

**ökotárs**  
alapítvány

# On the way to community organizing

Brief summary of the experience with programs aiming at supporting communities

**Community-Organizing-Leadership**

in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung e.V.

 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, public and private organizations have studied many angles of the development of the wider society and local small communities in Hungary. These studies comprise the main reference points of this paper, most of all basic studies such as the public trust survey that has been conducted by the Association of Community Developers since 2005, the researches on voluntarism commissioned by Volunteering Hungary - Centre of Social Innovation and the different strategy papers of the Hungarian state based on the data of the Central Statistical Office. Ökotárs - Environmental Partnership Foundation aims at adding to this picture a point of view of a grantmaking organization. During the planning and managing various grant systems Ökotárs collected experience of interactions with thousands NGOs. Of course none of all of this experience and lessons can be separated from the social and political trends of the past quarter century.

Almost three decades after the political changes and transition to democracy it is becoming clear that neither society nor especially the political elite can live up to the inherent values and standards which characterize a truly open and democratic state. Public policy is still burdened by issues which remained unresolved e.g. the transparency of party and campaign financing and the elimination of corruption. This provides a very strong incentive to all kinds of illegal and corrupt dealings, sometimes indirectly affecting the NGO sector as well.

This and other factors cause the general loss of public trust: most public institutions, including the Parliament and politicians and also politics in general are not trusted by the citizens. Distrust also decreases the willingness to participate in public policy, as the majority of people do not believe they can make a difference, and more than half of them do not engage in any such activity<sup>1</sup> and distance themselves from the political sphere which is thus practically monopolized by the political parties.

In smaller settlements where NGOs and people are more dependent on their municipality, advocacy is still weaker, as there is a widespread fear of “not biting the feeding hand”. Examples are social services and education. This can mainly be observed on the local level, where small NGOs are more or less dependent on municipal funding and on good relationships with local leaders who may view advocacy efforts as personal attacks. Generally, the lack of independent funding as well as constituency is a major obstacle in the way of developing advocacy.

Generally in the rural areas of the country, the status of the small communities and naturally that of individual people's is more depressing. According to the present state government: “The rural, local communities lost their service providing and community preserving institutions, their schools, community transport opportunities, healthcare facilities, local authorities and post offices. The willingness to cooperate is generally low and the tools for cooperation also lost. Civic activism decreases. Due to the emigration of the educated population the number of intellectuals is shrinking, in some regions the villages and homesteads became empty. The willingness to be active, to organise themselves on the local level is weak. The social strength of community work is decreasing and these greatly affect the opportunities and power of the local societies.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Péterfi Ferenc: The NGO's marching forward? Public Trust 2015, Civil Collage Foundation, Association of Community Developers <http://reszvetelhete.hu/2016/03/23/kozbizalom-2015-felmeres-eredmenyek-a-civilek-elorenyomulnak>

<sup>2</sup> National Rural Strategy 2012 – 2020, Ministry of Regional Development <http://videkstrategia.kormany.hu/download/4/37/30000/Nemzeti%20Vid%C3%A9kstrat%C3%A9gia.pdf>

## Ökotárs – experience in community support programs

In the last 25 years Ökotárs Foundation has continuously monitored the situation of NGOs and the larger communities behind them and was shaping its own grant programs and those it has managed according to these experiences – as far as it was possible. From among the earlier programs the Integrated Organizational Development must be mentioned as an example, while the more recent the latest relevant programs are: the GreenBelt Program (2006-), the EEA and Norway Grants NGO Programme (2008-2011, 2013-), the Swiss-Hungarian NGO Block Grant (2012-2015), and last but not least the Community-Organizing-Leadership Program (2016-).

During the ten years of the GreenBelt Program it has supported mainly the creating of viable community spaces in small towns and for this purpose stimulated cooperation in local communities. The last two internal evaluation studies of the program (2010, 2014) showed that while analyses reported about communities falling apart and the alienation of the communities and local governments, intentions for cooperation were still blooming in these communities and only the enhancement of appropriate and common (and above all free from party politics) goals and values was needed for united community action. Altogether 288 communities were supported from all over the country until 2014; the following numbers are based on their data.

Almost all the communities held promise from the local self-government for support in the design of the community places, but this did not necessarily mean effective assistance. While in 2010 an average 8.4 people from the local government helped the communities with administrative or manual labor activities, in 2014 this number increased to 9.6.<sup>3</sup> At first sight we might say this means that municipalities increasingly meet the standards of the Law on Local Governments in Hungary (year 2011. CLXXXIX. Law), and „they support the self-organizing communities of the population, cooperating with them and ensuring broad citizen participation in local community issues.”<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless the total work hours provided by the local government in a project decreased from 72.5 hour to 64.3. Thus, this despite the increase in the number of workers, the amount of time spent decreased per project.<sup>5</sup>

We need to mention here of course that the public work programs<sup>6</sup>, which have strengthened dependencies in small towns and conserved disadvantaged situations, have also been expanded rapidly in the period examined, therefore the data from 2014 might be distorted by the assignment public workers to the given tasks.

