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PUBLIC WORK IN AN INTERNATIONAL AND HUNGARIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The objective of active labour market policies (providing labour market services and supporting employment) is to channel back those without a job to the labour market as soon as possible. Public work, regarded as an active instrument, is generally criticised for not substantially improving employment rate; most jobs produce low added value; participation decreases the motivation and willingness of those concerned to find a job. In addition, the programmes prove to be expensive and make people more dependent on the unemployment benefit. According to the experts one of the benefits is that in the short and medium term the programmes provide the safety of survival to the participants and can also contribute to implementing the other tasks of improvement while decreasing poverty and inequalities. Another beneficial impact is its suitability to make the disadvantaged groups more dynamic whose primary labour integration is unlikely. It is also suitable for overcoming the challenges of structural unemployment and easing the downsides of global economic crises. The public work programmes are facing similar challenges internationally and in Hungary, as well. Our paper presents the problems of public work (if it is effective enough and able to fulfil its mission) as one of the most frequently applied instruments of employment policies both theoretically and empirically, and also from an international as well as a Hungarian perspective.

Key words

government policy, public work, provision and effects of welfare programmes, unemployment

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Introduction

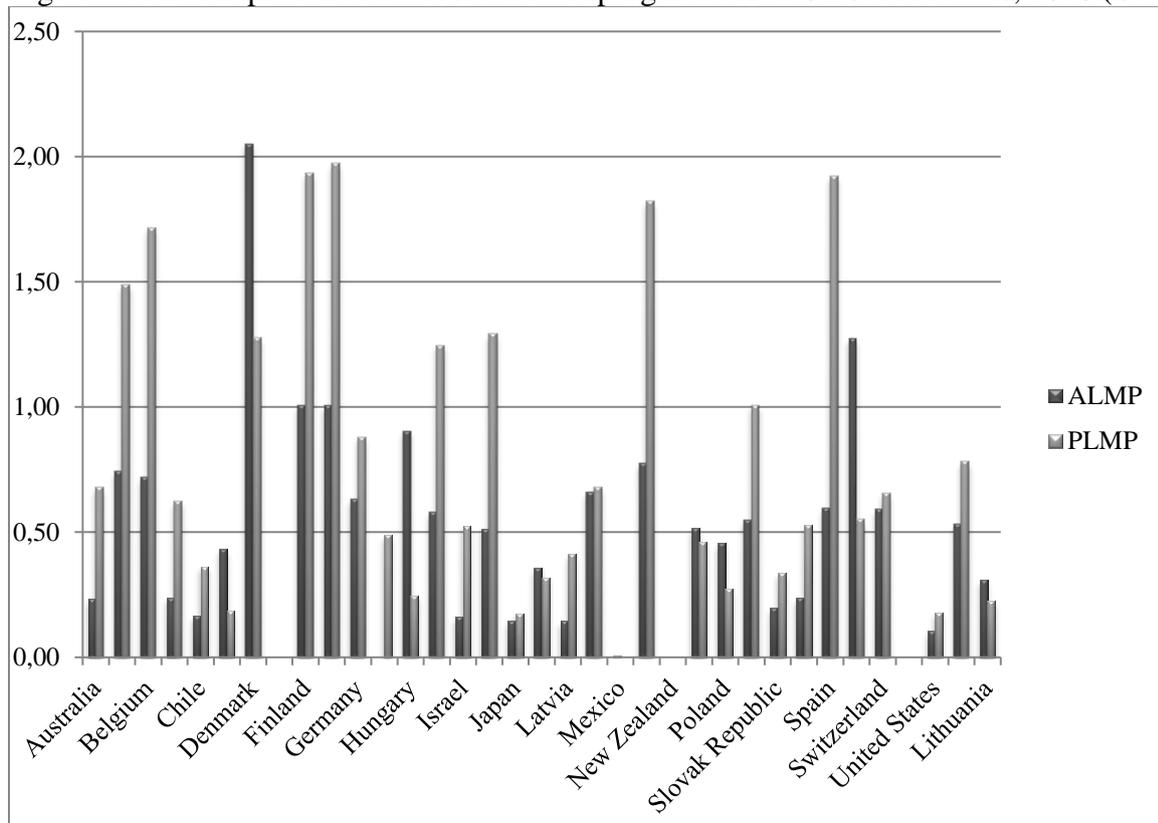
Labour market policy makes use of two types of instruments: the active and the passive ones that are different issues. While the active labour market policies (ALMP) assist the unemployed in finding a job, so they reintegrate them into the labour market, the passive ones (PLMP) help

