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Workfare with a human face?

Innovative utilizations of public work in rural municipalities in Hungary¹

Introduction

Public work is currently the major national tool for the reintegration of the long-term unemployed into the world of labour in Hungary. As a result of the expansion of resources the government allotted to facilitate public work employment, labour statistics improved substantially. Nonetheless, public labour as an institution is objected to intense criticism. Since employment as public worker is not bound to citizenship rights, local municipalities have a large degree of discretion about selecting whom they hire. Criticism most often focuses on employment discrimination. In contrast, this research takes a progressive municipality, with anti-discriminatory profile as an example, where public work was adapted as a welfare, rather than purely workfare praxis. Uszka, a rural small-sized municipality, is characterized by high ethnified unemployment. Its politicians and administrators adapted varied strategies to help combat poverty and unemployment. The paper explores the place of public work in the context of social policy instruments and poverty reduction strategies applied and the degrees of freedom and limitations municipalities have in adapting state instruments.

Public work as a workfare strategy to counteract the welfare dependency of the long-term unemployed was first formulated in 1996. Municipalities became obliged to organize public work from 2000 onward. In the meantime, it became a central tool to counteract unemployment from 2009 as part of the “Way to work” [Út a munkába] strategy of the Socialist-Liberal coalition. The conservative government renamed this strategy START, thereby reducing the eligibilities attached to it several times between 2011 and 2015 (Csoba 2010; MSH 2014). Public work as a strategy to overcome long-term unemployment was subjected to an extensive and varied criticism (MSH 2014, Fazekas - Scharle 2012, Szabó 2013, Köllő - Scharle 2011), describing public work as a “cul de sac”, rather than leading out of exclusion from the labour market. It was accused of being both non-voluntary and having punitive features (Ferge 2012). Studies indicate that the rate of return to the labour market even decreased in villages while extensively utilizing public work programmes (Köllő - Scharle 2011).

Municipality strategies in small-size settlements adapting the Út a munkába (“Way to work”) programme showed a great variation (Udvari - Varga 2010). Paradoxically,

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disciplinary potentials in the construction of public work were more likely to be utilized by prosperous municipalities, which on the other hand had more access to experts, thus allowing more resourceful adaptations of public work compared to the more disadvantaged settlements (Vida - Virág 2010).

Two major directions can be differentiated among strategies to combat poverty: those oriented to coping and those oriented towards the improvement of the capacities of marginalized groups, i.e. providing the fish or the net to learn how to fish (Asztalos Morell 2011). In this paper, I first explore to what degree public work projects and other complementary programmes initiated in Uszka focus on the provision of basic material goods, such as food and shelter (coping), or do they constitute instruments to improve the abilities and resources of the marginalized groups, i.e. capacity building? Second, a further aspect of poverty reduction strategies is in what way these involve the participation of the marginalized groups and their agency. Lastly, the paper will explore in what way poverty reduction strategies have contributed to the improvement of inter-ethnic relations.

Uszka is a small settlement that has increased from 228 inhabitants in 1989 to 419 inhabitants by 2012. This change was accompanied by a shift in the ethnic composition, in which the proportion of Romani is currently between 80-90%. Unemployment was the highest (43% according to Rácz (2008: 389) in the small Tiszahát region, only counting the officially registered unemployed.

The study was based on interviews, focus groups interviews and participant observations conducted during the winter of 2012 and spring of 2013. Among the interviewed are the local mayor since 1994, two vice mayors, one administrative leader, one public works brigade leader, six religious leaders from the local free-Christian denomination, one Protestant priest, one project leader, one local Hungarian- and a group of Roma residents, and made participant observations.

Deindustrialization, welfare state retrenchment and long-term unemployment

Post-socialist communities became a major site for the emergence of the precarious class. In Hungary, the post-socialist economic transition resulted in mass exclusion from the labour force. The employment rate has been 56.2% in 2011 compared to the EU 28 average of 64.1%, with only Greece having lower levels among the EU 28. The improvement of the employment level reached 61.7% by 2014 (OECD 2014), when six other EU 28 countries had lower rates and the average for the EU was 64.8%. This improvement has been attributed to an increase in public employment. During the post-socialist transformation, rural communities were hit the hardest: decollectivization, as well as deindustrialization following the integration into the global economy, contributed to a larger degree of loss of employment opportunities compared to urban areas, while household-based production, which had a central role in rural survival strategies has drastically declined (Kováč 2010). Globalization has transformed rural societies, disembedding local self-sufficiencies, integrating

production into global chains and transforming production societies into consumer societies. Especially hard hit were communities with a longer distance to employment opportunities (Váradi 2008, 2010). As an outcome, inequalities increased, dividing the population into categories characterized by widely divergent living conditions (Atal 1999, Ferge 2002, Szalai 2007). Poverty became widespread, and large sections of rural residents became welfare-dependent. The mass loss of employment following transition was to be counterbalanced by the developing welfare state. However, neither has the economy been able to reintegrate the displaced labour force, nor have past and present governments presented comprehensive and effective governmental strategies to reintegrate those in long-term unemployment into the main stream of the labour market (Krémer 2008), as the welfare dependency of those on the margins prevails. The increasing educational gap in society (Molnár - Dupcsik 2008) indicates a long-term trend. Moreover, the neo-liberal turn in welfare policies, enhanced by the demand of international monetary institutions such as the World Bank, applied pressure for welfare cuts.