In summary despite the promises of the local governments in the application phase, the effective work for supporting the community actions has been of much less importance for them.

In any case volunteering is the basis of all internal community building processes, which might be boosted by motivating or at least not interfering on the side of the local government. At the same time this only means the first step, while the joining together of active people, who are not or only occasionally cooperating, are also indispensable to form a core community. GreenBelts would like to help in this beginning phase, and the process of becoming a community needs to be followed by a longer assistance work.

Such projects were supported by the two big grant programs managed by Ökotárs: the EEA and Norway Grants NGO Programme and the Swiss-Hungarian NGO Block Grant.

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<sup>3</sup> Greenbelts 2010 and 2014 study on volunteering and involvement of the local self-governments

<sup>4</sup> Law on the local governments in Hungary 2011. Year CLXXXIX.

<sup>5</sup> Greenbelts 2010 and 2014 study on volunteering and involvement of the local self-governments

<sup>6</sup> Labour Market Mirror 2014, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2015

The aim of the Swiss-Hungarian NGO Block Grant was to strengthen social and environmental NGOs in the two most disadvantaged regions of the country (North-Hungary and North-Plains), their cooperation with local governments (state actors) and advocacy based on community involvement were also in strong focus. Experiences of the programme summarized in 2015 also confirming the existence of the problems already formulated in the government strategy referred to above, according to which the rate of intellectuals is decreasing in the area, and community activity is low.<sup>7</sup>

During the implementation of the projects supported by the Swiss NGO Block Grant (102 grants) it became obvious that approximately one fifth of them had no real community support, in the better cases it was only a mission of one (or a handful of) enthusiastic local person, in the worse cases it was a fantasy of an NGO operating in a community but not with it. Although cooperation and advocacy was underlined in the calls, in reality most of the NGOs tended not to engage in community building, activating, awareness-raising methods, because these were suppressed by the desire to provide immediate help in most of the cases. They have been trying to save the still existing local values through crisis intervention, or by addressing burning social problems (providing services that are not sustainable without external resources).

The reasons of these problems is manifold: partly as a consequence of the large-scale emigration there are no people left in the small communities who have the local knowledge and education, who would be able to take up the mission of planning and implementing a project. On the other hand, local people who would like to do something for the community they live in are at the same time employees or members of the local government and/or members of the minority government and/or church officers and/or members of NGOs.

As a consequence of these multiple roles, their relationship with the community is at least ambiguous because they need to maneuver among the different interest groups. In the worst cases they are buried by the lot of issues and lose their connection with the community. Also for this reason a confused situation is forming in the community because there are numerous leaders nominally, but there is no real involvement, decisions happen without the local people, and they have a deepening feeling that they have no chance to influence decision making and therefore it's no use for them to become active.

It also contributes to all these processes, and makes the situation of the communities' even worse that not only local opinion leaders, but also a part of the NGOs have lost their connection to those people who they were created for. This is proven by the generalized problem descriptions and the lack of community planning in the grant applications.

All these problems were also underlined by the more comprehensive researches conducted in the frameworks of the EEA/Norwegian NGO Programme (closing evaluation: 2010-2011, impact assessment: 2014-). These also make it clear that the idea of local community and smaller "groups are often mingled in the mind of the applicants, and this way projects intended to benefit specific groups through common experiences are also occurring among applications aiming at community development." They also confirm that service delivery often mingles with community activation methods, "community development often is not the only goal..." and in many cases organizations "are planning community building activities around their services."<sup>8</sup> Of course it's not a problem by itself, but it decreases the number of projects that really put the long-term development of the community, advocacy and autonomy in focus.