the jobless by supporting them with benefits and ease social tensions. Public work and its previous forms can be regarded as the active instruments of employment policy. Public work is the key instrument of employment policy that supports the unemployed who already receive social care with some benefits. The work performed within the framework of the public work programme is aimed at improving the social, health, educational, cultural, safety and transportation situation of the settlements. Public work ensures entitlement to social security, pension and job seeking benefits and also assists in entering or re-entering the primary labour market. Public work can be performed by self-governments, budgetary institutions, the church, civil organisation and social cooperatives.

Theoretical background

The main objective of active labour market policies is to expand the opportunities of employing job seekers and improving job-person fit. Accordingly, they consist of institutional and workplace training offers, encourage indirect employment (creating jobs), protected and supported employment and direct employment (public work). Active labour market policies help channel back the unemployed to the labour market within the shortest time possible. The public expenditure in the active labour market programmes of the OECD countries as of GDP is very varied. The more than 2 percent value of Denmark is followed by the other Scandinavian countries (1-1.5 percent) while the end-tailers include the USA, Japan and the Baltic countries (0.1 percent). Hungary with its 0.8 percent can be found in the first third.

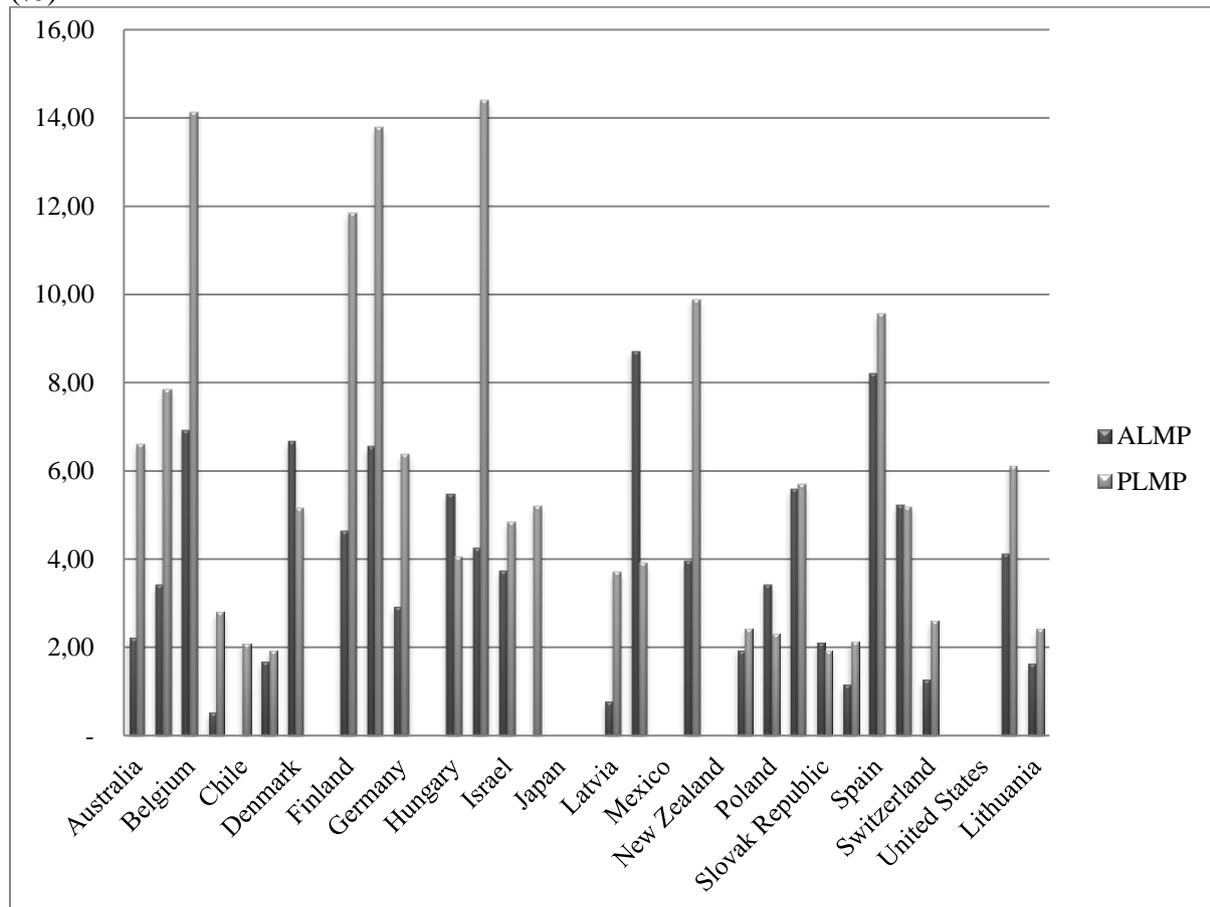
Figure 1 Public expenditure in labour market programmes in OECD countries, 2016 (GDP%)



