

The Annual Report of the Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network

2013¹

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A. Influencing National Governments for Better Policies: Advocacy, Lobbying and Policy-Making linked to European Level developments

Our network has two strategic pillars: 1. workfare workers (approaching better circumstances for them and strengthening their rights by community organizing); 2. income poverty – promoting an adequate minimum income. Therefore, in the followings we separate the report according to these pillars.

ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO PUBLIC WORK AND IMPROVING THE SITUATION OF PUBLIC WORKERS

We continued our work in Budapest with the people working in public work (workfare). In early January the group found its name: Workfare Movement For The Future. We attended many conferences about workfare and the government answers to unemployment: social and so-called employment cooperatives. We participated in conferences organized by the Economic Sciences Society, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, local NGOs and workfare providers. One of our members [talked about his experiences and the goals of our group](#) in a round-table discussion on a conference. The event was organized on the 24th of October by the local Corvinus University on the topic of criminalization tendencies towards the poor.

As a result of the rethinking of the ways how we work, we decided to not organize weekly picnics, but more operational weekly meetings and actions. Our first action was a demonstration on the 6th of February in front of the Ministry of Interior, who is responsible for the public work program. [We gave our open letter](#) with our demands - regarding the low wages, the inhumane, degrading treatment of some workers, as well as about the insufficient tools and working conditions - to the representative of the Ministry and started a discussion.

A few days afterwards we learned from one of our allies, that the Ministry was about to organize an international conference on the topic of public work. We wanted to get an invitation, but the Ministry would not even make the place of venue official. They only wanted the group to attend the official dinner of the event, which the group refused. The conference was held with closed doors with not more than 20 persons attending.

The fight was not easy as there was a mass amount of fluctuation in the membership. Some people got tired, some got proper jobs and could not come anymore, some moved away. We needed recruitment, but there are not so many people in public work during the winter months, especially in the capital. Things were hard, only a handful of people showed up at every meeting, even though we tried to do out-reach to new people. So we started trainings in April focused on the needs of the members: English and German language courses, computer course, media course. These trainings had three aims:

- to provide learning opportunities for our members to be able to work more efficiently in the group;
- to help members to find proper jobs;
- to recruit new people in the group, who are interested in trainings but might be persuaded to participate.

Based on the media training, the group decided on the two persons who would be media representatives. This was a major step in forming an organization, since this is the first role picked up by members.

So with the new people we were building our group during the summer. We organized open air leisure activities, meetings and had fun. Summer is the high time of workfare in Hungary, we continued to reach out to people as well with our trainings, but there were less and less of them in Budapest.

In the meanwhile, the organizer and members participated in international meetings and trainings, thanks to the connections of the Network to the European Anti-Poverty Network and the European Community Organizing Network. Besides professional study visits, members participated in grass roots fundraising trainings etc.

Our next action was a press conference held on one of our trainings, because we wanted to show that there is no training for the public workers in Budapest. We managed to get into the news of a national TV channel.

With the Workfare Research organized by the Network in different parts of the country (see below), there was a good opportunity to get to know some more people working in public work in Budapest. Many volunteers helped to find new public workers to fill out questionnaires, therefore our group has been energized again. This was the last step of how we managed to reach out to more than 300 people this year.

In October we had a 2-days retreat not far away from the city, where we made progress on group rules and updating the strategy. This was a giant step in the life of our community as well. For example since this weekend there are always two moderators of the weekly meetings, a main and an assistant moderator, both are group members. Of course there is always a preoperational meeting made beforehand with the organizer.

Based on the computer training, in October we constructed the media infrastructure for a successful advocacy campaign: the FB-Committee has been funded, hence the [blog](#) and [Facebook](#) profiles were started and are edited by the members with the help of a volunteer and the organizer. The group deliberately did not choose to support the page of the Network (ourvoice.hu), but to start new ones, so we had to change our plans.

Another step in putting up a sustainable organization is economic independence. This is why the Financial Committee was formed. In small steps the group is trying to first get it's own incomes and start to think about independence.

So with huge fluctuation we had 34 new active members this year. Now we have about 25 active people with relevant public work experience, an updated strategy with long-term and short-term goals, tactics and a planned timeline of activities. We can start our advocacy work in working groups focusing on campaigns developed by the membership. The strategy for the next 6 months mainly aims building public pressure on the government and oppositional parties as in April 2014 we will have the next general election for the parliament.

