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# From the Forest to Housing: Challenges Faced by Former Rough Sleepers in the Private Rental Market in Hungary

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- › **Abstract\_** *This article explores the challenges homeless people face when trying to access the private rental market in a context where access to social housing is limited, and where there is no minimum income, nor substantial housing benefits. The paper draws on an evaluation of a recent initiative, the Pilisi Forest Project, which aimed to re-house 152 rough sleepers (during 2007-2009), the most vulnerable group within the homeless community, from various forests in Budapest, Hungary. The project offered service users a housing allowance as well as floating support for a duration of 12 months. The project faced a number of operational challenges including take-up from clients, community integration issues, the prejudice of landlords and lack of staff time. However the greatest challenge was in achieving housing sustainment beyond 12 months, in a situation where most clients had insufficient financial resources to meet the rent without assistance from the project. The article draws conclusions from the lessons learnt in this project that can be adapted to the wider context of Hungary, as well as other European countries with a similar level of social provision.*
- › **Keywords\_** *Rough sleeping, access to housing, private rental market, housing allowances, floating support*

## Introduction

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I always say two things to support workers... Can you give me an apartment? No. Can you give me a job? No. I don't need anything else. All homeless people need these two things only. (Participant, Pilisi Forest Project)

This article explores the challenges that former rough sleepers face, firstly when trying to access the private rental market in Hungary, and secondly, maintain any accommodation secured following the cessation of support from any homelessness agencies. After briefly defining homelessness in the Hungarian and European context, the article outlines the barriers faced by rough sleepers in attempting to access settled housing, at both a structural and individual level. In particular, the social context of current day Hungary is described, including the lack of social housing, a very minimal guaranteed minimum income, <sup>1</sup> often not accessible for homeless people<sup>2</sup>, and limited housing benefits. The article then examines the quite limited range of services that exist to help former rough sleepers with integration into housing, before focusing on the specific example of the Pilisi Forest Project: a project aimed at re-housing rough sleepers from various forests in Budapest, primarily into the private rented sector. In the final section of the article, conclusions are drawn from the lessons learnt in this project that can be adapted to the wider context of Hungary, as well as other European countries with a similar levels and systems of social provision.

## Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Hungary

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In order to understand the challenges homeless people face in accessing housing in Hungary, it is first necessary to define homelessness, and rough sleeping, in the Hungarian context. Originating from the Social Act, 1993, there are two definitions as to who is considered homeless in Hungary – both of which are much narrower than in many other member states. Firstly, those who are either roofless or sleeping in homeless services are considered homeless, and/or secondly those without a registered abode, including those using a homeless facility or a public space (for example: Budapest, District 5; or Dózsa György Street – with no house number) as an 'address'. People living in overcrowded, substandard accommodation, or who

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<sup>1</sup> A maximum of about € 80 per month – about one third of what would be needed in order to access the cheapest possible private rental housing (rent and utilities).

<sup>2</sup> Only one person per family is entitled to the benefit of working-age people, and they are required to cooperate with the local Job Centre – accepting any employment opportunity proposed, for example. An official address is needed to apply.

are 'sofa surfing' are not considered homeless. In terms of the ETHOS typology, homelessness in Hungary is mainly represented by categories 1 to 3 (public spaces, night shelters, and other homeless shelters).

This article focuses on rough sleepers, the most disadvantaged group within the overall homeless population. Each year, a survey of homeless people is undertaken in Hungary (Fehér, 2011). In February 2012, as well as recording 10 205 beds in homeless shelters or hostels over Hungary, researchers enumerated at least 2 339 people sleeping rough (Győri and Szabó, 2012). However, this is likely to be a gross underestimate as the survey does not reach everyone and rough sleeping was treated as a legal offence in some communities, resulting in people sleeping rough in well hidden locations (Misetics, 2010). Research has also revealed that while some homeless people using shelters (37 percent) have never slept rough, almost half of them have slept rough at some point in their lives. About 14 percent of homeless people have only slept rough throughout their homeless career (Győri, 2008). Those who have only slept rough are less likely to have a job (24.7 percent as opposed to 36 percent); some kind of insurance-based income – such as old age or disability pension (10.9 percent as opposed to 28.8 percent); or any other social benefit (9.3 percent as opposed to 13.9 percent), than those homeless people who have never slept rough. Rough sleepers, on the other hand, are much more likely (25.2 percent as opposed to 2.6 percent) to make a living by collecting, recycling and selling garbage. Women who are sleeping rough are even less likely to have a job (17 percent), and slightly more likely to make a living from collecting garbage. Rough sleepers tend to drink more than people who stay at shelters<sup>3</sup> – 24 percent of them drink alcohol every day (12 percent of those in shelters), and alcohol seems to be an even bigger problem for women rough sleeping than men (Győri, 2008).

