

Social activity of rural communities in Hungary - Experiences of research camps

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Abstract

In this paper two basic points of the successful operation of a settlement will be examined. On the one hand, social activity will be studied. Since, according to the authors, a cooperative, active local community is essential for sustainable rural development in rural areas. On the other hand, in authors' opinion a settlement can be successful in the long run only if its own a positive internal image. To achieve this, the settlement management needs to know how can work the local communities, how the locals perceive their own settlement, what do they regard as their strengths, weaknesses, dangers, opportunities.

Therefore, this study gives a comprehensive overview about the social activity and the internal image of two Hungarian rural communities which are in quite different socio-economic situation. The findings of this study are based on interviews made with the leaders of social organizations and other key actors of rural communities and questionnaire surveys conducted among inhabitants within research camps in the summer of 2014 and 2015 in Hollókő and Átány villages.

Keywords: social activity, civil social organizations, internal image, sustainable development, rural community

JEL Classification: Q01, Y90

1. Introduction

It is generally believed that successful settlements can come into being where the citizens are also prosperous and successful; thus where the growth, the improvement of the quality of life appears also in the life of the community and of the individual. In this case the citizens are obviously content; they can create the properly multilateral and complex expression of interest (Bódi & Böhm, 2000). However, this scenario cannot be considered as a standard. Interpreting the success of settlements as the set of individual successes is a bit simplifying and idealistic. The individual successes do not always provide clear communal values. There is not in every case a long-term sustainable development behind such a success.

Success cannot be reduced to one sole factor. Although in the first place the public opinion interprets the success of the settlements from an economical viewpoint, in fact the success of a settlement is depending on several economical-social factors. The field-research done in domestic settlements also proves this. The factors determining success are thus complex. Every factor that influences the local condition of existence and the quality of life has an effect on the development of the settlement, thus also on its success (Ludescher, 2010). Behind the successful settlements stands a stable economy and community. According to Bartik (1995) and Čapkova (2005) the emphasis is on the positive quality of life besides having a sustainable development.

The settlements and the surrounding social, economic sphere are constantly changing. Among the continuously changing conditions those settlements can be truly successful which are able to adapt to their environment. Adapting to the environment can be interpreted in a political, economic, social, technological, nature-geographical and legal sense. The settlements as

autonomies due to their far-reaching role-system possess means of different characteristics, which can strengthen or even weaken each other's effects. One part of the instruments used by the settlements are unique (e.g. local taxes, local communities, etc.), whereas other instruments (e.g. administrative legal regulation) work alike everywhere. The success of a settlement depends also on finding their effective means and how well they use it.

The success of the settlement depends on the local economy and other factors, for example useful local conditions, local initiatives, a genuine management of the settlement, a positive internal image and an active local community. Social activity of local actors has a range of benefits, for instance better decision making and enhanced cost effectiveness (Atkinson, 1999). Civil social organizations can contribute significantly to the development of local community, building of social capital and so to the strengthening of trust and cooperation among them (see e.g. Kuti, 1996; Nárai, 2008, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Reisinger, 2012; Szakál, 2004 etc.) One of the main functions of such organizations is that they can activate the community members, and so can foster their integration into the local society (Kuti, 1996). Besides, civil social organizations have a great importance from economic (e.g. contribution to GDP, employment, etc.) and development policy point of view and promote the appropriate operation of democracy (Reisinger, 2012). Thus, civil social organizations can provide a better quality of life for community members.

Because of the above mentioned benefits, the number of civil social organizations in Hungary has significantly increased for the last two decades. They have already been present at many different (e.g. economic, social, health, charitable, cultural, sport and public security) areas of life (Pierog & Szabados, 2012).

Beside social activity, an own positive internal image is also vital to the successful operation of settlement in a long run. This means people living in the given region have a positive image from their own settlement. Nevertheless, a positive image can be built from a miscellaneous and controversial image. This needs adequate community building, well-defined goals; such ones as everyone can undertake, with which everyone can identify themselves. The head of the settlement has to be fully aware of the fact how the locals see their own settlement, what they regard as their strength, their weaknesses, dangers, opportunities (Molnár, 2015). In this paper we summarize our experiences about internal image. The starting point is that the local social activity is reflected in the interior image.