Source: authors' own editing based on OECD data

Regarding active labour market policies (Figure 2) Luxembourg and Spain take the leading role (more than 8 percent of the labour force receive support) while Hungary (5.5 percent) together with Portugal and Sweden are in the first third again.

Figure 2 Participant stocks in labour market programmes in OECD countries by category, 2016 (%)



Source: authors' own editing based on OECD data

Regarding stocks the highest amount in 2016 was spent by Hungary (0.52 percent of its GDP), Ireland (0.27 percent), Bulgaria (0.15 percent) and France (0.14 percent) on direct job creating public work programmes. Relatively high (0.07–0.14 percent) was the expenditure of Slovenia, Ireland, Lithuania and Latvia. It is these countries coupled by Greece where we can find public work programmes of greater scale (OECD, 2016).

According to international experience real impacts can only be achieved by tailor-made, personalised programmes among the active labour market policies (Martin & Grubb, 2001; Crépon & Van den Berg, 2016). While individual counselling, assistance in finding a job, making use of the services of job centres and distributing wage subsidies (relatively in this order) can be successful, public work programmes fail with regard to finding a job in the future and earn salary. These programmes are partly successful but they are rather expensive (Brown & Koettl, 2015; McKenzie, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2017). When analysing the active instruments of the great Swedish labour market reform in the 1990's experts (Heikkilä et al., 2002; Albæk et al. 2014) concluded that job creating programmes can be more effective if they imitate the real situation of employment more realistically; if they are much more similar to that.

The currently used term workfare is the coinage of „work” and „welfare” known in the 1970's but used only in the 1990's both in the developed and developing world. This system is of American origin based on the principle that the prerequisite of having benefits is performing work for social good and applying financial sanction in the case of certain failures. One of the objectives of workfare programmes is to respond to labour market changes through active

labour market programmes aiming at those on the dole. The concept of workfare lies behind the public work programmes. Basically, these programmes involve both demand based (job creation, wage subsidies) and supply based (flexibility and assisting labour mobility) measures to decrease unemployment (French, British and American examples). In some countries this instrument is more frequently used in the case of clients who have difficulty in finding a job. For them, part of these programmes (the Danish, Dutch, British and Californian programme) also provides opportunities for education and training or social activity. In addition, the Danish, Dutch, British and American programmes also include a case study to tailor the programme to the needs of the clients. Of these four programmes the Danish activity places the greatest emphasis on the long term strategy and developing human capital while the American programmes urge immediate labour market participation (Besley & Coate, 1992; Čapošová, 2015; Eardley et al., 1996; Grover & Stewart, 1999; Brown & Koettl, 2015; Murgai et al., 2015).

The workfare instruments are directed at reducing the number of those on the dole in two ways. On the one hand, they select and exclude those who are working (and not entitled to the benefit) or who are not seeking a job (as it is the prerequisite of the benefit), on the other hand. The filtering impact of the programme can prevail in attracting those who are really in need and keep off the wealthier, which can reduce the administrative cost of the government. If the inconveniences caused by the prerequisites of the benefit (frequent visits to job centres, compulsory public service, possibly trainings etc.) are so huge that it leads to immediately leaving the unemployed status or not applying for the benefit at all or if the work to be performed is much greater than normally done without intervention, the deterring effect prevails (Kálmán, 2015). On the other hand, individuals are pushed into situations where human capital can be improved and chances are higher for finding a job. Workfare includes such different programmes and approaches that are based on the different combinations of these two mechanisms (Heikkilä et al., 2002).