Public work, which shares some features with other EU workfare strategies (Junestav 2004; Clasen & Clegg 2011), was streamlined after 2010 by the national conservative (Fidesz) government. The Fidesz government has further accentuated the principle of “work-based society”, incorporating the duty to work in the Constitution: “Every person shall be obliged to contribute to the enrichment of the community to their best ability and potential“, and turn to social benefits to be determined according to “the usefulness of the beneficiaries’ activities for the community”. Thus, Article 19 excludes “idle beneficiaries” from rights (Szikra 2014: 492). A new Labour Code was accepted and unemployment insurance was cut to three months (modification of Act IV/1991), social assistance was lowered to 15% of the average wage (modification of Act III/1993), social subsidies were made dependent on at least 30 days of work participation; the welfare client claimants had to accept employment opportunities regardless of educational level, while in the absence of such opportunities they had to participate in public works programmes (Act CVI/2011). Behaviour codes were required of claimants, requiring them to keep gardens tidy (Act III/1993), and since 2013 claimants can be excluded if their children are caught being truant from school. Meanwhile, the amount of labour hours for public work increased to eight hours per day, whereas public work has not been incorporated under the protection of the Labour Code. Payments are weekly and have been lowered to 70% of the minimum wage. Consequently, punitive elements of workfare have increased. As a result, municipalities are not obliged to provide public work for all unemployed. Exclusionary stipulations open for misuse by local municipalities, and examples of blatant racist misuse have been addressed by civil rights associations (TASZ 2013) and by the Ombudsman of Fundamental Rights (2012).

In Hungary, welfare provision is a municipal responsibility, while resource-weak municipalities lack long-term, viable instruments for fighting exclusion in the context of economic recession (Szalai 2007). The basic form of public work is financed to different degrees (between 70-90%) from the state budget to partially compensate municipalities. Nonetheless, resource-poor municipalities might not have the

resources to co-finance. Therefore, in settlements lacking viable enterprises capable of offering market-based employment in rural areas, municipalities have become the key agents for realizing the state ambitions of a new form of workfare, i.e. preconditioning welfare with work.

The START programme was initiated by the Fidesz government to fully finance public work projects by multiply disadvantaged regions with an unemployment rate over 14%. These opportunities cannot be simply applied for on the basis of some type of given normative standards. Municipalities have to actively create viable programmes for the employment of people that they ask state refunds for. However, not even these regions receive support corresponding to the total number of eligible unemployed. According to Cseres-Gergely and Molnár (2014), only 10% of those on public work programmes find market-based employment after public employment. The participants in the most optimistic cases could circulate between short-term START work and social security payments.

In 2014, the public work wage was 77,300 Forints brutto, leaving 50,630 Forints after taxes. Those with higher qualifications were entitled to a higher payment. This wage was higher than social security payments (from 2012 called foglalkoztatást helyettesítő támogatás), which as of 2014 was 22,800 Ft. Public work wages constituted 78% of the minimum wage, which was 101,500 forints brutto and 66,480 Forints netto. Public work provides highly precarious life conditions since the provided work is typically short-term (5.1 months on average, Cseres-Gergely & Molnár 2014: 211). In 2013, 49.5% of public workers were employed within START programmes, 30.6% in long-term public work and 20.2% on national public work programmes (ibid: 214). Further restrictions have been implemented from 2015, which has taken away the obligation from municipalities to pay social security benefits.

Neo-liberal and social-conservative trends of welfare state transformation aggravate social differentiation, thereby facilitating exclusion along the lines of “deserving” and “underserving” poor while increasing social tensions between different sections of society. Moralizing between the deserving and undeserving poor obtained an ethnified dimension, in which Romaness and undeservingness often become unhappily associated (Schwartz 2012).

Enforced workfare results in new forms of precarious labour relations. The state support to the maintenance of workfare modifies market principles, since under these conditions labour does not have to be self-financing. Furthermore, workfare employment typically falls under specific labour security regulations. Because the eligibility to social welfare revenues has been preconditioned by participation in public labour prior to 2015, those enrolled in these programmes are in a dependent position on local notables and the judgement of local moral communities (Kay 2011). In the meantime, public workers constitute a close to free of charge labour for municipalities.

