

Motivation and group dynamics in Hungarian community foundations

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Foreword

My research is focused on the subject of group motivation within the context of the Hungarian community foundations (CFs). I am currently working in Hungary with CFs as the program lead of the Community Foundation Support Program at the Roots and Wings Foundation (R&WF). My motivation for this paper to develop is twofold, on one hand to better understand our partners' actions through motivational factors, on the other hand based on the results of their answers to reflect on how we - as a support organization - work with them. My intention was not to characterize the personal motivation of individuals who are part of a certain CFs, but rather to explore the motivational factors which affect the actions of these CFs. My research does not intend to go into individual psychological analysis but rather to draw conclusions how these motivational factors impact the actions of these CFs and therefore getting a perspective on our work at R&WF.

Context

R&WF's founders have been involved in the development of CFs in Hungary since 2008. They established the first CF in the country in 2011 then moved on to establish R&WF as a CF support organization in 2014. Since the beginning the team has worked with multiple methods to make the CF concept known in the country and to establish CFs. These methods produced mixed results in the past 8 years but brought a vast experience in terms of working with groups aiming to form their own CFs. With a redesigned approach (and for reasons I will explore in this paper) the number of CFs went from two to seven in 2021 and there are more in the making. One aspect of this massive growth is R&WF's newly developed method to start new community foundations. Six years of experimenting with different approaches resulted in creating a new process which meant the following. R&WF started to work with a single local community development professional in a certain city or district and that person gathered the diverse group of individuals who became core members of the organizing group and later the board of the foundation. At all stages of the 1.5 years long process there were specific educational workshops to gradually introduce first the professional and then the group to what community foundations are and what steps are necessary to form their own. Additionally, we provided funds to each stage of this process. This 350% growth in terms of numbers of CFs in Hungary gives a particular relevance of the topic of group motivation and motivational factors. In this paper I will try to examine how these CFs react to certain influences and how those affect them in a positive or negative ways and through those effects what actions follow.

Method

The method I chose to investigate the topic of group motivation was to interview five core members of five different CFs or CFs in the making. These interviews were narrative in their nature and circled around certain topics regarding motivation but the questions were not fixed and followed the logic of the interviewee. In this paper instead of analyzing the interviews separately I will attempt to summarize their answers in different categories.

Hypothesis and Environment

I did not want to force my perspective of motivation on the interviews however my expectation was to hear about both internal and external motivational factors. By internal I primarily mean the group dynamics, by external factors I mean mostly political, economic, sociological aspects of how the group is formed and is working currently and what impacts them in ways that guide their actions. At this point I must explain briefly the external context in which these CF are to be born and to operate in current day Hungary. The state and quality of democracy in this country has been in sharp decline for at least a decade. There are two main reasons for this trend. One is the current government's systematic work to weaken, control or ignore democratic institutions and dismantle the checks and balances of a multi-party, parliamentary democracy. The second is the inability of Hungarian society to resist to and challenge this trend. Consequently, the health and strength of civil society organizations and the nonprofit sector has decreased drastically. The other important external factor I must mention here is the 2019 municipality elections when the opposition won over cities from the ruling party and government which many experts characterized as a breath of fresh air for the civil society, since at least in these cities the pressure and stigmatization of civic activity was not labeled negatively or surpassed as strongly as before.

The way I conducted the interviews were the following: The first set of questions as a kind of warming up were about the interviewee's personal motivation or story how they got involved with the organization of the CF core group. The second set of questions were targeted towards how the group works, what forces are affecting the groups, what do they find exciting, when do they work best, when were they satisfied however the as I mentioned my questions were not standardized rather were guided by the answers given by the CF members.

Preliminary observations

Before I discuss their answers in detail, I would like to highlight that none (!) of the interviewees emphasized explicit external factors as a component of motivation or demotivation. They rather cited broad ideological concepts such as the benefit of a society, working together, democratic values, helping causes as personal motivations

and beliefs why they felt that they would like to join such an initiative. The overwhelming majority of motivational factors for the groups were internal ones, more specifically the fluctuation of the group dynamics which I will discuss later.

Why to join

All the interviewees felt attracted to the concept of a community foundation and yet none of them ever felt the courage to actually start an organizing group or join an existing CF by themselves. Some of them had extensive knowledge on the concept of the CFs and had personal connections to people who were/are members of the board of a CF or were connected to R&WF. The reason why they did not initiate themselves the organization is because they have not felt that they are the type of a leader who can take on such a task. The key here was a charismatic leader who took the reins at least at the very beginning, mostly gathering the group and explaining what a community foundation is. That is the stage where most of the interviewees joined the initiative.

The secondary reason why people felt they would like to join lies in the openness of the concept of a community foundation. The flexible format of the foundation can accommodate to the community's needs allowing everybody to find their own ideological or practical reason to join. Some of them were excited about creating something new, that is little or not known in Hungary, some of them see democratic values in practice how such a foundation works and some of them feels that this form of civic action is the most appropriate since it's not dependent on politics at any levels.

The third group of reasons are some kind of personal experience related to the activities of Roots and Wings Foundation. In some cases, it was a lecture given by one of the members of R&WF or a conference or a live crowdfunding event or a project/activity hosted by one of the older CFs or organized by R&WF. These personal experiences created a belief that the idea of a CF is feasible.

And finally, as one of the interviewees pointed out people in general like to feel control over something bigger than their life. The word 'vanity' was used in the conversation; however, it was not mentioned in a negative light. The appeal of recognition in a somewhat formal position and the potential to change their livelihood through making decision, deciding what project/organization/person gets support from the CF is definitely an element in all groups no matter how they have been involved with a CF.

