PLACES TO GROW

Study Visit Report

SLOVAKIA

22-23 SEPTEMBER, 2022

International Child
Development Initiatives

The 'Places to Grow' Programme is an initiative originated and funded by the Porticus Foundation to put inclusive Early Childhood Development high on the policy agenda and to support its quality improvement and system change in Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia.

The programme aims to:

- promote coordination among Early Childhood Development (ECD) services for children from marginalised communities and ethnic minorities (e.g., Roma),
- build knowledge of policy makers and the workforce for future greater focus on early childhood services,
- create evidence for reforms of financing of early childhood systems and follow-up advocacy at national and the European Union level.

International Child Development Initiatives - ICDI is a knowledge organisation that supports and develops initiatives in the field of ECD, child protection and wellbeing.

We aim to create rich, safe and nurturing environments for young children to live, grow and learn, especially for those who are most vulnerable.

International Child Development Initiatives

In this programme, ICDI's role is to:

1. Increase understanding, knowledge and skills of ECD service providers and local policy makers on how to catalyse whole child development through cross-sectoral cooperation.
2. Support cross-country capacity building and peer-mentoring in Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

During the Kick off Meeting of Places to Grow (Spring 2022), thematic areas and inspirational projects for future collaboration were discussed together with the partner organisations from Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. The following 6 topics were outlined as central in the upcoming learning exchanges, training events, and study visits: 1. Cross-sectoral cooperation and integration of services; 2. Importance of early years; 3. Reflective practices and quality assessment; 4. Intergenerational learning; 5. Diversity and inclusion in ECEC; 6. Learning through play.

HIGHLIGHTS

The first study visit within the Places to Grow programme took place in Slovakia on 22 and 23 September 2022. Participants were a diverse group of 22 practitioners within the ECEC field (including NGO staff, kindergarten teachers and directors, among others), coming from both Slovakia and Czech Republic.

The study visited started at the Primary School in Spišský Hrhov. This is a model school, located in a small village of 1500 inhabitants in North-East Slovakia, where approximately half of the population is of Roma origins. The village and its former Mayor appeared in an article on The New York Times in 2017, where it was described as a successful example of integration and partnership between the Roma and non-Roma population. It is in this spirit and building on the work done by the local administration, that the school principal, Peter Strážik, has made his mission to make the local primary school an inclusive, open, innovative hub for all children and their families. Among other initiatives, such as a state-of-the-art school garden, an environmentally friendly building, and great sports facility, in 2017, the school decided to participate in the TOY for Inclusion project, coordinated by ICDI and locally implemented by the Slovak NGO Škola dokorán, and become the first Slovak school to open an ECEC Play Hub.

Play Hubs are community-based inclusive non-formal educational spaces for children and families.

They especially make sure to include and engage young children (0-10 years old) from vulnerable, minority groups and growing up in difficult circumstances. Here, young children and families from all backgrounds form relationships through playing together and borrowing toys in the toy library, They also connect with health, education and social services that collaboratively participate in the activities of the Play Hub as a one-stop-shop for all information about responsive parenting, health, early learning, and development.

There are currently 23 Play Hubs and one mobile Play Hub in seven EU countries. Six new Play Hubs have been opened in Slovakia in 2022 in cooperation with UNICEF as a response to the Ukraine refugee crisis. Every year the Play Hubs reach more than 6000 children, 2000 caregivers and 1000 professionals.

Play Hubs are a flexible solution that offers educational opportunities for all those children who are often excluded from formal educational services or are yet too young to attend formal schooling and might have a difficult transition. They are also a power way to prevent school drop out for those children that are attending school but are at risk of exclusion.

