

ABATHON community development marathon

A case study of a methodological experiment in the Abaúj region

Introduction

In the spring of 2019, the Hungarian Association of Community Development (HACD) organised a professional workshop in Telkibánya, a village in the Northeast of Hungary. Its main goal was to explore – together with the international project partners, including those from Szeklerland, Transylvania, Romania – the possibility and pre-conditions of the community-based operation of social and health care services, with a focus on the quality of the services and the actors involved. At that time we had been working in the Gönc district for almost one and a half years, thus we had some impressions and important contacts from earlier times (like the "Fogadó" North-Abaúj Community Developers Association, in short: FÉSZAK-KÖR), as well as new ones. We examined why local actors (organisations, institutions), despite the resources at their disposal and their goodwill, are not able to achieve better results in public services. The partners involved in the research project have themselves formulated what they thought was the key to improving effectiveness: cooperative planning and development. It was clear that there were people, organisations and institutions who were willing to take action and generate change, who would be partners in an action-based process beyond the scope of the research project. We also sensed that our potential partners in rural areas were counting on us, because – in addition to raising awareness of community solutions – action requires ongoing motivation which they expected from us. As our partners in Szeklerland came to the same conclusion as we did in Abaúj, we had the two rural actors of the professional consortium as a given.

Based on the above findings, our colleague, a community development expert, Lucia Csabai, recalled a method that she encountered earlier in Estonia, which focuses on community actions that grow out of community planning. In Estonia this method was called a "competition of ideas" (or a social hackathon); it included events that were geared toward the community-based planning and implementation of social services in disadvantaged rural areas. Upon reading the methodological descriptions of this method, HACD colleagues committed to this field immediately recognised that the innovative method could have a refreshing effect on field interventions of community-based development.

These were the motivations behind forming a consortium, consisting of HACD and FÉSZAK-Kör from Hungary; the Human Reform Foundation (HUREF) and the Homoród-Küküllő LEADER Association (HKLE) from Szeklerland; and the Vorumaa Development Centre (Vorumaa Arenduskeskus, hereinafter Vorumaa) from Estonia. The potential funding for our work for the common objectives was offered by an Erasmus+ call for proposals. The specific topic that we included in the application was the adaptation of the social hackathon methodology to the professional framework of community development to test the practical implementation of community planning in disadvantaged rural areas in Szeklerland and Abaúj.

The term "hackathon" is a combination of the words "hacker" and "marathon", referencing the innovation-driven world of IT and the marathon length of the event. The method was first used in the IT sector to develop innovative ideas, usually in a 48-hour timeframe, with full professional support. Since then, the method has spread and is now generally used in the for-profit sector as a specialised competition of ideas. Building on these foundations, the Tallinn University and the Voru County

Development Centre in Estonia took this method further and adapted it to design and develop social services. In so doing, they aimed to make services responsive to local needs and to ensure that the local community, as opposed to being only an entity with expectations towards service providers, acts as an active participant in the process and feels responsible for organising better care and providing the missing elements of services through civic initiatives.

For us, community developers, the goal during fieldwork is to use newer and newer methods to motivate and create opportunities for participation among local actors most involved in local issues. If local people communicate, meet, come together and plan together on a regular basis, we can expect to see productive community action. The result is not only action, but also a recognition that sustained thinking about possibilities not only solves problems but also contributes to a change in the quality of life. Due to the novelty and action-oriented character of the social hackathon, it was able to reach actors in very different circumstances. This untried venture was driven by the excitement of pioneering a novel way of reaching out to and activating local people and communities, and it filled us, the organisers, with hopeful anticipation.

As a first step, we learned about the social hackathon method from our Estonian partner about how they do it; then we started to break down the method into its components, and redesign it according to our professional principles and values, taking into account the characteristics of the Gönc district as well. Each region, each future social hackathon, must develop its own brand and focus, because the organisations and communities behind local development are different, the composition of local populations differs and they live under different circumstances, and each region has its specificities that require tailor-made solutions.