In the developed countries such programmes are applied typically for a short period only when reacting to a short term economic shock or in the case of high unemployment rate primarily to lead the unemployed back to the labour market. In the developing countries the most underdeveloped settlements are targeted, which is a kind of selection, and the public work wages are below the average market wages of the poor. Public work programmes offer few opportunities of breaking out for those in a very disadvantaged situation (Wulfgramm, 2014; Zieliński, 2015; Kádár, 2017; Douarin & Mickiewicz, 2017).

The special nature of the Hungarian public work programme

The impacts of active labour market policies were first analysed in Hungary after the initiation of the ILO Japan Programme between 1992 and 1993 (Godfrey, Lázár & O'Leary, 1993). Since then the monitoring system designed for that purpose has been measuring the aggregate impacts of completed labour market policies. In general, it is concluded that individuals having benefitted from active support previously are more likely to participate in the second phase of the supporting system than the control group (Csoba & Nagy, 2011).

Public work is one of the oldest and the second active programme in the Hungarian labour market that affects masses of people of active employment policies. According to the quick analysis of the European data the extent of the Hungarian public work programme is unique in Europe. Act IV of 1991 regulates public work on the Hungarian labour market after the change of the regime. According to this act public work is an alternative to unemployment, an

emergency arrangement that temporarily ensures the labour market reintegration of the jobless with an objective of assisting those who are unable to find a job. Public work served two declared purposes: the so-called work test on the one hand, which means those who refuse public work will be excluded from the unemployment register; and it could also ensure normal and not subsidised jobs to the participants (Galasi & Nagy, 2008).

The system of public work has undergone several changes since the 1990's in Hungary. Employment for public good existed between 1987 and 2010, public work programmes from 1996 to 2010 and work for public purposes between 1999 and 2010. In 2011 a great change took place in the system of public work as the several forms created after the regime change were replaced by the unified system of public work that is regulated by Act CVI of 2011 on public work and the modification of the act on public work and other acts. The description of new supports can be found in Government Decree 375/2010. The act also regulates the legal relationships of public work and wages (approximately 76-88 percent of the net minimum wage). Personal income tax advances (16 percent), superannuation tax (10 percent), healthcare contribution (7 percent) and labour market contribution (1.5 percent) are deducted from the wages while the employers are obliged to pay social contribution (13.5 percent) and vocational contribution (1.5 percent) (Szabó, 2013; Bördős, 2015). The concept of 'work instead of benefits' induced the changes as since then there have been no work for public good, public work programmes and work for public purposes as the unified system of public work took their place on 1 September 2011 (Bankó, 2015).

The public work programmes in Hungary serve three purposes: social, employment and political ones. The social objective is to ensure income for those seeking job for a longer time. The aim concerning employment is to improve employability skills and reintegrate the individuals to the primary labour market. The other disclosed objective was to decrease black employment and receive greater attention paid by the employers. Concerning the political objective it was directed at making up for the loss in the budget of local governments and easing local social tensions.

In Hungary 30-40 thousand people were engaged in public work between 1996 and 2006 on the average. This number has been growing to 60-100 thousand since 2009 and in 2013 it reached more than 130 thousand. In 2018 190 thousand, in 2019 170 thousand and in 2020 150 thousand are estimated (Table 1). This number is considered high even in the international scenario.

In an international comparison Hungary spends a lot on public work programmes and little on other labour market instruments that are to retrain the unemployed or assist them in finding a job. The expenditure on public work was continuously growing between 2011 and 2016 (from 7 billion Ft to 340 billion Ft) but the projection for 2018 is much lower (220 billion Ft).

On the average, 200-220 thousand people are employed monthly in the current system of public work and the annual average is 355 thousand. In addition, the distribution is very uneven in the country following the regional distribution of unemployment (where unemployment rate is high, many are employed in public work programmes) (Figure 3.).

