

Evaluation of the Equal Opportunity and Integration Project SROP 331

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The key project 331 of the Social Renewal Operation Programme (SROP) was launched at the end of 2007 and its first phase completed in 2009. The project aims to improve the performance of pupils with multiple disadvantages in public education. The Budapest Institute was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) to carry out the evaluation of the project in October 2009. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the experiences of the first phase and propose modifications for the next project phase starting in 2010. The evaluation reviews the results of the project that are measurable with indicators, assesses the progress of the project against the original time schedule, and lastly identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation so far, on the basis of the project documentation and interviews.

This is a summary of the key findings of the evaluation. The full report is available at the following website (in Hungarian): http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/BI_OKM_tamop331_ertekelés_2010marcius.pdf

The aims and main results of the project

Deep poverty, lack of education, unemployment and the integration of the Roma population are the most pressing problems of Hungarian society. Nearly one third of each cohort leave public education without the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics which would enable them to find a job or to retrain later in their career. This is largely a result of the unequal opportunities of pupils from different social backgrounds in the system of public education. The provision of high quality education and ending the educational segregation of pupils with multiple disadvantages are a precondition to tackling any of the problems mentioned above, which renders SROP 331 to be a project of utmost importance.

The aim of key project SROP 331 is to improve the performance of pupils with multiple disadvantages in education, increase the pre-school enrolment of children with multiple disadvantages, reduce school segregation, prevent the unjustified categorisation of socially disadvantaged children as having learning disabilities, improve access to high quality education, and promote equal opportunities objectives in the financing of local development projects.

By the end of 2009, the educational development programmes of Educatio Non-profit Ltd (Educatio), the organisation responsible for the implementation of SROP 331, reached approximately 75-80,000 pupils with multiple disadvantages and around 200-225,000 non-disadvantaged pupils in 1,600 primary schools. One fourth of primary schools in Hungary took part in the programme supporting the renewal of teaching methodologies. The key project and related funding opportunities provide teacher training to support the adoption of more inclusive teaching methods, and a mentoring service that helps to consolidate the new methods in schools. The training programmes that were originally developed for primary schools in the predecessor programme have been adapted for use in secondary schools and pre-schools. Through a sub-project targeting local governments responsible for the provision of public education, 1,300 authorities adopted equal opportunities action plans. The implementation of these plans is supported by legal incentives and mentors.

The Government approved the project with a budget of 1.65 billion forints in July, 2007. The preparation of the project however took longer than usual; it lasted nearly 18 months. More than one year passed between the Government's decision and the signature of the funding agreement. The delay in the adoption of the Operational Programmes and in the closure of previous programmes, together with the restructuring of the implementation system considerably delayed the start of the project and therefore reduced the time available for the substantive project activities to such an extent that this might have endangered the quality of implementation.

The key project tackles an important social issue in a clear framework, with careful and thorough coordination amidst difficult conditions. Despite the obstacles, the project has achieved considerable results, and the majority of the sub-projects have been implemented with only minor delays. The main strength of the programme is that it addresses clearly defined problems with a set of adequate and well coordinated measures; its weakest points are communication and adaptation to the financial constraints.

Problems and solutions

Problems with the quality of public education, and particularly the exclusion of the poorest children from quality education, clearly justify government intervention. Evidently, public education is a public service and the state is responsible for its quality. The quality of public education on the one hand defines the development of human resources and thus the welfare of the country. On the other hand, public education is a key determinant of individuals' life opportunities and it is one of the most important channels of social inclusion and mobility.

The key project continues along the directions set by the predecessor programmes of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP): first, it supports the development and transfer of *teaching methods* supporting integration; and second, it provides incentives and professional support for the integration measures of *local governments*.

