



# Rescuing a small village school in the context of rural change in Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

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The paper discusses local responses to schooling policy in the context of the uneven differentiation and sharp social polarisation of the Hungarian countryside. Counter-urbanisation, on the one hand, has brought affluent urban middle classes to suburban spaces, on the other hand, peripheral areas are becoming impoverished with high unemployment, while there are rural areas where a process of ghettoisation is taking place. Parallel with these processes, rural education has had to face demographic decline and the shrinking ability of municipalities to maintain schools. The case study presented in this article illustrates the cultural and spatial barriers impeding the creation of co-operation in the field of education. Given that the community of the village concerned is remarkably vibrant, with strong intra-community horizontal ties, the concept of social capital is used to explain how bonding and bridging networks as well as “missing links” influence community actions, in this case a school-rescue operation.

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## 1. Introduction

In Hungary, as elsewhere in East Central Europe, rural change has been increasingly reshaping the countryside. Agriculture has been shrinking and provides livelihoods only in more remote rural areas and even there only for a rather limited number of people. Differentiation has been highly uneven; in the richest parts, the countryside has been transformed into suburban spaces reshaped by middle-class urban migrants, whilst in the peripheries, weak economies and scarce employment opportunities impede development and undermine the well being of the population. In the worst cases, the absence of resources coupled with ethnic segregation as a consequence of selective migration have resulted in a drain of human resources from the area, including both Roma and non-Roma people.

In 2004–2005, almost 15 years after the passing of the Local Government Act in 1990, measures were taken to reform the system of local authority funding. Local authorities were suffering from sharply declining financial viability and – particularly in rural areas – problems in relation to service provision. The funding of public services was secured through co-financing: central government covered the greater part (in the case of primary education

80–90% of costs were paid centrally) while municipalities provided the rest. But, by the turn of the millennium, the share of state support had dropped to 60–70% on average and 50% in small village schools.

Despite this, closures or amalgamations occurred only rarely; the rural school network was kept relatively intact until as late as 2004 as a result of state support provided specifically to small villages to maintain schools, on the one hand, and a new act passed in 1997 promoting voluntary associations of local governments, on the other. In 2004, however, an Act on Multi-Functional Micro-Regional Local Government Associations (hereafter MLGAs) came into force<sup>1</sup> which rechanneled state incentives and promoted the amalgamation of rural schools. The combination of legislative changes and fiscal arrangements of the central government brought the prospects of small rural schools to a turning point: there was a dramatic speed-up in the number of grassroots reorganisations and within four years the number of villages maintaining primary schools dropped by a half. An estimated 10% of small schools were closed, whilst some 30–35% were amalgamated and continued under the administration of a central unit.

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<sup>1</sup> Multi-Functional Micro-Regional Local Government Associations stipulated by the Act No CVII of 2004 represent a special type of so-called voluntary actions of local governments. (See Section 3.3 below.)

These processes were background influences for the events of 2007 when the closure and merger of rural schools as a consequence of top-down pressure on local governments attracted considerable media attention. One of the most eminent NGOs ('Human Chain') took up the issue and campaigned against closures ('Human Chain for Rural Schools'<sup>2</sup>). This movement directed interest to a group of small schools that had survived the harsh times. The school of Erdőkürt was selected from among these primary schools as our research site because of the villagers' remarkably strong community engagement, which raised the question of the impact of a strong local community on saving the school.

Section 4 below explores in detail the complex dilemmas surrounding the question of whether or not to maintain the village school in the context of financial constraints and demographic decline influenced by geographical conditions as well as ethnic and social processes within a rural neighbourhood. The ambiguous significance of the vibrant village community combined with a rich network of horizontal inter-community ties and a considerable stock of social capital in resisting amalgamation with any of the neighbouring primary schools is also discussed in this section. Prior to this detailed discussion of the case of Erdőkürt school, the paper explains the wider research project from which data have been drawn for this article and then offers a detailed discussion of rural transformations in Hungary and in the research location more specifically, and of recent political, financial and demographic factors influencing the maintenance of village schools in this context.

## 2. Research questions and methodology

The empirical research on which this article is based took place in Erdőkürt and its vicinity in three phases during 2008 and 2009 as part of a "research methodology seminar" at the Sociology Department of the Eötvös Loránd University.<sup>3</sup> Two broad themes were explored in the research: (1) the community itself with particular focus on civic engagement and its roots, and (2) the dilemma of whether or not to maintain the local school with issues ranging from pupil-recruitment policies, via alternatives to maintaining the school, to the attitudes of decision-makers.

