

Village and homestead caretaker: community based services in tiny villages and remote rural areas, Hungary

Sándor KÖLES, Rural Workshop Foundation

- **Scale of activity:** national
- **Actor/s:** public authorities, association, citizens
- **State of the activity:** started in 1989, ongoing
- **Keywords:** integrated rural services, inclusion, tiny rural areas; development of basic democracy ; partnership between civil society and government ; alleviating rural isolation, social link.



Summary

The village caretaker goal is to assist those living in tiny villages with a population of fewer than 1000 people and in satellite settlements far removed from densely populated locations. Since small settlements lack even basic services such as post offices, schools, shops, pharmacies or medical centers, the village caretaker's most frequent service is to transport people to these facilities.

Description of activities

The village or homestead caretaker, who is usually elected by the village assembly and has to undergo special training organized by the Hungarian Association of Village and Homestead Caretakers, is the settlement's 'factotum' and plays a central role in its life, knows the community and its problems, has information about potential solutions and services and about how to access them.

The village caretaker is usually a local person who is provided with a minimum eight-seat minibus and whose task is to meet the needs of the settlement's inhabitants.

Since small settlements lack even basic services such as post offices, schools, shops, pharmacies or medical centres, the village caretaker's most frequent service is to transport people to these facilities. However, the potential service capability is broader than that: it can link up with the existing social services, such as meals on wheels for elderly people, school transport, transport to medical centers and pharmacies and transport to railway stations for those who work outside the village or to further education centers.

This complex and broad task list enables him or her to react to a wide range of situations and needs right where and when they arise. This is a considerable advantage compared with the conventional social services, which tend to be less all-encompassing and may be too bureaucratic.

The village caretakers are also organizing cultural and community events thus they are the central figure of the community life.

These services are strengthening the development of local democracy, and the caretaker plays a special mediator role between the leaders of the local authority and the population. He or she signals the needs arising among the population and is able to give information about the opportunities and possible services offered by the authorities.



Results

The idea was developed by the Hungarian Village Development Association in the mid 80s, and the first caretaker services were established in 1989 in Cserehát, one of the most disadvantaged regions of the country, on the North-East border with Slovakia.

This approach brought together the needs and priorities of the village communities and the interest of central and local government in finding an effective, low-cost way of providing basic services to village communities. In 1991 the Social Affairs Ministry began inviting applications and gradually included new counties so that now all qualifying village communities can recruit caretakers. Since the beginning 828 village and homestead caretaker services were established. This is a good example for cooperation between government and civil society.

Outlook

Challenges

The key challenge is to retain the bottom up initiative character of village caretaker as a local institution and strengthen its rural movement nature. Additional challenge is to provide regular and systematic trainings for village caretakers taking into consideration the complexity of their task.

Source and contact

Information gathered at: the European Rural Parliament 2017 Market of initiatives (20 Oct. 2017)

Contact: Sándor Köles

Organisation: Rural Workshop Foundation

E-mail: sandor.koeles (a) gmail.com

Website: <http://fmawebs.org>

Available on Forum Synergies' website: http://forum-synergies.eu/bdf_fiche-experience-181_en.html