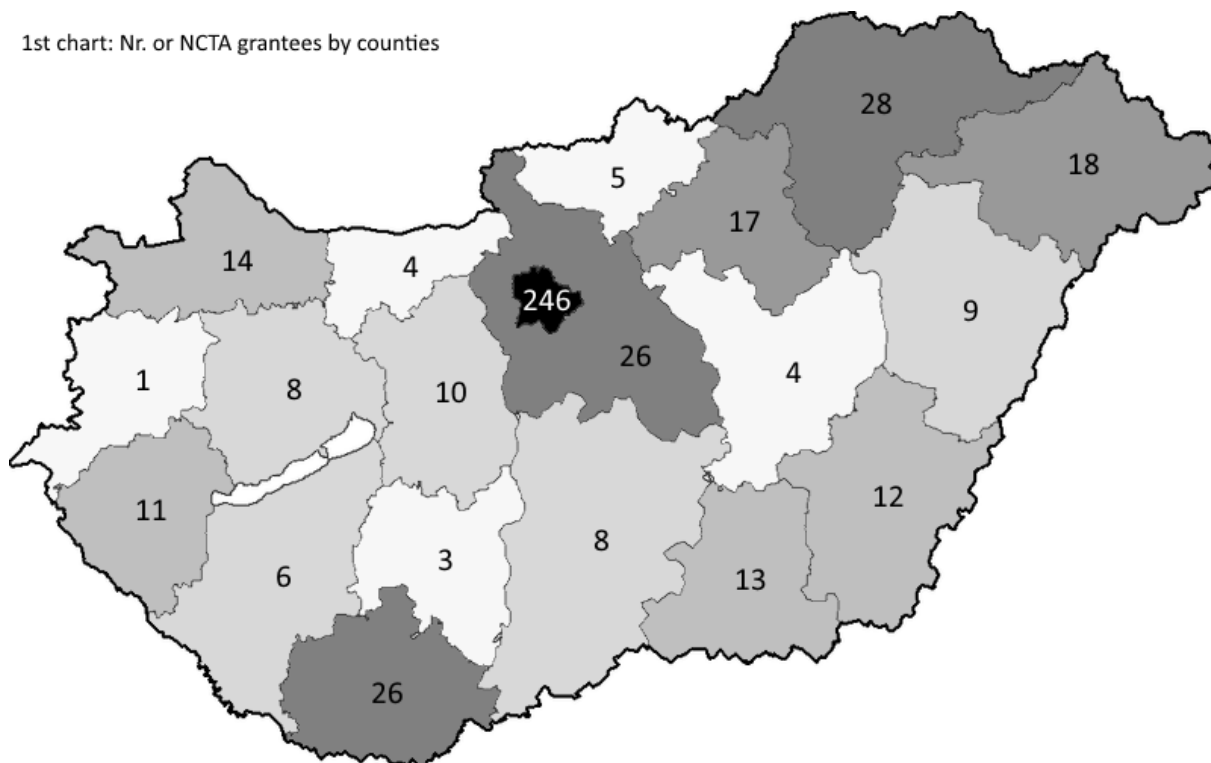
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<sup>7</sup> Swiss-Hungarian NGO Block Grant and Scholarship Funds 2012-15 – summary and evaluation

<sup>8</sup> Csurgó Bernadett – Rácz Andrea – Tamáska Máté: Innovativity and system? Evaluation of the applicants of the NGO Fund of the EEA/Norway Grants –in: The 3 years of the Norwegian Civil Fund, 2011

In the calls of the NGO Programme in the 2013-2015 period addressing local (and broader) communities played a central role in all the thematic areas. Apart from the directly community-oriented applications out of 469 projects, 80 dealt with the topic of community building (according their own words). Their geographical distribution around the country is quite diverse, but if we consider all the projects there are no real white spots and there are overrepresented regions such as Budapest, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Pest and Baranya counties.

1st chart: Nr. of NCTA grantees by counties



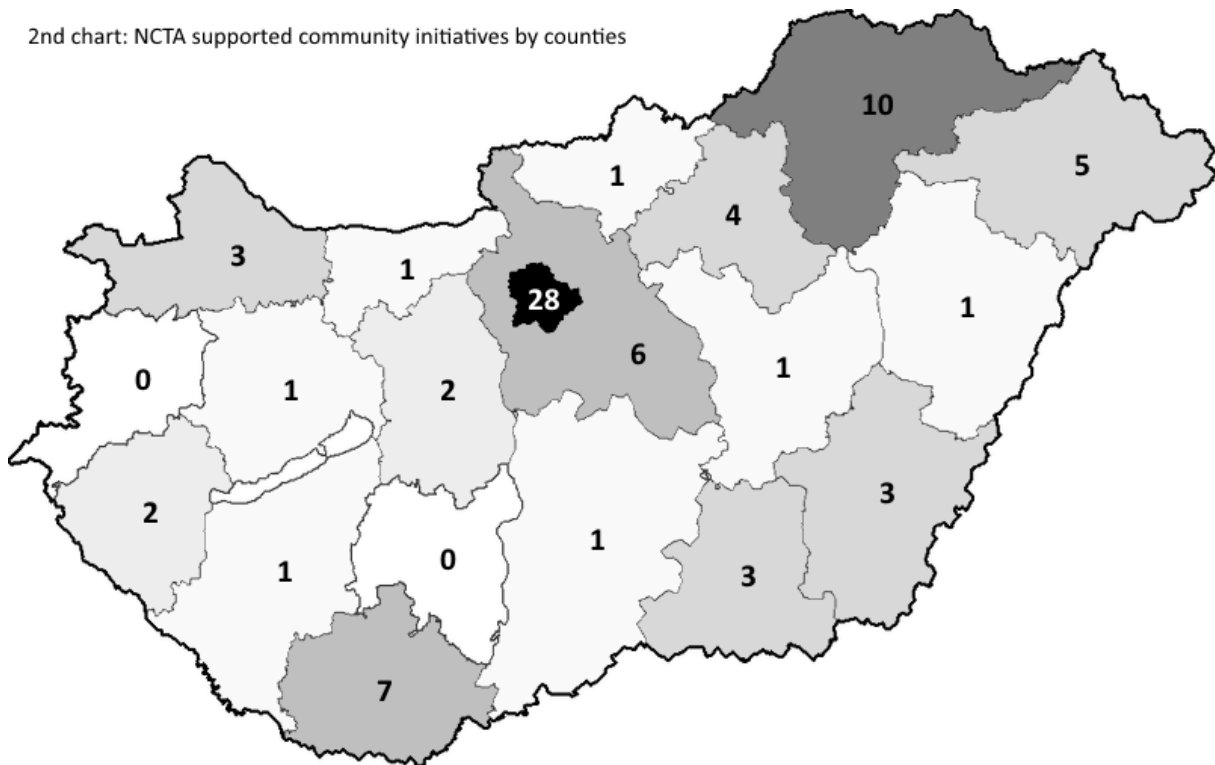
Budapest	246	Fejér	10
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	28	Hajdú-Bihar	9
Pest	26	Veszprém	8
Baranya	26	Bács-Kiskun	8
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	18	Somogy	6
Heves	17	Nógrád	5
Győr-Moson-Sopron	14	Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	4
Csongrád	13	Komárom-Esztergom	4
Békés	12	Tolna	3
Zala	11	Vas	1

