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SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATION OF HUNGARIAN COMMUNITY GARDENS

Doctoral (Ph.D) theses

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I. Justification of the choice of topic, theoretical background

Over the past nearly two decades, there has been a significant increase in scientific interest in urban agriculture. Whereas in the past the importance of urban agriculture was mostly examined from the perspective of developing countries, today the main course of professional discourse on the subject has shifted to the countries of the Global North. In addition to scientific interest, the topic is accompanied by significant media attention, and community garden openings and other events are covered in local newspapers and media. The scientific and everyday discourses see the seeds of change in urban agriculture in community gardening and believe that they can become key places for greening and sustainability of cities, play a role in transforming and shaping urban communities, and in general they can change the way cities function. Until recently, such an interpretation of urban agriculture has remained decisive, and only critical research in recent years has warned that urban agricultural initiatives do not live up to their promise, and often reinforce the very effects they have counteracted.

Community gardens are specific types of urban agriculture that can be traced back to North America. Gardens have become the main focus of social science research, and most have examined the internal cohesion of gardens (AUGUSTINA – BEILIN, 2011; FIRTH ET AL. 2011), the motivations of cultivators to join (ARMSTRONG, 2000) and health effects. Some have also addressed the relationship between community gardens and urban food deserts (EVERS – HODGSON, 2011). The most important professional achievement in recent years has been the adaptation of critical social theory approaches and the connection of gardens with the critical discourse of urban agriculture (TORNIAGHI, 2014, MCCLINTOCK, 2018). The focus of this discourse has been on various elements of urban agriculture, with particular emphasis on community gardens, examining their role and significance in terms of social injustices or their reproduction (REYNOLDS, 2014), but placing significant emphasis on exploring the relationship between urban agricultural initiatives and neoliberal urban policy. is.

Despite the rather extensive foreign literature, there are relatively few domestic studies. One of the studies dealing with community gardens aimed only at introducing gardens to the Hungarian scientific community (HERCZEG, 2013; SZABÓ, 2013; KOVÁCS, 2014; ADORJÁN ET AL. 2015), without deeper empirical research. However, domestic research on community gardens has recently expanded, and representatives of several disciplines have also focused on their research. FÁCZÁNYI ZS. (2017) in his doctoral dissertation on landscape architecture, he interprets gardens as a new kind of urban land use. In the domestic discourse of community gardens BÁRSONY, F. ET AL. (2020) introduced their interpretation from the point of view of public goods theory. In his research, he found that the basis of the operation of gardens in his studied gardens is provided by the cooperation between gardeners, while he hardly experienced the presence of political aspirations often related to public goods.

Similarly, little scholarly work deals with the emergence of community gardens in Central and Eastern Europe, although a comparative study has already been published on the subject (BORČIĆ, 2016; SAMKOVÁ, 2013; TRENDOV, 2018). These authors sought to identify local specificities and provide feedback at the international level. As a result of their research, the community gardens of the region are similar in appearance and function to their Western counterparts, however, the authors pointed out that their appearance is due to different mechanisms that may result from different development trajectories in each country.

Gaps in the literature raise a number of issues. On the one hand, the adaptation of community gardens to the post-socialist environment is not properly documented. The Hungarian scientific community has not yet revealed whether the motivations behind the creation of community gardens are the same as what can be experienced elsewhere. There is also a lack of documentation of the settlement impacts of gardens, and it is not clear how successful community building is. Therefore, my dissertation can be a useful complement to the international scientific discourse of community gardens,

especially because the number of empirical research conducted in the post-socialist region is still low.

II. Description of the main research question

The main questions of the doctoral dissertation also aim to partially address the shortcomings outlined above. I want to answer my questions through the experiences and research results of Hungarian case studies and field surveys. The main research questions of the dissertation are the following:

The main goal of my doctoral dissertation is **to place domestic community gardens in a global and Central European or post-socialist context and to explore the mechanisms behind the emergence of community gardens**. In connection with the main goal of the dissertation, I defined the following questions:

1. What mechanisms are behind the appearance of community gardens in Hungary?
2. Can Hungarian or post-socialist peculiarities be discovered in Hungarian gardens?