2. Data and Methods

Two Hungarian settlements were involved in this examination: Átány (Heves county), and Hollókő (Nógrád county). Átány is village in a less favoured area from social and economic point of view with a population of 1487 people (in 2013), while Hollókő is a frequented touristic place (the only UNESCO World Heritage village in Hungary) with a population of 333 people (in 2013) (Figure 1).

This paper provides an overview about the internal image and social activity of the population of the two examined villages. Among others the main activities, the difficulties and some other important characteristics of civil social organizations will be presented. In addition, the opinion of the inhabitants of rural villages regarding the necessity and the visibility of these organizations has been mapped as well.

Figure 1: The location of Hollókő and Átány villages



Source: Google maps, 2016

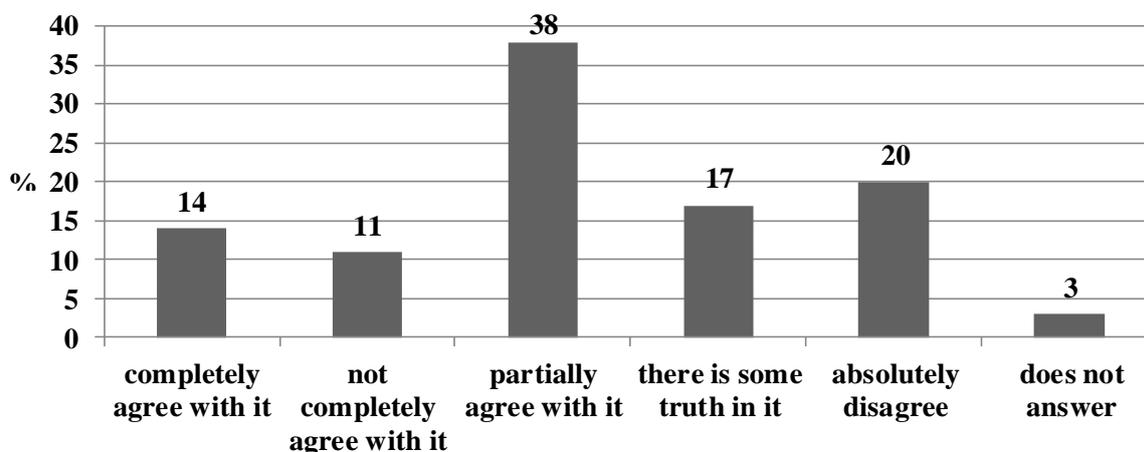
To obtain the necessary data for this study, first an overall document analysis was done. Then research camps were organized in the examined villages led by the authors in the summer of 2014 and 2015. In the frame of field research, interviews were made with the leaders of social organizations and other key actors of rural communities. Moreover, questionnaire surveys were conducted, too. The sampling principle of the questionnaire survey was to collect information about every third households. Some of findings related to internal image and social activity of local people are presented in the next chapter.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Internal image in the examined villages

It is established that the internal image is not unambiguously positive in Átány. The population of the village was surveyed by following question: ‘*Your village is nice, and it has got good atmosphere.*’ The answers had to be indicated on a Linkert scale that showed to which extent the respondents agreed with the above mentioned statement. It can be seen on Figure 2 that most of the people partly agreed with it. On the other hand, a large amount of people did not agree with this statement, so in their mind the village is not definitely nice and doesn’t have a good atmosphere. In addition, many people did not give their opinion. In our opinion, this is not a really positive special value judgment as well (Figure 2). So, altogether around 40% of the respondents had a negative internal image according to the outcomes of the questionnaire survey.