If we narrow the picture to the work of community building or developing organizations, we see that the Central Hungarian Region (Pest County and Budapest) have 35 projects from among the eighty. The three neighboring counties in the northeast (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Heves) represent almost one-quarter of the initiatives. In the Transdanubian region Baranya County stands out with 7 projects.

These numbers count the regions according the registration location of the supported NGO, but in several cases project partners from other counties are involved or they targeted groups from outside their operating base or designed multi-regional or national activities. Due to this the white

zones are disappearing but the scales will remain, Budapest and the above listed counties are highly overrepresented.

2nd chart: NCTA supported community initiatives by counties



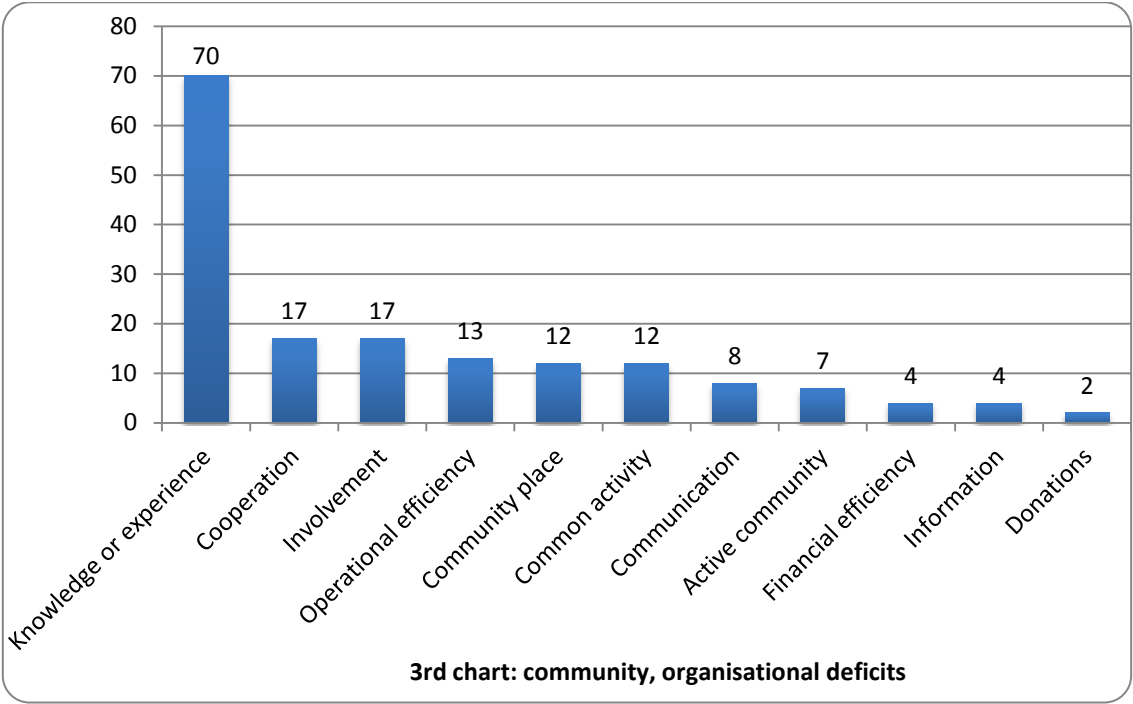
Budapest	28	Fejér	2
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	10	Hajdú-Bihar	1
Pest	6	Veszprém	1
Baranya	7	Bács-Kiskun	1
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	5	Somogy	1
Heves	4	Nógrád	1
Győr-Moson-Sopron	3	Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	1
Csongrád	3	Komárom-Esztergom	1
Békés	3	Tolna	0
Zala	2	Vas	0

Communities behind the organizations and groups are assessing their most important problems in a diverse way: most of them think that they need to answer some knowledge or experience-gaps in the community to make it possible to develop and grow. They would like to decrease these shortages by skills development or knowledge transfer – that means basically various trainings, workshops, personal competency and organizational development programs.

