



# The case of Rónakeresztes

## A community house with a changing target group

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### THE INITIAL PROBLEM AND CONTEXT

#### The Place

Rónakeresztes<sup>9</sup> is in the inner periphery of the country. The town of some 20000 inhabitants has been historically an agricultural town with all the important educational, health care and social care institutions.

The segregated neighbourhood of Rónakeresztes is situated on the edge of the small town. According to different local estimations, 1800 to 2000 people live in this neighbourhood, but their proportion of the total population is less than 10 percent. It has been a mixed multi-ethnic community of the poor Roma and non-Roma people since the 1940s. Due to selective migration trends after the fall of communism, this part of the town tended to be a dominantly Roma neighbourhood: while non-Roma residents left the neighbourhood, former Roma residents who had moved to work elsewhere were constrained to return, and faced the decline of the local economy (especially for unskilled workers). Everybody who lives in

this part of the town is a Roma according to the majority society. Nowadays, the area- or as the inhabitants of Rónakeresztes called it, the 'Gypsy-Town' - where mainly Roma live, can be considered as a pocket of poverty: the conditions of the houses, streets and the living standard of the population are much lower there than in other parts of the town. Recently, this neighbourhood has emerged as a *stigmatized and criminalized* area, an ethnic ghetto and a 'no-go area' for the regular townspeople.

#### The Political and Social Context

In the last fifteen years, the development concepts of the town leadership have mostly focused on the renewal of the town centre and the modernisation of public institutions. In addition to carrying out developments, the local government initiated the expansion or downsizing of services and institutional capacities according to the needs of the local elite. In a continuously changing regulatory environment, it aimed to keep the rights to access institutions and services under its supervision; more precisely, to determine which groups of the local society would have the right to use them. Beyond limiting the right of access, there has been an increasing demand to create a *parallel set of institutions* for the socially and/or ethnically stigmatised group. The town's development concepts, the formal and informal regulation of the use of institutions serve the goal to make poor families in the 'Gypsy town' *invisible* and to make sure, that social and ethnic conflicts

<sup>9</sup> We changed the name of the town to a fictional one. See more Keller et al 2015.

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/176>



or problems would not spread beyond the increasingly more visible walls of the stigmatised district.

## The Initial Problem

The life of the poorest Roma families in the segregated neighbourhood (constituted by the former Gypsy colony and in the cheap unfinished social houses) is characterised by uncertainty and helplessness. Their daily life is all about improvised solutions for a day-to-day survival. Low level of education, exclusion from the primary job market, early parenthood and many children: all these factors are interrelated, keeping families in the poverty trap. Fear, lack of personal security is felt mostly in the former colony and in the neighbouring streets. This group has only limited social ties, functioning almost exclusively within this segregated area, primarily through kinship and neighbourhood relations.

In the obviously problematic neighbourhood, treated by the local government as invisible, a local development program was initiated by the Development Office of the local government: a Sure Start house project won the support of the EU funds. The project aimed to renovate a house and create a community space for the most disadvantaged families living in a segregated neighbourhood. The project's primary target group is the poorest families with small children: their early development and the programs for their families are to improve their situation in the long term and ease the problems caused by their living conditions and other structural factors.

## THE STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INITIAL POSITION

### The local government

The Development Office, a separate department within the Town Hall is responsible for the planning of integration programs. Its manager is satisfied with the planning process, which is – according to him – based on regular meetings with representatives of the ethnic minority and the civil society. In his narrative, no doubt is raised about the efficiency of the projects as long as the planning of projects fulfills all formal requirements. All in all, the interest of the Town Hall is that projects are developed, submitted adequately and accepted accordingly.

### Staff of the community house (Sure Start house)

Due to the lack of local expertise, it is hard for the local government to find tender experts for Roma integration projects. It happens often that the preparation of social integration projects is too challenging for those settlements where integration as a policy goal only appears on paper in tender documents. At the same time, the lack of dialogue between the actors is rather visible: the whole process from planning to implementation tasks are delegated and only executed by the staff of the municipality.