The case study was prepared with the aim of presenting how the first Hungarian social hackathon, i.e. the community planning marathon, was organised and implemented, serving as a model for those regions, organisations and communities which would like to apply and test this method in their own work. In addition, we would like to introduce the new method to the community development toolkit by presenting the adaptation pilot, thus laying the foundations for broader professional reflection on the method.

The case study is divided into four parts: the first part describes the region where the community development marathon took place; the second part describes the steps that led us to the 48-hour marathon, followed by details about the event itself; the last part presents the lessons learned and recommendations.

The region¹

The Gönc district is located in the northern part of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, a north-eastern Hungarian county bordering Slovakia. It is a region rich in historical traditions, natural resources, and cultural values, but is still relatively underdeveloped, with a standard of living well below the Hungarian average. Our professional experience in research and community development made us realise that the region does not seem to be able to mobilise its human and natural resources effectively to improve the livelihoods of its inhabitants, to make them beneficiaries of change and development rather than sufferers of it. The presence of industry is not at all characteristic to the region.

¹Prepared on the basis of the e-study booklet *Serving Communities in Small Settlements* (2020): https://kofe.hu/wp-content/uploads/Dokumentumok/efop-2018-2020/eStudySeries_final.pdf

The population decline is steady and sharp. This is mainly due to out-migration and a concomitant deteriorating age structure.

There is at least one registered NGO in every settlement in the region, but many of them are not active. As to their activities, these are mainly cultural, recreational, sports and vigilante associations, and many of them are foundations established to support institutions, kindergartens and schools, with the aim of supplementing the operational funds of these institutions. The number of organisations involved in development, social development, advocacy and lobbying is negligible, and a genuine civic attitude is missing. In recent years, the importance of these organisations, their influence and impact on the development of the region have been declining. The authorities do not involve, nor reach out to the few organisations that would be ready to act, not even in relation to programmes that fall specifically within the scope of their activities and expertise. Thus, these NGOs work in isolation, in most cases alone, as they try to make a difference, or sometimes work together to gain greater influence and represent local civil interests. As they are generally excluded from development funds, they are also poorly resourced and lack infrastructure. This is also due to the lack of experience and the courage that are necessary for succeeding with intervention actions based on civic initiative in deprived areas, as well as the lack of a financially strong segment of potential supporters.

The district has two towns: Gönc in the north and Abaújszántó in the south. Because of the towns' locations, their central roles, and the services clustered around them, the district is considered bi-polar. The relationship between the two towns is less cooperative and more competitive for a leadership role.

The road to ABATHON

ABATHON – the community development marathon - was co-organised by two organisations in the Gönc district of the Abaúj region. One of them was HACD, a national professional organisation, which contributed to the event with its professional experience in community development and its nationwide network. The other organisation was FÉSZAK-KÖR, which as a local actor added its local knowledge, local network and 15 years of community development experience in the northern part of the region.

The 15-year community development process, which ABATHON is embedded in, has been important for the organisation of the event. This ensured that the local organisers knew about and understood the importance of the intervention, the responsibility that came with its organisation, and quickly realised that ABATHON could bring new contacts, new members and with it a move out of North Abaúj into a wider reach for FÉSZAK-KÖR.

Why ABATHON?

We knew from the very beginning that the term “social hackathon” would be used only as a working title and only until we found a good name for the event, because these two words together are not evocative enough, do not sound Hungarian and will not say much to the people we are addressing, the

prospective local participants, nor to the professionals, because it is not a widespread method yet. Analysing social hackathons in Estonia quickly led us to the conclusion that this is in fact a community planning marathon. We insisted on the word marathon, because it is fitting for the heroic 48-hour work of collective brainstorming and concentration, which local teams carry out during this time, supported by mentors. In addition to a professional term, we really wanted to have a name that was linked to the region, and so we reached back to the name of the Aba clan, the origin of the name of Abaúj region, which ruled the region around the time of Hungary's state formation. ABATHON, as the title of the event, was coined by combining the two, as the title of the event, and 'community development marathon' or 'community planning marathon' was added to express the essence of the method and help to clarify its content. (A task remaining perhaps is to find a catchy, expressive short Hungarian name for the method. In the meantime, the terms community development marathon and community planning marathon are used as synonyms in this description.)