## **The Housing Market: Barriers to Access**

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In Hungary, as in many other Central and Eastern European countries, homeless people face significant structural barriers to accessing appropriate and sustainable housing. In particular there is a lack of affordable housing for those on low incomes. In Hungary, the main form of tenure is homeownership. This brings about two problems. The first one is that Hungary has one of the lowest rates of public housing stock in Europe at approximately 3 percent of total housing stock. This stock is also unevenly distributed across the country – in some regions the social housing stock is less than 1 percent of all housing, and, especially in smaller settlements, there are no social housing units at all. Moreover, the Housing Law does not specify how

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<sup>3</sup> Though in most shelters alcohol consumption is not tolerated.

many such units local authorities need to provide their population with, who is entitled to social housing, nor how social rent should be calculated. In practice, the small sector is mainly targeted at the 'deserving poor' with homeless people unlikely to gain access due to both administrative and financial barriers (Fehér *et al*, 2011). For example, BMSZKI, the largest homelessness service provider in Budapest<sup>4</sup>, recorded that in 2011 232 of their clients applied for social housing, of which only 23 people succeeded.

As a consequence, the only possible way out of homelessness for most people is the private rented sector. However, this sector also has a number of structural problems that make this process difficult. The sector has been subject to only small-scale and less than successful measures since 1989 (Fehér *et al*, 2011). The main policy measure has been deregulation of the private rented sector, which has resulted in both landlords and tenants being more vulnerable. The amount of rent is not protected by law, and landlords often try to avoid paying taxes and/or giving tenants claimable rights to the property by refusing to sign an official contract for the rent. This might mean that the privacy of the tenant is not guaranteed, but also that the tenant cannot register the tenancy as their official address, which might result in a multitude of other difficulties. Certain groups of people (the Roma, families with children) are generally mistrusted by landlords and have even more difficulties trying to access the private rental market.

In addition, lack of any sufficient and regular income makes it difficult for homeless people to move out to the private rental sector. The minimum rent (for a bedroom only) in Budapest costs €140 per month, plus a similar amount for the maintenance of the apartment. Most landlords also ask for a deposit of two months in advance. Many homeless people cannot even pay for hostels which demand a token fee of €30-70 per month. Most of those who do not have a job are not entitled to unemployment benefit as they had not been legally employed beforehand, and even if they qualify for this or a social benefit, both of these amount to approximately €100 per month. Even with the minimum wage (€330 per month before taxes, about €260 per month after taxes), or with obligatory public employment for those who do not want to lose their long-term unemployment benefit (€250 per month before taxes, about €200 per month after taxes), it is very unlikely for someone to be able to afford to rent an apartment in the private housing sector. Rising energy costs and utility prices are also a major issue in Hungary for all low-income households (Hegedüs, 2011).

Further, there is almost no housing support in Hungary. There is no rent subsidy provided by the Hungarian state with a housing allowance subsidising the costs of utilities only. The amount of the normative housing allowance is also extremely low

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<sup>4</sup> Has a share of about 30 percent of beds in homeless provision in Budapest (total number of beds in Budapest = 6565).

(usually between €10-25 per month) and therefore it does not offer substantial assistance to those with low (or no) income. Moreover, to be eligible for a housing allowance, tenants need to register their address officially, something many landlords are reluctant to do.

Alongside substantial housing market barriers, many homeless people and rough sleepers in particular, face personal hardship and health problems that can create additional barriers to accessing housing. As outlined in the previous section, many homeless people suffer from problems with their health, mental health and/or some sort of substance abuse, and this can make it difficult for them to access the housing market and maintain housing in the long term –as well as landlord reluctance to house people with health issues. Some groups of people have become so institutionalised that they have lost their independent life skills (for example, people having served long prison sentences, young people who have grown up in group homes or homeless people who have lived in services for several years). The lack of individual counselling or floating support makes it difficult for these people to access, or to keep any form of independent housing. Many homeless people have difficulty in accessing health services to address physical health problems, and there is an inadequate network of services offering support for people with mental health problems or addiction. Thus, individual problems are also structural ones in the Hungarian context.

### **Specific Schemes to Assist Homeless People**

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Initiatives aimed at resettling homeless people have a long history in the European Union, particularly some countries like the United Kingdom (Crane *et al*, 2012). In contrast, such programmes have been developed more recently in Hungary and other Central and Eastern European countries, with most provision focused on providing basic shelter to people sleeping rough. As noted above, there is a network of homeless night shelters or hostels in Hungary, offering 10205 beds in total (with 64 percent of these beds being in Budapest). There are also day centres, and more recently, some medical centres for homeless people have been established. However, most homelessness provision has not changed its function significantly since its development in the early 1990s (Filipovic-Hrast *et al*, 2009). They do not have access to any move-on housing options, although some aim to help people back into “normal housing”. The system functions within the framework of a ‘staircase’ model of provision (Sahlin, 2005), but with the ‘highest stairs’ missing, in terms of there being a lack of supported accommodation that can prepare people for living independently (Fehér *et al*, 2011).