Motivation to work

Once the members joined the group it appears the people, I interviewed, unanimously had the same experience regarding motivation: Getting to know the group they joined and developing the idea of their CF together. It seems a community

information is the utmost motivational factor for all. Through this process of formation, testing the nature of their cooperation/relationship, planning is in the core of their activities. It seems this factor remains among top reasons to continue working for a CF. Being in their respective groups is their main reason for their involvement and feeling motivated.

What works and what does not

Regardless of the age of the community foundation, whether it is a 10+ years old one or a newly born CF they all experience the following strengths for their group: Planning activities or projects is a key element of their work and that is the only consistent element which is always present in their operation. Planning seems to be the time when most members of the CF are active, engaged and interested and the community of the CF, they are also working the best when they are in planning mode and when they are doing it together.

Another important observation is that the Hungarian CFs are more in favour of short term tasks¹. This means in terms of their own activities, cooperations, grantmaking and fundraising, so all in the major areas of operation focusing on short term actions. When I asked them why they all highlighted the importance of little successes. Short term projects may bring forth success a lot earlier than something which is in the making for a period they cannot oversee. The length of these short term projects is around one to three months. However I must emphasize it does not mean that they are not willing to look ahead and plan for longer term action/project, it is something which is a lot less engaging for most of the members of the CFs.

Those little successes are essentially the fuel for the longevity and continuous operation and development of CFs, once they experience the sense of accomplishment that will motivate them to take on the next goal. The first and basic measurement of the success if such a short term project is carried out or finished. Such projects may include a fundraising campaign, grants are given or events/projects are organized by the members of the CF. The second and more complex measurement is based on positive feedback from beneficiaries, partners or basically any other source. It is also a key element of the perceived success, once the specific activity gets positive feedback, that is a massive motivational factor for the members of a CF to continue their work. Another factor which contributes to the sense of success if most or all of the board members/volunteers are somehow involved with that specific action. This bit of information reinforces one of the first observations that the group of the CF and the time spent together in itself is a huge motivational factor for the ones who are involved. Once a project is labeled as a failure or brings no sense of satisfaction or success that can slow down the group and the motivation for working towards the next objective.

As I mentioned before the factors affecting the motivation of the group are almost exclusively internal therefore demotivation is also coming from internal issues. The

following list of tasks are the ones which appear from the very beginning of the formation of the group and it seems no matter the age these are recurring problems which affect the group in a negative way. Delegating tasks is often came as a first answer when I was conducted the interviews. Mostly the lack of time is identified as a reason for the failure or partial success of delegating tasks. Giving and receiving feedback is something which CFs find hard to arrange and find dedicated time for, often it is a desired but technically missing element from the operation of the CFs. The next few issues are more general ones in the operation of any kind of organization identified by the interviewees like monitoring and evaluation.

There are two more aspects I would like to highlight from the answers. One is that the forming CFs are finding difficult to deal with is to come up with a decision making system. They all strive towards the most sensitive and egalitarian decision making which often slows them down and cause major difficulties and eventually erodes the group dynamics on the long run.

The final problem I would like to draw attention to is the lack of self acknowledgement. All groups are keen to receive positive feedback and some form of affirmation about their work, yet they fail to give themselves the proper time and space to acknowledge their own achievements and work in general.

Motivation and CF effectiveness

Among the reasons how they got involved they listed that there was **a**; a charismatic leader who convinces them to join or they joined an already existing group of people (a or better to say a community) or **b**; the creation of something new which works along the line of the values they agree on or strive towards, like independence from politics, democracy, active citizenship, local focus and **c**; some kind of personal experience related towards the activity of R&WF, like a live crowdfunding event or conference. And finally, one of the more psychologically inclined interviewee highlighted **d**; the recognition aspect of joining a community foundation, namely that people like to feel important and like to feel that they have power over something beyond their own life.

Hungarian CFs work the best when they can **e**; plan an activity or project, this is a useful tool because their actions are well-thought of and they can use this skill when cooperating with another organization/business/the state. Focusing on **f**; short term projects is an important motivational element, they are most vital and excited about their next goal when it is withing a few months time. Additionally when they get **g**; feedback and acknowledgement and **h**; continous success.

Reflections on the work of R&WF

Roots and Wings Foundation has adapted its approach to developing and fostering new CFs which takes account of these motivations. The question of the charismatic

leader is a major one, finding somebody with the right qualities and the dedication to start a CF is unpredictable therefore the role was transformed into a professional role, with professional background and salary. The format of the CF is still relatively unknown in Hungary, therefore it still appears as a fresh type of organization to work with a local community and the pandemic drew the attention of the local community aspect of our lives worldwide which helped promote the value of starting a community foundation. In terms of making the concept popular R&WF is doing all in its power to make itself visible and I believe this proves that on the long run all activities reach a certain audience and from those people some can get involved in the future.

R&WF's strongest virtue is to continuously shape its approach to the needs of the CFs and adjust its programs, educational materials and workshops, financial and professional support accordingly. I believe that the support the CFs get at the moment is adequate. It appears that this structure for starting CFs proved fruitful and R&WF will continue its work to promote and develop CFs across Hungary.

ⁱ There were little reflection among the interviewees why they shy away from long term goals or processes, however at different phases of the lifespan of older CF there were some attempts to develop some kind of financial stability which is a sign of long term planning. At the same time it is unclear at this point where these attempts lead on the long run.