The focus of the *Methods Component* is to equip teachers with a new state-of-the-art toolset (curricula and training) to support skills development in classes of mixed ability and diverse social background and to facilitate group work and cooperation in the classroom and develop the partnership with parents. The impact assessment of the predecessor programme between 2003 and 2006 found that the performance of pupils taught according to the new, inclusive methodology improved already in the short run compared to the control group of children in non-participating schools. The key project is also monitored by a similarly detailed impact assessment. However, the most important outcomes cannot be measured yet: these will be the long-term positive impacts on the labour market prospects of disadvantaged children.

The most important incentive for *local governments* is the insertion of equal opportunities objectives into development funding, which means that access to funding resources is dependent upon efforts to improve equal opportunities. This legal incentive is a new policy instrument in Hungary and its introduction was also welcomed by the institutions of the European Union. According to Article 105 of Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education, organisations applying for national or international funds in the field of education need to produce an assessment of the existing local conditions concerning equal opportunities in public education and adopt an equal opportunities action plan for public education. This provision is now being extended to all local projects, so that access to all state or EU provided development funds available to local governments will be conditional on the adoption of equal opportunities action plans.

The action plans reviewed as part of this evaluation reflect a cautious, introductory approach by the local governments characterised by unambitious targets and the avoidance of risks. In this respect most local governments seemed to comply with formal requirements rather than preparing and designing effective measures. In some cases, this applies to methodological trainings as well: when the local authority (who are responsible for public education) has an interest in sabotaging integration, the schools' motivation for quality training may be weak.

Coherence

The strategic objectives of the project (overarching and specific objectives) are clearly and easily quantifiable. In the period between 2007-2013, the measures are focused on pupils with multiple disadvantages (as opposed to disadvantaged pupils in the HRDOP); and the project-level objectives have become more precise and specific, which indicates a coordination with earlier programmes and more strategic targeting. The new objectives include the increase of the pre-school enrolment of children with multiple disadvantages, a reduction in the number of disadvantaged pupils who are wrongly categorised as having learning disabilities, and the mainstreaming of an equal opportunities-oriented allocation mechanism of education development funds. This shift was also motivated by the experiences of implementation from before 2007, and the feedback from public consultations.

Priority 3 of SROP and the sub-objectives of the key project are coordinated with the strategic framework of education policy and they are adequately aligned with the non-developmental interventions as well. The policy coordination of implementation is also working well. The Ministry actively supports the project by introducing legal guarantees and financial incentives to ensure its sustainability. The attention of the EU, and the adoption of the project as 'good practice' also helps to gain and keep support for it among policy makers.

The project is well coordinated with other, *directly-related* EU development projects; however this carries

the risk that potential delays in the implementation of some projects cause a disruption in other projects as well. The project performs weaker in terms of coordination with the content and timing of other, *indirectly related* EU programmes (SROP, ROP); the Managing Authority and the Ministry do not always ensure that these are adequately matched.

Links to other ministries' relevant programmes are sometimes also weak, which can be explained by a variety of factors: general limitations of the policy making culture; conflicting views and interests at personal and political levels, different policy and value choices; and political costs. Although better cooperation with policy areas under the responsibility of other ministries is one of the objectives of the 3.31 SROP key project, there is no evidence of progress in that.

Communication

Resistance to change among stakeholders represents a strong obstacle and risk, which is made worse by the unfavourable public mood and the political tensions. The project elements tackling this, particularly communication, are still relatively weak. The majority of the messages set out in the communication strategy of the project had no or very limited appearance in the national media and thus failed to reach the wider public.

The project pays little attention to strengthening the openness and adaptability to change among teachers. One of the signs of this is that the internal communication of the project uses the jargon of development policy rather than the language of schools. As a result, teachers often see change as top-down orders and criticism, rather than as support for addressing their local, practical problems.

The equal opportunities vision of the Ministry is thorough and clear, however the communication of this strategy both towards the general public and the participants of the programme is poor. This might have a negative impact on the social acceptance of the project and the motivation of the participants.

