

## **LOCAL SOCIETY AND THE BIOMASS PROJECT IN CSERNELY – THE IMPACT OF CONFLICTS BETWEEN ROMA AND NON- ROMA HUNGARIANS ON THE REALIZATION OF THE PROJECT**

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In my paper I focus on the patterns of living together from a historical point of view. By using Fredrik Barth's concept on ethnicity the focal point of my analysis are the situations in which the different ethnic groups associate. A special focus is given to the inner configuration of the Roma community of Csernely and also to the specific system of values and norms. The complex analysis of the narrative structures of Roma and Non-Roma living together is carried out in order to describe the different points of views, behavioral patterns and images of the other that exist in the village.

**Keywords:** Biomass project, patterns of living together, conflicts of the local society, the impact of conflicts on the project.

### **Introduction**

In order to develop a model of biomass-based energy provision sufficient for completely or partially satisfy the heating energy needs of a given locality a multidisciplinary research team was formed at the University of Miskolc (engineers, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and jurists). The settlement chosen as the locality of the pilot project is situated halfway between Ózd and Szilvásvárad. The aim of the project in Csernely is to replace the heating energy system using natural gas with a system using renewable sources. The project also aims to create workplaces, to utilize currently not used lands and to create a settlement that is not only an energy user but also an energy provider [1]. The social scientific research focuses on risk management and conflict potential.

The applied anthropological research is based on the hypothesis that the simple description of the relations between the different groups of citizens at Csernely does not cover all the social and cultural aspects to be known for the success of the project. The biomass project includes a complex development plan the impact of which shall not only be understood in terms of economy, energy or labor market but also in terms of the relations between the citizens of the settlement. The impact of the project on the life of the local society is predictable.

In order to successfully realize the "Biomass Project" it is an absolute necessity to ensure that the local citizens are cooperative and accepting. The complex survey carried out at Csernely showed us that one of the strongest conflicts of the local society arise from the different lifestyles, values and norms of the Non-Roma and the Roma citizens the later being relatively new settler at the village. In my paper I focus on the patterns of living together from a historical point of view. By using Fredrik Barth's concept on ethnicity the

focal point of my analysis are the situations in which the different ethnic groups associate [2].

The patterns of living together in Csernely are developed by using the results of the survey and the qualitative interviews that were made. A special focus is given to the inner configuration of the Roma community of Csernely and also to the specific system of values and norms. The complex analysis of the narrative structures of Roma and Non-Roma living together is carried out in order to describe the different points of views, behavioral patterns and images of the other that exist in the village.

Based on the methodological findings of existing researches we claimed that there is a huge discrepancy between attitudes and actual behaviors. Therefore the quantitative data gained by the survey had to be completed by using qualitative methods (life interview, narrative biography).

In order to conceptualize the research question it is essential to describe the most important social aspects of the local society. In 1900 the village was inhabited by 1227 person. The number of citizens increased between the wars reaching 1474 by 1940. After the World War II the rate of increase slows down reaching its highest point at 1496 in 1960. From that time the village experiences a constant decline in number of citizens. In 1980 the number of inhabitants is 1292, while at the time of the collapse of the regime in 1989 it is only 1091. The decrease continues up to our times. According to the data given by the local government 800 people lived in the village in 2010, which means that, compared to the data of 1960, the number of inhabitants lessened by 50%.

The most important factor of decrease is the higher migration potential arising from the closing down of nearby mines, factories and plants. We can also observe a different reason for migration: the inhabitants with better education or higher degrees move to the urban areas. This process started during the time of the socialist modernization and continues today. Although it cannot balance the deficit, from the time of the collapse of the regime a inward migration can also be experienced in the village. This later is process is characterized by the arrival of settlers of different ethnic origin. Roma people from the neighboring village move in Csernely. At the beginning they used the state given social aid to purchase empty houses. Nowadays it is more and more common that they move in the empty houses arbitrary. After 1989 Dutch and Belgian families also bought properties in the village, but with the increasing number of Roma settlers, this process slowed down.