Professional activities

As mentioned above, the Network compiled a questionnaire and an interview in order to have up-to-date data on the situation the people working in public work are facing. Based on the involvement of our activists and member organizations we managed to fill out 540 questionnaires and do 46 interviews, which does not make the research representative on the target groups, but still: a deep insight on the problems. The data come from workfare workers living in mainly the least developed regions of Hungary and also in Budapest. The research reached about 25 villages and cities that vary in size and other contexts as well. We are still working on the report today, estimated press event is scheduled in January 2014.

Sadly we did not manage to extend our community organizing work to the countryside because of the lack of available funds. Our organizer colleague regularly participated in the Community Organizing Learning Circle this year as well as the last. He held several trainings for different groups (Roma youth, university students, volunteers, etc.) in the topic. He managed to find new volunteers from a local university and held basic training for them on community organizing and the Workfare Movement For The Future. Still, there is need for more volunteer power, so we are planning to strengthen our ties with a local university where there is an MA in Community Work. We will be a place of internship for the students from February 2014 in order to have the sufficient volunteer backup for our efforts.

ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO MINIMUM INCOME

Minimum income was chosen by the Network to be another campaign topic for the next three years. The reason why we considered this topic to be extremely important is that in connection with it we can raise issues as the amount of money necessary to live dignified life, or the need for involving people living in poverty into the forming of the social assistance, or the link between human rights and the right for an adequate income through the welfare provision for those who are not able to earn that money in a paid job.

In the framework of an EU-wide cooperation between research institutions, national and European NGO networks, public bodies etc. our network started an intensive work on the topic of minimum income this year. A so called national report on minimum income was drafted with the involvement of academic people and researchers, and consulted by the members of our network. Connected to our annual general assembly a conference with the title of “Possible steps on the way forward an adequate minimum income” was organized with some 30 participants (with representatives of ministries, universities, churches and relevant NGOs among them). With a report on the conference a huge article was published in one of the biggest daily newspaper on minimum income: http://nol.hu/belfold/20130716-lesz-e_valaha_magyarorszagon_garantalt_minimumjovedelem

In the national report we provide a short evaluation of the recent social assistance schemes in Hungary, the problems with adequacy, coverage and take-up. The most important part of the report is a list of proposed steps to have a more adequate minimum income scheme in Hungary. These suggested changes can be discussed widely when our members initiate discussions and meetings with the candidates standing for the European Parliament and national elections in 2014.

Messages from the report have been already used during our [small media campaign](#) connected to the mobilization for the International Day Against Poverty (17th of October). E.g. that for those who cannot find a job (for example because of their age) the 22 800 HUF (appr. 78 EUR) monthly benefit is not ensuring the dignified life but pure survival. The campaign which we implemented on Facebook was quite successful regarding the number of shares, likes and new followers (more than 200) of our FB page.

Focused advocacy work

As we have written before in line with our most recent strategy the Network focuses its advocacy work on three topics: public work, minimum income and child poverty. The first two have been already mentioned. With regard to tackling child poverty we decided to continue attending the government chaired monitoring committee of the implementation of the National Strategy Against Child Poverty. Though we do not consider this committee as a meaningful forum for representing the interests of children living in poverty, we still think it is “useful” for getting up-dated information (which we can transfer to our partners) and at least have some chance for getting engaged in dialogue with some government representatives.

Besides our three major topics we have been always paying attention to the work around the European Social Fund. In partnership with our members we produced inputs and comments on the planning documents. ESF is one of the topics on which our cooperation with EAPN is especially strong. We played an active role in the successful campaign aiming to ensure that at least 25% of the European Social Fund will be used on fighting poverty. We provided inputs for discussion papers and other documents of EAPN on community based planning, successful community lead projects etc.

Our network delegated dr. Krisztina Jász into the National Sustainable Development Council where in the debate of national strategic documents she represents the interest of people experiencing poverty. This council organized the event titled ‘Differently About Poverty – Sustainable Solutions in the Consequences of Treatment of Poverty’ on 01/10/2013 at Science University of Pécs. The aim of the event was introducing good practices to social professionals coming from all around the country.

B. Participation of People Experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion in Internal and External Workings of the National Network

ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION AND SELF-ORGANIZATION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY

As we have already written about it, while our community organizing program continued in Budapest, we did not have the resources for hiring more organizers and start the organizing process in the countryside. Nevertheless spreading the idea of organizing happened throughout the year as we communicated, educated about it at several events.