Regional enclaves of impoverished “rust pockets” and the ethnification of poverty

Among those living in poverty, Romani are strongly overrepresented (Tárki 2013, Fodor 2002, Ladányi & Szelényi 2004). Those Roma who live in peripheral rural communities can be seen as multiply marginalized. Due to a lower level of education compared to the majority society, they experience a higher level of exclusion from the labour market, and are often even subjected to exclusionary practices within their communities (Schwartz 2012).

The deprivation of Romani communities are seen as multi-causal and related to a combination of structural and cultural factors (Ladányi - Szelényi 2004, Dupcsik 2005) with path dependencies. Under state socialism, the marginal position of Romani was defined by politics as a social, rather than ethnic concern, hence promoting the conformity of the Roma population to the majority. Thus, the state socialist policy was assimilationist towards the Roma. This implied a participation in the labour force and an improvement in living conditions, even if integration into the labour force was not on equal terms and the independent minority status of the Roma was not acknowledged (Majtényi & Majtényi 2012). In the meantime, there were spontaneous processes of local integration (Szuhay 2005), such as an unfolding Roma peasantization in rural communities, which he judged as a social rather than ethnic assimilation.

Despite a process of assimilation into mainstream society through labour force participation, the Romani have remained being subjected to stigmatization, and their integration has been on unequal terms (Ladányi - Szelényi 2004). The Romani formed the unskilled labour force of the technically backward state socialist economy, and when inefficient mines and heavy industry closed down, the Romani lost their jobs to a larger degree than regular Hungarians. Lacking skills, they could not reintegrate into the new branches, which required more diversified skills (Emigh, Fodor - Szelényi 2001: 3). Unemployment is most concentrated in the so-called “rust pocket” regions of the country, where small-size village societies are the most affected (Kovács 2008). This marginal situation is passed down to subsequent generations, since the school system is not capable of lifting children out of poverty (Molnár - Dupcsik 2008).

Váradi (2010) connected Roma marginalization to rural geographic and demographic processes of counter selective mobility. Aging communities with lack of employment opportunities became the targets of mobility for a social stratum weak in resources. This counter-selective mobility has obtained ethnic dimensions since the Romani constitute a large segment of those hit hardest by transition, and belong to the long-term unemployed. Local communities impacted by a counter-selective mobility experience a transformation of the system of coexistence, characterizing them prior to population change (Kotics 2012, Szabó-Tóth 2012). Previously, the established harmonic co-existence has been challenged, and often the original Romani residents associate themselves with the local Hungarians in opposition to the newly immigrating Romani (Durst 2008). According to studies by Havas (1999: 174 in Kotics 2012: 76), the process of ethnic transformation most typically gets started in settlements in

which the immigration rate of Romani reached 20% for a local community. Several studies have documented that the abandoning of the local schools by Hungarian children is typically an indication of a process of counter-selective mobility, which often leads to Hungarians, as well as resourceful Romani, to abandon villages, turning these abandoned communities into isolated ethnic Romani enclaves (Ladányi - Szelényi 2004, Virág 2010, Durst 2008). The common characteristic of these ghetto-like communities is the total lack of working opportunities in the “first market”. Those working become dependent on the quasi-labour market generated by various short-term welfare jobs and the black economy. The ghetto-like settlements typically lose their pattern-setting socially mobile inhabitants, and are “destined for a life strategy with a kind of now-orientation focusing on pure survival. Breaking the norm is not unusual in these settlements” (Kovács 2010). For those left to themselves in these villages, the unmediated power of the “baron” and “millionaires” subordinate those poor, without alternative sources of livelihood (Durst 2008). Therefore, the importance of culture and identity has also been raised in the understanding of ethnified poverty. On the one hand, impoverished communities recreate dysfunctional cultures of poverty, whereas on the other, the discriminatory practices of the majority society contribute to the reproduction of marginal positions.

Szalai (2007) identified the “municipalization of welfare” as one key structural explanatory factor for the reproduction of poverty. Following the transition social welfare has been designated as the concern of resource-poor municipalities strengthening the role of local particularities in forming the conditions of social citizenship in local welfare regimes (Asztalos Morell 2008): “poverty, as a social problem becomes a small community issue” ... “the conflict between poor and not poor appears as the malfunction of the local communities” (Szalai 2002: 39).

The decentralization of welfare to the community level gave power to local officials to negotiate entitlements to benefits. Moreover, these negotiations often led to ethnified differentiation among the “deserving” and “undeserving poor” on the basis of judgments made on belonging to “moral communities”, the workings of which are well documented in by case studies (Thelen 2012, Schwartz 2012). Neo-liberal arguments of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility mix with Soviet-style references to work morality in drawing the limits of these excluding moral communities. Theories on the role of ethnicity for entitlements emphasize the dynamics between majority and minority societies and the role of institutions: “Existence and maintenance of poverty and exclusion ... is not only rooted in commonly known structural factors, but also results from the working methods of educational and social security institution” (Schwartz 2012: 101).