As a result of the migration three specific segments formed within the local society: mostly elderly non-Roma Hungarians living in single or two-person households, Roma people living in Csernely for generations and Roma newcomers arriving to the village in the last 10 years. The 50 Roma families make up 40 per cent of the total population. In the kindergarten there are only Roma children. The children of the non-Roma inhabitants attend elementary school in the nearby settlements. As a result the elementary school of Csernely had to be closed down two years ago.

According to the data on employment currently more than half of the inhabitants are inactive pensioners, most of the people in active age are unemployed only a few families have regular income. Since the first two decades of the 20th century the inhabitants of Csernely have been employed by the mining corporations or by the Iron Work Factory of Ózd. Beside a few families living from agriculture most of the families were employed by the heavy industry. Up to the 1980's the village experienced successful modernization with outstanding work opportunities, chances of gaining wealth and better social status. This era

is characterized by wealth and success in the reminiscences. The formerly prosperous village faces several problems now: aging population conflicts with the newcomers, outward migration of the younger generation and the local government being constantly in debt.

### **1. Narratives of the Roma and non-Roma Hungarian living together**

In terms of time the narratives of the Roma and non-Roma Hungarian living together can be described as follows:

- The past in which the living together was absolutely ideal
- The present with all its conflicts
- The future that is lost for the local Hungarians

This narrative is characterized by the notions of decline, of devastation. According to the locals the formerly existing values got contested in the last 10-15 years. The reasons are obvious: in their point of view the closing down of mines and factories together with the arrival of Roma are causing the decline of the village. The most important attributes of the decline-narrative are: aging, rapid decay of living standards, future beyond recovery, disintegration of the local order, fear of everyday crimes, danger. The reason for all of these is the process of Gypsies moving in the village – the locals say. The social, existential problems of the village are understood as of ethnic conflicts.

Many times the narratives on Gypsies distinguish between Gypsies living in the village for generations and Roma newcomers. It is also true though that negative attitudes are expressed toward the Roma as a whole.

Beside the narrative of deprivation also the narrative of revival exists. The most important characteristic of the later is that it considers the recovery of the village as a possibility. The process is reversible; if certain circumstances and requirements are met the decline of the village becomes avoidable. In this view the natural environment of Csernely is a potential based on which a new future is possible. We have to add though that this new future excludes Gypsies. Mounted tourism, renovation of the Strumann mansion and the utilization of it, establishment of a local museum and the usage of alternative/renewable energy sources are the main elements of this new future. These suppose to help the village. According to this concept the “troublemaker” Gypsy families “who don’t like living in a village where there is order” will voluntarily move out. Others believe that the outward migration of the Gypsies would only speed up with the help of non-local financial resources.

The actual practical aspect of the narrative of revival is preventive and pro-active. Firstly, the further moving in of “troublemaker” Gypsy families should be prevented, together with the purchase or arbitrary occupation of empty houses. Some say that to prevent this the empty houses should be demolished. The pro-active dimension seeks to change the situation by making reasonable decisions. These include the creation of workplaces for the younger generation, the re-opening of the school, touristic developments, renovation of the mansion, and modernization of energy supply, to name just the most important ones.

## 2. The changing image of Gypsies

The locals of Csernely distinguish between two types of Gypsies living in the village. All the narratives formed around Gypsies are characterized by the categories of Gypsies living in the village for generations and newcomers. These categories have their own values added to them: the “normal” or “decent” Gypsies are old settlers, while the newcomers are “troublemakers”.

In terms of newcomers the mostly cited attributes are: their living conditions are frugal, they live on stealing and social aid, they are untrustworthy in terms of work, they are aggressive and lazy, they only accept a job when there is nothing else they can do. The devaluation of newcomer Gypsies legitimizes the negative attitude toward them [3]. Many times serious accusations are made against them. One for example is that they consciously provoke other locals or that incest is common among them. Such narratives obviously strengthen the stigmatization of the newcomers. The old settlers, e.g. Gypsies living in the village of generations, regard the newcomers with the same hostile attitude. The attributed stigmas are exactly the same and they distance themselves from the newcomers. According to the interviews they cannot even imagine having any relationship or contact with them.