When planning the event, we thought that we would have almost a year to find people in the Gönc district who are ready to act, and invite them for discussions at places (cafés, restaurants) that ensure a casual form and a friendly setting. These occasions provided the opportunity to get to know, inspire and engage these people and invite them to become our partners, either in the organisation or as participants in ABATHON. At the time, we did not know that the pandemic would derail this plan. So, as soon as we emerged from our lockdown in spring 2020, we started to revise our plans at online sessions held regularly, together with the organising team, and we started preparing for the event. The first step was to introduce members of HACD and FÉSZAK-KÖR, who could be the organising team of the event, to the social hackathon method.

How was the organising team set up?

The organising team was composed of members of the FÉSZAK-KÖR and HACD, and worked along the following functions:

- The coordinator: oversaw the entire organisational process and kept the organising team moving.
- The logistics team was responsible for the venue, catering, accommodation, accompanying and leisure activities.
- The professional team was in charge of selecting, recruiting and preparing the mentors and jury members and compiling the various professional materials.
- The volunteer working group took care of recruiting, training and managing volunteers for the various tasks involved in the process.
- Communication team: to promote the event and its aftermath, to follow up on ideas and to support the teams.
- The fundraising team worked on identifying donors and sponsors.
- All: diversifying and refining ideas, recruiting teams and participants.

By the time the organising team had grasped the social hackathon methodology and begun to embrace and adapt it to their own conditions, the country was once again closed down and restrictions were once again introduced on face-to-face encounters. This was a major obstacle, because the adequate working method of FÉSZAK-KÖR - and by its very nature, that of community development - is based on individual and group encounters.

By early 2021, the consortium partnership had produced a curriculum on preparing prospective participants and organisers to implement the community development marathon through training or a series of workshops. We waited until March 2021, and in the meantime, we met with the organising team several times in the online space, repeatedly revising and redesigning. In March, however, we decided that we could no longer postpone the first steps. Therefore, we divided the Gönc district into three sub-district, and the FÉSZAK-KÖR organising team reached out to settlements in these areas to gather a list of people who they thought could be successfully involved because they had a community orientation. The criteria for selection were openness to being involved in community action, caring about the community, ability to advocate for change, being open to be a participant in ABATHON, and ability to mobilise others. An important point to highlight is that the potential participants and contributors of the Abaúj social hackathon and community development marathon were drawn from the informal network of the FÉSZAK-KÖR. This was also crucial for the formation of the teams around the emerging ideas in the subsequent process. A roster of nearly 100 people was established this way; in an attempt to ensure that all three micro-regions are represented, we selected people from this roster who were contacted them by phone by their referees. At this first contact, we outlined the social hackathon methodology, we assessed the person's interest in it and, if the reception was favourable, we invited them to professional workshops. We had no choice but to start with an online workshop at first, indicating that we had hoped to meet in person and in a group at the beginning of the summer at the latest. This was a kind of filtering, as it were, as those who were already willing to participate in this format would be hopefully even more willing to participate in person. The majority of the people contacted were very open, and we soon had a team of people who we thought would help us to organise ABATHON, and who would then take on the role of organisers and motivators in each micro-region, reaching out to and involving interested people in their area. In this way we had hoped to ensure the territorial diversity of ABATHON in the Gönc district.

Workshops

The first 3-4 sessions took place online. As not all participants were comfortable in the online space, or because some of them did not have the right equipment, therefore we started by mapping these problems and then organised a training session on participating in online meetings. Unfortunately, at this point, those who did not have the equipment or could not cope with the challenges of the online environment dropped out were unable to take part in the further sessions.

The online sessions focused on three important issues: community intervention and the corresponding responsibilities, methods of community work (obviously those relevant to the social hackathon), and learning about the social hackathon process. After several online sessions, we were looking forward to finally having the opportunity to meet in person, but as this was not possible and we did not want to lose the momentum and enthusiasm of the participants in the long wait, more online sessions were scheduled.

