Social Housing Reconstruction Camp 2010 Nagykanizsa

In Hungary, the rate of home ownership is exceptionally high, but so is the rate of those who cannot afford their own home, nor rents at market value. An appropriate government level housing program could be an adequate answer for this problem. Because of the lack of the necessary financial resources, coupled with the generally weak state of the existing housing stock, this solution isn't feasible on neither the national, nor the municipal level. Accordingly, innovative ideas in this field usually come from civil society actors.
We came up with the idea of the social housing reconstruction work camp in 2009, after visiting a family facing eviction in Nagykanizsa (a town in West Hungary) together with the members of a homeless advocacy volunteering network, and we successfully implemented our first such project in 2010. The concept was to create a possibility for the tenants of municipality owned social housing with rent in arrears, to renovate the buildings they live in, while reducing their debts towards the municipality by the value of their work. The following paragraphs give a brief description of this project.

Project objectives

The social reconstruction camp is intended to be an intersectoral pilot model aiming to improve the living conditions of the underprivileged target group, living in municipality owned social housing, and often struggling with rent-arrears, while involving them in the activities as widely as possible. It was important to find people within our target group who are interested in working on repaying their debts, and who are able to realize their common interests, and cooperate accordingly.
We implemented our project in one of the two biggest slum areas of Nagykanizsa, called Ligetváros. The buildings, formerly military hospital barracks, are dilapidated, and their tenants' standard of living is far below the national average. The project consisted of the external renovation of selected buildings in Ligetváros. Since most of the work was easy manual labor, anyone could join as a volunteer. We put great emphasis on the cooperation between locals with rent arrears, and the volunteers recruited by the foundation. Cooperation with the local civil society and the municipality was also important.

Target group

As mentioned earlier, the primary target group was the inhabitants of Ligetváros, particularly unemployed locals with arrears in rent towards the municipality, and whose such debts could be significantly reduced or entirely erased by participating in our project. We tried to involve as many local families as possible. We did not intend to replace the municipality's debt management program - instead, we were trying to offer an alternative.
Indirectly, our target group also involved the other (non-participating) inhabitants of Ligetváros as well, since the works improved the conditions of the community as a whole, and were meant to enhance the living standards of the entire neighborhood. Our underprivileged participants were ready to make an effort for themselves, so they gained a higher appreciation of the people in the neighborhood. This is particularly important, knowing that Ligetváros is one of the most segregated areas of Nagykanizsa, with a high rate of Roma population. Labor market discrimination does not apply in our project, and everyone is able to complete the easy manual labor required to participate, so we encouraged everyone, including women, to get involved.

Steps of project implementation

Although the idea was born in early 2009, we had a long way to go until its implementation. Norway Grants offered the call for tenders that suited our idea the best, and in June 2009 we were informed that our project was selected for support. We originally intended to realize the project in

late summer 2009. However, because of the prolonged, and unexpectedly difficult, negotiations with the local municipality, we could only sign a contract with the town council in February 2010.
The legal entity behind the organizers was the foundation running the College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory. We found indispensable co-organizers in other specialized colleges: law student members of the István Bibó College sketched the legal background of the concept, and architecture students of the Bercsényi Architecture School provided us with planning the implementation as well as with calculating the quantity of materials to be used.
In autumn 2009 we submitted a proposal to the Hungarian branch of Habitat for Humanity (HfH). according to our contract with them, HfH construction supervisors coordinated the work of locals and volunteers, provided us with the necessary tools and machinery, and included international volunteers, recruited through HfH networks for one week of each phase. The expertise and experience of HfH supervisors was an indispensable help. Based on the excellent results of our cooperation, we hope to work together with them on our future projects as well.
From early 2010 we visited the site more or less on a weekly basis to build connections with locals, and recruit as many participants as possible. These visits helped give credibility to the project in the eyes of the locals, and made municipality representatives take us seriously. In the meanwhile we were recruiting volunteers, and contacted potential sponsors, allowing us to use the Norway Grant support more efficiently, and renovate more buildings.
The project was eventually implemented in two phases. We renovated two buildings (each consisting of 4 apartments) in April, and another 4 apartment building in August 2010. Local participants and volunteers cooperated smoothly during both phases. Locals appreciated the project and grew attached to the organizers.

