

Evaluation of the KÖZ-SZER-VEZ Programme (2016-26)

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1. Social and Organisational Background of the Programme

The KÖZösség-SZERvezés-VEZetés (Community Organizing and Leadership), abbreviated as the **KÖZ-SZER-VEZ** programme, grew out of the civil society development and grant management experience of the Ökotárs Foundation. Historically, the foundation had always operated on the premise that supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) cannot be limited to providing financial resources: it is at least as important to strengthen their conscious operation, sustainability, community roots, and skill development. One of the most critical problems of the Hungarian civil sector is that CSOs are usually driven by competent and deeply committed, yet relatively small groups of people, while their broader social base is often weak. During the past one or two decades, the cohesive strength of local communities has declined in many municipalities, civic participation has narrowed, and residents increasingly feel they have no meaningful impact on the affairs of their own localities.

The programme responded to this gap. Its primary objective was to help rural, small-town civic initiatives and informal groups (often in marginalised regions) learn how to identify local problems, reach out to and involve residents, identify shared issues, and advocate for interests along these lines. Therefore, the support provided by Ökotárs combined grant funding with a multi-year development process that included training, mentoring, consultation, and community learning. The starting point and the core idea of KÖZ-SZER-VEZ was that community organizing can only be successful when local residents recognise their own resources, increase their capacity for action, and are capable of negotiating with or exerting pressure on decision-makers who possess the power necessary for solutions.

The programme took place in several phases between 2016 and 2026. Initially, the focus was on launching local community organizing work: during the programme, collective thinking began in 75 communities through four open calls for proposals, and actual work based on community organizing methodology commenced in about two dozen of these locations. The results of the early phase were showcased through short films and a summary publication. From 2019, the focus of the programme gradually shifted toward building micro-regional networks, and by 2026, it reached approximately one hundred community groups across nearly fifty municipalities. Throughout the evolution of the programme, specific sub-programmes also emerged, including the *Ariadné* programme thread aimed at strengthening women community leaders, and the *Baranyai Jövőképek* (Futures of Baranya) initiative targeting younger generations.

2. Community Organizing as a Methodological Foundation

Community organizing does not mean general community building or event organisation, but rather a conscious advocacy process. Its essence is that members of a local community recognise their shared problems, identify the actors and institutions that have influence and competence to solve the issue, and take organised action for the cause. This can occur through negotiation, public awareness raising, freedom of information requests, public forums, petitioning, media work, or other leverage tools. An important element of the methodology is that local residents do not appear as passive beneficiaries, but as active shapers of their own affairs.

Community organizing therefore strengthens five main competency areas:

- Identifying shared needs
- Mapping opportunities and resources

- Building advocacy
- Planning collective actions
- Winning shared causes.

These steps build upon one another. First, it is necessary to understand what residents consider a real problem and around which of these a broader base of support can be organised. Next, it is essential to identify who potential allies might be, who the decision-makers are, what formal and informal resources are available, and what obstacles should be anticipated. Only after this can actual action planning and advocacy engagement follow.

In the KÖZ-SZER-VEZ programme, community organizing received particular emphasis in the case of municipalities or neighbourhoods with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. In these environments, local power is often characterised by strong and more personal relations of dependency, which is why reaching out to and activating residents can be simultaneously easier and more difficult. It is easier because people know each other, information spreads quickly, and personal trust can act as a mobilising force. It is more difficult because local conflicts, fear of retaliation, existential dependence, and existing fault lines can easily hinder open participation. The programme attempted to provide methodological tools to manage this duality.

3. Main Milestones of the Programme

2015 – Staff study trip to the USA visiting Joe Szakos, community organizer, one of the founders of Ökotárs and founding director of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth and Virginia Organizing.

2016 – The first pilot phase is launched with an open call for proposals, with Civil College Foundations as partner; organizing work starts in 12 communities.

2018 – The first phase is summarised in the publication titled “Results of community organising”.

2019 – Supported communities actively engage during the municipal election campaign to strengthen informed voting by organising public forums and debates among candidates.

2020 – Start of supporting (micro) regional collaboration, first in Nógrád county parallel with the launch of the Ariadne programme thread.

2021 – The regional collaboration approach is extended to Baranya, Zala, Nógrád and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties and the Futures of Baranya experimental project is launched.