Public work as a road for empowerment?

Workfare strategies emerged from the critique of social benefits, which were seen to passivize benefit receivers. Monetary transfers were seen to help the long-term unemployed to cope and secure access to basic consumption goods, yet did not improve the abilities necessary to achieve a better self-sufficiency. Some kind of improvement of abilities is necessary for breaking out of dependency and poverty (Sen 1984, Sätre 2014). To use Bourdieu's theory (1986), economic resources alone are not sufficient to break the reproduction of inequalities. The accumulation of and transfer of immaterial assets (human, cultural and social capital) is required for changing the vicious circles of poverty reproduction and marginalization. Bourdieu (1986) differentiates between materialized cultural capital (also called human capital, in the form of educational achievements) and embodied cultural capital (also referred to as habitus). Educational credits (human capital) open access to the labour market. Nonetheless, credentials might not suffice in cases of discrimination or a lack of contacts or trust (also referred to as lack of social capital). Habitus encompasses a set of orientations towards the world and ways of attributing its goods. In contrast to the autonomous risk-taking entrepreneurial habitus (Kováč 1988, Asztalos Morell 1999), welfare dependency (Kovács 2008) or a wage worker habitus is also associated with a kind of lost ability for independent agency (Swain 2003). Theories of the culture of poverty also help explain the reproduction of poverty to a combination of habitus (embodied cultural capital) associated with an acute present orientation and a general lack of interest in the future, and the lack of trusting social relations (Ladányi - Szelényi 2004).

While social capital is seen as a crucial asset, the lack of which enforces poverty, how one defines social capital varies. Bourdieu identified social capital as an asset that the individual accumulates through social contacts that can be transferred into other assets, such as jobs or market contacts. Following Bourdieu, Swain (2003) and Thelen (2001) argued that in-group social-contacts of the poor are only "shackles to break". However, as shown by Asztalos Morell (2014), under certain conditions even kin and neighbourhood-based contacts are important for the accumulation of assets, and can contribute to breaking out of poverty. Micro-finance projects build also on strong local networks in the effort to overcome poverty (Yunus 2007). Nonetheless, most scholars agree on the importance attributed to what Putnam (2000) differentiates as bridging social capital, i.e. social capital based on contacts between socially different groups, as compared to "bonding social capital", i.e. capital based on contacts within socially enclosed groups - for the accumulation of assets necessary for breaking out of poverty. Putnam (2000) also elucidates trust as a crucial feature of social capital, and views it as an asset realized in the sum of positive relations and the kind of climate of trustfulness in society it creates, rather than simply a sum of concrete helping contacts.

Uszka: From black collar commuter settlement to unemployment

Under state socialism, work was not only a right but also a duty, and those who were found to be without official work were punished. Both Roma and non-Roma alike had paid labour, and beyond the local agricultural cooperative most of the Roma of the village commuted to Székesfehérvár and Budapest to work on road construction. Those first people who lost their jobs due to the shutting down of industries felt ashamed:

“I do recall very clearly Uncle D. and K. [both of Roma origin], how their tears ran, since they came ashamed: “We came home, because our workplace shut down. We are going to be unemployed. What is going to happen with us?” They felt ashamed because they had no job left to go to.” (Ibolya)

The majority of the work opportunities disappeared by the early 1990s. Today, there are no viable employers in the vicinity of the municipality. Fehérgyarmat is the closest settlement with city status 37 kms away, and the two last sizeable private employers here, the spoon factory and a mechanical centre, resulted in the loss of 300-400 jobs. There is a conservation factory, which seasonally employs three shifts at the minimal wage level, which was 93,000 Forints brutto, with netto being a little above 60,000 Forints. Taking a job at a distance entails travel costs and extra food expenses. Therefore, even though there were attempts to organize a bus to fetch the workers, it was not seen as being viable to commute for the locals, according to the municipality administration. Hence, close to the entire active age population is without employment through the market sector, instead relying for subsistence on alternative incomes. The main provider is the municipality.

The kinds of jobs that men in particular could take are in the building industry. However, many had bad experiences from Uszka. As one of my interviewees, Nándor, explained: “People were locked away with promises, and after two months of work they did not receive either their regular pay or their social security employer fees.” This was also the case with entrepreneurs in the building industry, insofar as the company they had contracted work with had not paid them. People have a suspicion about jobs a long distance away. This stands in contrast with the experiences of the older generation, many of whom worked in another part of Hungary in Székesfehérvár. They were fetched by busses and lived in workers’ hotels working at construction sites.