The Sure Start program was not planned together with the future social workers and community house staff, but they were selected afterwards. This predicts that the integrated understanding of the program



may be harmed by the actual staff in the field.

### Roma Ethnic Minority Self-Government (RMSG)

The local government maintains a balanced, but unequal relationship with the RMSG’s representatives; by involving them in the distribution of social transfers and public work opportunities, it delegates them responsibility, as well as the conflicts coming from the scarcity of sources. Meanwhile, the local government grants a kind of *gatekeeper role* to the RMSG members, whose function is to keep the members and problems of the Roma community away from the town and the local government offices. Accepting the gatekeeper role presumes loyalty towards the town leadership on one hand and it means the expropriation of institutional relationships pointing outwards to the families living in the Gypsy town (e.g. distributing the welfare and developmental resources granted to colony-dwellers) on the other hand. We could say that a *hierarchical chain of existential and political dependencies* has taken shape, where the president and the members of RMSG are loyal towards the town leadership, but are representatives of power towards the colony’s Roma.

Apart from a weak RMSG, there are no Roma NGOs or expert organisations that could represent the interests of the poor and Roma people and act as partner organisations of the local government in the planning of development projects.



### The residents of the “Gipsy town”

Residents are socially as well as spatially stratified in the Gypsy town. The poorest people maintain a strong distrust towards the institutions with which they do not have many connections. At the same time, they are strongly dependent on the resources distributed by the gatekeeper RMSG: social benefits, public work, seasonal and agricultural work.



### THE STORY

#### Phase 1 - Establishing a Sure Start house for the poorest people

The Sure Start program was launched in 2009 in Rónakeresztes. The local



government – however, was not interested in “making the neighbourhood visible” – but they were willing to bring EU resources to the development of the segregated neighbourhood.

The established community house is in the neighbourhood of the segregated part of the Catholic school (segregated school for only Roma children from the neighbourhood), situated at the utmost parts of the settlement. As a result, the house is at an uncomfortable walking distance for a mother with small children from the poorest areas of the settlement. All in all, the Sure Start house is located in a mixed Roma and non-Roma neighbourhood, close to a stigmatized institution, which defines its positions at the symbolic level and explains its stigmatization in the eyes of the town's residents.

Initially, a former public worker had become the manager of the house. Her task was to involve the target group, local residents from the poorest strata of the segregated neighbourhood in the project.

### Turning point 1 – The former manager of house leaves

The first manager of the community house soon left for maternity leave, before the actual program of the house could have started. The task of finding the suitable successor was delegated to the new manager. It proved to be a hard task, local teachers with an advanced professional career were not keen to work for the Sure Start House and the expert pool was quite narrow in the small town. As a result, she has been appointed as the manager,

because as a retired teacher she was also motivated to find employment.

### Phase 2 – The operation of the house with a new management

The new manager of the Sure Start house is well integrated in the local public life, she enjoys the confidence of the mayor and she cares about the residents of the settlement as the elected local territorial representative.

The Sure Start program is based on the inclusion of the Roma as employees to enhance the integrated operation of the community house. One of the three employees of the Sure Start house in Rónakeresztes is the president of the local RMSG. Due to his character, his presence strengthens authoritarian practices rather than trust-building. *“They fear him because he is a leader in the public work program and he can say that you shouldn't come to work tomorrow.”* (Manager of the Sure Start house) This situation depicts local circumstances; the way the authoritarian male leader of the RMSG becomes the „Roma colleague“ in the community house mostly frequented by women. His role can be understood as the watchdog of the local authority over the community. His gatekeeper position in all the programs targeting the poor and Roma population (public work, different social projects) legitimates and enhances the strongly hierarchical system in which the poor Roma cannot directly contact the local institutions (a parallel institutional system).

