



**NARRATIVE REPORT**  
**ON THE ACTIVITIES**  
**OF THE HUNGARIAN ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK**  
**IN 2011**

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This narrative report was written in relation to the grant provided by the Stefan Batory Foundation with the aim at supporting the activities of the Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network. The report follows the structure and refers to activities included into the plan for the year 2011 submitted to the Foundation.

## FOREWORDS

Although we had already hard times in Hungary when our proposal had been written and submitted to the Stefan Batory Foundation nobody could have been forecasted how far more serious the situation would become in 2011. Our country is often on the headlines of international newspapers nowadays. There is no need for detailed description of the several anti-democracy measures and changes our Parliament has already introduced. These changes have effect on all the democratic institutions, including civil society. Lack of dialogue with civil society and the totally closed decision making process had been a problem in 2010 already, but 2011 brought serious cuts on the National Civil Fund and a totally new bill on civil society organizations.

Beside the anti-democratic tendencies there are very serious anti-poor-people tendencies, too, which are not really discussed by the media outside of the country. “(..) in the past year and a half we have witnessed several measures we have to register as unusual, or at least as far more serious than any previous ones when it comes to hurting the poor. In fact, government actions regarding the poor have shifted from a course of reluctant assistance to one that began with a curtailment of rights and with systematic humiliation, then gradually led to an outright rejection of the poor, the criminalization of poverty and eventually the treatment of the poor as criminals.” wrote Zsuzsa Ferge (one of the founders of our network) in her article<sup>1</sup> in December 2011. There is a long list of measures letting poor people behind or even – as Zsuzsa wrote – criminalizing them, like the introduction of a flat-rate tax system, the drop in the level of social benefits, cuts on the unemployment benefit system, more and humiliating conditions of benefits, more and more cash benefits provided in kind, introduction of work camps for unemployed people and threatening homeless people with prison.

In this circumstances where most of the organizations (as individuals, too) were shocked trying to find their places and ways of survival while the government’s bill-factory produced bunches of new laws without any kind of consultation, it was pretty hard to accomplish our advocacy work. As a kind of preparation for even more difficult times, we decided to put capacity building, empowering people living in poverty and coalition building (internal and external) in the focus.

## DETAILED REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES COMPLETED IN 2011

In line with the plans our Network continued some regular and “traditional” activities last year. These activities are related to the operation and the development of the coalition. They ensure

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<sup>1</sup> Zsuzsa Ferge: ‘On the holiday of love’, Nepszava, December 24, 2011

the involvement of our member organizations into the planning, implementation and monitoring processes of the Network. These activities are to make sure that our advocacy work is built on the experiences and priorities of our members as well.

## **I. Coordination of the coalition**

The Board of the Network which is responsible for the coordination of the implementation of the 3-year Strategy and the annual working plans of the Network had seven meetings during the year. The dates were: February 22, April 13, May 18, July 15, September 17, October 12 and November 17.

The regional representatives (2 people in each region) who are responsible for the direct communication with our members, organization of local and regional activities and representing our Network at local level had three meetings in 2011. The dates were April 13, June 22 (connected to the General Assembly of the Network) and September 30 – October 1 (connected to the capacity building of representatives and activists of the Network).

As the main decision taking body and discussion forum for the main policy issues our General Assembly was held on June 22. Beside organizational issues (e.g. approval of annual reports and annual plans) we had two speakers and two main topics for discussion. First, on the social and economical impact of the decisions taken by the government; and the alternative ways of ensuring fairer distribution and smaller inequalities. Second on community organizing and how the method could be used in order to strengthen participation of people experiencing poverty and building power among them.

## **II. Background work for advocacy activities**

The working groups of the Network bring together representatives of our member organizations and our activists (people experiencing poverty) who are focusing on specific areas of our policy work. There are four working groups (on sustainable development, on employment, on social provisions and on education) operating mainly on-line. Two of them had meetings during the year: the sustainable development working group on April 11 and the social provisions working group on September 9.

The September 9 working group meeting was connected to a broad members' meeting from Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg county. People coming together could discuss on the problems experienced by poor people and the possible ways for better advocacy work. They started planning their joint action for October 15.

