provide services for all families within the settlements without prior entitlement, with a special focus on the most vulnerable. In this vein, the methodology of Hungarian Sure Start provisions combines principles of early prevention and the social investment state (Heckmann, 2000; Esping-Andersen, 2015).

Notwithstanding the future-oriented character of measures, changes introduced to domestic public policies since 2010 have been widely criticized for their incongruence and hierarchical governance modes. Two seemingly contradictory policy processes emerged in the aftermath of the 2010 national elections which brought about the second victory of the right-wing Fidesz party. Institutional reshuffling in public administration and in nearly all policy areas was characterized by intensive centralization which worked through centralizing financial resources and withdrawing power from local governments. As a result, the latter lost a large part of their administrative capacity in relation to local education when school education was re-nationalized in 2011. Parallel to this, targeted central funding was re-introduced to support local service provisions such as kindergartens, crèches, and family and child welfare services. In 2013, public administration districts were re-established and directly connected to central state

³ Bringing disadvantaged children into the public educational and care system as early as possible was seen an important measure for tackling disadvantages and ameliorating the effects of family background. Sure Start houses thus became important as the first sites of institutional assistance/correction/control due to the scarcity of crèche availability or the complete lack thereof in disadvantaged localities.

agencies with a mandate to represent the functions of state authority in child welfare and education service provisions as well. The loss of direct control over financial resources and the coordination of service provision was particularly devastating for small settlements in which local governments had limited room for maneuver in terms of resource mobilization. This strengthened the dependent position of small settlements at higher policy levels and generally reshaped the role of local governments in local affairs, further constraining them from influencing local spheres of life.

The central state's increasing involvement in the administration of some policies, however, was carried out in a selective manner. Welfare policy changes such as the new family tax allowance scheme, and the extension of means-tested parental leave allowance, benefited families with a higher income (Szikra, 2014; 2018). Additionally, anti-poor, punitive measures embodied in provisions targeting lower-income families and disinvestment in welfare policies both in financial terms and in human resource provision reflected the withdrawal of the central state from its role in managing poverty and inequalities. The systematic erosion of provisions for low-income families, such as the non-indexation of the flat-rate child care allowance and universal family benefit since 2009 illustrate these trends. All in all, centralization and state disinvestment in welfare have been interlinked with increasingly bureaucratic procedures guided by the administrative and compliance-driven control of the local level and the poor by the central state. Despite laudatory phrases about social investment and its inclusion in policy documents, the Hungarian policy landscape has thus re-institutionalized a bifurcated system (Szalai, 2007) that marginalizes those at the social and spatial peripheries. Social vulnerability/marginalization and the spatial position of residence are strongly correlated in this bifurcated system. Small settlements in disadvantaged regions have a high concentration of poor families, amongst which Roma families are overrepresented (Kovács and Bihari, 2006; Virág, 2009; Koós, 2014). The complex nature of bureaucratized state disinvestment and centralization appear to reinforce socio-spatial inequalities; small disadvantaged settlements with the least capacity for resource mobilization suffer most from the scarcity of welfare professionals (teachers, nurses, social workers) and services (Virág, 2009; Farkas, 2015; Uzzoli and Szilágyi, 2013; Velkey, 2013). Under these structural constraints and spatialized political-economic processes, local governments in small settlements struggle to ensure minimum standards of child welfare services.

5. Institutional constraints and local implementations

5.1 Selectively weak institutionalization

Policy incoherence in Hungary's welfare system can be observed in the selectively weak institutionalization of the criteria for Sure Start service provision. In practice, this means that some methodological principles concerning quality are not regulated by the institutional framework, while others are turned into administrative requirements. What is more, the regulatory changes in 2018 increased administrative control over Sure Start provisions by assigning additional duties, such as the mandatory organization of one community event and two inter-

professional workshops, each month. The new regulatory framework also requires more intensive mobilization of disadvantaged families and the participation of more disadvantaged children in Sure Start programs coupled with strict administrative conditions about documenting families/children's disadvantaged status, their developmental status, and the like. More stringent administrative requirements, however, were not coupled with the provision of resources for implementers to cover the increased expense of mandatory community events and the employment of further personnel needed to fulfill administrative requirements and engage in professional work.