Poverty relief or Workfare: Public work as access to social benefits

Public work as a social security instrument in the municipal government became first promoted by the socialist/liberal Horn government (1994-1998). The mayor, who has been in office since 1994, expanded the utilization of public work. As the administrative chief in Uszka explained: “Prior to 1994, the municipality employed only those who they needed. The former mayor did not want to employ more people than he needed, as he wondered: ‘What kind of job could he give to these?’” (Ibolya). The new mayor’s goal was to incorporate everyone into different public work projects to secure an income for everyone, which was the prevailing goal, even at the time of the interview: “Nobody should be left without benefits... we pay attention that everybody should get at least the 22,500 Forints” (Veronika).

The mayor remembers that:

“When I started in 1994, I found that there were barely a few people who had a safe income. To the contrary, they were not even eligible to receive social benefits or unemployment insurance since they could not show enough number of work months. ... They had to start from zero.”

The mayor introduced a strategy through which he could move the people back into the social security system:

“We tried to press for public work opportunities. We started to apply for these. And in this way, we turned the people into the system during a period of 3-4-5-6 years, so that everybody should have at least one year of an employment relationship, so they would become part of the social benefit system.”

In 2012, there are 140 capable working age people. Out of this, 100 were without employment. “Out of these we can occupy 60 people through the START programme during this year. Right now, we have 25-30 active.” This high participation rate in the START programme was made possible since Uszka qualified as a multiply disadvantaged region in the classificatory system. Such regions are eligible for a higher allotment of public work support from the state without municipality contribution to the wages. However, the length of employment varies. According to the brigade leader Nándor, two-month-long contracts were signed at a time, but as one focus group participant expressed: “We hope it will be extended to nine months.”

Work under the START programme pays 71,800 Forints brutto, leaving 47,000 after taxes. Those with higher qualifications are entitled for a higher payment. This sum is very low and not sufficient to live on. Nonetheless, this sum is still higher than social security, and people are interested in obtaining the positions.

According to the administrative chief, social considerations are central in decisions on selecting participants in the programmes: “Those are chosen who have no other income, i.e. have already lost eligibility to social benefits Families with children are prioritized. However, not all who want can get appointed” (Ibolya). This intentions is

only partially corroborated in one of the interviews, in which an eighteen-year-old father with two children complained about not having been admitted into the public work programme. He felt that “some are favoured over others”. In the meantime, he was not without social benefit thanks to previous public work employment. A social benefit system, in which the available means (number of public work opportunities provided by the state) do not cover all the needy (those without employment and ready to work), puts pressure on municipalities to make choices. As a result, feelings of discontent can emerge despite alleged intentions to work for a socially sensitive distribution.

Public work in public areas and municipal institutions

Municipalities most commonly utilize public work to clean public areas and produce for the benefit of public institutions. In Uszka the 60 public workers were divided into brigades. One of the brigades worked with cleaning the irrigation ditches for polder and fixing the inland inundation system, whereas another brigade cleaned five hectares of land of bushes and trees. The rehabilitated land was utilized for sowing maize and potatoes by the municipality’s tractor. The third brigade worked with the reparation of a bicycle path and the fourth in the day activity centre for the elderly. Lastly, a brigade consisting of five members was assigned to building renovation and maintenance work and, among others, painted the elderly home in the winter season:

“I asked him. Give us at least five people. I was bargaining with him, like the kofák [outspoken saleswomen] on the market. He checked how many quadrat meters and then asked me if there was something else to paint. I said the funeral (catafalque) room.... We got support for five people for two months.”
(Ibolya)

During 2012, Uszka applied for the implementation of a renewable energy-based furnace utilizing biomass that people would collect along the roads and cut into small pieces. This could employ two heaters throughout the entire year.

Municipal agency and public work projects

According to the municipality administrator, the application for START support requires an active agency from the municipalities, and those mayors who apply for it are taking a risk because the type of work they claim to provide is controlled by the authorities. It has to be work and activity that fulfils EU and national standards, as well as being an activity that is possible to carry out on the sites of the municipality. Municipalities are not entitled to apply for material expenses, i.e. they have to provide buildings and equipment. According to the municipal administrator of projects, this involves a large risk-taking by the mayors:

“Truly, what kind of eight-hour work can one provide for 150 people? To clean the sidewalks or slash hay in December? But the mayors take on the task, simply to be able to ensure people 47,000 and not 22,800 Forints [income a month]. And there are some people with ill will. It is enough that someone makes an ill-willed accusation to the authorities. If a controller comes out, we have to prove what the people were working with.” (Ibolya)

For example, the municipality tried to initiate local pasta production. However, the controller from the Ministry of Internal Affairs found that they had no proper kitchen that would meet the standards required by ÁNTSZ (Állami Népegészségügyi és Tisztiorvosi Szolgálat: National Health Institute). Although they had a kitchen in the elderly club, this was only certified to warm food. Consequently, before being able to produce pasta and receive START work support for it, they first needed to find resources to upgrade the kitchen. The municipality does not own many buildings, and those they own are not in the best condition. One planned solution was to apply for additional support through the Settlement programme to upgrade the cultural house, thereby making it suitable for a workplace for public winter work.

