

Evaluation of the Revitalising Small Towns Programme

Short Summary

Prepared by



**ROOTS AND
WINGS**
FOUNDATION

On behalf of

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Introduction

This research report summarises the evaluation results of the Revitalising Small Towns programme. The evaluation was commissioned by the Roots and Wings Foundation (RWF) and carried out by Gábor Héra, Senior Researcher at HOLO. The primary objective of the evaluation was to explore the programme's impact on the lives of the beneficiaries, their organisations, and the local community. Data collection included eighteen interviews conducted in February and March 2024. The evaluation followed an Outcome Harvesting methodology.

Impacts Achieved

The interviews suggest that the programme impacted the lives of grantees and their teams primarily, but not exclusively, in the following ways:

- developed skills (especially leadership and effective teamwork),
- increased commitment to the local community,
- increased awareness and embeddedness,
- developed partnerships (with regional or national organisations),
- established organisations and their leaders as a local power,
- established formal, registered local organisations,
- helped these organisations bring local people together despite power struggles.

During the evaluation, interviewees identified twenty-four additional impacts at the individual, organisational, and the community level. These will not be described in detail in this short summary.

Programme-specific Factors Contributing to Impact Achievements

Interviewees suggested that several programme-specific factors contributed to achieving these outcomes. First and foremost, being selected to take part in the programme had a great impact on the participants' confidence, as the donor, seen as a legitimate professional, gave credence to the grantees and their ideas. Second, participants mentioned that the face-to-face meetings organised by the Revitalising Small Towns Programme provided an opportunity to learn group facilitation methods, and how to engage and motivate participants to act. The programme's support philosophy was also highlighted by the interviewees; rather than the accountability and control-based grant cooperation many were accustomed to, beneficiaries were met with interest, encouragement and very little administrative burden. In addition, the programme offered a high degree of autonomy, and did not prescribe mandatory activities. Many perceived the personal visits by Revitalising Small Towns

Programme staff at major events as positive and enhancing the personal nature of the programme.

The following were also of particular importance in achieving these outcomes:

- [films about the beneficiaries](#),
- financial support,
- an unusually long funding period in the civil sector,
- personal meetings and programmes with other Revitalising Small Towns Programme beneficiaries and representatives of the donor organisation,
- the professionalism of the programme staff.

External Factors Contributing to Impact Achievement

In interviews, several external factors – those not specific to the programme, but rather to the beneficiaries and their environment—were mentioned that contributed to achieving these outcomes. Those who felt a personal obligation to fulfil the promises they made in their application, and those with a supportive family environment (as beneficiaries often spent less time with their families and more time on voluntary/unpaid activities), were more likely to succeed. Additionally, those beneficiaries who took on conflicts within the local community, even with the local authority, while respecting the interests and values of their team, were also quite successful.

Priority was given to team and local collaboration in several locations, as evidenced by the organisational development (team building, operational and strategic planning) that took place there. During these meetings, objectives and tasks were delegated to team members with a specific focus on the effective division of labour. It is our assessment that the grantees who consciously undertook organisational development achieved a more significant impact through the Revitalising Small Towns Programme. The same can be said for teams that demonstrated: 1) resource planning, 2) communication and marketing, 3) management of ICT tools supporting project management, 4) self-reflection and self-development.

In our experience, group members were most successful when given a high degree of autonomy and flexibility: when tasks were not delegated by leaders, and when the range of tasks that could be undertaken was not fixed in advance. These groups generated new project ideas based on the needs of the community, or the interests of the members of the group— if someone offered to coordinate the project.

In a group, it takes time to get to know each other, to define common objectives and working methods, to allocate tasks, to develop a working model, and to involve all

team members. In some municipalities, this "fusion" began prior to the Revitalising Small Towns Programme, or occurred over the longer course of the programme. Allowing sufficient time for group formation contributed to the programme's success.

A greater impact can be achieved when municipalities work together, and hence the local community played a key role in the programme's success; Success was not only a matter of what the applicants wanted to achieve, but of how well the services they (and their team) offered matched the needs of the local community. The socio-economic status of the community was another important criterion: wealthier communities were more likely to have donors who could offer support to a local programme or organisation, even without direct solicitation. Finally, it is worth noting that the existence of a local tradition and pattern of civic engagement and active community life influenced the programme's outcomes.

What Prevented Success?

In those places lacking cooperation in the local civil society ecosystem, or where conflicts between (and within) organisations prevented joint thinking and action, it was difficult to achieve hoped-for outcomes. Equally, if the programme beneficiary could not motivate and coordinate its team members, if it couldn't make civic activity attractive and recruit new members, this posed a barrier to success. The (perceived) special skills of a community leader could also make team building difficult, as could distinctiveness (outsiderness) – when someone is unwilling to accept local conditions, relationships and rules. Finally, the disadvantages of geographical distance should be highlighted – beneficiaries living further away from Budapest, and thus lacking intensive contact, might have felt alone.

The interviewees made suggestions for improvements to the programme. The applicability of these suggestions was discussed with the Revitalising Small Towns Programme staff on several occasions, but are not presented in this short summary.