2022 - The Futures of Baranya method is used in 3 locations involving almost fifty young people.

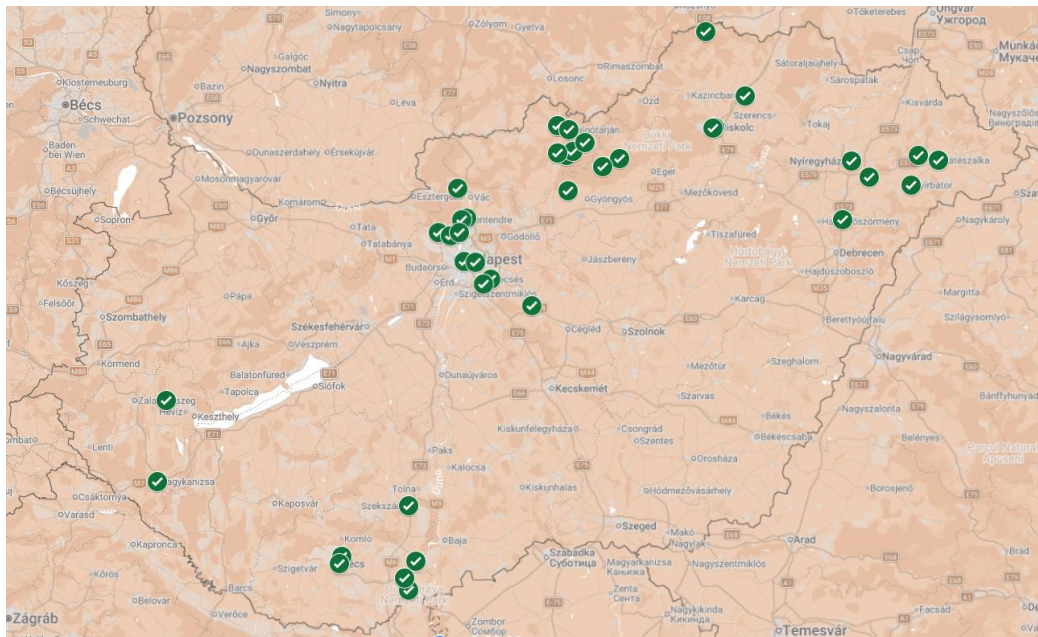
2023 – 2 regional collaborations are active in both Nógrád and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties.

2024 – The method of engaging young people is adapted to several dozen communities in 5 counties.

2025 – Programme evaluation and the methodology guide to engage young people are completed.

2026 – The first decade of the programme is closed – main locations on the map below:¹

¹ Represented municipalities in alphabetical order: Almásháza, Bányaterenye, Bódvaszilas, Budakalász, Budapest, VIII. ker., Budapest, X. ker., Dunaszekcső, Etes, Gyál, Gyöngyöspata, Hajdúhadház, Halmaj, Kazár-Mizserfa, Kölked, Mátészalka, Mátraverebély, Miskolc, Mohács, Nyírkálló, Nyíregyháza, Ór, Parád, Pécs, Pécsbánya, Pilis, Pilisborosjenő, Pilisvörösvár, Salgótarján, Sámsonháza, Szajla, Szekszárd, Szentendre, Szigetmonostor, Vecsés, Verőce.



4. Purpose, Methodology, and Limitations of the Evaluation

This study summarises the results of the final external evaluation of the KÖZ-SZER-VEZ programme (conducted by sociologist Gábor Héra, a researcher at HOLO) and to a lesser extent, also uses the results of the programme's prior internal assessments. The evaluation was based on

- programme documentation from the period between 2016 and 2025
- engaging the broadest possible circle of the communities that participated in the programme.

The research consisted of several phases. In 2021, document analysis and a survey data collection focusing on the female members of the involved communities took place. Between 2021 and 2024, nearly five hundred community members were contacted; out of 401 involved participants, 150 individuals took part in 37 focus group discussions and 19 individual interviews. In the third and final phase, between October 2025 and January 2026, an additional 15 interviews were conducted with newcomers. The evaluation was fundamentally based on qualitative methodology, though scale-based, numerical feedback was also used in certain questions. The main topics of the investigation were

- the background of joining the programme
- the evaluation of services provided by Ökotárs and partners
- experiences with the community organizing work
- sustainability, and
- development recommendations formulated by the participants.