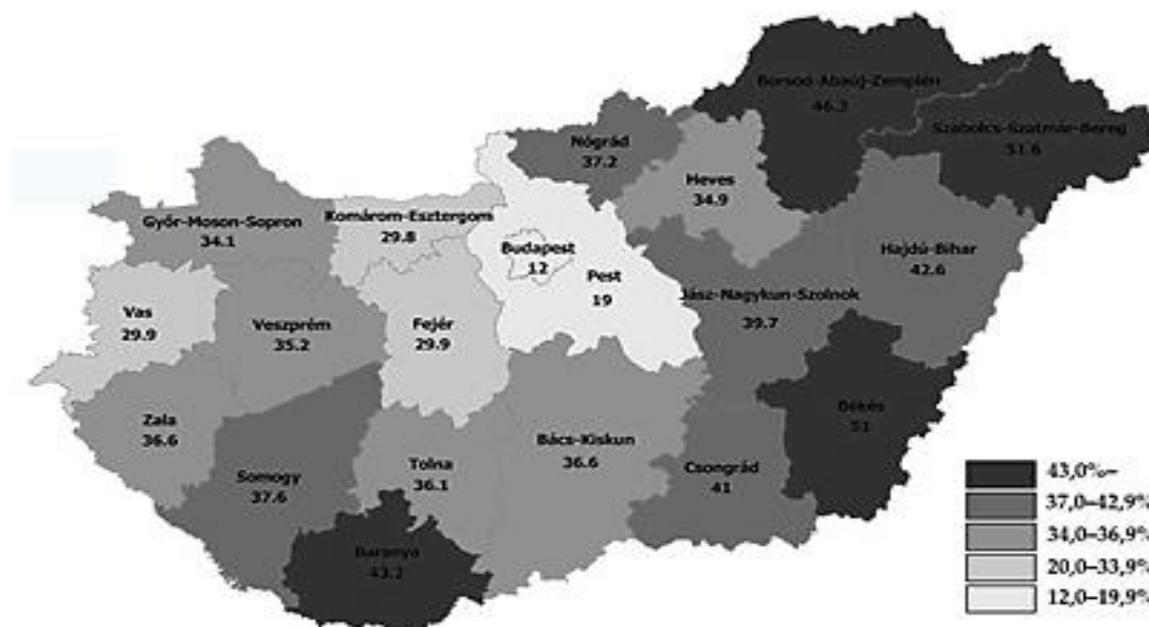
Table 1 The expenditure and participants of the Hungarian public work programmes from 2011 to 2018

Years	Expenditure (bn HUF)	Participants (person)
2011	66	75000
2012	132	92000
2013	171	121000
2014	225	178000
2015	270	208000
2016	340	223000
2017	298	210000
2018	225	190000

Source: authors' own editing based on <http://kozfoglalkoztatás.kormany.hu/>

Most people participated in public work programmes in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county (34091) followed by Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (34082), Hajdú-Bihar (18779) and Békés (13668) counties while in Vas (1885) and Győr-Moson-Sopron counties (1734) the number of those concerned is only 5 percent of the value in Borsod.

Figure 3 Changes in the rate of public work employment per county in 2017



Source:

http://kozfoglalkoztatás.kormany.hu/download/e/a6/02000/Kozfoglalkoztatasi%20rata%20alakulasa%20megyen%20kent_2017%20oktober.JPG

Regarding the diversity of the employers we primarily find non-profit, construction firms and the church. In 2017 the biggest Hungarian employer was NMI Cultural Institute Nonprofit Public Good Kft. Volt (2589) followed by the Hungarian Reformed Charity Service (1959) and Hungarian Public Road Nonprofit Zrt. (1928). Then came several regional water management authorities in the rank (1200-1700 persons), then the National Széchenyi Library (1140) and the Hungarian Railways Zrt. (1060). Local governments can also be employers quite frequently. The typical jobs include post delivering, weeding (ragweed), cleaning, sweeping the street,

collecting litter, agricultural hand, clerk, keeping records etc. The latter ones are available only for the highly qualified like teachers or graduates with a degree.

Considering industries agriculture is highly overrepresented in public work (26605 persons). A promising tendency is that in the past 2-3 years the number of public work programmes focusing on local specialities is strikingly high (14248 persons) followed by those engaged in road works (9834) and inland water management (7257). In 2018 the 8-hour-wage in public work remains 81 530 Ft gross and the guaranteed salary in public work 106 555 Ft gross for 8 hours a day (<http://kozfozlalkoztatas.bm.hu/>).