In June 2021, when the country re-opened, we were ready to launch in-person workshops immediately. Although we were trying to make sure that those who joined the online workshops also attended the face-to-face workshops, there were a number of people who dropped out of the previous pool of participants. Therefore, we selected and contacted new people from our contact list. In these workshops, the focus was on the process of the social hackathon, the 48 hours, in order to help the participants to understand the essence of the method and enable them to disseminate it more

successfully and authentically in their own circles of contacts. In addition, we worked further on increasing awareness of the value of community, of the value of community solutions.

How the organising team worked

In addition to the online workshops, the organising team of FÉSZAK-KÖR continued to work and plan ABATHON in several working groups. Until June, this work was also confined to the online space, which limited its momentum and effectiveness. Our working method was to first review the tasks related to the event and then delegate them to the different working groups that would start to work on it. The joint meetings were organised by the coordinator, and at these meetings the working groups reported on their progress and what the next steps would be. In addition, there were always activities that either involved all the groups or built on each other, and these were also discussed and decided at these meetings.

The first and most important task was to find a venue for the event. We knew that we needed a large hall and 7-8 small rooms, therefore we decided to hold it in a school (the practice in Voru County, Estonia, was used as a model), in the building of the Telkibánya primary school, which had been out of operation for three years. We approached the local government with our idea, they were open to it and made the building available to us. Our idea turned out to be a good one, but when we visited the school and its courtyard for the first time, we realised that we had our work cut out for us, as we were dealing with a building that had stood empty and unused for 3 years. Despite this, no one from the organising team voiced concerns about this seemingly impossible mission, only at the very end, during the evaluation, did someone say: "*When I saw the school, I didn't think we could do this*". What we saw in the classrooms, the corridors and the gym, was not the impossible, but the potential. We quickly started to plan how and with what we could brighten up the building, decorate it, make it more beautiful and homely, and add the necessary features (e.g. internet access).

Once it became possible, the organising team also moved to face-to-face planning meetings, which took place on a weekly basis, as there were only 6 weeks to go until the event. It was decided to set up the school the weekend before the event so that we would only need to do the finishing touches the day before; before all this, however, the teaching equipment and materials left in the classrooms had to be moved out. The municipality had given us everything we needed to clean the building, but there was still a lot left for us to do. It was exciting to see the members of the organising teams arrive from the surrounding villages, all loaded up with curtains, textiles, glass, cleaning products, lawnmowers, pruning shears, rakes, etc. In two days, we transformed the school building and its courtyard into a place that could accommodate almost 100 people.

Preparatory events

In July, we organised a preparatory event in each of the three sub-districts, facilitated and organised by local residents who took part in the preparatory workshops. We invited potential partners who either had a cause or an idea to bring to ABATHON or who were committed to bringing about change in the area and could join as team members connected to a cause/idea that they resonated with. We were careful to ensure that these meetings were not too distant in time from ABATHON, so that the enthusiasm and spirit that these encounters prompt are not broken over time. The focus of the preparatory events was to introduce the new method, the social hackathon, but alongside this we

talked about the organisations, the change, the ideas that have been put forward in the region so far. All along we sought to empower, encourage and motivate people to participate.

By the second preparatory event, it seemed that there were six ideas, and potentially six corresponding teams. Then, a few days later, it turned out that there were in fact only four ideas, because two idea promoters withdrew. Then, another few days passed, and we were back to seven ideas. As the number of participants was constantly changing, it soon became a slogan in the organising team that the most important task was to organise, to organise potential participants, to organise people, all the way until the beginning of the event at 3pm on 13 August 2021. This was necessary, because even before the event, a team had to withdraw, while there were new ideas and new people appearing.

Who were the actors of ABATHON?