The other Roma employee of the Sure Start house is a young woman with a



university degree, who formerly had worked in the employment centre, in the Family Care Centre and in other projects. Nevertheless, she has never been employed in a permanent position, because *“they don’t like if a Roma is overqualified”*. She is very devoted to the question of Roma integration just as her father who had been a member of the RMSG for years. Thus she can really identify herself with the aims of the program and the role of a support staff.

The Sure Start house has made several efforts to reach its target group, the poorest families and to make programs attractive for them. Besides giving out leaflets and appear at different events, the Roma employees and the district nurses personally visited and informed the inhabitants. However, the visiting Roma employee was perceived by the residents as a representative of the authorities as they confused her position with the Family and Child Care Services’ workers. They feared that he would see the deficiencies of their households and they would suffer some negative consequences. This confirms that an institutional system based on hierarchy and exclusion feeds mistrust, therefore cooperation and symmetrical partnerships are unfamiliar for all the actors. There are no institutional mechanisms for the local community to participate in the work of the Sure Start house as it is primarily linked to personal relations of the manager. Older residents of the neighbouring streets sometimes get involved and help in the programs, but people living in the settlement do not come to work as volunteers.

Programs are organized in line with tendering requirements. Some mandatory services such as laundry are not used by the locals. According to the manager, poor families are ashamed to bring their clothes to public places, even though it would help them to save money. In spite of recognizing this problem, local authorities in Rónakeresztes have been unable to find a convenient solution. In this settlement, authorities have not been able to mobilize the poorest Roma families to participate in the activities of the community house. In addition, the daily schedule of Roma families does not match the strict opening hours of the house; when it is open, women must do their housework. Offering one or two hours of warm shelter in a day and some food is not a solution for those living in extreme poverty because they have to ensure their livelihood in the remaining time as well.

## Turning point 2 – Finding a new target group

The strategies of involving the original target group, the poorest group of the segregated neighbourhood did not succeed; they were not open to participate in the programs. The staff of the house started to involve a new target group in order to fulfil the administrative duties.

## Phase 3 – A success story with a new target group

According to the official program of the community house, it aims to address disadvantaged families living in the segregated area of the town. In practice, however, the house is open to all disadvantaged families. As a result, the



target group of services offered by the community house has shifted to *lower-middle class families* who are unable to pay for services at a market price. According to the manager of the Sure Start House, being disadvantaged is not only a financial question. A young woman can also be regarded as disadvantaged if she arrives by car, but gets no help from her family in the childcare and if she is left alone with her problems.

By also targeting other people than the poorest, the staff of the Sure Start house could reach the appropriate amount of people to match the formal requirements of the project. Many functions – e.g. the laundry machine, shower – are not used at all, because these program elements are specifically designed to those who do not have running water at home. However, the program became a success story and one of the most recognized Sure Start Houses in the country. The local government was satisfied with the operation of the house, because it was succeeding along the indicators and also could be shown as an effort for the advancement of the poor townspeople.

## CONCLUSIONS

The case of the Sure Start house in Rónakeresztes implies that people participating in the implementation of the program do not address long-term integrational aims and visions. While the leader of the house is working to fulfil the requirements of the project, the RMSG representative appears in an authoritarian role in the local setting. Only their young Roma colleague contemplates the integration opportunities from the point of

view of the local residents. While the original idea behind the Sure Start House was to reach the poorest people, it could not be adapted to local circumstances in a flexible manner. In this way the house, instead of pursuing an inclusion strategy, only follows an administrative routine and thus reproduces existing hierarchical relations.

This micro-story gives an example of how local development funds were diverted to reach the lower middle class instead of a territorially based development for the poorest people, while the whole story of the community house was perceived and communicated as a successful development and integration project. In practice, however, the absence of staff committed to the principles of the original project led to a situation in which statistical project benchmarks were met during implementation, while the unequal treatment of people and exclusion continued, hierarchical relations were recreated.