The complex methodology of Sure Start houses is laid out in the document entitled *Methodological Criteria for the Operation of Sure Start Houses – Professional Recommendations* (Methodological Criteria, 2013), issued by the National Rehabilitation and Social Office. The document defines the basic principles and goals of the Sure Start program and provides detailed methodological guidelines about the personnel and infrastructural criteria needed to provide high quality services and includes a list of furniture, toys, and educational equipment Sure Start houses should be equipped with in order to satisfy hygiene-related and pedagogical standards for the age group of zero to three years of age. The document, unlike the Basic Crèche Program, is not included in the appendices of the Act on Child Protection, and is only indirectly referred to as an external document that may be found at the Ministry of Human Resources' website and the Social Sector Portal. On neither of these websites, however, does following the relevant link lead to the document. This makes the service criteria listed in the core professional document of Sure Start houses difficult to enforce, as opposed to the service criteria for crèche provisions, in spite of the fact that both documents are central collections of standard principles for their respective services.⁴ In addition, the quality of crèche provisions is also guaranteed by cross-sectoral regulations (e.g. regulations in the healthcare sector about hygiene-related standards), while Sure Start provisions lack similar veto-points in the overall child welfare system. However, multiple veto-points may guarantee stronger enforcement of rules across sectors and also make them more difficult to change. Moreover, the weak institutionalization of Sure Start provisions can also be traced in the way that even the administratively selected guidelines that have been defined as mandatory assignments for Sure Start houses are put under financial and human resource constraints by the disproportionately low level of funding for mandatory tasks and the structurally inhibited supply of human resources. The asymmetrical funding scheme that provides a budget that is disproportionate to the legally binding assignments of Sure Start houses not only constrains the implementation of high quality early prevention and child welfare services, but

⁴ Crèches and Sure Start houses are both basic services provided by the child welfare system guaranteed by Act 31 of 1997 on Child Protection. They both provide early welfare services for children between zero and three years of age, but while crèches have a long tradition of providing day-care services, the more recent Sure Start houses focus on early prevention. Disadvantaged and Roma children are traditionally underrepresented in crèches due to their parents' unemployment status and/or their residence in smaller settlements of disadvantaged localities that have no capacity to maintain such services (Blaskó and Gábos, 2012). The objective of incorporating Sure Start services into the domestic welfare system was to fill gaps in crèche services, the availability of which has been limited to the urban middle-classes.

also recreates existing spatial inequalities in service provision. Given the disproportionately low rate of funding in comparison to the assigned tasks, local implementers often have to provide additional supplies for Sure Start houses to make sure they fulfill and implement their mission. Financial and human resources, however, are gradually decreasing in proportion to the size of settlements (i.e. it is particularly those small settlements in which the greatest concentration of disadvantaged children live that are unable to complement central state funding with their own resources, hence the quality of service provisions suffers in these localities the most).

5.2 Financing and socio-spatial inequalities

Before the institutionalization of Sure Start provisions in 2013, Sure Start houses had been financed by the European Social Fund through a tendering system. Project-based financing provided 30–60 million HUF (€100–200,000) over the three-year project cycle. This meant €33,000 of discretionary funding each year for Sure Start houses. The financing of Sure Start provisions is currently phased and is based on two institutional sources: domestic and ESF funds. In the current EU programming period, proportionate funding is allocated from ESF for four years based on the size of settlements: settlements with a population of 1000 to 4000 inhabitants receive 35–40 million HUF (€116,000–133,000) and small villages with a population of fewer than 1000 inhabitants can receive 40–44 million HUF (€133,000–150,000). By offering more funding for small settlements, this financial scheme reflects the spatial disparities in socio-economic conditions and public service provisions. In comparison, the domestic funding system that Sure Start houses are phased into at the end of the ESF project cycle does not consider socio-spatial inequalities and provides a lump sum of 6.2 million HUF (€33,000) per year. At this funding rate, Sure Start houses find it difficult to sustain their services, resulting in a decline both in visits by developmental professionals and in the supply of new toys and healthy nutritious snacks, as both earlier working papers (Balás et al., 2016: 3; Németh, 2018: 25–26) and the current research reveal.

In contrast to project-based funding that provides Sure Start houses with wide discretion in the use of funds, in the domestic framework 60 per cent of annual funding is earmarked for paying for the salaries of two Sure Start employees (Balás et al., 2016). The remaining 40 per cent must cover expenses related to tasks assigned by the regulatory framework on the one hand, and those recommended by the Methodological Criteria (2013), on the other. The latter include providing healthy, nutritious snacks for children, supplying toys and teaching equipment specifically designed for the age group, and coordinating and ensuring the visits of pediatric developmental professionals. Non-indexed since its introduction, the annual lump sum funding of Sure Start houses allows for only limited restocking of furniture and age-specific toys and educational tools (Balás et al., 2016). Sure Start employees in the small village explained that

Developing skills and capabilities is really different here. We have never met a child here who knew the numbers and colors. So, we wanted to paint a hopscotch outline to promote movement and cognitive development at the

same time. But the special paint costs 3000 HUF (€9) per color. What we are using now for painting was paid for from our pockets.