A further aim of my dissertation was to examine in more detail the specific geographical aspects of community gardens. One of the key issues of the research was to understand **how community gardens appearing in a transforming district relate to their surroundings and what role they play in the transformation process of the district**. My related research question was:

3. How do community gardens relate to gentrification processes in certain neighborhoods?

I also focused on the effects of community gardens on urban societies. I considered it important to assess the extent to which **community gardens contribute to the development of local or residential communities and the extent to which they can be tools for the development of urban communities**. My related research question was:

4. What role do community gardens play in shaping urban communities?

III. Description of the applied research methods

Exploring and analyzing the settlement impact of community gardens requires a complex approach. Consequently, both qualitative and quantitative methods were needed in the research. Among these methods, the method of semi-structured interviews was given a dominant role, in addition to which a questionnaire was collected in the case of a sample area. In addition, in the later stages of the research, I will also conduct online content analysis and extensive fieldwork. I performed my studies in 2014 and 2021 in several consecutive stages. The studies concerned three levels: at the micro level I examined the community gardens, at the meso level I examined the community gardens by fitting them into their neighborhood, and at the macro level I explored and examined the community gardens of Hungary.

A I carried out a nationwide excavation of community gardens in the spring of 2017. First, I created a definition of community garden, the need for which was justified by the diversity of urban garden initiatives. Based on the definitions of the community garden in the international literature and strategic documents, I determined the main features of the community gardens and the keywords related to them. After that, I examined the territorial location of the Hungarian community gardens. On January 1, 2016, I was looking for community gardens with a population of more than 10,000. I did this in the Hungarian search engine of Google in the form of an online search. In the course of the research, I used the combination of the name of the community garden and the given settlement as keywords. As a result of the online search, 44 community gardens were identified in 16 urban settlements (Figure 1). In the data collection phase of the national exploration, I conducted interviews with the garden organizers. My data are available from 37 community gardens in ten different settlements based on 18 interviews. The questions of the interviews sought answers regarding the

organizational and operational background of community gardens and community life. The interviews were recorded on the spot in several cases, but were more by telephone.



Figure 1. Community gardens explored during national research

Source: own research

The first survey of the Budapest sample area took place in April and May 2016. Research in the Leonardo Garden and Grundkert sought to explore whether a relationship could be established between the appearance, function, and effects of community gardens and gentrification in the neighborhood. The main topics of the interviews with the gardeners and the garden coordinators concerned the relationship between the garden and the surroundings, possible conflicts, their relationship with the local residents and their involvement. Both gardens were approached after consultation with the garden coordinators. A total of 19 interviews were recorded in the Leonardo Garden and 11 in the Grundkert, giving a total of 30 interviews from the sample area.

The research of the community gardens in Szeged took place in two consecutive periods. I conducted a pilot study between the fall of 2014 and the spring of 2015 in the community gardens of Megálló and Makkosházi. Then in 2016, as an integral part of my doctoral research, I carried out another data collection examining the two gardens together. The primary goal of the pilot research was to conduct an exploratory work with a settlement geography approach, which sought to establish further research directions. At that time, a total of 21 interviews were recorded in the studied gardens. The exploration of the Szeged sample area ended with the second research conducted in the autumn of 2016. At that time, the internal cohesion of gardens became the focus of my research, and my main issues were grouped around community development, community events, internal conflicts, decision-making mechanisms, and the involvement of external, non-gardeners. A total of 17 interviews were conducted during the IP in relation to the two Community Gardens. Multiple returns to the sample area and the involvement of former garden members provided an opportunity to gain a comprehensive picture of the development of the two community gardens, in particular the evolution of the gardeners' community. In total, 38 interviews are available from the two community gardens.