Within this overall context, there have been some limited special funds from the Ministry of Social Affairs<sup>5</sup> reserved for supporting the re-housing of homeless people since 2005. These funds could be accessed by hostel users and rough sleepers via outreach teams or day centres. The amount of this type of support was a maximum of €860 to be paid within 12 months (so an average €70 per month), in a diminishing fashion. Homeless people received floating support, but there is no data as to how frequently meetings between them and support workers occurred.<sup>6</sup> Beneficiaries were expected to have a regular income, and they had to pay a growing share of their housing costs. Each year about 200 homeless people moved on with the help of the re-housing support in Budapest and its surroundings – representing only a small minority of the almost 8000 homeless population of the Central Hungarian region<sup>7</sup>.

Monitoring of the re-housing support revealed that the average income of beneficiaries was more than the minimum salary (Győri, 2010), which is unsurprising given that they would have struggled without access to additional funds. More than half of the beneficiaries moved together with at least one other person, usually a family member. Family members had not always been homeless themselves, so this scheme reached more people than the actual number of beneficiaries.

One of the weaknesses of the re-housing support was that it only usually lasted for 12 months, although in some cases, funding for another year could be requested, and there is no data available as to whether beneficiaries remained housed once the support had expired. However, the re-housing support for homeless people was more flexible than the normative housing support: it did not require the tenant to register his/her address in the place of living, the support could be used to cover rent as well as utilities, and it could be given to several individuals moving together, thus providing substantial help for couples or groups

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<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Social Affairs nominated two public foundations (Hajléktalanokért Közalapítvány – *Public Foundation for the Homeless* and Összefogás Közalapítvány – *Cooperation Public Foundation*, the second of which was closed in 2012) to distribute these funds to homeless services, who then could allocate it to homeless people who were moving out to the private (or, less frequently, to the public) housing market. Hajléktalanokért Közalapítvány was responsible for reaching services outside Budapest, but the funding was only available between 2005-2007. Összefogás Közalapítvány was responsible for Budapest and its surroundings; the last round of funding was paid in 2011.

<sup>6</sup> As the support work expected was not quantified, it can be assumed that in some cases visits took place on a fortnightly or even monthly basis – and they could have taken place in the office of the support worker and not at the home of the beneficiary.

<sup>7</sup> Eight-nine (smaller and bigger) service providers applied to distribute the funds among their users. At the same time, there were about 6500 beds available in services for homeless people (including temporary accommodation for homeless families), while at least 1150 people slept rough (Győri, 2011).

of friends. The programme was very popular among homeless people as well as service providers, as this was seen as the most realistic way out of homelessness in the absence of other solutions.

There have been several other smaller scale projects targeting the (housing) reintegration of homeless people across Hungary, trying to overcome both the individual as well as structural causes of homelessness (Fehér *et al*, 2011). Some of these projects focused on rough sleepers especially, while others included all kinds of homeless people. All of them were limited in time.<sup>8</sup> This article now focuses on one of these projects which stands out in several ways: it was implemented by several organisations under the coordination of one public foundation; it targeted rough sleepers and managed to reach quite a large number of them; and it offered support workers quite a lot of freedom in how they wanted to proceed in rehousing their contacts. As described below, whilst the scheme did not only offer individual housing in the private rental market, this appeared to be the most popular option for beneficiaries and thus is discussed in detail. The project targeted rough sleepers living in specific forest areas.

## The Pilisi Forest Project

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In 2006, the Pilisi Forest Company, which owns several forest areas in the Budapest area, approached the Ministry of Social Affairs to ask for assistance to clear the forests of homeless people as well as illegally disposed garbage in the areas. The Ministry allocated some funds to the Public Foundation for the Homeless who subsequently posted a call to organisations working with rough sleepers to be their partners in re-housing homeless people from the forest. Seven organisations<sup>9</sup> responded to the call and began work on the project between 2007-2009. Similar to the special funds scheme described above, the project offered homeless people a housing allowance as well as floating support by their former outreach workers, for a duration of 12 months. The average staff-client ratio was 1: 7 in the project.

It is important to highlight that the main goal of the project was to 'clear the forests' as requested by the forest company. A secondary aim of the project was to prevent people from rough sleeping again or using homeless shelters. Long-term housing stability was not an explicit goal of the project and several characteristics of the project made this difficult, including the shortage of working hours of staff, lack of professional guidance and a lack of a stable and sufficient income of clients.

