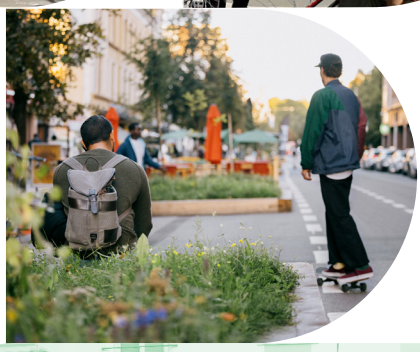
Urban Doers Community

Alsómocsolád Community Energy Initiative

Editors: Lisa Hudson-Bushart | FFG, Johannes Riegler | FFG



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EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP

Co-funded by the European Union

Imprint

Driving Urban Transitions Partnership
Website: https://dutpartnership.eu/
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/dut-partnership/

Design and Layout
Front page: HAUS
Text: Tina Cihal

Photo credit
Front page: In order of appearance: Johannes Riegler, purchased image from iStock, Mariborska kolesarska mreža, Barkarby Science AB, Jan Khur, Julie Hrncirova, Supergrätzl Lichtental

November 2024

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Name of author(s)	Anita Szőllőssy, Eszter Úr
Contact Details	https://transzformatorkozpont.hu/, https://www.facebook.com/Transzformator, eszter.ur@szolidarisgazdasag.hu

Abstract

Alsómocsolád is a small village of just 300 inhabitants in Baranya County, Hungary, where the mayor is progressive and, the municipality is among the better-off of the small settlements. The inhabitants have higher status than those living in the surrounding villages although the houses have an overall bad energy efficiency rating as it is common in rural Hungary.

Our original plan was to help and facilitate the funding of a community financing scheme for renovations in the village, in which the municipality would play a supporting role alongside the residents. In the long term, the main goal would be to build an energy community based on electricity sharing and solidarity.

During the preparation of the project we conducted interviews with locals, about their energy usage and housing situation, also with municipality officials and we have spoken with the mayor on multiple occasions. During this fieldwork, we could identifiedy some bottlenecks that could potentially hinder the implementation of our project.

Firstly, we realised that the village is too small and there are too few savings to get started. Also, it was revealed that a community financing scheme had been considered in the past on other issues, but residents were not really open to it: those who have the opportunity are not really open, and those who are open and would need it, cannot contribute. Secondly, we also saw from the interviews that although it is a fairly well-off village, some forms of energy poverty are present, for which the proposed model is not a solution, so it is worth creating other plans in this area.

As the original project could not be realised, we started to work out on alternative ideas. Based on our interviews and field experience, we have developed recommendations that we believe are feasible and address the problems identified in the settlement.

Our main idea is based on an interest-free municipal loan, which is a best practice that already exists in the municipality in a basic form. The aim would be to make the loan accessible to people living in energy poverty. It should not require a significant contribution from the client and could be applied for a new renovation immediately after the repayment was done. Also, and very importantly, financial support alone is often not enough. Reliable expert support is also needed; this is particularly relevant for single elderly people who live alone. A local one-stop-shop would be a best practice to overcome this.

In addition, a complex village renovation programme should be developed. This could be based on a comprehensive energy audit, which would include a general energy audit of the houses and a questionnaire to assess the needs of the inhabitants. This programme could also provide the professional support to the citizens that they need, in addition to the financial support. For the locals to be more interested in renovations there could be model projects that they can see and learn from. These could be done on the houses owned by the municipality, which are in differing energy situations.

Key lessons:

1. Problems related to energy use and housing conditions vary greatly between different households (e.g. newcomers, locals, elderly people, etc.). Also, asking for help is a major issue for those who would need it the most, because of their pride, and also the small community makes it harder.

2. Alsómocsolád is a village that is overloaded with projects, participatory planning and EU grants. However, it is also a small village: we should focus on connecting initiatives from here with neighbouring villages. Secondly, we should also focus on developing the existing projects and not always coming up with newer and newer ideas.

3. You cannot have a proper energy efficiency community fund without external help. Be it the state, or the municipality, energy efficient renovations are highly capital intensive ventures and it is unrealistic to expect the Hungarian residents to put this together by themselves.