The second and third most popular categories were – 17 projects in both cases – cooperation and involvement. Here the expansion of the inner and/or outer connections was considered the most important direction of community building. Increasing effectiveness of the NGO or group and the establishment of community spaces as a cornerstone of community development has more or less the same share of the total. Developing common activities and activating communities formed two similar categories that are difficult to separate. The main common point is that in both cases the most important goal is to bring together as many community members as possible, while the reason is not important. So here the most important objective is to ensure the common experience, reveal and solve inner tensions, but concrete advocacy is not in the foreground.

Similar to the last two categories, communication and the lack of information are also connected to one other, but basically communication is about “public relations” of the NGO, the other category is about the needs of the target groups. The first one means the communication of the activities of the NGO, while the second one is about providing information to the target group about an issue of interest for community.

The organizational and financial effectiveness can be differentiated along the professional and administrative functions of the organization. The donation category means the lack of the financial support.



In spite of all the problems and deficits positive and progressive initiatives can be found in all the three programs mentioned. People living in the condominium in Garay Street in Budapest shaped the concrete yard of their house literally into a blooming community garden, which gives space for the community in a way that creates common values besides increasing environmental awareness. The community work in the project of the Dialóg Association in Miskolc was supported by the Swiss programme and continued with the support of the EAA/Norway grants resulted a community space, too, but apart from this they also started the process of creating neighborhood councils in order to generate local advocacy and autonomy.



## From problems to action- about the Community-Organizing-Leadership Program

In case of the above presented projects, financial support was so far more dominant in the programmers than skills' development, training or mentoring to realize community ideas. In contrast to this, the newest program of Ökotárs, Community-Organizing-Leadership started in 2015, focuses on regular mentoring and knowhow, only accompanied by financial support tailored to the individual conditions and needs.

The aim of the programme is to enable local communities to build their advocacy and mobilization capacities, and to exercise effective public control over the institutions, authorities and businesses. It is expected that participating civic organizations and groups will become able to learn and use the tools of community organizing through training, mentoring and consultations and thus to improve the quality of their life, the state of their environs as well as to identify and solve local problems and issues.

4th chart: Community-Organizing-Leadership second round applicants



## **The self-image and vision of the communities**

The Community-Organizing-Leadership Program aims to support communities, which are, according to social and economic indicators, live in the most marginalized parts of the country or were left out of earlier development programs for any reason. A further aim is to support people who have already stated their intention to contribute to community initiatives (have set up groups, carried out needs assessments, etc...)

Therefore, we were expecting a two-pronged image of the communities. These expectations were fulfilled, as the interviews and application forms revealed exhausted and apathetic communities, in which the lack of perspective and helplessness (caused by the loss of trust in party politics) gave rise to internal tensions. Some local members (the more motivated ones) aspire to handle these problems, while the most deprived groups – presumably on account of the missing cultural capital – blame the internal tensions for their powerlessness and frustration.

This self-image of the communities is disappointing, and therefore confidence in the future is ebbing away. Their most common phrases are the poverty and the dissension, which they explain with economic and party political conditions. As they don't see opportunities on the labor market for themselves, and view party political fight as an external, independent power, way 'above their heads', they don't see any hope for change either. More accurately they don't think they can change on their own so they don't want to do it either, because it's vain.

In order to reduce their frustration, they place the responsibility outside as well as the causes of the problems so they can wait for the solution to be brought by others. Obviously it's impossible to plan, so they don't have any expectations and visions. Actually what appears, shows resignation to the immutable.

Despite this pessimism, there were encouraging initiatives reported in every community. For example the application for our call for proposals in itself is progressive.

## The problems of the communities

In the present description we are discussing only those cases which are internal problems, to which local solutions can be found without taking into account the impact of global social processes. We are not listing such issues as „the political fragmentation of the country by the parties”, the macro economical situation („there is a crisis”), „insufficient public regulation” that cannot be solved by local communities and analyzed through the methodology of community organizing.

In the Community-Organizing-Leadership Program, altogether 24 applicants were invited to the second phase of the call. From these, 10 are registered NGOs, one is an informal applicant under registration and further 13 are informal groups which do not plan to be a registered as an NGO. Based on the applications and interviews, there is no difference between the problems mentioned by the registered and non-registered NGOs. Still, it has to be mentioned that while immigration is present to a smaller more or bigger extent in every village/town examined, only the unregistered groups reported conflicts between the original inhabitants and the newcomers.