Furthermore, the controller wanted to know what they wanted to do with the pasta, since the municipality does not run day-care centres, schools or institutions where the pasta could be utilized. The administrator’s suggestion to sell it at the nearby city market was received with laughter:

“I suggested that we take it to the market and sell it. The notary was sitting beside me, and he was holding his stomach, he was laughing so hard. ‘What kind of ideas are you making up?!’ ‘No I said. I am not making up ideas. It is indeed so. We could pack it nicely in small packages. They would take it as sugar.’” (Ibolya)

The municipal administrator describes her agency as being a saleswoman, “pressing and bargaining” with governmental officials. Nevertheless, the critique had to be taken seriously since the production of food has to meet hygienic standards, and in the end they did not receive permission to produce pasta.

Beneficiaries of public work production

The usufruct of public work is commonly aimed to benefit the local municipalities, which was corroborated by four other fieldwork sites. However, Uszka is too small to run its own larger institutions, such as schools or day-care centres. The only institution left is a limited-function elderly club and homecare service. This is too limited to be able to provide supply needs to make production in a municipal regime feasible. Therefore, part of the yield was given to the day-care centre and the school located in the neighbouring communities.

In Uszka, the usufruct of agricultural production remaining after allotments to the public institutions was divided between 68 families below minimum income. The eligible received 10 kg of maize. There were 10 families, those receiving pensions, who were just above the minimum income. Finally, the representatives decided to give something to everybody: "Even these are poor. They only earn a bit above the minimum... That would only create tension in the community", argued one of the vice mayors, a Roma man, who was also a leader for one of the brigades.

Another fringe benefit of agricultural production is the spread of know-how, which is expected to stimulate household-based production.

Alternative municipality strategies beyond public work

Through initiation of a project financed by the Social land programme 10 years ago a number of families started to grow cucumbers. This activity expanded in a way that today one-fifth of the families participate in petty commodity production. The municipality continues to assist the producers. The growers have also found integrators pre-financing part of the expenses of the production and who also buy up the products. Some of these families became also seasonal employers of day-labour. The municipality plans also to assist with the conservation of the cucumbers to increase the independence of producers.

While cucumber production is promoting a smaller elite group in the community, the municipality is also active in attracting support for the needy. Despite of the active policy to include the whole community into the social security system, social transfer are not sufficient to guarantee incomes sufficient to satisfy basic needs. Uszka municipality tries to complement the meagre transfers with deliveries of aid originating from charity. When I visited, they had just distributed help from the Child Food Foundation with biscuits, flour, sugar and pasta. "The people would be starving without these" (Ibolya). Receiving aid assumes the active agency of the municipality. They have also applied for donations from the Maltese Order, the Protection Alliance and the Food Bank. My visit was prior to Christmas. In order to be able to give Christmas packages to the needy, the administrative leader of the municipality tried to utilize all opportunities, having just written to four foundations asking for Christmas donations: "I throw myself after everything!" (Ibolya). They are in daily contact with the foundation Every Child Should be Fed.

Despite of comprehensive efforts to hinder poverty, there is a documented involvement with informal boarder trade corroborated also by previous research (Rácz 2008). The municipality tries to hinder the activity of usurers. Usurers are the typical usurpers of poverty (Béres - Lukács 2008). Based on the interviews it appears that while the municipality has a zero tolerance profile against usury, one of the administrative leaders attributes it to her personal agency to prevent usurers in Uszka. She provides a personal guaranty for those in need when buying from vendors that bills are to be cleared by and agreed deadline.

A central community forming force has been the local free Christian denomination with roots back to the 1970s. Although the denomination was founded by a Hungarian Baptist couple, by today a second generation of Roma teachers are leading the congregations (Kopasz 2011, Turcsány 1972). Religious rebirth is associated with strict moral obligations and community and family orientation, which has benefited the reborn members to fight asocial behavior cut on alcohol consumption and strengthen the obligations to provide for their families. The presence of the denomination has been a strong base for the municipal efforts. The mayor agrees that, “I have received this ready-made,” since the religious renewal had changed the local society by the time of his arrival. However, as he formulates: “I gave worldly legitimation to it.”