The morning of 22 September, at the Primary School in Spišský Hrhov was dedicated to a capacity building activity organised and facilitated by ICDI on reflective practices in Early Childhood Development (ECD) services.
Reflective practice is a form of critical thinking that considers our experiences and beliefs. It can support us in increasing our understanding and in improving our practices. Reflective practice is a structured approach that comprises at least three steps: 1. identifying the problem or issue; 2. reflecting upon or analysing it; 3. drawing conclusions and planning for the future.
Professionals who engage in the process of reflection on their practice are more likely to:

- Take the time to think about the impact and effectiveness of their current practices and environment;
- Review their everyday practices and identify opportunities for growth;
- Learn, develop and strengthen their capacity as a team;
- Engage in the exchange of ideas, shared decision-making, and positive partnerships.

Reflective practice can be spontaneous and responsive to a situation, or can occur as part of a planned exercise where professionals are looking to investigate a specific component of their practice as part of a commitment to continuous improvement.

The training prompted discussion about the different ways and timings in which participants apply reflective practices in their own work, with the participants sharing their own experiences and reflections on plenary. It is of note that a majority of the participants already applied reflective practices periodically. Participants recognized the added value of taking the time to reflect on their own work, together as a team. Taking the time to reflect can lead to an increase in self-awareness over the nature and impact of their role, which can create opportunities for personal and professional development. Participants were introduced to the ECD-QUAT (a QUality Assessment Tool developed by ICDI) and invited to use it during the study visit at the school as an observation guide.

In the afternoon of the first day, the school principal led the visit to the grounds and buildings of the school, and to the Play Hub situated in the same premises. Participants were very enthusiastic during this visit to the school and enjoyed having the opportunity to discuss with the Play Hub staff, which they found very knowledgeable.

In the last fours months, Škola dokorán (in cooperation with UNICEF) successsfully established six new Play Hubs in Slovakia, specially created to answer the needs of Ukrainian refugees. These Play Hubs have been offering a safe and welcoming space to refugee children and their families. The locations for these Play Hubs were chosen for the number of Ukrainian refugees they are hosting and are often located in refugee camps and Primary schools. The teams of professionals leading these Play Hubs are composed of Slovakian and Ukranian practitioners, educators, and volunteers.

On the second day of the study visit, participants visited two of these new Play Hubs: one in Poprad, in the premises of a charity building, and another in Prešov, in the premises of a bilingual (Slovak and Ukrainian) Elementary school. Miroslav Balon, project manager of Škola dokorán, provided participants with an overview of these new Play Hubs, including their different contexts and challenges. The Play Hub in Poprad, situated next to a room that functions as a welcome center to refugee families, supports families by enabling caregivers to leave their children (sometimes as old as 12 years old) at the care of the staff while they are busy with the different tasks demanded of them upon arrival and settling. For the Play Hub in Prešov, the language barrier was not a challenge, and the integration for refugee families appears to be helped by the presence of a numerous Ukrainian community in the region.

Following the visit to the Play Hubs, participants shared what was, for them, the most interesting/valuable part of the experience: getting to talk with the staff in the Play Hubs and seeing how much knowledge and experience is present; gaining a clear understanding of how Play Hubs function in practice; and, finally, observing how the needs and local context lead to different solutions in each Play Hub.

According to the participants, the most interesting take-aways of the study visit were:

- the opportunity to discuss with professionals in the field of ECEC;
- the community involvement;
- the establishment of new contacts;
- the opportunity to see intersectorial cooperation in practice;
- the exchange of experiences between the two countries;
- the quality of the Play Hubs as a non-formal ECEC service.

> **SOCIAL INCLUSION STARTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN'S EAGERNESS TO PLAY**

A SPECIAL THANK YOU AND APPRECIATION TO ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN THE ORGANISATION AND PLANNING FOR THIS STUDY VISIT, WITH A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO MIROSLAV SKLENKA (ŠKOLA DOKORÁN) AND KETEVAN SULAVA (ICDI).

The Study Visit in Slovakia was the first of a total of three Study Visits planned in the Places to Grow programme

NEXT STUDY VISIT

Hungary, 10-11 October 2022