Calculated at 2017 prices, domestic funding provided 25,000 HUF (€83) per month for healthy nutritious snacks and left Sure Start employees without reserves to supply age-specific developmental teaching equipment (such as books or toys). The domestic funding scheme is also inconsiderate of those mandatory assignments that were introduced by the 2018 regulatory changes. The new regulation requires more intensive mobilization of disadvantaged families, but the funding scheme does not provide additional resources for covering the provision of snacks for more disadvantaged children. The head of one of the Sure Start houses under analysis pointed out that 'this is a contradiction in the system, as the goal is having more children participate in sessions, but from this amount of money I cannot provide snacks for so many kids. There is a limit to how many kids I can bring into the house, as I cannot give them food.' The budget allocated by central state funding also falls short of covering the additional expenses of mandatory community events and inter-professional workshops. The lump-sum funding scheme of the domestic institutional framework thus puts small settlements in deprived areas with a high concentration of poverty but low capacity to generate their own resources under considerable pressure as they struggle to maintain a reasonable quality of service that is comparable to that which families became used to during times of project financing.

A recent working paper also observes that the shift from EU project scheme to domestic financing has resulted in a reduction of the ability of Sure Start houses to obtain equipment and to run professional programs (Németh, 2018: 25–26). However, our research reveals that this does not affect Sure Start houses in the same way. Our empirical data shows that it is very important who the maintainer of the service is, and what resources they can draw on to complement centrally assigned funding. This largely determines their opportunities to satisfy the stated goals of the program and the related methodological recommendations, hence the provision of a high quality service. In the small remote village, the Sure Start house is currently maintained by the local government, which is largely dependent on central state resources due to the lack of local companies and other income-producing resources. It also cannot redirect resources from other state directives such as earmarked central grants for the public work scheme and the local kindergarten. Consequently, the Sure Start house must operate using only the very limited central fund of 6.2 million HUF per year. In addition to the two employees (and one more assistant employed through public work), this grant only covers the cost of daily food for participants, and sometimes even this has to be financed by the staff of the house if they want to provide more than just bread (the cheapest wheat-based type) with butter and cheap salami, which is usually the only menu. 'We simply can't make more healthy and varied food from this money. Here in the village even the cheapest bread costs more than in bigger towns,' explained the head of the house.

Similarly, the house is short of developmental and activity-stimulating toys. Apart from a big trampoline and toy motorcycles which are set up inside the activity room, and a few pencils and baby activity toys, the house only has some

used soft toys and cars which were donated by better-off families from the village. Most of these are broken or missing some parts. So, the children usually use only the trampoline and the motorbikes or play in the garden. There are no toys at all for movement development/therapy sessions or music sessions. Moreover, the house also lacks the resources to pay development professionals to hold weekly sessions for participants, which should be one of the main aims of this early prevention service. While during the EU financing period a movement therapist was paid to hold weekly sessions at the house, there are currently no external professionals working with the children. These professionals are difficult for local inhabitants to access, especially poorer more disadvantaged families, for various reasons. First, these services are only available in a larger town that is approximately one hour's drive from the village, and would take even longer with public transport, which has scarce services. In addition to the distance, for poorer families the cost of the trip would pose difficulties, while according to the staff for some very disadvantaged families even just the planning and execution of such a trip would be difficult. Thus, due to financial limitations and the lack of local assets of the maintainer, the service cannot really compensate for the place-based disadvantages of the village.⁵

In comparison, in the small town near Budapest the program is run by a nationwide religious charity.⁶ Both the better positionality of the place and the opportunities of the maintainer result in wider and more readily mobilizable resources. The charity has ample resources to draw on, both financially and in terms of human resources. Consequently, it is less dependent on state financing, which allows for much higher flexibility for the maintainer, as well as for the local staff in terms of acquiring equipment, organizing programs, and involving professionals. In addition, the house is run as part of a larger socio-development program for the Roma neighborhood. This also allows for the temporary reshuffling of resources or filling of gaps, as needed. In this house, printing drawings for the children and buying the type of food they plan to serve does not pose a problem. In addition to bread and salami, sausages and yoghurt and sweet bakery products were also offered at least once a week. The resources that are available furthermore permitted the cooking of a warm meal of participants' choice on a weekly basis, which took place in a community spirit.