Community processes: Municipal representation and inter-ethnic relations

Some 30 years ago, alcoholism was often the cause of fights and atrocities between Hungarian and Roma men. At that time, Hungarians were in the majority and the Hungarian men fought with the Roma: “Those big men, Gy and P... There were many in the pub. And I saw how they were kicking my brothers.” Today the inter-ethnic relations between the Hungarians and Roma are seen by both the Hungarian and Roma informants I met as being mutually harmonious: “the most important change was when we, the Roma, converted.” Meanwhile, most of the descendants of the Hungarian peasant families have moved away from the village, leaving the elderly behind. Today, 80-90% of the inhabitants are of Roma origin. Consequently, Uszka is an example of Romanizing communities with counter-selective mobility and high degree of segregation. However, as argued above, the social development patterns of Uszka do not corroborate the association of ethnic segregation with the negative aspects of ghettoized communities documented in the literature (Váradi 2008), since the new pattern of giving families are of Roma origin.

Beyond the influence of the religious revival, the current leadership partly claims the virtues for the improvement of interethnic relations. Prior to the current mayor, the municipal council had no Roma representative, even if the majority of the inhabitants were of Roma origin by that time. The mayor has radically changed this practice. At the time of my visit at the end of 2012, there were six members in the council, out of this three are of Roma origin and one is half Roma/half Hungarian. It is crucial for him to work together for goals: “We should choose the goals together. Work for the goals together. If we succeed, we should be happy for it together. If we do not succeed, we should feel sorrow together.”

The mayor describes his principles in leadership as being guided by the triple rule of minority politics:

“Maximal tolerance in relation to otherness and positive actions for the needy, independent of the ethnicity of the needy, whether it be Roma or Hungarian or Ukrainian. Finally, zero tolerance against asocial behaviour. These three things have to be done together.”

The mayor agrees that, “I have received this ready-made,” since the religious renewal had changed the local society by the time of his arrival. However, as he formulates: “I gave worldly legitimation to it.”

His policy orientation towards the Roma minority was considered to be deviant during the 1990s:

“I was the subject of public hatred. What does he want with the Gypsies? What a traitor, he is fraternizing with the Roma. They were teasing me: He goes to bed with Gypsies and wakes up with fleas.”

However, the attitudes changed radically after 1997, when developmental means became targeted toward improvement of the conditions for the Roma. They realized the potential and started to call the mayor and ask for advice. By now, the mayor finds that the region is full of pro-Roma mayors, independent of their political status. He argues that beyond the availability of resources, the politicians also have a personal interest in promoting the minority. In the region, most mayoral candidates are Hungarians, who originate from their own villages. The two-three local candidates have their own family and supporters who normally give a similar amount of votes. The winner is the one who can address the Roma minority and gain their vote. Nevertheless, some mayors can fall on the other side of shifting norms and avoid the punishment of the Roma with antisocial behaviour, fearing their responses. The mayor brings a recent example, when he has fired a public worker who had not come to work for two weeks.

“I did not mind losing his vote. I wanted to demonstrate the zero tolerance principle. Because it is when you leave holes that the Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard) is coming and marching.”

Tolerance towards otherness is a complex issue involving respect for differences in preferences, style and readiness to understand the meaning of otherness. The neighbouring mayors were complaining why the houses are painted in all kinds of bright colours, including lilac: “This village would be fine ... if the houses were not painted gimcrack.” “The style of Roma is often loud, which many interpret as aggressive. One turns them against if you react as if it was aggressiveness.”

Meanwhile, one has to be proactive with the issues of poverty and need. The municipality applied for the so-called Settlement Programme, through which 67 houses were to be renovated between 2007 and 2008. The project was created for the improvement of the housing conditions of Roma communities. When they presented the project at the village forum, the Roma residents were complaining. They did not

want to be privileged compared to their Hungarian neighbours, who they perceived as having been in just as much need as they themselves were. Lastly, the municipal leadership returned to the ministry and applied for being able to incorporate even the Hungarian houses. “They were even cleverer than me. It was not my idea. They came up with this, the people at the Forum.”

Public work and the development of social and cultural capital

In 2008, the municipality applied for a project to improve the educational level of the inhabitants. As a result, 24 of those who did not complete their eight-year-long primary school could finally complete it, and those willing to complete the gymnasium could also do so. They employed a teacher from Tiszavasvári of Roma origin. The municipality also had a Tanoda, where gymnasium-educated Roma educator helped schoolchildren with their studies, although at the time of my interviews they were not in operation.

Even so, education was not valued by all of my informants. A young 18-year-old father had only completed eight years of primary school, and did not see it as being worthwhile to continue his studies. “Even those who have skills are without work” he argued, and his father supported his son. For these young men, to obtain public work was the best opportunity at hand. By contrast, another 50-year-old informant was proud to have completed gymnasium 10 years ago, thanks to adult educational opportunities.

According to my informants, the municipality had difficulties in influencing the kind of educational programmes made available through START programmes. This was a condition that limited the ability to launch activities demanding skills. Since public work programmes typically were underfinanced and assumed the replacement of technology by manual labour power, rather than the opposite, most activities were restricted to a low technological level. Therefore, public work seems to block rather than promote the development of skills. Even municipalities, like Uszka, which intend to promote skills, face hindrances to find viable educational opportunities for participants that these could capitalise on the open labour market.