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the details of previous projects and their reports can be accessed at [www.osszefogaskozalap.hu](http://www.osszefogaskozalap.hu) or [www.hajlekot.hu](http://www.hajlekot.hu)

<sup>9</sup> Six out of the seven organizations were NGOs while one was the outreach team of a local authority.

Many of the homeless people targeted had lived in the forest for several years and had built wooden huts and installed heating, creating real (if illegal) homes. One key research question was therefore whether the re-housing support would enable them to move to a new home at least as comfortable (or more so) as the one they had built for themselves in the forest. There was also a question as to whether they would be able to take their belongings and especially their animals, including dogs, cats, chicken and other small animals.

In 2012 research was conducted on the project (three years after the end of the project). Basic monitoring data was analysed that had been collected by support workers on those who had signed an agreement with project workers at the start of the project. Qualitative interviews were also undertaken with 14 participants, comparing their situation prior to moving in to housing and at the end of the support. Interviews were also conducted with support workers.

A limitation of the research is that it was not possible to collect detailed information on rough sleepers who did not take part in the project. However it was known that many people refused to cooperate with the outreach team and moved to other areas. Some people also stayed where they were and were left undisturbed by the forest company. In some areas, rough sleepers had been informed about the project through the media as well as the forest rangers, and often this information proved incorrect. Many homeless people believed that they were entitled to receive the financial support in cash and were disappointed when it transpired the support was in kind. There was also some confusion as to who was evicting people – some homeless people thought the outreach teams were responsible for this and this led to a lack of trust in the project. Generally, outreach staff had to convince people to take part in the project.

### ***About the beneficiaries***

Each service provider was able to decide upon the admission criteria for the project. Some tried to include everyone who was interested; others tried to select people based on the 'intuition' of outreach workers, and only involve those who were likely to succeed after the one-year re-housing support had run out. This typically meant people were more likely to be selected if they had a less severe addiction problem, some sort of a stable income or the likelihood of securing one, and a motivation to move out from the forest.

Of the 152 clients in the Pilisi Forest Project, 65 per cent were male and 35 per cent were female. The average age of clients was 44.6 years at the start of the project. More than half of participants (56 percent) had elementary education or lower. About one third (35 percent) went to some kind of vocational school. Nine per cent graduated from secondary school. None had gained a higher education. The



average length of homelessness (rough sleeping or staying in the forest) had been 6.46 years. The majority (64 percent) of clients lived together with a partner, spouse or other family members. About two-third of clients had a substance abuse problem, with 95 per cent addicted to alcohol and 5 per cent to drugs (some of the drug-addicts also had alcohol issues).

When entering the project, 76 per cent of clients had some kind of income. However, only 15 per cent of all clients were in possession of a regular income, 37 per cent had some kind of temporary job (including street paper vending). Almost a quarter (24 percent) lived from collecting garbage or begging, one fifth (19 percent) received either old age or disability pension. Very few people received unemployment (2 percent) or social benefits (3 percent).

### ***Project participation***

The average length of participation in the project was nine months. Forty percent remained housed for the whole period of time agreed, while 60 per cent left the project and/or accommodation before this point. This extremely high non-completion rate can be explained by the large number of clients who decided to quit the project after having signed the agreement. These (63 clients) started with the project but took part in the project for 6 months or less.

### ***Income / employment outcomes***

There were some changes in terms of clients' income and/or employment status.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the project, the proportion of people without any income decreased from 17 to 9 per cent for the completers. There was an increase in the share of those who had a regular income (from 15 to 21 percent). There was a noticeable decrease in the share of temporary jobs (from 37 to 30 percent). Also significantly fewer people relied on collecting garbage or begging (15 percent compared to 24 percent). These changes may be explained by the fact that by the end of the project a much greater proportion (33 percent compared to 24 percent earlier) of people received some kind of social benefit (pension, unemployment or social benefits). This may be the result of the co-operation with support workers who helped clients to obtain these forms of support.

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<sup>10</sup> Starting figures below refer to all clients while end-of-cooperation figures refer only to those who stayed in the program at least until the agreed period of cooperation.