The research approach was qualitative and included a number of different methodological elements. Seventy semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors including, decision-makers and administrative leaders of the local governments in Erdőkürt and its vicinity, leaders of the local NGOs, teachers, respected figures and opinion-shapers in the village. Focus-group discussions were undertaken with teachers, parents and a mixed group of decision-makers, NGO leaders and teachers. A set of structured interviews gathered insights and opinions from villagers (one fifth of the 280 households was sampled on a random basis, 51 questionnaires were completed). A total of 61 parents of pupils and 18 parents of children enrolled in the nursery were surveyed about parental choice (enquiring into their motivations and expectations in relation to the

school).<sup>4</sup> In addition to these various interview methods, the research team gathered information on the membership of local NGOs: membership lists with a basic set of information<sup>5</sup> were compiled. Finally, the minutes of local council and village assemblies were collected and analysed from 1990 to 2008.

## 3. The countryside and the researched village

### 3.1. Structural changes in the Hungarian countryside

In Hungary, as in advanced countries worldwide, rural areas are increasingly differentiating as they become more and more "integrated into regional formations which are proceeding along their own distinctive trajectories of development" (Murdoch et al., 2003: 10). Counter-urbanisation that had already appeared sporadically in Hungary before the fall of the socialist system and then accelerated in the second half of the 1990s still continues to affect rural areas around the capital and big cities intensively. The spreading suburban zones signal fundamentally changed (urbanised) villages and small towns with disappearing agriculture and an over-representation of better-off urban migrants. In parallel with shifting land use, traditional agricultural activities have increasingly been displaced from the spreading suburban (transformed rural) area and pushed towards more distant rural spaces. However, most of the new 'villagers' in the suburbanised zones have remained dependent on the urban labour market and service provisions, despite the economic boom which suburban areas have witnessed over the last 15 years, primarily due to the rapid growth of logistics, trade and service industries (Koós, 2007). The point here is that new rural settlers' dependency on urban spaces sets geographical limitations on the process of middle-class outflow.

Though the emblematic social layers of counter-urbanisation have been the urban middle and upper classes, this does not mean that the process has been restricted to them. Members of the lower-middle class and the urban poor have also fled the cities in considerable numbers for two key reasons: 1) they sought lower living costs or 2) they moved to the countryside to live in a quiet and healthy rural environment in their old age. Neither of these groups could usually afford to move to the suburban villages and towns; rather, they chose villages outside the suburban area, but still relatively close to the city. Pensioners dominate this group of migrants, particularly among returnees. The few middle-aged migrants, confronted with scarce local employment opportunities and expensive commuting costs usually soon found themselves on public work schemes or in receipt of social assistance. The 'second ring settlers' are therefore less dependent on the urban labour market and services than the active aged middle-class of the more prestigious suburban zones. The intensity of the outflow of these migrants has been lower and geographically less concentrated than that of the middle class in the suburbanised area, therefore rural characteristics of the 'second ring' villages and their communities have been reshaped to a lesser extent than within the more attractive and prestigious 'first (suburban) ring'.

In sharp contrast to (rural) areas which attract an urban population, the countryside, especially in rural peripheries, has also been suffering from the consequences of the declining local and regional economy, such as high unemployment, the outmigration of youth and an ageing population profile. Adapting Marsden's typology these can be seen as 'clientelist' rural spaces, where "much of the ... rural economy can be sustained by state subsidy" (Marsden, 1998: 108). In rural hinterlands of regions hit by the collapse of heavy industry and the absence of viable economic

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.elolanc.hu/kisiskola/>.

<sup>3</sup> The project was led by András Lányi and supported by the Norway Grants. Five students from the seminar participated in two phases of joint fieldwork during the spring of 2008 and the summer of 2009 under the supervision of two teachers, Katalin Kovács and Katalin Rácz, researcher of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Most of the material was collected during these common fieldwork endeavours, with some additional material collected during subsequent individual visits.

<sup>4</sup> The questionnaires were either distributed to their parents by the pupils, or the parents themselves took them from the school/nursery and returned them once completed.

<sup>5</sup> The data collected included: date of first membership, age, occupation, local roots and any role taken in the NGO.

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