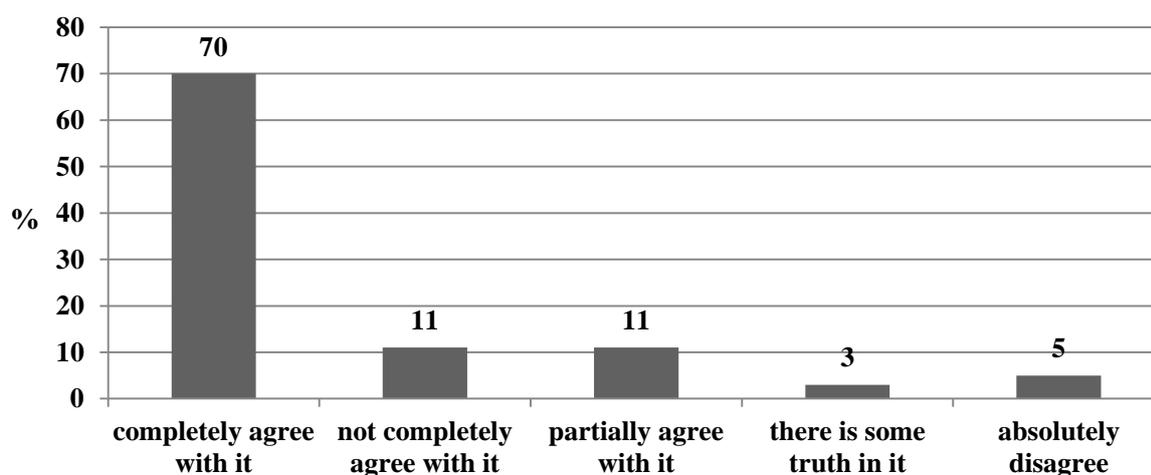
Figure 2: Internal image in Átány village – Distribution of answers for the question ‘Your village is nice, and it has got good atmosphere.’ (%)



Source: own questionnaire survey, 2014

It was found that the internal image was much more homogeneous in case of Hollókő. In the mind of the inhabitants the village is firmly nice and it has got good atmosphere. So the village has got positive internal image (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Internal image in Hollókő village – Distribution of answers for the question ‘Your village is nice, and it has got good atmosphere.’ (%)



Source: own questionnaire survey, 2015

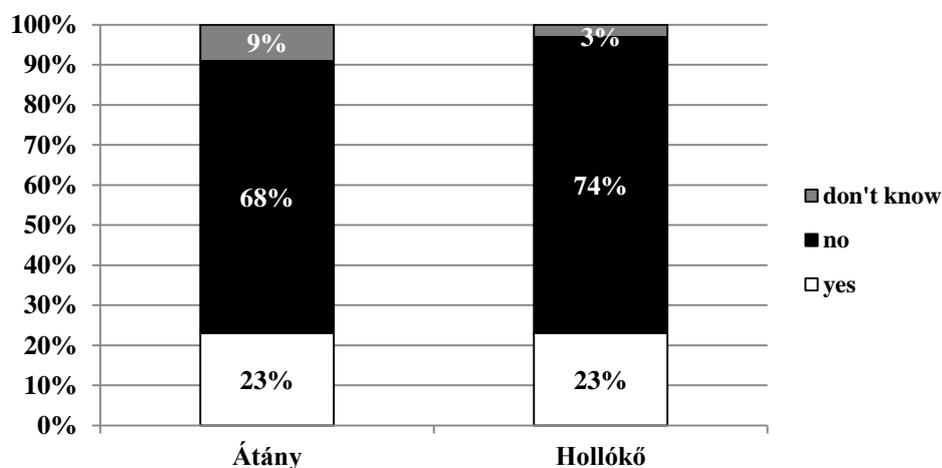
3.2. Social activity in the examined villages

We surveyed what the villagers think about the necessity of communal organizations in their own village. Most of the respondents considered the existence of such organizations important in both settlements. While in Átány more than two-third (69%), in Hollókő more than four out of five citizens stated that there is a significant need for such community organizations.

Although in both villages the majority thought the existence of these organizations vital, less than one-fourth of the respondents were members in at least one local civil society organization. The ratio of those who stated that they did not participate in the membership of any organizations was higher in Hollókő than in Átány village. While in Átány more than two-third of the villagers were not members in any local civil society organizations (68%), in Hollókő it was almost three quarters (Figure 4). However, we assume that the respondents, who stated that they did not know whether they were members in any NGOs, probably did

also not participate in the memberships. If it is true, then the proportion of members was equal in the examined villages.

Figure 4: Memberships in local civil society organizations in Átány and Hollókő villages (%)



Source: own questionnaire survey, 2014-2015

The reasons for non-participation in civil society organizations were partly similar. Many people noted they had no time for participation because of the family or job; or their health state did not allow them to join to any civil society organization. However, some differences were revealed between the villages as well. In Hollókő most of the respondents decided on non-participation in NGOs on their own. They did not have a need for being active in social term. In Átány the majority had different reasons for the lack of active participation. Most of the villagers had afraid to let their home empty because of the bad public security (e.g. very large number of burglary and theft). Therefore, they were not able to active participate in community organizations.