## Accommodation Outcomes

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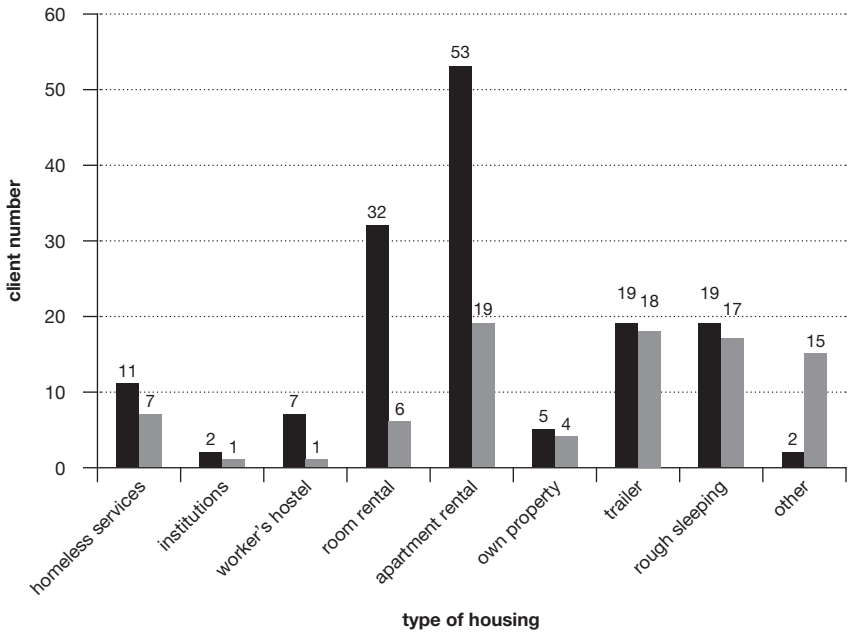
Support workers consulted with clients about what type of accommodation they would ideally prefer. There were four main options available: renting a bedroom or an apartment; buying a trailer; buying one's own property; or a workers' hostel or a hostel for homeless people in Budapest. In all cases, the money for the accommodation was not given directly to the clients; rather it was paid by the organisation to the landlord/owner/company instead.

Chart 1 shows the accommodation status for the first place the 150 clients moved to following signing up to the project (first column) and at the end of the individual contracts with clients (second column). Completion data is shown for 88 people as 62 clients left the project.

### *Rented accommodation*

For those with some kind of a stable income (whether pension, benefit or paid work), renting a bedroom or an apartment/house was often the best housing option. Outreach workers helped clients to find accommodation although most homeless people found their own housing. Key workers were present at the signing of the contracts, and they often handed the rent/deposit directly to the landlord. The re-housing support mostly covered the deposit and the rent, while tenants were responsible for paying for utilities. The amount of financial support usually decreased over time, so tenants had to pay an increasing proportion of the costs of their housing.

Rented accommodation was the preferred option for couples (to offer more privacy and because sharing of costs made this more achievable), as well as for families hoping to reunite with their children. The project recorded that couples proved to be more successful in sustaining their new form of housing than single people. However, retaining private rented accommodation proved extremely difficult for most clients. During the project, a total of 85 people (56 percent) rented a room or an apartment, however only 25 remained in this accommodation at the end of the project (Chart 1).

**Chart1: Type of housing during and at the end of co-operation period**

Note: Other includes re-union with family, institutional care and hospitalisation

### **Trailers**

Trailers are an unusual housing option in Hungary and the option was offered following a request from one couple. Support staff considered that trailers could potentially be financially sustainable in the long term and could also suit the special needs of people moving in directly from the forest (for instance where they could bring all their belongings or pets). However, as there are no official trailer parks in Hungary, it took considerable effort to find a place where a trailer could be stored in the long-term. A park outside of Budapest was found that offered a building with a common toilet, shower, laundry and kitchen, while the trailers could use the electricity and water from the main building (that tenants had to pay for themselves). A total of 19 people moved to a trailer, with 18 remaining there at the end of the contract agreement.

Where two people moved together, housing support could cover the price of the trailer as well as subsidise the rent and utilities for a few months. Trailers were bought second-hand for €600-800. The trailers were bought to be the property of the NGOs. Each trailer cost a monthly rent of €60, plus €20 for common expenses, as well as an individual electricity bill. According to the contract with clients, after two years of smooth co-operation, clients could 'inherit' the trailer

and it would officially become their own property. Where the agreement was violated, new residents could move to the trailer and it remained the property of the service provider.

Most of the people who live here work normally. They get up at five or four in the morning... Some of them look through the garbage bins of the inner city, some in the outer districts. Some collect metal and take it to a recycling station. They earn 2-3-4 thousand forints a day, which is enough for them. Small families, the woman is at home, they have one or two children... The youngest one is two months old. (Support worker)

By the time of the research, the Landlord had acquired ownership of four trailers from the project: either the users sold them to him after becoming full owners, or in the case of a single person who had died, the landlord acquired it by no legal inheritor claiming it. The Landlord decided to sell the fourth one as no homeless person wanted to live there any more. Although residents of the trailer park appeared to form a community, support workers felt that the park could lead to clients being segregated from the rest of society. With the park situated on the border of the city, residents could not easily socialise with others and employment could be the only field of integration for them. However, many people worked for the trailer park owner, which could lead to further isolation.