The government target for 2018 is the decrease of the monthly average maximum number of participants in public work programmes to 150 thousand gradually till 2020. There is a change as those under 25 and skilled can only be part of the public work programmes if the job centre made three attempts unsuccessfully due to the employers or the job centre was unable to offer them a suitable job for three months. The young under 25 not taking part in public work programmes are compensated by the government with the help of the Youth Guarantee Programme funded by the European Union that tries to assist them in finding a job. Data prove that by 2017 the number of the young in public work programmes decreased to 19 thousand, which is 6 thousand lower than in the previous year. A further objective is that starting from June 2018 within three years no one could be a public worker for longer than one year except there is no proper employment for them in the private sector. It is very difficult to stop being a public worker as one cannot look for a job in the meantime. The new government decree makes it possible to compensate the public workers for their travelling expenses while looking for a job (Márk, 2017).

Material and methods

Labour market issues are frequently discussed and given the dynamics of changes it is necessary to deal with them intensively. The aim of this paper is to analyse these changes. The main objective of active labour market policies is to expand the opportunities of employing job seekers and improving job-person fit.

This paper is primarily based on the available macroeconomic data that were collected from relevant national sources. In addition to these national data sources, figures published by the OECD were also used. Further scientific papers and sources published at home and abroad were also used, all of which come from recognized scientific journals. Our findings from previous research projects and reports served as our primary data sources.

The collected data were further analysed by using qualitative and quantitative methods. From among qualitative methods inductive-deductive approaches and critical analysis were applied, and from among the quantitative ones descriptive statistics were used. The research findings are presented both in text and in graphical form.

Results and discussion

Taking the expenditure or the number of participants into account, the Hungarian public work system is unique in Europe. It is the most important employment policy of the period after 2010 so analysing its long term and short term impact is an important task. Researchers mention several advantages and disadvantages of the public work programme as written below.

The positive aspects of public work programmes include (Csehné, 2018; Csoba, 2017; Czirfusz, 2014; Czibere – Molnár, 2017; Koltai, 2014; Koós, 2016; Uszkai, 2014; Váradi, 2010; Váradi 2016; Virág, 2017):

- Society supports “work for benefit” principle.
- Undoubtedly, result is that the employment rate has significantly been improved as of 2010 by public work. Reintegrating inactive employees is a serious achievement.
- In areas where local governments are the sole employers, it is the ultimate instrument in fighting against poverty and desolation indirectly.
- For those who have been unemployed for long it ensures occupation, structures their time, they can be in community, make new contacts and feel useful.

The negative aspects of public work programmes include (Csehné, 2007; Csoba, 2010; Csoba, 2017; Cseres-Gergely – Molnár, 2014a,b; Fazekas, 2015; Frey, 1995; Köllő, 2014; Koltai, 2014; László, 2016; Scharle, 2013):

- It only takes employees to the primary labour market in minimal numbers. One of the reasons for this is lack of vacant positions.
- There is no effective educational system for public work programmes although there are enough vacant positions in the developed regions of the country but they require skilled labour force. Although the skilled worker also is very important in the case of other positions (Czeglédi-Juhász, 2014).
- There is a secondary, closed, devaluated labour market with lower efficiency where public work wages are lower than the minimum wage.
- The typical tasks of public work in greater number (manual, unskilled jobs) do not prepare employees and do not provide them with work experience that would assist them in finding a job.

The results of the examinations carried out so far point out that the expenditures on public work prevent the employability of active instruments and there is a strong ‘getting stuck effect’ (Frey, 2007; Galasi – Nagy, 2008; Cseres-Gergely – Molnár, 2014a). After the programme terminates, the chances of finding a job are much lower and almost half of those concerned work at the same workplace several times. Public work has resulted in a quasi-secondary market that can slow down economic development programmes.

Conclusion

Measuring the success of active employment policies properly is essential in the case of every programme so that feedback can be obtained and the possible faults may be eliminated. One of the most important lessons to be learnt from international examinations is that active labour market programmes are effective if they can ensure well-rounded complex solutions while concentrating on a special problem. However, in Europe expanded national programmes can be seen for a broad target audience and potential participants are not selected and higher allowances are given than the benefit. In most cases these programmes operate with a low level of efficiency. Accordingly, the Hungarian programmes are also not expected to serve as a remedy to structural unemployment and the problem of low employment rate. Based on the results of the analysis the Hungarian public work programmes have not resulted in decreasing unemployment in the long term. This is in line with international experience and the previous research results on national public work programmes. Experts agree that the most important objective is to avoid getting stuck in public work. Ensuring the transparency of the programme,

clarifying its conditions and guaranteeing its high standard is the task of national politics. The employment problems of the settlements could be solved by the simultaneous presence of public work, job creation and training.

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