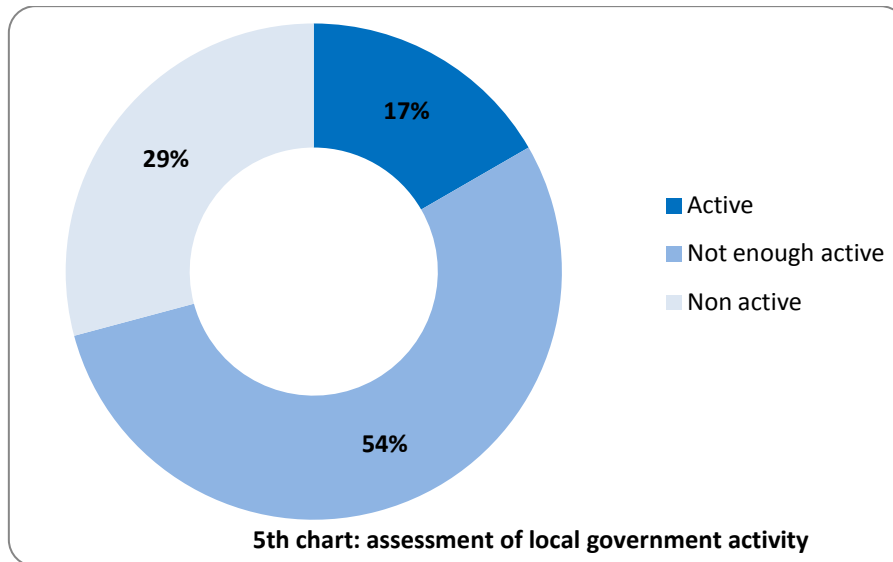
According to the applications and interviews for the second round of the Community-Organizing-Leadership Program, the problems listed by the applicants can be divided into the following clusters (see chart 8). Most of the communities point to the operation of the local self-government as the major problem in the settlement.

Common characteristics: significant part of the communities is apathetic, the interest in common issues/problems is low and present in form of displeasure, the level of their activity is not significant either. The tradition of help and support is present in every community, however, generally it means purely charitable activity. Usually we can talk about single donations which don't constitute a system, and there is no conscious strategy behind them, but if there is, it has the above mentioned charitable character (e.g. fundraising to cover the costs of beginning school, helping suffering people to get to hospitals).

In general, both civic or other supporters (e.g. church, religious organizations, local governments) do not encourage the community to strengthen self-governance or self-help in a way that would lead to the development of an ingenious financial support system. By aspiring to develop the dependency of community members, the local governments try to limit the competence of the community and strengthen their own power at the same time.

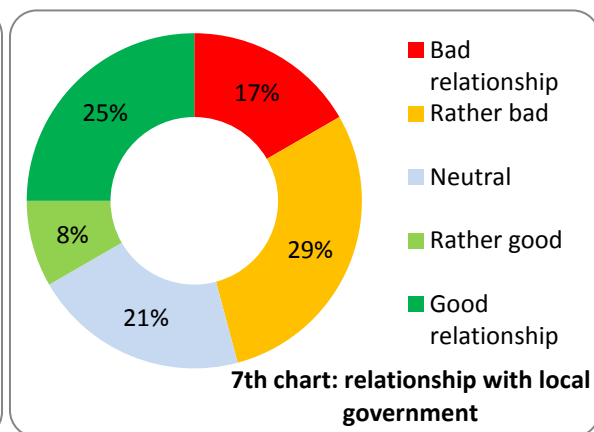
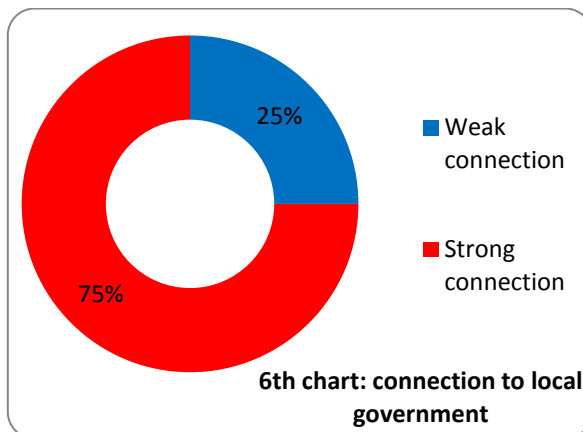
As a result of this, almost every community reports about their interests and rights being harmed. The slightest restriction is limited access to public information, the more serious cases are e.g. threatening with taking away the children from the family (if the family does not act like the local government expects it), exclusion from public work, and school segregation is also significant. The latter case is present not only among Roma communities, but it is a serious structural problem of education among the poor people in settlements with insufficient public transport service.

Another common symptom is that even where the communities consider the local authorities as helpful and cooperative – based on the interviews – the official bodies still lack efficient communication. Examining the relationship between communities and the local government, a strong connection between the local authority and the community can be seen in many places, but this might not be a good relationship. The communities articulated as general criticism that the local government's efforts of uncovering and managing of local problems are insufficient.



The judgment on the activity level of the local government did not depend on the quality or power of the relationship. The activity was criticized even by the communities which maintain a good relationship because according to them the “government doesn’t see the problem” and due to this there is no solution. Some of those that had bad relation also identified their local government as active, but its work is not responding to the real needs of the community. Three-quarter of the interviewed communities try to build strong connections, in order to be able implement effective advocacy work.

In each case, the opinion and attitude about the local governments’ work depends on how they meet the needs of the community.