Toys also arrived in abundance through donations to the charity, but were also regularly acquired from the additional budget. Accordingly, the activity room contained a wide variety of toys, including baby activity toys, building blocks, dolls and a play kitchen, train tracks, puppets and even a few books. The developmental session toys, however, were locked away and were only used occasionally, from fear of them becoming damaged. The house also operates with a full complement of personnel, employing two assistants and a head, as well as one part-time cleaner through the public work program. The charity is also able to mobilize human

⁵ We witnessed similar problems and outcomes in several disadvantaged villages in which the service was maintained by the local government.

⁶ Various religious charities exist as maintainers, but in our study we only analyze one specifically. While the resources the different charities can draw on might differ, their opportunity as providers to mobilize extra resources that are less dependent on central state budgets is similar, so to varying degrees our analysis can be also extended to them.

resources, partly through volunteers who regularly visit the house with various programs who are paid in part from extra resources. Thus a movement therapist, a psychologist, and a speech therapist arrived weekly to organize extra activities, some of whom were paid from extra resources, while others worked as volunteers.⁷ However, despite the good physical conditions, the staff often adjusted their activity to the expectations of the families who came to the house more for socializing and for charity, and were uninterested in the daily activities led by the assistants that were meant to enhance parenting skills and develop child-parent connections. Thus, the latter have been increasingly abandoned in favor of gift distribution and community events, leading to the loss of the service's main focus.

Finally, the Sure Start house in Budapest was the best provided for in every sense. Even though it is also maintained by the local government, it operates through the central nursery of the district, which also allowed for more flexibility and the ability to draw on wider resources. Being situated in the capital also meant that resources such as support and donations from various civic organizations were available, involving both volunteers and donations of various goods (ranging from nappies to healthy food products and toys or decorations for the activity room). Furthermore, in the capital a wider variety of products are available more cheaply than in the vicinity of the remote village, which meant that for less money better/more goods could be acquired. Consequently, the house offered a varied and healthy menu every day that included various types of fruit, yoghurt, vegetables, and the weekly communal making of cakes as well as freshly baked cakes for birthdays. The staff put special emphasis on offering healthy and varied food that participants often could not afford or would not buy.

Furthermore, the house was equipped with a large variety of good quality toys in excellent condition, constantly renewed and refreshed. Numerous developmental and activity toys were available for participants, even adjusted to different age groups, such as musical instruments, a ball pool, climbing frames and jumping balls, a puppet theatre, along with different types of building blocks, a fully equipped toy kitchen and baby activity toys. Acquiring tools for activities such as playing with dough, coloring and painting did not pose a problem. In fact, craft activities for parents were commonly held during which seasonal decorations and toys were made. Numerous development-based sessions were held by external professionals including a special music session (*Ringató*), movement therapy, visits by a psychologist, diet advisor, and a puppet theatre, all implemented either through volunteers or by employees of the central nursery. Some of these activities were channeled from the nursery and could only be achieved through the sharing of resources. In this respect, the house in Budapest appeared to achieve the goals of the service to the greatest extent.

These empirical examples reveal that the current institutional and financing framework permits large differences in the way the service is run which are largely dependent on place-based opportunities and constraints, as well as the extra resources that the maintainer can draw on. As the presented cases show, the program was least able to provide a good quality service and fulfil its targeted goals in the most remote rural location where it is needed most to compensate for

⁷ In other houses situated in other settlements but maintained by the same charity we experienced similar conditions.

socio-spatial disadvantages. In comparison, in the capital, where a wider variety of goods, services, and programs are in general more readily available for disadvantaged families, the service could best fulfil its stated goals.

5.3 Availability of professionals, human resources

The stability of the professional operation of Sure Start houses across the various funding schemes has been maintained by Sure Start mentors who regularly visited houses, observed and participated in sessions and provided methodological-pedagogical counselling to Sure Start employees. Mentors employed during project cycles were laid off when Sure Start houses were integrated into the domestic child welfare system. New mentors were trained, but their employment conditions had not been specified even in 2018. As a result of institutional instabilities, many mentors left the field, leaving the remaining employees with an overwhelming number of houses to visit (one mentor for fourteen houses in 2017).