As one of the important ways of capacity building among our activists and our member organizations we always paid attention to involvement of in different international and exchanges, visits on the topic of participation. Some examples for these kinds of exchanges and mutual learning forums for 2013:

- international visit to the Netherlands and attending a forum of mental health patients to learn about ways they use to improve participation; organized by the Dutch Anti-Poverty Network – Balint Vojtonovszki (our community organizer) and Maria Bucsak (member of our board) attended
- International learning forum organized by the European Anti-Poverty Network in Estonia in May 2013 – Attila Mester (member of our board) and Daniella Orobej (as a person experiencing poverty) attended and facilitated a workshop on the method of community organizing
- international visit to Austria to attend the Austrian meeting of people experiencing poverty and learn about using forum theatre method in empowerment of people living in poverty organized by die Armutskonferenz (the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network) in June 2013 – Balint Vojtonovszki, Jozsefne Palinkas (member of the organized group of public workers) and Melinda Szemes (member of our board) attended.

The European Commission (in partnership with the European Anti-Poverty Network) organized the 12th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty this year. As in the years before our network was responsible for the preparation of the Hungarian delegations. The four persons experiencing poverty took part in a training program in May and June to make sure their full participation at the event. Our delegation had the chance for getting engaged in direct dialogue with EU decision makers ([even with Laszlo Andor, EU Commissioner responsible for social issues](#)), members of the EU Parliament and European Commission officials.

About the involvement of people experiencing poverty see also the first chapter: the activities of the Workfare Workers For The Future group.

C. Development and Growth of the Network (including growth and training and capacity building actions)

Capacity building of our member organizations and strengthening co-operation among members and activists

Mainly because of financial difficulties which became quite serious in the second part of the year we could not dedicate those human resources and energy to capacity building of our members as it was planned originally. The intention still exists and we try to raise the necessary funds for these activities for the coming years. Nevertheless, though capacity building has not happened in a very complex way, but we have implemented several activities with the involvement of our members, provided information for them, contributed to improving their knowledge and skills..

For example we have organized one bigger thematic seminar/conference on the topic of minimum income and have had several smaller discussions and meetings on topics like the European Social Fund. We provided a capacity building training for the activist involved in the data collection part of our research on public work. We organized our General Assembly in June 2013 which served as a forum for exchanges between our members and discussions on the joint future of our network.

Participation in civil coalitions

In line with our limited capacities we tried to stay active in the existing coalitions (Housing Platform; From building roads to building societies coalition; Human Platform). As none of the coalitions are focusing on the topics we have chosen in our strategy, we have withdrawn a little bit from them especially in the second half of the year and focused more on building coalitions around our issues.

Awareness raising and strengthening publicity on issues related to the fight against poverty

In addition to the action and awareness raising activities linked to public work and minimum income described above we would like to mention our “usual” awareness raising action linked to the International Day Against Eradication Poverty (17 October). Our action called “Enough 2013” combined speeches from people experiencing poverty, joint actions with the participants (we symbolically burnt poverty, discrimination etc. in real fires) and contributions from so called VIP persons. Some photos are available [here](#). According to our estimations some 80-100 people joined our action and it got some [media coverage](#) (it was smaller than in the previous years as some political parties also had events on the same day).

D. Governance and Internal Democracy (including internal governance, respect of statutory requirements, management in the network and funding)

The structure of our board is based on built-in democratic features and real involvement of people experiencing poverty. We organize our general assembly every year. (In 2013 the date was: 11/06.) Every second year, the election of the members of the board takes place at the general assembly.

The board has 7 members who are elected by the representatives of our member organizations. At least 4 of the board members have to be people experiencing poverty. The board makes the strategic decisions, everyone has 1 vote. The staff has to report to them about their activity via e-mail and at the leader body sessions which are held once a month.

Furthermore, a staff meeting is held every week and each occasion is led by one member of the leader body. The staff meetings are open events, one leader body member has to be there but anyone else from the leader body can participate on it. Occasionally guests (experts, representatives of allies, volunteers) participate on our staff meetings as well.

Both the board and the staff members have the right to introduce an idea about funding, networking or campaigning – the only framework is the current strategy accepted by the board. (Momentarily the two strategic pillars are: workfare workers’ movement and income poverty – minimum income.)

The workfare workers’ movement supported by HAPN is also based on democratic methodology: our community organizer colleague, Bálint Vojtonovszki pays attention on the democratic decision-making of the group and he encourages the group members for equal participation. See more: kozmunksmozgalom.blog.hu