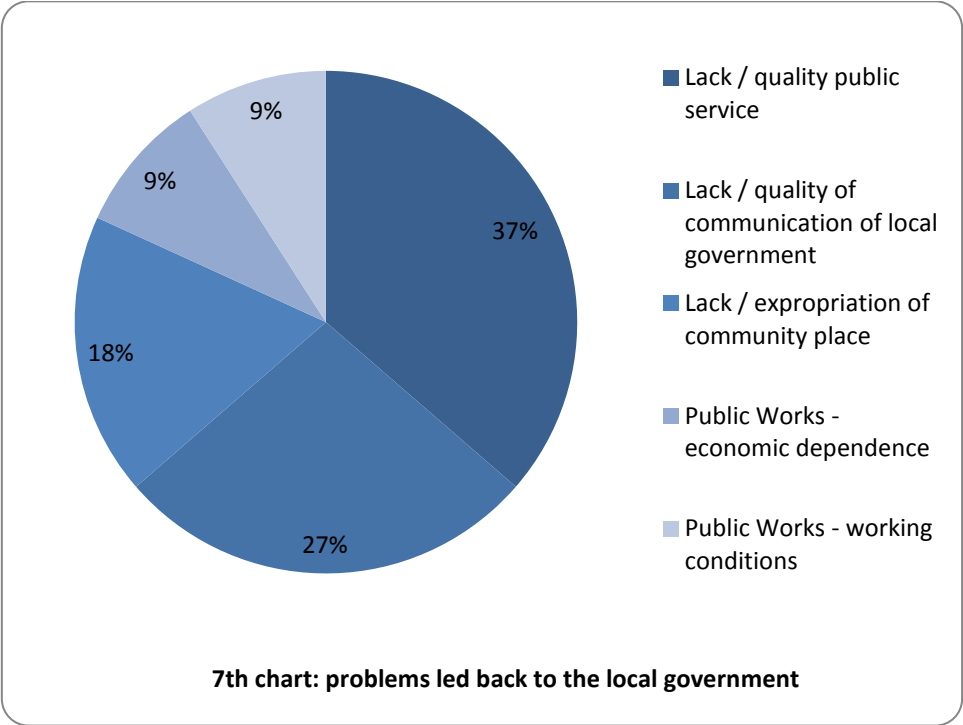


The focus on the deficiency of communication between the local government and people is also characteristic. A quite mixed picture evolved here: on one hand the majority does not feel the need to have a broader overview about the operation of the local authority. On the other hand those who identify it as a problem, consider it to be the most serious and urgent. According to them “before solving this, it does not make sense to engage in others”.

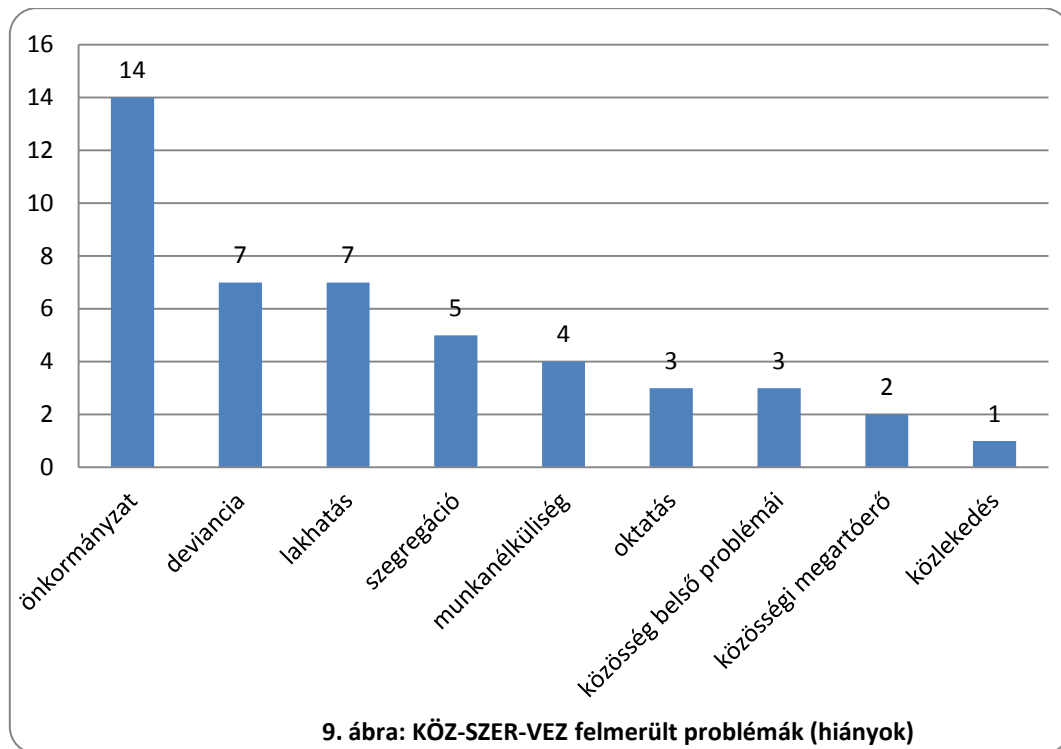
The communities think about public services as major source of problem, more than third of the disagreements stem from the quality of the services. There is a very varied picture of problems, the cases mentioned included the malfunction or lack of sewage systems, the status of roads, as well lack of information in a webpage of a (local) authority, etc.