### ***Ownership***

Outreach teams only supported six clients in buying their own property. As a home-owning society, it was understandable that some clients wished to become home-owners. However the amount of the re-housing support only allowed them to buy property of very low quality (or a container home) that needed renovation or lacked water, electricity and gas. Mostly these properties are located in the countryside far from bigger cities, which decreases the chances of finding a job. Ownership was only a real option for those with a stable income, usually with a pension.

### ***Workers' hostel***

Workers' hostel seemed like a good (although a bit more pricy) housing option for those who did not wish to live in a shelter for the homeless, who needed accommodation fast or who could not find a suitable homeless service but did not wish to live entirely on their own. Workers' hostels usually offer shared bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms, but beds can be reserved even for one night – so people with no steady income can pay per night. They are very similar to hostels for the homeless, but there are no social support workers on duty. Seven people took up a place in one of these hostels at the outset of the project, but only one person was living there at the end of the agreement.

## Project Challenges

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The project encountered a number of key challenges, including the sustainability of housing, community integration, clients' lack of independent living skills, the prejudice of landlords and lack of staff time.

### *Sustainability*

Long-term reintegration into the housing market could only be achieved if tenants managed to sustain their housing (or move to other similar accommodation). Arguably the greatest challenge of the project was the lack of clients' sufficient income to keep the housing once the financial support ran out. Most people had no stable work, nor were they capable of working full time due to their physical or mental state. Support staff tried to help their clients access any social benefits they might have been entitled to, but even if such was the case, this did not provide enough income to retain their housing. Therefore most people had to find some type of paid work to retain the housing and this was not easy for clients and staff.

We were glad to be out of the streets, but it did not turn out so well in the end. To be out of the forest, I mean. But after renting the apartment, we could not get a job. Even if I was called in for an interview, they would see that I am Roma, they would see that I don't have an address... I never made it. I think this is why many of us have failed. There was not enough money to pay for the apartment. I really think if we had had work, and more money, we would not have moved back to the forest. (Participant)

As housing support only lasted for about 12 months, those not able to live independently at this point had no choice but to return to the streets. Even during the 12 months of receiving housing support, clients had to pay their share for accommodation, which often exceeded one third of their income. Those with no or very low income could not choose to move to independent rented accommodation, simply because they could not have afforded it even with the support. This could explain why staff emphasise the role of a job or another sort of stable income, and why some teams preferred to support those homeless people who were more likely to succeed this way.

I do not have enough money to rent an apartment. There is no housing support, and I don't make enough to rent something for the two of us. You cannot even rent a place for €180, but even if you could, you would still need to pay more for the utilities. Altogether €260-300. Where would I get that sort of money? We both receive unemployment benefit, so we have €170 for the two of us. Plus whatever we can make. We have to make this last for the whole month. (Participant)

In this situation, couples were generally more successful than single persons as they could share the costs of living and could also provide each other with support. However, success was not dependent on family status alone, it was also related to addiction: couples were more successful when at least one of them did not have (severe) alcohol problems. Support workers found that families with small children were the ones that were the most motivated to access and sustain their accommodation. Often this was the condition to regain custody of their children, and be allowed to take care of them.

### *Community integration*

Another challenge faced by some tenants was how to manage their own behaviour in a new accommodation setting, and also sometimes the behaviour of their peers. Living in the forest had its own rules: some homeless people had lived there as part of a forest community, sharing their income and some household chores together. These people got used to the rules of the forest community, and could struggle when trying to adapt to a new set of rules. For example, several people with severe alcohol dependence issues from one community moved to the trailer park together, and brought with them the chaotic lifestyle they had been used to in the forest. This is what the owner of the trailer-park (the landlord in this case) recalls:

When the first tenants arrived, they used to have big parties. Most of our tenants were alcoholics. Today they drink a bit. I've never seen people drink like them before: they stand in one place, drink pálinka [local strong liqueur], have misty eyes and then wet their pants. When they get up, their first thought is to go and beat up their wives.... In the beginning we had to call the police several times. One man set fire to his trailer, with his wife inside. Another one was caught stealing at night. (Landlord)

Some homeless people decided in the very beginning not to live in normal rented accommodation, because they feared neighbourhood conflicts. As one woman, living with her partner, explained:

Right in the beginning, I said we wanted to move to a trailer. I knew my husband, I knew that when he drank, he should not be around other people. So rented accommodation or a shelter was not an option for us. I said: 'let's move to a trailer'. (Participant)

In these cases – especially in the trailer park, but also in some rented accommodation where several friends had moved together – the old values clashed with the new ones. Community integration was a challenge as the old community still surrounded people, while a new community was also pressing them with new demands. Intensive support work could have prevented evictions in some cases, but usually staff could only visit their tenants once or twice a month.