Public work proved instrumental to move villagers back into the social security system. Public work provided also a social context beyond isolation. Thanks to the creative engagement of the local administration it has also been filled with meaningful tasks contributing to the improvement of local institutions, to the supply of food to these and to the members of the municipality. It has also strengthened community cohesion, since public workers could influence the ways how the surplus products of the work became distributed. By deciding to divide the produce to all residents, including poor Hungarian pensioners beyond those on the lowest income levels, who were mainly of Roma origin, they have strengthened the feeling of community solidarity. While public work in its form applied in Uszka has definitely strengthened social cohesion, it has not been increasing the contacts of locals beyond those in their

own situation, with the exception of those participating in trainings. Therefore, it could be seen to reproduce rather than brake the forces of local isolation.

Conclusion: Potential and shortcomings of workfare based programs

As argued above, municipalities have a substantial space for action to influence the conditions for the eligibility of individual people to receive social benefits. They also have a space of action in terms of creating opportunities for local citizens to cope with expenses and improve their resources, the creation of which provides them with opportunities to assume an active agency from their side.

The utility of public work for the marginalized had been closely related to the agency of local power holders and the local forces working for community cohesion. Municipal leaders and administrators in Uszka based their agency on the “triple principle” formulated by the mayor: positive actions to combat poverty, tolerance towards ethnic differences and zero-tolerance against asocial behavior.

Firstly, public work has been a major strategy from 1994 onwards utilized in Uszka to incorporate the long-term employed into the social security system. This was achieved by prioritizing the employment of those who otherwise would not have been eligible for social security payment and those with children to support. Furthermore, public work opportunities provided locally were filled with activities that benefited the community and contributed to the functioning of local institutions and public spaces.

However, public work alone could not solve the social needs of long-term unemployed. On the one hand, the municipality facilitates the emergence of entrepreneurial activities. As an example social land programmes helped to facilitate the growth of market-oriented cucumber growing, which led to the rise of a few entrepreneurial families who could offer alternative models in facing the destructive tendencies of alcoholism and the power of usurers. On the other hand, the municipality is active in attracting aid through diverse charity organisations to ease the situation of the needy.

Secondly, inter-ethnic tolerance was strengthened by universalistic principles of distribution. Differences between those above and below the poverty line are minimal in the community. Even those pensioners just above the poverty line, most of who are of Hungarian origin, live under severe constraints. Therefore, an innovative component of the local welfare state was the implementation of a universalistic distribution of the surplus food produced through the help of public work, rather than distributing according to strictly enforced means tested boundaries of poverty. This form of distribution was based on a decision made in consultation with the public workers, most of who are of Roma origin. Universalistic distribution contributed to inter-ethnic community cohesion and solidarity and gave meaning to public work for the participants.

Thirdly, the zero-tolerance principle against asocial behaviour increased the trust and credibility of the municipality externally as well as internally contributing to the improvement of work discipline.

It is important to add that, beyond municipal efforts, community cohesion emerged from the free Christian domination working in the municipality as early as in the 1970s. Belonging to the church also improved the trust vested in the community.

Municipality strategies in Uszka corroborate with what Rácz (2008) identified as a model of “producing municipalities taking over former agricultural cooperative functions”. Agricultural cooperatives under state socialism functioned as both large-scale producer organizations, but also as coordinators of small-scale agricultural production for their members and for the residents of the municipalities where they were functioning (Asztalos Morell, 1999). State transfers for public work are used innovatively in Uszka, a praxis that is in tune with what Rácz (2008) described in neighbouring municipalities. Lacking alternative investment opportunities, municipal leadership utilizes public work to expand the cultivation of abandoned agricultural land. In the meantime, agricultural know-how and support is extended to the households. As a third component, the market production of small producers is promoted.

Despite of the positive practices and achievements public work as an instrument to work against long-term unemployment has serious limitations. Local municipal administrations are restricted in their agency. Prevailing regulations and a lack of flexibility in access to developmental means, whether it be in relation to technological investments, local development or educational needs, does not give the potential of public labour to lead to either production capable of meeting concurrence or to the emergence of labour power with qualities ready to enter the open labour market.

Lastly, despite the socially sensitive utilization of public work by local municipalities, this institution in its current form and terms is not capable of functioning as an instrument of social security alone. The number of long-term unemployed exceeds by many times the number of available public labour positions. It can only be offered for a few months at a time, thereby providing an income below minimum wage. Socially sensitive municipalities such as Uszka need to lobby for further support, either from EU funding, alternative civil organizations or private donations, which indicates the dismantlement of the welfare state towards a rudimental neo-liberal and conservative form.

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