



Begleitende Evaluation des Ausbaus regionaler Frühe-Hilfen-Netzwerke im Rahmen des Österreichischen Aufbau- und Resilienzplans

Englische Kurzzusammenfassung der Evaluationsergebnisse

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English Summary of the Evaluation Report on the Expansion of Regional "Frühe Hilfen" Networks as part of the Austrian Recovery and Resilience Plan (ARP)

1 Introduction

The following report presents the results of the accompanying evaluation of the expansion of regional "Frühe Hilfen" networks that took place as part of the Austrian Recovery and Resilience Plan (ARP) funded by the European Union through NextGenerationEU. The report combines previous results from the interim report with findings from additional quantitative and qualitative surveys conducted more recently. The evaluation aimed to assess the success of the quality-assured rollout process of "Frühe Hilfen" networks across all Austrian districts (which took place between 2022 and 2024), as well as target group reach and impact.

2 Background and Development of "Frühe Hilfen" in Austria

"Netzwerk Familie" (implemented in Vorarlberg in 2009) was the starting point for the Austrian "Frühe Hilfen" program, a comprehensive concept of measures aimed at health promotion and early intervention during pregnancy and early childhood. Since then, the program has expanded to other regions, supported by the Austrian Ministry of Health and various other stakeholders. Early on in the process, the "Idealmodell" was developed, which served as a theoretical foundation and outline for practical implementation and to guide the establishment of regional "Frühe Hilfen" networks in Austria. The initiative aims to support (expectant) parents and families in stressful situations, focusing on the period from pregnancy to the child's third year, extending up to the child's sixth year if necessary.

The nationwide expansion of the program began in 2015, with coordinated efforts between federal, state, and social insurance organizations leading to the establishment of numerous regional networks. From 2022 to 2024, the expansion was further continued with the use of European Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds intended to establish networks in all Austrian districts (nationwide coverage).

3 Research Questions

The evaluation's focus was twofold. We assessed (a) the structural aspects of the program's RRF-funded nationwide rollout, and (b) questions regarding target group reach and impact. Pertaining to the structural aspects of the rollout, we looked into the national rollout itself and into the conditions, approaches, and structures that aided or impeded the implementation of additional "Frühe Hilfen" networks. In addition, we investigated the role of the supportive framework and structures in overseeing and assisting the implementation. Regarding target group reach and impact, we investigated whether the newly established networks were able to adequately reach and support their target group, in particular families at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

4 Methods

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, expert interviews, focus groups, online surveys, telephone interviews, qualitative interviews, and content analysis of reports and feedback forms (secondary data analysis). The following methods were employed:

- Document analysis (Desk Research): a review of relevant documents was conducted, including the Austrian Recovery and Resilience Plan as well as specific guidelines for funding the expansion of "Frühe Hilfen" networks. This served to provide a comprehensive understanding of the framework, structures, and processes involved in the expansion.
- Expert Interviews with key stakeholders in the "Frühe Hilfen" networks were used to gather insights on implementation processes, challenges, and success factors.
- Focus Groups with "Frühe Hilfen" coordinators were held to (a) discuss experiences, identify best practices, and gather feedback on the program's implementation thus far; and (b) discuss and reflect on the evaluation's results.
- Online Survey with individuals directly involved in "Frühe Hilfen" networks as well as external network partners were used to collect quantitative data on the program's reach and effectiveness.
- Telephone Interviews with network managers were carried out to gain insight into processes regarding network coordination and network building.
- Qualitative interviews with individuals working in family support (Familienbegleiter:innen) and families who were currently or had previously been receiving support were used to supply additional in-depth information.

- Content analyses of family feedback forms and data collected as part of the FRÜDOK documentation (secondary data analysis) were carried out to investigate target group reach and impact.

5 Key Findings

5.1 Findings at the Structural Level: Expansion and Development and the Role of the “Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen” (NZFH)

- Nationwide implementation: The evaluation found that the nationwide implementation of regional "Frühe Hilfen" networks was generally successful, with a significant expansion in coverage and services. By 2024, all of Austria's regions had established "Frühe Hilfen" networks, providing comprehensive support to families.
- Supporting and hindering factors: Factors that supported the expansion included existing structures, cooperative responsibilities among federal, state, and social insurance bodies, and the strategic role of the Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen" (NZFH). Hindering factors included administrative challenges, regional disparities in resource availability, and the complexity of managing multiple funding sources at the network level.
- Quality assurance: The NZFH played a crucial role in providing quality assurance, supporting regional networks, and facilitating knowledge transfer and experience sharing among networks. The establishment of standardized procedures and guidelines helped maintain consistency across different regions.
- Coordination and networking: Effective coordination and networking activities were critical to integrating various stakeholders and ensuring comprehensive support for families. Regular meetings, workshops, and communication platforms facilitated collaboration and information exchange among network partners.

5.2 Findings regarding Target Group Reach and Impact

- Family reach and support: The program successfully reached a large number of families, particularly those in socio-economically disadvantaged situations (i.e., at risk of poverty or social exclusion). Key channels for reaching families included referrals from healthcare providers, social services, and self-referrals. The focus on early intervention and continuous support proved beneficial in addressing the needs of these families.

- Outcomes: Families received diverse support services, including health promotion, psychosocial support, and assistance in accessing further services. The program has been able to effectively address various family needs and contribute to improved health and social outcomes. The integration of different service providers ensured that families received comprehensive and coordinated care.
- Feedback and satisfaction: Feedback from families indicated high levels of satisfaction with the support received. Families appreciated the continuity of care provided by family companions and the comprehensive nature of the support network. The evaluation results highlight the importance of personalized and flexible support tailored to the specific needs of each family.
- Challenges in implementation: Challenges included managing the administrative requirements of the RRF funding, ensuring consistent quality across regions, and addressing specific local needs. The complexity of coordinating multiple stakeholders and funding sources sometimes led to delays and inefficiencies.

6 Conclusion

The evaluation results suggest that the expansion of "Frühe Hilfen" networks using RRF funds was largely successful both in its aim of implementing nationwide coverage and in achieving its objectives of providing comprehensive support to families in need. The NZFH's role in quality assurance and network coordination was pivotal to the success of the implementation throughout the funding period, and the NZFH remains a source of guidance and support for the existing networks.

Efforts to secure follow-up funding for the program led to the approval of the „Frühe-Hilfen-Vereinbarung“ (Vereinbarung gemäß Artikel 15a B-VG), ensuring the funding of comprehensive and needs-based provision of "Frühe Hilfen" services in Austria beyond the RRF funding period.