Timing, meeting deadlines

The administrative preparation of the project took significantly longer than planned; nevertheless the sub-projects were by-and-large implemented according to the original schedule. Some subprojects however could not be carried out as planned or the targets had to be revised due to the delay or failure of related projects. Often there was a long gap between the actual implementation and payment; sometimes reimbursement lagged behind delivery by several months.

The delay in the preparation and implementation of the project is due to various reasons: (1) disagreement over the content of the project between the Managing Authority and the Ministry of Education (Educatio Llc); (2) bureaucratic obstacles during implementation within the intermediate body, the Fund Management Directorate of the Ministry of Education (FMD MoE), the Educatio Llc, and in their cooperation; (3) continuous organisational learning within the institutions responsible for the management of European funds, changes in protocols and procedures; and (4) legislative changes in the rules governing the allocation of funds. Further analysis would be necessary to explore to what extent the possible constraints of the MA's institutional capacity played a role in the disruptions of the implementation process.

In the monitoring of the implementation, there is no feedback on the administrative burden and cash flow problems of the Educatio Llc and other actors involved in implementation (consultants, trainers, schools etc.).

Delays always increase the administrative cost of the project. Furthermore, implementing tasks faster than planned might lower their quality, the synergies from linking the activities might not be realised, implementation might focus on procedures and become a formal exercise rather than concentrate on the outcomes, and key experts might decide to leave the project.

The participants of the project are typically schools, non-profit organisations and consultants – mainly organisations and individuals with limited resources who are not able to adapt to the disruptions or long delays of payment. This is particularly true for independent non-profit organisations and disadvantaged small regions that cannot afford to prefinance their activities. The exposure and vulnerability of these participants means that the disruptions in the financing of the project are a fundamental risk to the successful implementation of the whole project.

Sustainability

At present, one fourth of the primary schools are receiving the integration subsidy and the supplementary payment for teachers, which increases the commitment of these organisations to the policy of integration.

It is a risk that the project has not been openly and widely communicated and lacked political endorsement beyond the policy area of education even by the Government that initiated it. Support is not guaranteed from the current government either. Moreover, at present even the commitment of education policy (and policy makers) is uncertain, partly due to competition for centrally allocated EU funding and partly as a result of the short-term political costs of integration efforts.

The project heavily builds on costly and less efficient professional training by external consultants and mentoring, while little attention is paid to utilising the internal resources of schools and their teachers, and fostering cooperation and sharing within and between school staff (which is considerably cheaper). The incorporation and adaptation of the integration programme into teacher training degree courses would be the main channel for changing teaching methods that is feasible in the long run, however, progress in this area has been rather modest so far.

Key recommendations for organisations involved in the project implementation

Educatio Ltd

- Developing internal control and improving the responsiveness of the organisation through better bilateral communication.
- Appointing a spokesperson to organise and carry out the external communication of the project.
- Increasing assistance to public education institutions to get through the critical period of methodological change, e.g. by providing training to all teachers within the school and separate funding for peer observation exchange between schools.
- Setting up an on-line forum to make available all the information on integration-related training and services. Communication among members of this on-line community would also facilitate the exchange of experience on the content and quality of training and trainers.

Ministry of Education and Culture

- Simplifying formal, administrative requirements hindering the actual implementation of the projects (FMD MoE).
- Bridging the liquidity problems of Educatio Ltd.
- Ensuring the participation of public education equality consultants and mentors in the local inspection of ROP projects and other funding arrangements to guarantee the effective monitoring of equal opportunity commitments made in local authorities' plans.
- Exploring the reasons behind the modest results achieved in terms of the incorporation of new methods in teacher training and increase efforts to improve this.
- Strengthening educational integration in pre-schools and the first four years of primary school. The findings of the evaluation report suggest that methodological change is easier in these settings, and teachers working with children aged between 3-7 years could be the "agents" of change.

Human Resources Programmes Managing Authority and National Development Agency

- Putting an explicit time limit on the decision time of Project Evaluation Committees and the time allowed for setting up the contracts. This should not be more than three months from the submission of the project proposal.