As the most important event in the framework of our activities for empowerment of poor people and collecting their experiences we organized the National Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty on October 15. Participants coming from different parts of the country discussed the topics of participation at local level, employment, services of general interest and dignified life, collected demands and planned actions to take together.

### **III. The Hungarian Presidency of the European Union**

The following part of the report is referring to the concrete focuses and topics identified in our plan for 2011.

#### **3.1. [The 10<sup>th</sup> Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty](#)**

The 10<sup>th</sup> Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (Meeting) was identified as the main presidency event in the field of fight against poverty. The Meeting brought together around 150 people most of them directly affected by poverty, European and National decision makers, academic persons and representatives of European civil society organizations. The preparation of the event was a shared responsibility of the Hungarian government, the European Commission and the European Anti-Poverty Network, which ensured the direct participation and the chance for influencing the content for our network, too. One of the main aims of the Meeting was to evaluate the progress that had been achieved (or not) since the first such meeting. The topic for last year was the barriers and problems related to the access of labor market and quality jobs.

The representative of our Network (Attila Mester) was involved closely in the preparation. He attended two preparatory meetings in Brussels, where he could speak on behalf of our members and channel the suggestions from people experiencing poverty into the discussions.

As part of the national preparation for the Meeting we held seven meetings for people experiencing poverty (on January 26, March 3, March 23, April 5, April 12, April 19, May 4) in the framework of our “Make your voice heard!” training. As a result of the preparatory meetings we could collect relevant experiences on unemployment not only from the participants but from many members of the Network. The training itself focused not only on the content of the Meeting but on the capacity building and empowerment of those participating people experiencing poverty. As a result they could fully participate on the Meeting in Brussels and put on the table the most burning issues related to employment in Hungary.

#### **3.2. Europe 2020 Strategy and the National Reform Programs**

The involvement of our Network in the preparation of the National Reform Program remained limited with some possibilities for providing opinion on the part of the document focusing on the fight against poverty. This part was discussed by the Monitoring Committee of the “Let children get better!” National Strategy Against Child Poverty in which the network has one representative. The Committee put together its concerns and suggestions related to the draft of the NRP and sent them to the Junior Minister for Social Inclusion. (The National Strategy Against Child Poverty and the National Reform Program are broad strategic documents and not specific pieces of legislation).

Beside we provided up-to-date information on the preparation of the NRP to our members and encouraged them to take part in the consultation process. The government ensured the possibility for a short on-line consultation at the beginning of 2011. Unfortunately the document did not get real publicity and attention. One of the main concerns regarding the drafting process was the lack of real consultation with the civil society not only in Hungary but in many EU member states.

### 3.3. 2014-2020 programming period of the EU Structural Funds

As the result of the preparation and the legislative process for the 2014-2020 budgeting period of the European Union became public only in October the activities and involvement have been possible for only couple of months. Thanks to the membership in the European Anti-Poverty Network we have and we can disseminate direct information on the discussions at EU level. Right now the main concern for our network is how far EU money can be used for the accomplishment of the poverty reduction targets (in the NRP) and how the involvement of civil society organizations can be ensured at national level in the future.

The planning process has not started at national level yet. According to recent information from the Ministry for National Development it is foreseen for the year of 2012. As members of the CNNy (Civil Society Organizations for the Publicity of the National Development Planning) we try to play an active role in the monitoring of planning and implementation.

### 3.4. European Strategy for the inclusion of Roma people

One of the most important initiatives of the Hungarian Presidency was the idea of the European Framework Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma People and the national strategies on the implementation. Although the government created a structure for consultation it seems that very limited group of actors have any influence on the document.

In order to follow the drafting of the Strategy as closely as possible we attended an EU level conference organized on the topic in Budapest on April 8 and applied for membership in the recently set up Roma Coordination Council (the main consultative body on the Strategy in Hungary). The Council had its first meeting in September with our representative among its members. According to the information coming from her it seems that all the decisions had been taken already behind the doors. (The National Roma Integration Strategy is a broad strategic document and not a specific piece of legislation).

In order to support the work of our representative in the Council we have started to bring together a task force (from our member organizations) that could provide help for her by collecting experiences and formulating suggestions.

