

Detailed review comments

Overall Grade: A-

Justification: This is an excellent report which uses appropriate methods and procedures and draws on a wide range of relevant evidence. It is well written and presented in a clear and logical way leading to evidence based conclusions and recommendations. The limitations of the study are clearly stated and understood and within this context, very good use is made of the material available. A key strength of the report is the clear descriptions of how decisions were made during the HIA process and reasoning for these decisions. In general where there are weaknesses in the report these can be accounted for by the pilot nature of the assessment and the level of HIA (rapid).

Context Summary Grade: A

Site description and policy framework

This HIA considers a national level policy so the review question in relation to site description is not completely applicable. The policy framework is well reviewed. This is a complex area and the authors have covered this to an appropriate depth. It is good to see that the local context is also explicitly linked to macro level influences such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It would be helpful to include a policy map (e.g. a table identifying and summarising relevant policies/drivers) and also perhaps a timeline of events.

Description of the project

A very clear description of the context and purpose of the '15a-Vereinbarung zum verpflichtenden Kindergartenjahr' is provided. By using scenarios for assessment it is clear what is being assessed.

Public health profile

Some additional detail (including numbers) of potentially vulnerable groups and identified priority groups would be helpful especially given that the HIA has a strong emphasis on assessing impacts on health equity. For example more detailed information on numbers of: KindergartenpädagogInnen, KindergartenhelferInnen und KindergartenassistentInnen, Eltern, Kindertagsträger /-erhalter, Kinder nicht-deutscher Erstsprache (profile refers to increase but doesn't provide numbers), socio-economic status, geographical differences. Where data is missing this could be picked up in the recommendations. Limited data availability is referred to, but it would be helpful to have more explanation of this. The structure of the profile could also be made clearer through sub headings and grouping of data. For example, currently under 'Anzahl der Kinder in Kindertagesheimen' also contains information about number of children with working mothers. This could be under a separate heading

Management Summary Grade: A

Identification and prediction of impacts

The screening and scoping process is clearly and well described.

It is difficult for me to judge the extent to which the literature review is complete but it is clear that the report draws on a wide range of national and international literature and there are no obvious gaps. The search strategy is clearly described and the literature summarised in an appendix. The evidence from the literature, together with that from key informants and stakeholders, provides a solid base on which the potential impacts of the policy have been assessed.

There was limited use of quantitative data. The main form of quantitative data is contained within the profile. There was some attempt to link this to the assessment. For example, the number of extra children who would attend as a result of the compulsory kindergarten year was identified. The emphasis on qualitative data is typical for policy level HIAs and is appropriate for this subject matter.

Primary data was collected in the form of a focus group and questionnaire. The data collection methods are well described. The authors rightly acknowledge the difficulties in engaging those people most likely to be affected. Further focus groups were planned but not carried out and the explanations for this are provided. This was ameliorated to some extent by developing a questionnaire however this was limited to attendees of 'Kindergartenleiter/innentreffen' in Steiermark region. The authors also attempted to gain further Austrian wide evidence through an additional questionnaire. A low response rates meant that this information is not presented in the report.

Governance

The steering group contained a wide range of appropriate representatives and appear to have been well linked into the planning and assessment process. A strength of this HIA is the emphasis given to developing a 'Partizipationskonzept'. The reasoning behind decisions to engage with different groups and the level of engagement is clearly provided.

Engagement

There were limitations to the engagement carried out and this is clearly acknowledged and acceptable given the time constraints, depth and pilot nature of this HIA. For example, there was limited direct engagement of sensitive population groups such as new migrants and German not as primary language groups. This was partly addressed through the involvement of the 'Armutskonferenz' in the HIA process. The context specific insights gained through engagement can considerably strengthen HIAs. It appears that this HIA has provided valuable learning about the process of engaging stakeholders within the process. Future pilot HIAs may want to build on this and focus on investigating how this can work within the Austrian context.

Assessment Summary Grade: B

Description of health effects

The evidence underpinning the impact assessment is clearly identified and the impact assessment draws appropriately on this evidence. The use of tables to summarise the impacts and traffic light system provides a very effective overview of the impacts.

The assessment table in Anhang E is very good; however, it is 'lost' by being placed in an appendix. Linking this more explicitly into the assessment section would make the assessment more transparent and also provide information about the scale and certainty of impacts. For example, in the assessment section the certainty of impacts is not referred to. It would be good where possible to more specifically link impacts to numbers of population groups to enable an understanding of the magnitude of different impacts. An example of where this has been done is where the number of children who would have previously not attended kindergarten was identified. It would be interesting to know whether there are expected differences relating to geographical location (e.g. between regions or urban vs. rural) however the HIA was scoped to focus on the national level so it is appropriate that this has not been covered. It would also be helpful to differentiate the time frame for impacts – again this has been done in the assessment matrix but not included in the assessment section.

The assessment does not explicitly refer to the strength of evidence. It would be useful to include a description of how evidence is to be valued (this usually forms part of the scoping phase) and then explicitly refer to this in the assessment.

There are good qualitative descriptions of the causal pathway. Mapping out these pathways would also be a helpful addition.

The authors explain the use and relevance of both the local and international evidence clearly.

Risk assessment

All the assessments are qualitative, and this is entirely appropriate given the subject matter and level of HIA

Analysis of distribution of effects

The report clearly identifies differential impacts on population groups. There is a particular focus given to impacts on health equity. This makes it clear that although the overall numbers of extra children benefiting from attending Kindergarten are relatively low there are potentially significant positive impacts on those groups who could benefit most.

Reporting Summary Grade: B

Discussion of results

The results are clearly structured. The use of tables in section 3 provides a very useful structured overview of the impacts. In section 4 there are clear predictions in relation to health impacts. The findings, conclusions and recommendations are credible, with the impacts identified being firmly based on the evidence presented earlier in the report.

Recommendations

Relatively lower grades have been given in regards to some of the recommendation criteria- however this should be seen within the context of this being a pilot project with no actual decision to influence at this stage. The reasoning for this is detailed in the 'Partizipationskonzept'. In future it would be helpful to present a summary of the recommendations in table form with the stakeholders responsible for implementing recommendations identified.

Communication and layout

The structure of the report is logical and clear. The sections are organised in a way that is easy to follow.