Left without the professional support of their mentors, Sure Start employees faced increased pressure after changes in the regulatory framework in 2018. Although the Methodological Criteria (2013) recommend three employees per Sure Start house, the domestic framework provides funding for the employment of two: the head of the house, and one assistant. Methodological guidelines recommend the employment of a local member of the marginalized community as second assistant, whose role is to actively support the mobilization of disadvantaged families through direct personal contact and the work of the other two employees during sessions with mediation. In the domestic institutional framework, local maintainers of Sure Start houses had to find alternative ways of providing the two employees with such support. As a result, the third employee is generally a public worker paid for by the local government.

The employment conditions of the head and assistant of Sure Start houses fuel further institutional instability. Although more than half of the annual lump-sum funding is needed to cover the salaries of the two employees, these are still tragically low compared to their complex responsibilities. As one Sure Start head explained: 'we have to fulfil many different kinds of roles: early childhood professional, parental counsellor, community developer, administrator, etc... [...] we work in difficult localities with children who do not have an easy life; we compensate for their disadvantages [...] and we often work more with parents.' The regulatory changes in 2018 modified the employment status of Sure Start employees who can now receive some additional benefits as public servants, but also increased the requirements relating to their educational attainment without raising salaries or transforming working conditions. Sure Start employees, who now have the same educational qualifications and public servant status as early childhood professionals in crèches, are still not entitled to the same allowances and period of rest. Sure Start employees are not entitled to receive a regular allowance for occupational clothing and only have five days of holidays each year (when Sure Start houses are closed), as opposed to crèche employees who are entitled to 25 days per year.

These structural constraints were also evident in the Sure Start houses we examined. In all three houses there has been significant turnover of permanent

staff, which was usually explained by the low salary and high level of responsibility and demands of the job, the poor working conditions (job instability, limited resources), and difficult-to-satisfy requirements. Significant fluctuation particularly strongly affected the *head* positions, which involve major responsibility with very little freedom to dispose of resources. The heads of several Sure Start houses mentioned that the current requirements pose extreme difficulties in terms of the everyday organization of tasks with the limited staff they have at hand. As one of them very acutely described the situation:

For me the most important aspect of this job was always working with the families. I think that should be the main point of our job. But instead I spend my time filling out forms and documents as now we have two parallel documentation systems. Because if I don't do this, then it doesn't matter if we do a great job here at the house, if it's not documented, then we appear to be under-utilized and will have a funding shortfall. And now with the new regulations we are supposed to recruit disadvantaged families, so regular family visits are prescribed. But we didn't receive additional staff for this, and no one thought about how this can be coordinated with the same amount of personnel, who are already stretched. And most families with young children are most likely to be at home between 10–12 a.m., exactly when we are the busiest here as well. So, in the end I have hardly any chance to spend time with the families in the house. And that should be the main point of this whole program!

In fact, administrative criteria were often mentioned as one of the main obstacles to organizing a good quality service and fulfilling the main goals of the program. Due to limited personnel and a high workload related to administrative criteria (upon which the central funding and hence the survival of the house is dependent), the quality and quantity of professional work (such as intensive daily activities with parents – which are mostly uncontrolled and unmonitored) often fell short.

Nonetheless, there were still important variations between the Sure Start Houses we examined linked to the opportunities and limitations of the maintainer of the service. In the small remote village, the struggling local government cannot provide a long-term service. While the staff in Budapest also felt somewhat insecure due to instability linked to the yearly financial cycles, they trusted that the provider would secure funding for the maintenance of the house if it fell short of central financing. However, this was not the case in the village, where the local government made it clear they would only maintain the service if it could operate with zero contribution on their part. As an assistant explained about her decision to leave the house and become a teacher:

One thing was the salary, which is much higher in the school now that I have an MA as well. In the Sure Start program I received the same as the other assistant who only had training certified by the National Training Register (*OKJ*)! That made me so mad. And to be honest even then I was thinking of staying. But since the mayor could not guarantee that the House would be still there during the next financial cycle, that decided it for me!

The circulation of professionals between different positions in the social welfare and education sphere was very evident during our research, and the instability of Sure Start houses linked to the yearly financing cycles was often mentioned as one of the main disadvantages in comparison to other positions. In this respect, the nationwide religious charity with its wide networks and autonomous resource mobilization capacities appeared to guarantee the greatest security/stability, along with great flexibility in terms of jobs and opportunities for training, thus proving more attractive to professionals than employment through the other maintainers.