A major limitation of the study is that participants often had to recall events from years or even a decade earlier. This can distort memories, make it harder to recall precise details, and reduce the validity of the results. The sample size cannot be considered comprehensive either, and the effectiveness of recruitment was also affected by the fact that some participants had already distanced themselves from the programme or the civil sector. At the same time, the main experiences, recurring patterns, and development directions could be captured. The strength of the evaluation lies precisely in the fact that it did not merely collect success stories, but also made conflicts, failures, exhaustion, and methodological dilemmas visible.

5. Background and Motivations of Participants

Participants entering the programme did not arrive with identical backgrounds. The evaluation distinguished three major groups:

1. **The first group** included those who, even prior to KÖZ-SZER-VEZ, had participated in civil development or community organizing training, for instance, in the programmes of the Ökotárs Foundation, the Civil College Foundation, the Hungarian Association for Community Development, or other organisations. For many of them, these earlier encounters marked the beginning of their commitment to community organizing; the language they used during the interviews also showed strong personal identification.
2. **The second group** comprised those who, while lacking community organizing experience, had previously strived to strengthen their local community or represent the interests of residents.
3. **The third and smallest group** consisted of those who had no previous background in civil society or community organizing, but felt a strong inner drive to become more active participants in the life of their locality.

One of the most important motivations for applying to the programme was dissatisfaction with local public conditions. Several participants reported collapsing small communities, apathetic residents, deteriorating villages, and the closed or arbitrary exercise of power by mayors and municipal councils. However, their desire for change generally did not mean striving for political power, but rather activating the community, strengthening local public discourse, increasing transparency, and involving marginalized residents. The majority of participants thus did not view the programme as a political career, but as a tool that could help handle local problems collectively.

The desire to belong to a community also appeared among the motivations. Several persons applied because they wanted to feel good to live where they reside, or because they wanted to become an active part of the local community. For others, the financial support of the programme was also important: it provided livelihood security and a certain degree of independence to dedicate time to community work. There were also those who were motivated by the joy of working with the community, continuing an already existing routine, or precisely by methodological curiosity. The diversity of participants was one of the programme's strengths, but also a challenge, as people with different levels of preparedness, distinct personalities, and varied local positions had to be integrated into the same development framework.

6. Evaluation of Services Provided by the Programme

Among the services of the programme, participants evaluated the training sessions most positively. These provided an opportunity to master the mindset and practical tools of community organizing. The training covered group formation, group leadership, the designation of roles and areas of responsibility, negotiation techniques, procedures of freedom of information requests, and strategies for coordinating with the representatives of power. Several participants emphasised that this knowledge was directly applicable in the field: it helped them prepare problem maps, plan actions, reach out to residents, and communicate with decision-makers.

In addition to training, regular meetings and mentoring also proved to be important forms of support. The meetings provided an occasion for collective thinking, sharing experiences, and learning from mistakes and successes. Mentors were mostly seen as well-prepared and supportive by the participants. They provided assistance in forming teams, prioritising problems, developing advocacy strategies, and handling blockages. In several cases, mentors remained in contact with the community organizers even after the official conclusion of the programme, which strengthened professional security in the long run.

At the same time, criticisms were also voiced regarding the services. A few participants missed quicker and more substantive feedback, particularly in the case of administrative or professional roadblocks. Others believed that stronger supervision would have been necessary because fieldwork was demanding not only professionally but also emotionally. It occurred sometimes that participants were left alone with local conflicts, anxiety, frustration, or uncertainty regarding their own performance. According to some feedback, the personal or professional fit between the mentor and the mentee was not always adequate, and the training curriculum did not always adapt sufficiently to the specifics of initiatives operating in urban housing estates, or as informal groups.

7. Implemented Activities and Advocacy Tools

The first step of local activities implemented within the framework of KÖZ-SZER-VEZ was problem identification almost everywhere. Community organizers gathered feedback from residents by going door-to-door, talking in public spaces, or at forums and personal meetings.