In terms of the Gypsies living in the village for generations, the locals of Csernely formulate quite a different opinion. They believe that a different behavioral pattern is characteristic of this group. The words used to describe the old settlers are the total opposites of words describing the newcomers. Accordingly, the old settlers are decent, hard-working, clean, trustworthy, honest, etc. Ad hoc working relations are common with them. The locals were and are giving smaller loans to the old settlers, because they always give it back in time. These Gypsies are part of the local religious congregation, they are baptized and they participate at the funerals honoring the deceased.

Even among the old settlers there is one Roma family, let's call them the Z. family, with which the locals have more and more conflicts. They say that there were no problems with the grandparents, who accepted the norms and values of the major society and lived accordingly. Some of the children and most of the grandchildren though live a life that is unacceptable for the local society. The Z. family is regarded as the newcomers. This fact makes the image of local, old settlers a bit more complicated, because, as we've seen, one family falls into the category of “troublemakers”.

Some aspects of the ideally described Roma-Hungarian relationship of the past suggest asymmetries. The establishment and intensity of fictional kinship shall be interpreted by considering this. It was a common practice that the Roma families chose Hungarian godparents for their children. The collective memory does not preserve any case though in which a Hungarian family would have chosen Roma godparents.

One of the most obvious signs of the taboo of crossing certain social borders can be observed by looking at the question of mixed marriages [4]. Not a single case of mixed marriage existed before the last ten years. Both groups tend to insist on choosing a partner from his/her own group. Although the Gypsies regard mixed marriages as unfortunate but it is the reputation of the Hungarian family that is really harmed by such event. The rejection of mixed marriages shall be understood as a tool of preserving ethnic identities. It is interesting to take a look at the only mixed marriage of the village. One of the male members of an old settler Gypsy family married a Hungarian woman from a nearby village. Both families were against the marriage, the Hungarian parents expressively forbade it. The

bride's family didn't even participate the wedding, only time brought some acceptance. The Hungarian brother-in-law works with the Gypsy husband now and the later was really furious when telling us that his brother-in-law does not admit that they are relatives. The Hungarian bride was not welcomed in the Roma family either. They expected her to adapt to their customs, cultural traditions. Although the local non-Roma society is completely aware of the fact that the bride is a Hungarian from a neighboring village she is regarded as Roma because of her husband. Her husband coming from an integrated Roma family she has good and intensive relationship with the non-Roma locals but still the woman with two children is identified as Roma. The husband himself has an expressively Roma identity. For years he was an active member of the Roma Minority Council. On the contrary his family seeks assimilation. It is also proved by the fact that the sister of the husband chose a Hungarian man to marry, just like their cousins who live in the capital.

Their older son is seeing a Hungarian girl. For him the identification as Roma is offensive. Notwithstanding, the locals regard all members of the family as Gypsy. The Hungarian woman told us that when she applied for a job at the local school the headmaster turned her down because of being Roma. The stigmatization was made because of her being part of a Roma family. The obvious ethnic discrimination is contrary to the behavioral patterns applied in the interactions with Roma families living in the village for generations. Theoretically the locals accept the old settlers but in practice the behavior toward them is different.

The locals of the village still cannot forget the stealing of three bells from the local cemetery in 2008. One week prior to the theft there was the funeral of a local Gypsy man on which several Roma from the neighborhood were participating. One of the local Hungarians who has an intensive relationship with his Roma godchild now living in Budapest and also with the local old settler Roma people see a direct connection between the funeral and the theft. He supposes that the thieves were present at the funeral and that the plan of stealing the bells was actually formed when attending the event. It is out of question that the thieves were Gypsies, although the investigation was closed without any result. This example shows us that even the formerly positive experiences cannot prevent the emerging of a negative image of Gypsies. This image though is characterized mostly by attributes connected to the newcomers.

Earlier the image of Gypsies at the settlement was formed along the positive experiences of everyday living. Economic relations were not based on a patron and client type of relationship. During the socialism the local Gypsies worked as agricultural day laborers, but not in Csernely. Therefore the common pattern of patron and client relationship could not be formed here. The most important connection between the local Roma and non-Roma inhabitants was formed by fictional kinship.