The strict criteria regarding the qualifications of the head of the Houses also created further difficulty, which was especially evident in the more remote rural locality where there is a significant shortage of professionals with high-level qualifications. This not only affects the quality of professional work in the settlements concerned, but also the utilization of the service. In every house we researched we witnessed changes in staff (usually involving the head, but often both the head and assistant together) during our field work, which resulted in a period of low participation as families had become attached to the former staff and stopped visiting the House when they quit. The new staff explained that after months of investment into recruiting participants, only a small segment of the formerly regular participants usually return after such changes.

The availability of professionals appeared as a major problem in terms of satisfying the main objectives of the service from yet another perspective, which also had a spatial aspect. Sure Start houses should organize sessions with various developmental experts and therapists in order to provide inhabitants who are otherwise inhibited in their access to quality services with access to these specialized services. This is a major prerogative that is meant to compensate for socio-spatial inequalities. However, the general lack of professionals is especially severe in disadvantaged, remote, rural areas, such as our example. Professionals are even lacking in the nearest town, which is a 30-minute ride from the village, and public transport is scarce. Thus, the maintainer would need to pay supporting professionals a considerably higher than average fee to cover their travel cost and time for providing weekly sessions for the house. However, the local government has no extra resources for this. During the EU financing cycle, the program was able to mobilize a speech- and a movement therapist on a weekly basis, but this service was stopped after the funding was centralized. In contrast, the maintainers in Budapest and in the small town are able to mobilize a network of volunteers concentrated in the capital (and linked to the religious charity in the case of the town) to lead various activities and sessions and also have the resources to pay professionals for developmental sessions. Thus, in this respect the current framework also appears to strengthen socio-spatial inequalities rather than alleviating them.

6. Conclusion

The combined effects of institutional weakness and the asymmetrical allocation of resources vis-à-vis mandatory assignments leave local implementers with broad discretion in relation to the quality of services provided in each Sure Start house.

As a consequence, variation in the qualitative content of service provision is high; implementers with greater resource capacities can ensure that Sure Start houses fulfil the qualitative standards for Sure Start provision as defined in the original methodological guidelines, while implementers whose capacities are weak in terms of their ability to obtain external financial and human resources must put up with poorer service quality. The institutional framework of child welfare policy, which lacks institutional guarantees for equitable service provision, can generate asymmetries and biases by further 'decapacitating' providers in small and disadvantaged localities that need investment the most due to the high concentration of disadvantaged individuals.

Our research reveals that in such contexts it is of great significance what type of organization the maintainer of the service is, and what its capacities are to find extra resources to compensate for the shortcomings of current central financing. Correspondingly, local governments appear to be more exposed to central budgetary constraints than other maintainers who dispose of other resources and have greater human capacity, such as religious or civic organizations. Thus, the latter have greater scope to make choices in relation to the content and quality of the services they provide, while local governments are more directly influenced by budgetary constraints determined by central financing and regulations.

These differentiated capacities are further complicated by spatial aspects as well. More remote and/or small rural localities in disadvantaged areas lack the extra financial and human resources and capacities (such as early childhood professionals) that would be needed to compensate for the place-based disadvantages of their inhabitants. Consequently, due to the shortcomings of the institutional and regulatory frame and the differentiated spatial embeddedness of different localities, it is exactly the places that would need such services the most where the maintainers and employers of the service have the least leeway to make choices and influence the quality and content of the service. This situation can be partly corrected if the maintainer is less dependent on central regulations and budgets, such as in the case of religious and civic organizations, whereas local governments in these localities have the least opportunity to operate good quality services. As such, the current institutional and regulatory context of the Sure Start program, in contrast to its goals, appears to further strengthen socio-spatial inequalities rather than alleviating them.

Overall, the tightening of centralization in Hungarian public administration, coupled with state disinvestment in social policy in the post-2010 era, is more palpable in peripheral locations. Peripheral communities are less resilient with regard to the hierarchically controlled withdrawal of resources due to the absence of sources of capital in these localities than centrally located, larger settlements, where alternative pathways for external resource mobilization may exist. As a result of the state's withdrawal from its public role in the field of social service provision (early childhood prevention in our case), local governments in disadvantaged localities fare much worse than religious or civic organizations that can draw on external resources due to their autonomous organizational background. This appears to be particularly important in several respects. First, the majority of Sure Start houses are run by local governments, many of which are

situated in disadvantaged localities; a situation which may trigger discussion about the role of the state in mitigating socio-spatial inequalities. Second, similar mechanisms of state withdrawal are occurring in other spheres of welfare provision, raising further questions about whether the state is fulfilling its public responsibility as a social investment state.

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