The problems uncovered were highly diverse. Infrastructural deficiencies frequently appeared, such as potholed roads, lack of sidewalks, insufficient public lighting, dangerous intersections, undeveloped bus stops, or the lack of direct transport between settlements. Elsewhere, public service issues came to the fore, such as disruptions in garbage collection, lack of public restrooms, rainwater drainage problems, the unavailability of basic hygienic facilities for public workers, or the inaccessibility of community spaces.

Following problem mapping, groups applied various mobilisation and advocacy tools. In some places, petitioning, Facebook campaigns, online mobilisation, preparation of press materials, or the involvement of national media took place. In other places, they used legal and procedural tools: they submitted freedom of information requests, attended municipal council meetings, monitored the work of the council, and initiated public hearings. Personal encounters also played an important role: town halls, group meetings, awareness-raising events, community mural painting, neighbourhood festivals, garbage collection, city walks, educational trail expansions, or playful quizzes. These served not only to advance a specific issue but also to build group cohesion and trust.

The composition and operation of the teams were highly varied. There were groups of a few people, but there were also teams consisting of 15–20 active members. Among the members, retirees, students, homemakers, Roma and non-Roma, long-time locals, and newcomers all appeared. Personal relationships and trust in the organizer were decisive, especially in smaller settlements. Teams often tried to establish rules: they defined tasks, responsibilities, the schedule of meetings, and in some places, even norms regarding mobile phone use, listening to each other, or managing anger. The strongest teams were characterised by the simultaneous presence of commitment to the cause, personal trust, and effective division of labour.

8. Factors Supporting the Work

Based on the programme evaluation, successful local work was supported by several factors:

- **Programme structure:** The training sessions, mentoring, consultations, regular meetings, and financial support together provided a background without which many local initiatives could not have started. Specific techniques carried practical utility, and regular meetings facilitated networking and horizontal knowledge transfer. Financial support was particularly important because it ensured time and independence for fieldwork.
- **Presence of allies:** These could be private individuals, civil society organisations, local institutions, media workers, minority self-governments, legal defense organisations, or informal contacts. For example, the local Roma minority self-government in some cases helped access municipal council

meetings and information. Elsewhere, old friends, former instructors, local associations, or national organisations provided advice, space, publicity, or advocacy support. Securing physical meeting spaces was particularly crucial because the sustainability of community organizing is difficult to imagine without a stable, safe meeting space.

- **Strategic issue selection:** It helped significantly if the chosen issue was capable of bridging local fault lines. Issues that affected many residents regardless of party affiliation, ethnic background, neighbourhood, or ideological commitment were best suited to form a broader unity coalition.

The presence of a committed, legitimate leader, regular meetings, a well-functioning division of labour, the utilisation of various skills, and the social support of team members also contributed to success. Successes—even in the form of minor results—reinforced the groups' self-confidence and reduced dropout rates. On an individual level, commitment, perseverance, and the capacity for resilience were particularly relevant, especially in situations where local power tried to hinder work through pressure or defamation.

9. Factors Hindering the Work

One of the most important lessons of the programme is that community organizing, in many cases, took place in specifically difficult political and social terrains. At the programme management level, several participants reported loneliness, a lack of feedback, delayed administrative responses, and an inadequate level of supervision. Community organizers frequently faced emotionally demanding situations: conflicts, fear, local attacks, feelings of personal inadequacy, or the frustration that the invested energy did not bring spectacular change. For some, this contributed to exiting the programme or even the civil sector.

However, the most frequently mentioned obstacle was the resistance of the local powers. Mayors and municipal councils, in many cases, did not view community organizers as partners, but as rivals or threats. Avoidance of communication, defamation, isolation, informal pressure, and the use of formal tools appeared as recurring motifs. Representatives of power often feared that community organizers would make real problems visible, thereby pointing out the shortcomings of local leadership, and could even become electoral challengers. The political context was further complicated by the fact that national government communication regarding foreign funding or civil society could generate mistrust at the local level as well.

Civic participation was also heavily hindered by fear of retaliation and existential dependence. Several feared that if they openly stood up for a cause, they could lose their jobs, public employment opportunities, or municipal housing. Social apathy, the "nothing changes anyway" sentiment, local fault lines, and conflicts between Roma and non-Roma, newcomers and long-time locals, different denominations or neighbourhoods also weakened the chances for collective action.