Some people in rented accommodation struggled with the close proximity of neighbours as well. The man quoted below, together with his wife, was eventually evicted after several complaints by their neighbours:

They [the neighbours] didn't like it when we had a fight. The walls are thin, they could hear everything.... But I could have made a fuss because of their baby crying in the middle of the night. Or one of these gigantic men beating up his wife..... Anyway, I didn't like their attitude. It made me crazy: I turned the DVD player and the radio up real loud. What do they think, telling me how to live in my own home? ! (Participant)

Often, staff were called in too late or not at all, so they could not offer their help in mediating between their clients, the landlord and the neighbours. The most typical problems were complaints by neighbours because of loud or aggressive behaviour (either within the apartment or towards people in the neighbourhood) or the moving in of several other people (often more chaotic in behaviour than the original tenants). This process unfortunately left a mark on landlords in several cases, and some who were originally open to offer their housing for vulnerable populations have since changed their minds.

Several homeless people mentioned anxiety and stress as the cause, related to the insecurity of their housing situation, of their disruptive behaviour.

We argued less after we moved here. We argued all the time beforehand! We both had been very tense. When we had lived in [normal housing] before, we did not argue. After we had spent some time there, we knew we could go home and feel safe. But when... we did not know how much longer we could keep living there, we started to fight again. We felt very insecure. Then we argued about every little thing – like how much money one of us spent that day. (Participant)

### ***Re-learning household skills***

Independent living skills (cleaning, shopping, cooking etc.) were often a struggle for clients who moved to rented apartments. Support workers did not generally have extra time to help tenants with these issues and felt that it should have been a key aspect of the project. In certain cases a lack of these skills led to the renunciation of the contract by the landlord (for example, one tenant did not use the rooms properly, chopped wood in the kitchen or stored large quantities of garbage inside).

### ***Landlord prejudices against homeless people***

In some cases, homeless people reported that they experienced prejudice from potential landlords when looking for a flat. It was often a dilemma whether to tell the potential landlord about the person's homelessness or not. In certain cases it was inevitable as the support organisation transferred the re-housing support

directly to the landlord. Some landlords preferred it this way as well, as they felt a well-known organisation served as some kind of security. Other homeless people decided not to share this information with their landlord or their new community:

There were two nice couples on the same corridor where we lived. They were Hungarians, not Roma, but they still invited us over for the evening, and we also invited them over. We would drink coffee together, or share some beers. We did not tell them about our lives. I would say that we came from the east of the country. I would share this before they even asked about us. I would say that we came to find work. They did not see me there during the day. I left in the morning; I went back in the evening. They thought I had a job. They did not know we lived on garbage. (Participant)

Support workers were always present at the negotiation of the contract, but the contract was between the landlord and the tenants directly. One difficulty that support workers had to face was that some landlords were not willing to sign a contract. Rental contracts were normally signed by the landlord and tenants, while the supporting organisation also made a separate co-operation agreement with each client. In the absence of the support workers, landlords often refused to give an invoice/receipt after they took the deposit worth 2-3 months rent.

The landlord said it was way enough if one of us was registered in the flat. I came first and when I wanted to register my woman, he said no. So she doesn't have an address now. (Participant)

Staff also felt that often the landlords themselves were not much better off than their tenants, and tried to take advantage of the tenants. In some cases, they tried to raise the rent after the first few weeks; in several cases they were unwilling to return the deposit when the contract ended. One organisation mentioned a secret agreement between the client and the landlord: after the support worker had given the deposit to the landlord, they shared it and the client did not really move in to the apartment.

Man: The landlord was a thief!

Woman: We paid as much for one room as we had paid for the whole apartment in the previous place. And we couldn't take a shower any time we wanted.

Man: Shared bathroom? Shared kitchen? Leave me alone – they locked the door of these places, so we could not use them! (Participants)

Families with small children, Roma people and people with obvious marks on their faces left by their street lifestyle reported having a difficulty finding accommodation where landlords would trust them with the keys.



### ***Support by staff***

As mentioned before, there was only a small amount of funding available for support work by staff in the re-housing project.<sup>11</sup> Most of the support work was carried out by those outreach workers or staff from day centres who had known the tenants while living in the forest, usually after their regular work shift. In addition, tenants often moved to another district, thus creating additional difficulties to keeping in touch on a regular basis. It is likely that more intensive support would have resulted in higher tenancy sustainment, as well as more people accessing the private market in the first place.

Staff reported that in some cases they were at a loss as to what they should do in their new role of providing home visits as opposed to visiting people in the forest (most often bringing with tea, sandwiches, vitamins and blankets, as well as information). In some case this was cited as the other reason (apart from time constraints) for limiting support work to taking care of financial and administrative details. Tenants, on the other hand, mentioned their disappointment at the change in the support offered by staff – the change from living in the forest to living in some kind of accommodation, but also the change after the support had expired. One woman, having moved to the trailer park with her spouse and a friend, talked about her disappointment about not being entitled to the Christmas packages they had enjoyed while living in the forest. Another woman mentioned how she was disillusioned by the team who did not visit them after the support had ran out, even when her husband (“whom they had all liked”) fell ill and eventually died<sup>12</sup>.