Besides the European Commission has started a separated consultation with civil society organizations in Hungary on the experiences with the use of Structural Funds on the integration of Roma people. The representative of our Network attended the first meeting in December and

forwarded the concerns and suggestions collected around the topic from our member organizations.

#### **IV. Other activities**

In order to ensure visibility, inform people and generate discussions around poverty related issues we had a series of short articles (or pamphlets) on our website in spring 2011. We collected the most recent data, evaluated shortly the decisions taken so far or planned by the government and made some suggestions and demands. The topics were employment, education, child poverty and the situation of elderly people. As an element of this series we put together our 12 points (demands) and published on March 15 (which is the memorial day of Revolution and Fight for Independence in 1848). The pamphlets were read several thousand people (they were downloaded by around 2000 people from our website only).

Instead of the originally planned publication on poverty (“Snapshots – recorded”) we decided to collect experiences from our members around specific issues. We have started working on the topic of public work in 2011. It seems that in the recent political situation in Hungary there is far more needed to get the attention of our politicians than a sole publication.

We organized a direct action on the day when the legislation on the new public work program passed the Parliament. Our activists, people directly affected by the law protested by the entrance of the Parliament building and disseminated our letter on the issue to the members of the Parliament. (The action was not organized with the support of Mott Foundation.)

After the approval of the bill we decided to start working on a campaign for the creation of sustainable and decent jobs in Hungary. So far we have started collecting direct experiences, identifying organizations that could be allies of us in the campaign and preparing the most challenging part which is organizing people directly affected by the public work program and unemployment.

As another way of providing voice for people experiencing poverty and visibility for their experiences we started a new website with the title of “Amihangunk.hu” (Ourvoice.hu). The idea is that people experiencing poverty are not only users but administrators of the site, they can put on it recent experiences, information and their opinion. We have been working on the building of a kind of core group of people who feel really responsible for the webpage and can involve other people in the development of it. People can put information on available social services, cuts (e.g. closing down a school or any kind of social services) and developments on a map. The users of the website can create groups to discuss specific issues, can put on questions (like a FAQ on poverty and social issues) but they can upload videos, pictures, articles related to poverty and done by themselves or found somewhere else on the web.

#### **V. Strengthening the Network**

We put recruitment of volunteers, supporters and involvement of organization in the focus in 2011. Most of our events (e.g. the Executive Committee meeting of the European Anti Poverty Network in Hungary, direct actions, our General Assembly, a big scale national event and the

National Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty on the International Day of the Fight Against Poverty in October) were organized with the active participation of many volunteers and our activists.

Our facebook page launched at the end of 2010 has more than 600 supporters now. We used several event and meetings organized by other civil society organizations to build contacts and develop cooperation with organizations dealing with poverty related issues.

In order to improve internal communication we shared all the relevant information with our members on our mailing list and encouraged them to do the same. As an example of the more coordinated advocacy work we issued a joint open letter with some of our member organizations on the new Social Policy Concept (drafted by the government).

In order to strengthen the expert background of the Network we approached quite a lot of experts, media people and civil society organizations having special expertise on specific fields. For example we invited Zoltan Pogatsa, a well-know political analyst to speak at our General Assembly and we organized an expert discussion with journalist and communication experts around the possible communication strategies for anti-poverty fight.

In line with our plan we organized couple of public actions during the year. Some of them aimed at organizing local community and strengthening local level solidarity. While we organized a huge event in Budapest on the International Day of the Fight Against Poverty, we asked our members to try to mobilize their local communities around the issue the same day. Some of our members managed to held local events and action e.g. in Nyíregyháza, Szarvas, Miskolc. They were successful in generating visibility and discussions.

In the framework of our capacity building activities we provided several trainings to our members in 2011:

- our annual “Make our voice heard!” training for people experiencing poverty coming from our members (with the participation of 14 people)
- two communication trainings in cooperation with the Nonprofit Media Center Foundation
- a two-day capacity building training for our regional representatives and activists (with 18 participants)
- a short introductory training on community organizing with the involvement of two American community organizers for people experiencing poverty in Budapest and the interested organizations in Miskolc.

April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, Budapest

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