4. Interviewing and making contact with the locals was very easy - everyone that we contacted let us into their houses, and shared their experiences about energy issues and even their living conditions, which is very sensitive information since it's so linked to class and income.

5. Financial support is hardly enough when it comes to energy efficient renovations because in many cases, especially with elderly people, professional support would be needed as well. They don't trust just anybody, they don't know where to find professionals who can work on their houses.

Hungarian and local context

Alsómocsolád is a small village of just 300 inhabitants in Baranya County, Hungary. This is important to underline, as the project was not implemented in an urban environment - however the project shows the peculiar challenges of working in a small rural environment. We didn't choose an urban site for our project, partially because we were already in touch with this rural municipality and wanted to continue the collaborative work and partially because we feel that the challenges that are apparent in this small village are very general to the Hungarian countryside.The lack of funding, the bad shape of the housing stock and the lack of community models drove our decision to work with a small municipality.

There are a few important features that define the character of the village:

- The mayor of Alsómocsolád is very progressive, and has been in power since the regime change - meaning the 1990's. He is not linked with any major political party,

- the municipality is among the better-off of the small settlements, since they have major tax revenues from some factories that operate in their area,

- and the inhabitants have higher status than those living in the surrounding villages.

However, the overall quality of the buildings is not very good in Alsómocsolád. In Hungary, most of the buildings are not insulated and there is an average energy efficiency rating for the housing block of an "H", and most of the single-family houses were built before 1980. At the moment, this problem is being overlooked by the government, while there are tons of people in rural Hungary who cannot properly warm up their rooms and houses. Now, there is one grant available for energy efficient house renovations, however, only 20.000 houses will get the grant, while there are more than 1.000.000 single-family houses in Hungary.

In addition, it is worth emphasising that in the last 10 years the municipality has received and implemented several grants (mostly from the EU). There is also a strong effort to involve the citizens of the village in the planning of these projects, and therefore several community involvement and community planning exercises have been carried out in the village. This has also resulted in the locals getting tired of being involved in such projects - which we could also feel when trying to implement our community involvement and participatory planning schemes.

They even have a vision and a mission that you can barely see from municipalities this size:

<<Our vision is: "Alsómocsolád is a small, liveable, friendly, and innovative settlement of the 21st century, preserving and renewing its values, growing from the local economy, increasing the number of its inhabitants."

Our mission: 'To create a liveable settlement, protected, valued, and loved by its citizens, which retains its population and attracts those who have left; responds to the challenges of our times; seeks and finds its breakthrough points; develops on a human scale; constantly renews itself, makes itself open, interesting, and attractive to the world; seeks out opportunities that can serve local, regional, and wider needs in an economically viable way.">>

Source: https://www.alsomocsolad.hu/?oldal=495

Original plan

The original plan was to help and facilitate the founding of a community financing scheme for renovations in the village, in which the municipality would play a supporting role alongside the residents.

In the long term, the main goal would be to build an energy community based on sharing and solidarity.

During the preparation for the project and laying the base for a future energy financing scheme or energy community, we conducted interviews with locals, municipality officials and have spoken with the mayor on multiple occasions, while also being in touch with the climate advisor regularly. During this fieldwork, we identified some bottlenecks that could hinder the implementation of our project.

Problems

We could see based on the interviews with the locals that a larger community would be needed for a community financing scheme to be established. The village is too small and there are not enough savings to get started. Also, among the more well-off members of the village we could sense some reluctance to contribute to such a community fund - ideally maybe even a bigger share, than the least fortunate members of the village. The project process revealed that a community financing scheme had been considered in the past on other issues, but residents were not really open to it: those who have the opportunity are not really open, and those who are open, cannot contribute.

From the experience of the interviews, we also found that although it is a fairly well-off village, some forms of energy poverty are present, for which the proposed model is not a solution, so it is worth creating other plans in this area.

At first, we interviewed some more well-off residents, such as a Dutch expat couple, who have been living in the village for almost a decade now. They were basically experts in energy issues: they have completely renovated and insulated their house, the PV installation is underway, they use perfectly dried out wood in their biomass heating system and they found the behaviour of Hungarians in the village inapprehensible. Why do they use trash and fresh wood that covers the whole village in a dark cloud for the winter? Why do they keep their shutters closed in the wintertime, when they could utilise the energy of the sun to heat their rooms to some degree? The newcomers were baffled by these differences...