Most of the local Roma were able to successfully adapt to the norms and values of the majority. During the socialist modernization their employment rate and their living conditions were similar to that of the non-Roma Hungarians in the village. Because of this successful integration the relationship between the two ethnic groups was characterized along social and not ethnic lines. The ethnic discrimination against newcomers, the interethnic tension and the general attitude toward the Gypsies show that things have changed nowadays. Today the living together of Roma and non-Roma Hungarians is mainly characterized by asymmetry. The most important aspect of the attitude toward the newcomer Gypsies is defined by devaluation, by the over-valuation of one's own ethnic

groups and by the common degradation of the others. The Hungarian majority adopted a model-like behavior toward Gypsies, which is characterized by keeping the distance and by social exclusion. The base of ethnic differentiation is the existential and moral superiority of the local Hungarians. Earlier this attitude was not common in Csernely. The reason for the changing attitude is that the “socialization” deficit of the newcomer Gypsies is balanced by the revaluation of one’s own ethnicity and culture. In the changing structures the earlier, traditional patterns of living together gradually lost their validity. Currently we experience the re-drawing of ethnic boundaries, the process of which is characterized by the re-definition of the notions ‘Gypsy’ and ‘non-Gypsy’. These notions and the differentiation are the practical tools to preserve the social stability for both groups.

### **3. The impact of conflicts between Roma and non-Roma Hungarians on the realization of the project**

The survey carried out among the population of the settlement shows us the local viewpoints concerning the project. Positive attitude toward the Biomass project can be observed in all of the groups. We have to note though that a significant number of elderly non-Roma Hungarians did not want to participate in the survey. Most of the citizens regard the Biomass project as a necessity of the renewal of the village. Despite the lack of information on the project most members of the community believe that it will have a positive impact on the lives of the citizens.

By looking at the answers regarding the current status and possibilities of the village we have to say that most of the respondents are in a state of apathy and hopelessness. The answers have similar elements: irreversible aging of the population, constant thefts and burglaries, lack of public safety, closing of the school and the local government in the state of bankruptcy. According to the respondents the desperate situation is a consequence of the “massive settlement of Gypsies” in the village. It also means that the most important factors influencing the success of the project are the conflicts between Roma and non-Roma inhabitants. Non-Roma villagers believe that the realization of the biomass project is highly endangered by the new Roma settlers. Their lifestyles and everyday practices obstruct the project. The non-Roma villagers suppose that the thefts and dilapidations committed by new Roma settlers will endanger the infrastructure of the innovative development. The strict line between non-Roma Hungarians and non-native Roma settlers is observable both in terms of everyday life and in terms of the success of the project.

The growing proportion of new settlers regarded as “troublemakers” increases the potential conflicts while also strengthens the oversimplifying general concept of Roma people as the source of all problems. The trouble is that this concept obliterates the boundaries between the integrated, native Roma community and the physically and mentally also segregated new settlers. As a consequence, the distrust between the local Roma and non-Roma community grows, significantly endangering the feasibility of the innovation.

In addition to this, the tension between the local government and the new settlers also hinders the realization of the development. The idea of development connected to renewable energy was that of the mayor. He is the main supporter of the biomass project. Unlike the former mayor he does not run from the conflicts with the new settlers. One of

the most significant aspects of his leadership is indeed the acceptance of confrontation. As a consequence, he is really unpopular among the non-native Romas. Conflicts evoke strong emotions more and more frequently with some ethno-political overtone. The non-native Gypsy community regards the mayor and anti-Roma or racist, nonetheless the mayor has a good relationship with the native Roma community. Supposedly this underlying conflict will show itself also in the reception of the project. The new Roma settlers of Csernely will stand against everything and anything coming from or connected to the local government or the mayor himself, while the integrated native Roma community will support the project.

The most serious conflicts of the local society in the present day Csernely originate from the changing of formerly functioning practices of Roma and non-Roma living together. Therefore no significant development projects can be planned or initiated without carrying out a social and cultural feasibility study.

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