In both settlements ten civil society organizations operated during our fieldwork. In Átány their activities were a bit more diverse than in Hollókő. In both villages most of the NGOs aimed at preservation of culture. Their proportion was 40% in Átány and 60% in Hollókő (Table 1).

Table1: Main activities of civil society organizations in Átány and Hollókő villages (%)

Area of activity	Átány	Hollókő
culture	40	60
education	10	0
militia	10	10
social	20	0
sport	10	10
tourism	0	10
other	10	10
total	100	100

Source: interviews, 2014-2015

In both villages could be found sport and militia organizations, too. Because of the disadvantageous socio-economic situation two social organizations and an educational one operated in Átány. In Hollókő there was no need for such organizations. But since Hollókő is frequented touristic place, a touristic organization also operated there (Table 1).

Some of the civil social organizations worked not really actively in both villages during our field research, but they did it for different reasons. While in Hollókő the main reason was ageing of population, in Átány primarily the lack of financial opportunities causes operational problems.

The general visibility related to these community organizations was also studied. It was found that the awareness was quite low in both cases. More than half of the inhabitants could not mention any local civil society organizations at all. In Átány NGOs being responsible for the improvement of the quality of life of retired people, preservation of cultural heritage were the most well-known organizations. In Hollókő the home guard NGO was on the first place, than cultural organizations came. Moreover, civil society organization aimed at development of tourism was also well-known.

The number of members in civil society organization was also studied in both villages. It was found that the average number of members was smaller in Hollókő than in Átány, which probably correlated to the population number of the examined villages. In Hollókő the membership consisted usually of 5 to 30 people. In Átány the picture was more diverse. The number of members was higher than 60 in 40% of the organizations. On the other hand, in other organizations less than 10 people took part in.

4. Conclusion

First, the internal images of the two examined villages were studied in the paper. It can be concluded that while in Hollókő it is absolutely positive; in Átány the situation is not so clear. Since a large amount of people did not agree with the statement of '*Your village is nice, and it has got good atmosphere.*' in the questionnaire survey conducted in the summer of 2014. This result reinforced our assumption that the internal image is not unambiguously positive in Átány. In our opinion, these findings are connected to the social activity of the population in the examined villages. It can be established that only a limited number of people have been socially active in both villages, but if we take the size of population into account, the situation have been better in Hollókő. Although the population in Hollókő is only around one-fourth compared to the population in Átány, the same number of civil social organizations has operated in both settlements.

However, according to the subjects for interviews the social capital and the willingness to cooperate used to be much stronger in the past in both cases. In Hollókő because of ageing of population the community has become quite passive. Although we found some good examples for cooperation in Hollókő, young people have cooperated only during the implementation of touristic programs and even then mainly for some selfish business reasons.

According the outcomes of the survey, the population in Átány has become indifferent and apathetic partly due to their serious socio-economic problems. The lack of solidarity and sense of belonging to the community were also often noted. Around 40-50 family have been really socially active. They have comprised the active membership of civil social organizations.

As a consequence of large number of civil social organizations operated in Átány and Hollókő villages, there have been significant overlaps of membership of such organizations. The overlaps have caused serious problems from time to time, because there have not been enough people to implement each action. In Hollókő the on-going replacement of members have risen the biggest problems because of ageing of population, too.

It is also concluded that the main activities of civil social organizations refer to the socio-economic situation of the examined villages. While more organizations aim at the improvement of social situation of inhabitants in Átány, in Hollókő cannot be found such NGOs. But in Hollókő a touristic association runs due to being a frequented touristic place. However, the most popular organizations are targeted at preservation of culture in both villages. It can be stated that the activities of organizations were slightly more homogenous in Hollókő than in Átány. This can also be noted in terms of compositions of membership and financial opportunities.

As it is mentioned above, although the majority of respondents indicated a significant necessity for community organizations in our survey, their general visibility have been quite low in both settlements. The awareness of population concerning existing civil social organizations should be raised in the future. Moreover, in our opinion, a greater emphasis should be put on the development of willingness to cooperate. Although we have seen some good examples for cooperation between local civil social organizations, continuous cooperation is not typical. Cooperation opportunities should be much more exploited in the future in both villages.

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