Meanwhile, the local Hungarians face very different problems: when talking to an elderly lady who is living alone in an old house, we realised that there are parallel realities existing even in a small village such as Alsómocsolád. She cannot heat up her home properly during the winter. She is doing everything in her power to modernise her home, but even with the help of the municipality, she only has the means to keep her home from falling apart. Her pension is around 100.000 Forint, equal to ca. 250 euros monthly, which is obviously not enough to renovate a house, or to form any kind of savings at all. It is not even enough to buy double the amount of wood that is needed for the season, so that she could have dry wood the next year. This is of course not general for the whole village, the average must be somewhere in the middle between the aforementioned two examples.

The main obstacle to the establishment of an energy community is that in Hungary there is currently no possibility for energy sharing in practice, and this must be preceded by the implementation of EU legislation and the development of detailed rules. In addition, the settlement already has a number of solar panels owned by the population, so installing new ones is not the priority in terms of energy efficiency. In a lot of households, the main problem is rather the overall condition of the dwelling, and the logical way of going forward would be to renovate the buildings, have a lower consumption and then size the photovoltaic installation according to that - also this way you would have a roof that can support the weight of the solar panels.

As the original project could not be realised, we started to develop alternative ideas. In order to do this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with local residents about their energy usage and housing situation. We explored topics such as what energy sources and appliances people use to heat their homes or how the house is insulated, but also habits such as how many degrees they heat their homes to or how they dry their firewood.

In addition, we have had several meetings with local municipal employees, elected representatives and the mayor.

Based on our interviews and field experience, we have developed recommendations that we believe are feasible and address the problems identified in the settlement.

We have also consulted with an energy expert, who has worked with small municipalities where firewood is one of the main sources of energy for households. We organised a workshop with him and with the municipality officials and the mayor to be able to think about how to utilise firewood the best. From this workshop, it turned out that the biggest problem with firewood heating is that residents usually don'tdo not dry the wood out properly. Due to this workshopworkshop, a project plan was proposed so that the village can have a common firewood drying facility and help finance the first round of firewood for the residents. However, with outdated iron stoves and uninsulated buildings, this is notn't a perfect solution in itself which also led us to think in a more complex way of the energy issues of such a small locality.

Concepts that could work based on our experience

There has been an interest-free loan provided by the municipality in effect for years. In this context, the municipality ensures energy efficient renovation of households.

This is a beneficial scheme of course; however, it could be even more socially inclusive. During the interviews we have conducted, we could see that when it comes to grave energy poverty - which is of course accompanied by general poverty - these loans are not enough. One of our interviewees could insulate and rebuild one of the main facades of her house, which she could only pay back in very small amounts, over the course of years. Now that the loan is paid back, she has to wait two years to acquire a new loan - meanwhile, her main door and windows are outdated, to say the least, since the wind is blowing into the house. She mentioned that she has to use pieces of clothes to fill in the holes next to the entrance door. In addition to the waiting period, the problem is that this scheme also requires the provision of own capital.

Therefore, there should be a grant-scheme for energy poverty that addresses the issues of those who struggle to pay back interest-free loans.

According to our interviews, what could also be useful is a sort of professional support system that helps residents do energy efficient renovations. A one-stop shop would probably be too much for a small village like this but there should be one person employed at the municipality, who, besides other tasks, knows how to conduct such a renovation, has the contacts for professionals, is familiar with the technologies etc.

Secondly, a general outlook of the conditions of housing could also be a useful measure. It would start with a general survey, then a more comprehensive energy audit of the housing block with some general plans for each house, what the steps of a potential renovation could look like. The complex energy efficient renovations programme then could be based on this.

For the locals to be more interested in renovations there could be model projects that they can see and learn from. These could be done on the houses owned by the municipality, which have different energy efficiency ratings and are being let out at the moment. Building up on this model, the municipality could give out loans again, renovating some houses. Then, when the trust in the system starts to grow with the residents and they can see the benefits of energy efficient renovations themselves, they could also loan money to the programme, therefore slowly

building up a financial fund that is not only managed by the municipality but collaboratively as well.