- *The participants: people who have come with their ideas, either as team members or just on their own, wanting to make a difference and looking for a cause to join.*

- *The organising team: those who organised everything, including the venue, the catering and accommodation, provided a professional structure for the 48 hours, who organised the preparatory events and workshops, recruiting and training mentors and judges, organising donations and prizes.*

- *The volunteers who helped the organisers.*

- *Among the volunteers, I would like to highlight the communications team, whose work was crucial; they made short films depicting the ideas the day before the event and posted them on the FB pages of the event coordinators. They also reported on the ABATHON event itself as it was taking place, organised media coverage and took care of the photo documentation.*

- *Mentors: the professionals who supported the teams, guiding them through the process of turning an idea into a project. The ABATHON mentors included community developers, rural development professionals, PR and communications professionals, social entrepreneurs and fundraising specialists. The mentors were prepared through a series of online workshops, covering the social hackathon method, the process that teams go through in 48 hours, and another on various team-building and community-building methods they can use in their work (preparing them was not too difficult, as we managed to bring the country's best community development professionals to ABATHON)*

- *The jury members were selected from among respected stakeholders in the region who are at the forefront of development. They included the head of a successful business in Abaúj, an innovative pastor, a local mayor, a representative of a grant-giving organisation, the head of a college promoting talented students, and a renowned community developer. The organising team developed the evaluation criteria, which were circulated to all the jury members and discussed and refined with them in a preliminary online meeting.*

- *Masters of Ceremonies: a team of two, one local and one external community development professional, responsible for both the professionalism and the atmosphere of the event. This way, local knowledge, knowledge of the social hackathon method, the ability to create a good atmosphere, jokes and punchlines were all on stage at the same time.*

The ABATHON

Every region, every group organising a community development marathon should dream up and invent its own event, adapt it to their region, taking into account local knowledge, customs and skills. This is what we did with ABATHON. As this event built on a civil society basis, and in particular on the working method of the FÉSZAK-KÖR implemented since 2007, the recruitment of teams and the formation of teams around the ideas also took place in a civil context in Abaúj. In the Estonian model, the teams are formed entirely in the first hours of the opening event on the first day, and the team members are selected on the spot, with attention to diversity within the team (e.g. diversity by profession, by place of residence, by age, etc.). In our case, because of the traditions and the lack of experience with civic engagement, the main priority was to strengthen motivation and nurture an enterprising spirit, and we therefore allowed teams with already developed/partially developed project ideas to apply for ABATHON. Our only requirement was to have maximum 5-7 people in a team. In the afternoon of the big day, we found out that eventually we had some teams with ideas, other teams without ideas, and participants without ideas who were looking for a team to join. In this dynamic atmosphere of community planning, 11 ideas were finally submitted to the Idea Marketplace, from which 7 teams were formed.

The ABATHON lasted 48 hours from 15:00 on 13 August 2021 to 18:00 on 15 August 2021. However, the organising team started the finishing touches a day earlier, on Thursday afternoon. The necessary tools (worksheets, paper, pens) were placed in the classrooms, the sound system in the main hall was set up, the whole school had internet access, and the hay bales arrived under the pergolas in the courtyard to provide a variety of comfortable places to work in the courtyard and in the building, in keeping with the season. On Friday morning, we continued with the beautification of the place, putting together the floral arrangements that gave the whole building a homely, welcoming feel, and putting together the recreational ping pong table, basketball hoop, bowling and foosball.

The mentors arrived at lunchtime, we showed them around the venue and reviewed the tasks again. Then the quintessential ABATHON participants started arriving, and as their numbers were steadily increasing, our local helpers were happy to provide them with the key information for the 48 hours ahead of them. As we approached 4pm, the attendance sheets, the schoolyard, the corridors and the gym started to fill up. The organizing team breathed a sigh of relief and with that we set off into the 48 hours ahead, the first Hungarian social hackathon, or community development marathon.

The programme started with welcoming speeches by representatives of the Municipality of Telkibánya, HACD, FÉSZAK-KÖR, and after a guitarist performed a song conveying a sense of community, the mentors and the programme were introduced. Eleven ideas were then presented in 3 minutes each. After each idea, the mentors were allowed to ask two questions to help them understand the idea. Meanwhile, the ideas were individually noted down on flipchart paper, which provided a visual aid to understanding the idea during the marketplace session which took place following the presentation of the ideas. The idea promoters took their flipchart papers out into the hallway and recruited team members, as those teams were allowed to start working, which had at least 5 members. In the meantime, when it was clear which ideas had been kept, the mentors went off with the organisers to decide which team they would like to work with and who they would like to work as a co-mentor.