Additionally, internal team conflicts could impede work: rivalry for the leadership role, differing ideas about goals and tools, expectations of overly rapid success, leader burnout, or the passivity of team members. It is an important observation that mere engagement in conflict is not enough on its own; lasting results were achieved rather by those who, alongside conflict, were also capable of partnership and cooperation.

10. Achievements and Impacts

Overall, participants viewed the KÖZ-SZER-VEZ programme as rather successful, though the level of success was not uniform across all areas. According to the scale-based evaluations on a five-point scale:

- Planning of collective action: 4.50 (highest score)
- Mapping of local problems and needs: 4.25
- Mapping of resources and opportunities: 3.92

- **General impact of the programme:** 3.46
- Establishing effective advocacy: 3.12
- Winning shared causes: 3.11
- Activating members of local communities: 3.04

These data clearly illustrate the structure of the programme: it was stronger in activities that teams could implement through their own efforts, under internal control. Uncovering problems, planning action, and identifying resources worked relatively well. Tasks that would have required broader civic activation, cooperation with local power, or changing the external environment proved to be more difficult. Participants explained the lower values by pointing to fear, apathy, resource shortages, internal conflicts, and the resistance of local power.

Although the impacts did not appear exclusively in direct, immediately visible results, concrete successes were achieved: infrastructural investments were realised, safe crossings, bus stops, and community spaces were created, inter-settlement transit routes were launched, garbage collection improved, municipal council meetings became more public, minutes became more accessible, and members of certain communities gained entry into the local government.

In addition, the programme set an example for other residents: it strengthened local activism, increased the number of people standing up for shared causes, and contributed to the formation of a community organizer identity. The networks not only provided knowledge transfer but also offered psychological support to those working in a difficult, often adversarial environment. The skills of group members also developed, particularly in the areas of assertive communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

10. Sustainability and Development Recommendations

Sustainability presents a mixed picture. Certain community organizers and groups remained active even after the closure of the programme, especially where real issues were identified, the team was capable of cooperating, local power was not entirely oppressive, or the group was capable of counterbalancing this resistance. Sustainability was strengthened if a significant part of the municipality supported the initiative, if the team realistically assessed its resources, and if there was a legitimate leader who assumed the mobilising and facilitating role after the programme. Elsewhere, activity remained but became less frequent, linking rather to occasional events or other types of supportive group operations. However, there were also locations where groups disbanded: due to the departure of the leader, deaths, relocations, political disappointments, or the wearing-down effect of local conflicts.

Another dilemma related to sustainability involves those organisations that successfully ran candidates in local elections. If civil activists become representatives or mayors, their situation changes: the accountability-seeking civil role criticising from the outside and the decision-maker role can come into tension with each other. This can hollow out the original civil society organisation or cause conflict between those who continue to demand power transparency and those who already operate as part of the local power structure. This role shift, therefore, would require distinct support and methodological processing.

Participants in the research formulated multi-level development recommendations:

- **Programme management level:** It would be important to have more regular, direct, and predictable communication, more detailed justification of grant decisions, timely processing of contracts and payments, as well as a greater organisational presence at beneficiaries' events.
- **Professional level:** There would be a need for stronger supervision, the possibility of mentor rotation, conscious network building, impact measurement methodology, and digital skill development.

- **Methodological level:** The methodology should be better adapted to different types of settlements because it functions differently in a small village, an urban housing estate, or an informal group.
- **Operational Level:** Additional recommendations included the possibility of full-time employment, increasing organizer wages, and involving co-community organizers. According to some interviewees, it would be justified to introduce a form of filtering and support only those applicants who are suitable for this work based on their personality, cooperation skills, and conflict management style.

In conclusion, the primary value of the KÖZ-SZER-VEZ programme lies not merely in the concrete results achieved in certain local matters. It is at least as significant that it empowered individuals and groups who experienced that local problems are not necessarily just private matters or unchangeable realities, but issues that can be collectively formulated and represented. The programme also rendered visible both the opportunities and limitations of rural civil work in Hungary. Success requires methodology, resources, leaders, allies, and perseverance, but it is equally vital to realistically recognise local power relations, fears, dependencies, and fault lines. Furthermore, it can be stated that a sustainable community organising programme places great emphasis not only on supporting actions and results but also on the professional, emotional, and organisational retention of community organizers.