The communities also condemned the practice of the maintaining and utilizing the local community places. According to this, the places are often not open to local visitors - where such places even exist. In many settlements the former community centers have been sold or the maintenance is not solved, the building is not functioning. If the community house is operating, the governance is reluctant to open it, because they have insufficient funds to operate and maintain it and if something happens, there will be no money for repair. And of course the local government won't give the place to the groups that they do not sympathize with (e.g. Roma or youngsters). In the villages where there is no more such places (the school is closed, the community house is collapsed or sold, etc.) the focus is finding new possible venues.

The last two groups of problems are about how the public work schemes are operated by the local governments. There are two basic types of criticism: the nontransparent selection and the disqualification of people in need, as well as the poor working conditions.



While the communities interpret the local governance's responsibility quite broadly, they often don't feel their own individual or communal responsibility.



For the deviant behavior, e.g. the children often get the drugs and alcohol from the local dealers, pubs, shops or even from family members, they blame the local governments using the argument that the municipality or its subordinated organs (local police, social institute, school) don't fight against this phenomenon. Same is valid for the infrastructure of the public places and its hygiene. They also mention that public places are damaged by the gangs of youth, but the recovery and cleaning would belong to the competences of the local government.

(In practice the often mentioned neighborhood watch, as a sample of communal responsibility, is not taken to be as a community initiative, but as a subordinate of the local government.)

Besides the problems related to the functioning of the local government, problems connected to the emergence of deviant behavior and the conditions of neighborhoods were mentioned with the same frequency (7-7 cases). The first group can be divided into two clearly distinguished parts: drug use (and crimes related to this) and dogs (and related illegal dogfights, stray dogs).

In the case of neighborhood problems, the responsibilities of the municipality („they don't eliminate the illegal landfills”, „they don't clean the canals”, „the public roads are in a bad condition”) the deficiency of the public transportation (being sort of the lines) and bad housing conditions (e.g. lacking tap water, sewerage system, bad quality houses) were reported.

These all are in connection and in interaction with the problem group of segregation and educational difficulties. In some settlements, where there are no educational institutions or working public transport systems, the children can't get to school or kindergarten. This phenomenon can also be interpreted as a form of segregation. Furthermore, in some places the deficiency of the road network makes the access of ambulance and fire engine impossible.

## Summary of the achieved improvements

In the Community-Organizing-Leadership Program 12 communities got a chance to find a solution for problems identified. The local development processes were launched following an intensive practice oriented training in June 2016, so here we can discuss the achievement of the goals after the first quarter of a year.

It is visible that concrete directions for action and analysis of the local problems have only been possible in this short timeframe where there is intensive cooperation and internal communication in a community with a relatively larger membership, or where communities have a small, but strong hard-core. In the rest of the cases the first phases group building and recruitment have not been finished after the first quarter of the year.

In these places the trainings for groups are running on different stages and the demand analysis interviews are in process. One of the objectives of the interviews is the identification potential group leaders.

There are many obstacles in this process; the financial possibilities of the members, their family connections, work duties and even the cultural background can make it difficult to become a leader. For example in many cases, men do not like to be involved, so the majority of the members are women, but most of the mothers have problem with the matching their maternal and community leader roles. In other cases the members work in a distant city and after work it is almost impossible to find common time to gather. Keeping alive the motivation of the members is also a constant challenge for the community organizers. In communities where the first planning period is finished and the actions are launched, the common activity and making a difference can serve as a positive drive.

Despite the difficulties, development is already visible, the groups are growing, and they have implemented actions, for example some of them:

- appeared in public hearings;
- submitted requests for public data;
- consulted with local authorities and institutions;
- regularly attended in municipal meetings;
- launched websites to communicate public issues;

Due to these and the continuous interviews more and more people become aware of their settlements' public affairs and learn to use the tools to make a difference in their own lives.

### **Community-organising: suggestions for the supports of the communal initiatives**

Based on the Ökotárs Foundation's experiences in grantmaking and capacity building: During the past decade the life of Hungarian CSOs changed markedly not least thanks to the financial support provided by the various European Union funds. Parallel with this their public image and support has changed, too, but not necessarily for the better: only few „big” cases could raise public attention towards the work of NGOs, but otherwise their social embeddedness remained weak. At the same time, the cohesion and the integrity of the communities from which CSOs themselves come has deteriorated as well. Citizens lost their motivation, and in general fewer and fewer organizations and individuals participate actively in the life and development of their communities.

In order for civil society organizations to function efficiently and to fulfill their missions, they need to have strong constituencies and ties to the smaller and bigger community they work in: they should have active, mobile people behind and around them who are ready to participate in the work for the common good either with their time, with their voice (through speaking up for the cause) or with their money.

We are convinced that adopting the methodology of the community building combined with ideal conditions for the applicants enable local communities to build their advocacy and mobilization capacities, and to exercise effective public control over the institutions, authorities and businesses.