Results and present status

Although we finished the on-site implementation, project activities are far from being over. The Norway Grant demands the regular follow-up monitoring of the results, which proved to be a manageable task, since we kept good relations with the participants after the renovation works. In cooperation with the organizers, HfH implemented a basic financial training for Ligetváros dwellers, led by an experienced trainer on two occasions.
The most remarkable result of the project is, no doubt, the reduction of the arrears of the participants by 3 million HUF - roughly the third of the total sum of arrears in the neighborhood. 38 people had the opportunity to reduce or completely make up for their debts in April, and 24 more in the August phase, helping them avoid being trapped in a debt spiral. The financial training helps locals manage their finances more reasonably in the future, with which they also set an example for the other members of the community.
Besides the local participants, roughly 70 volunteers (mostly coming from the capital Budapest) and various international volunteer groups recruited by HfH took part in the renovations. An important result of the camp is proving that people of very different social and economic backgrounds are able to efficiently cooperate for a common goal. We hope to keep up this tradition over future projects.
We created an informational booklet to present the idea to the general public, and particularly to municipalities and NGOs interested in initiating similar projects. Our activities received unexpectedly wide media coverage from national papers and television channels nearly as interested as the local media. We were invited to radio broadcasts to present the project, and participated in the anniversary conference of Autonomia Foundation Hungary, the national coordinator of the Norway Grant, where we could present our work camp as a “good practice”.

Sustainability

We put great emphasis on the cost efficient functioning of both local households and municipality management, since this concept is crucial to the idea of transforming debts, through work, into creating real value. Renovating already existing housing is clearly more economical than

demolishing old buildings and constructing new ones, which makes the idea sustainable from financial as well as environmental point of view. For the municipality, this activity is definitely worth the investment, since evicting people is a financial question as much as it is a social one: hosting people in emergency social provider institutions clearly costs more than giving financial support to their appropriate housing.
The kind support of Austrotherm is significant on the financial as well as the environmental level. Insulation renders households more cost and energy efficient - this aspect adds to the economic and environmental sustainability of the project.
As for organizational sustainability, the project is largely appreciated within and outside of TEK (the college of the organizing group), and the number of organizers and volunteers grew steadily over the implementation. A group of dedicated organizers emerged throughout the activities, who are ready to invest significant amount of their time and energy in this initiative. The college particularly highly appreciates the work of these people, and many of the members participated as volunteers. The renovation activities mobilized more members than any other project in the past few years - a notable piece of information, considering the 230 km distance from the capital where the college is located. Through this project we realized that the membership has pro-social activist potential besides its academic affiliations, and that our creativity and impetus can set an example to young people in social activism as well as in academic excellence.

Future plans

We would like to emphasise our intention to create a pilot model from our Nagykanizsa project. This way we could convince easier local governments all over the country, that indeed it is worth involving the tenants of their own social housing to the reconstruction works of these, because it could not only raise the price of the tenaments, but create „better debtors" from the residents, who would pay their rents more regularly than those ones living in otherwise forgotten and neglected housing blocks.
In order to obtain this objective, we contacted local governments of Hungarian cities with a population of more than 10000 people, especially those ones, that possess social tenaments in a single housing unit. These cities would be the ideal location of a possible spin-off of the Social Housing Reconstruction Camp.
Therefore we organize project presentations, and we are eager to pass our brochure to as many parties interested as we can. If a local government, which is suitable to our conditions, inquires about the details, we contact them, and discuss the ways of implementing a reconstruction camp in their town with our or some other NGO's contribution. We are also planning to enter other competitions, but this move requires us to overcome the limits of the university college's legal status and to found an association on our own.n This legal form would enhance our possibilities in spreading our concept, and it would provide us with a stronger policy setting ability as well. We intend to organize similar social housing work camps in the future, even if without the involvement of external support, and preferably in accordance with municipalities' own housing renovation programs. We plan on paying particular attention to Ligetváros, the site of our pilot project, and to stay in touch with its participants.

For further information, please visit: http://homokozo.tek.bke.hu/szepitotabor/rolunk_irtak
http://www.eukn.org/E_library/Housing/Housing_Policy/Social_Housing/Social_housing_reconstruction_camp_in_Nagykanizsa