The staff consisted mostly of outreach workers, with a qualification of social work or social education. Many of them expressed the need for involving professionals with other qualifications, particularly in mental health issues, substance abuse and legal expertise on housing, which would have helped them in those cases where they felt inadequately trained.

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<sup>11</sup> About €18 a month per tenant – the equivalent of about 4-5 hours of paid work. Calculating the time spent on transport as well, this did not allow for more than two visits a month on average.

<sup>12</sup> They did help in arranging – and paying for – the funeral, though.

## Conclusions

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The biggest challenge for the makers of housing policy in transitional countries is to provide institutional assistance to those social groups who have become vulnerable due to structural changes in the economy, including the privatization of housing and the commoditization of public services. (Hegedüs, 2011, p.24)

Since transition, Hungarian housing policy has focused on home ownership, with little attention to the social sector with the exception of privatising the stock to reduce its capacity further at a time of growing need. The private rented sector is often the only option for housing for vulnerable populations, yet this sector is poorly prepared to respond to the needs of homeless people. Landlords can be reluctant to accommodate people with support needs. This study has also shown very starkly how housing allowances, and other benefits, are inadequate in assisting people to sustain housing in Hungary without additional special assistance from homelessness funds. Arguably, if the state does not have enough capacity to offer social housing to all who need it, and the construction of social housing units is not feasible, sustainable housing benefits should be made available for all those with a low income who need to be housed through the private rental market. Housing benefits should cover (a share of) both rent and utilities, and should last as long as needed, and not just for a limited amount of time.

Hungarian policy also has to focus on combating the shortcomings of the current official system of address registration. Landlords should be obliged to register tenants (if they wish to be registered). Any system of social support has to be devised so that those who are vulnerable do not miss out on any benefits because of their insecure situation.

The present study has also highlighted that finding employment is of central importance in re-housing vulnerable populations in Central and Eastern European countries. It is essential partly because (in most cases at least) a stable income is needed to sustain housing, and partly because of the additional benefits it offers, including meaningful activity and opportunities for social integration. Gaining employment is recognised as an important element in preventing and ending homelessness across Europe, including the need for supported employment schemes for homeless people (FEANTSA, 2009). If there are no jobs (which unfortunately is the case in many member states in the current economic crisis), a sufficient minimum income needs to be available for those who are living in vulnerable situations.

However, reflecting homelessness experience more generally throughout Europe, the present study also strongly suggests that housing allowances or an adequate income may not be enough for housing sustainment: some people also need other forms of support to be able to enter the housing market, and to retain the housing

in the long term. Individual support needs to be available for those homeless people, especially former rough sleepers with issues of mental health and/or substance abuse who are moving into the private housing market. This study also highlights how support may need to be quite intensive at times and that support should be flexible to meet needs. Support staff should have the capacity to carry out their work during work hours, rather than as additional employment after their main day job has ended, an issue that is not usually faced by most Western European countries.

In Hungary, there is a relatively well developed NGO homelessness sector capable of delivering innovative new programmes, and one which has already had substantial influence on policy making in this area. However, although Budapest has a housing and homelessness strategy, there is no overall homeless policy at a national level, and whilst some national funding has been made available to address homelessness, overall it is a relatively low policy priority. In short, present homelessness policy is not well equipped to address systemic problems that lead to homelessness and housing exclusion.

As outlined, homelessness services in Hungary mainly offer basic shelter and hostel services within a broad 'staircase' framework (with missing higher rungs). Housing First, and/or a housing led approach, is now acknowledged as offering a good model as to how chronically homeless people can be helped with housing, supported by evidence of high rates of housing retention (Tsemberis, 2010). The relatively intensive support available in this model, including support from specialist mental health and addiction teams, is unlikely to be easily replicated in the Hungarian context. However, this study has shown that people who have slept rough for many years can move straight into private rented housing or alternative options such as housing trailers. Retention rates however are low due to the relatively low level of support and particularly lack of financial resources to meet relatively high rents in the sector. At the very least, Hungarian homelessness policy should work towards providing longer term schemes that can offer people assistance for a number of years; giving them a greater opportunity to address support needs and re-engage with work.

While re-housing former homeless people, especially rough sleepers with a long history of homelessness will mean the allocation of scarce resources, there is increasing evidence that there are also substantial gains to society (Culhane *et al*, 2002). This includes both financial gains, for example fewer days spent in prison or hospital, and also humane gains of a more just society where no-one has to live in precarious situations such as in a forest due to inadequate housing options.

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