Out of eleven ideas, seven teams were formed, some ideas were not taken forward and some were merged into another. The ideas that were kept were the following:

- Draken: a digital bulletin board, an easily accessible, regional information platform, with a potential to generate inter-municipal communities.
- Aranyosi Gasztró-Valley: bringing generations together - seasonal gastronomic, community events
- Árvácska Animal Rescue Station: establishment of a regional (wild) animal rescue station
- Habaújszántó: a community space in Abaújszántó for sustainability
- "Complete with you": community and employment programme for people with disabilities
- Göncöl szekér: Gönc community for the meeting of generations: for the involvement of young people
- Bánya Owl Forest School: to give the local school building back to the local community again. The make the school building ready for community use, with the involvement of the local community

The teams and their mentors went to their rooms and kicked off the teamwork with introductions and team building, which lasted until late in the evening. Despite the late hour, as people started to gather in the courtyard, guitars were brought out and socialising continued in a broader circle.

All day on Saturday the teams continued to brainstorm ideas with the support of their mentors, interrupted only by lunch and two checkpoints. At the checkpoints, only one person per team showed up to report about the team's progress and how far they had got with their planning. These checkpoints had two purposes. One was to set time limits for the work, not to let things slip, not to get stuck with one thing or another. The other aim was to hear from other mentors as well as from "external" people, who could then possibly give impetus to new ideas for further work. The first checkpoint took place in the traditional way, with one person from each team coming and reporting on their work. At the second checkpoint, 2-3 people from each team were present, the mentors went around and sat with each group, giving their advice, insights and possibly similar examples of their experiences.

After a full day's work, the evening continued with a dance party and a retro party, organised by the participants themselves, of course.

On Sunday morning, the teams continued to work on their ideas, progressing to the final stage, which could then be presented to the public in the form. Meanwhile, one member from each team who had taken on the role of spokesperson for the presentation met with the communication mentors, who gave advice and prepared the team members to give an effective presentation. Lunch was followed by presentations (rehearsal) to the mentors, where team members received more advice on the final presentation of the ideas they had developed. After the finishing touches, the closing ceremony began, featuring the participating teams and the jury. Here again, everyone had 3 minutes to present, and in this case the jury members were allowed to ask questions. While the jury retired to make its decision, participants had the opportunity to listen to interesting presentations about the ABATHON venue, Telkibánya, talk, play and wait with excitement.

The organising team decided not to give a cash prize, but to support the teams to continue working together, so the first three winners received gifts that would ensure they could spend 2-3 days together and work on their ideas. We made sure that no one was left without a reward, so each team received various gifts, one of which was presented by the Estonian Ambassador to Hungary, who was also

present at the closing ceremony of the marathon. The awards ceremony turned into a real celebration of the teams and their ideas, the organisers, the mentors, the jury, the volunteers and everyone who contributed to the success of the preceding 48 hours. The organisers, HACD and FÉSZAK-KÖR, consider it their responsibility as community developers to follow up and support the projects and the teams that gained momentum at ABATHON as much as possible in the future.

Every community intervention of this kind teaches its participants something new and strengthens them in a new way. If we look at ABATHON from this perspective, we can see that it has given the region new dynamics, new committed and active people. FÉSZAK-KÖR was able to expand its membership for the future through the new acquaintances, and the new work and new challenges have strengthened the organising team both in terms of people and event organising skills. Furthermore, it has given HACD a new way to contribute to the development of the community development profession.

SUMMARY

Community development marathons are resource-intensive, both in terms of human and financial resources. We therefore recommend that if you plan such an intervention, then you do it in a place where it can be embedded in a process, in a location where there are relevant precursors, where there are local networks to build on.

It is important that, as with all community interventions, community planning marathons need to be tailor-made, i.e. the basic methodology - the existing source of adaptation that is the basis of the method – should be adapted to the context and circumstances.

This great professional experiment has produced tangible results, already informally validated in professional circles, which have given rise to a number of new connections and new professional intervention foci for community development in the country. The community development marathon could be a priority topic for the professional forums of the near future, including the widest possible spectrum of fields.

Aranka Molnár

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