The questionnaire survey of the sample areas in Budapest took place between June and August 2016. This study was limited to the area around Leonardo Garden on the edge of the Corvin district. The aim of the study was to find out how people in the area evaluate the initiative, whether it causes any conflict, and who the groups would be happy to join. As a result of the questionnaire data collection, a total of 225 questionnaires were recorded, of which 80 were recorded on Tömő Street and 145 on Corvin Promenade. Those who identified themselves as being of Roma origin also took part in the research, although their proportion is insignificant in relation to the size of the sample.

I also conducted an online media content analysis to better understand community gardens and complement national research. The aim of the analysis was to identify the themes and characteristics that arise in

connection with community gardens. The analysis was performed in April 2021 as a supplement to the previous research of the dissertation. I have primarily reviewed articles about social gardens from online news portals. I collected the data with Google's Hungarian search engine, using the search term "community garden". In order to narrow down the results, I only searched for news, and I defined the search range at the end of December 2019. This is because the Corona virus epidemic in 2020 has triggered social and economic processes that may have led to changes in the use and perception of community gardens. As a result of the research, I identified 41 articles dealing with community gardens. Articles include, for example, the geographical areas mentioned, the nature and ownership of the areas involved, the purpose of the garden, etc. based on. During the analysis I used the ATLAS.ti analysis software, the results of which were exported to word and excel files. And finally, I interpreted the articles using simple statistical methods.

During the research of the community gardens, I also conducted a field trip in the period between June and July 2017. In addition to field observation, the main purpose of the field trip was the photographic documentation of the community gardens and their surroundings, ie to capture the settlement context. I also took photos of the buildings and communal spaces in the gardens, but also the information posted, such as opening hours and regulations. The targeted field trip was preceded by interview data collection in the sample areas of Budapest and Szeged, during which I also made recordings along a similar concept.

IV. Summary of the research results

In terms of the structure of the dissertation, it consists of two major parts. In the first chapter, I sought to synthesize professional discourses related to community gardens. In this chapter, I have summarized the historical development and distribution of community gardens and then synthesized their settlement effects. Finally, in this chapter, I have delineated

community gardens among domestic urban agricultural initiatives. The second major unit of the dissertation is the three chapters presenting the results of the field studies (Chapters 3 and 4). In these chapters, I summarized the results of a semi-structured interview and questionnaire survey of selected sample areas.

1. In the course of my research, I explored their relation to the gentrification processes of the district in connection with the community gardens in the inner residential area of Budapest.

During the exploration, I considered it important to determine the social and economic status of gardeners. I did this based on the socio-demographic profile of the interviewees and the subjective opinion of the respondents about other gardeners. The results showed that the cultivators of Leonardo Garden and Grundkert represent a different social group from the former low-status residents, but as a result of the urban rehabilitation project they are also partially separated from the groups moving into newly built apartments. This means that among the cultivators of the two gardens, those with a high level of education are highly represented, although cultivators with a lower level of education are also present in the Grundkert. According to the respondents, the practitioners of the Leonardo Garden come from the young age group, while the age composition in the Grundkert is more mixed, although previously the young activist layer was also dominant. It was an interesting observation that both creative workers and foreigners appeared in the Leonardo Garden, but the local disadvantaged population did not. In order to better delimit the cultivator groups, I applied the interpretation framework of PARTALIDOU – ANTHOPOULOU (2015), who distinguished high and low status groups along the accession motivations. Based on the interviews, it can be well identified that the cultivators joined the gardens to satisfy their higher level needs, and recreation, healing in nature and ecological awareness were the main motivations for joining. That is, they represented the higher status groups. In addition, as a result of the questionnaire exploration, I identified the conflicts related to community

gardens experienced by locals. For local disadvantaged groups, the garden is a source of noise and pollution, and it is believed that the garden has a good relationship with power and can therefore exist. It is a problem for them to know the positive effects of gardening, but they believe they are excluded from joining, renting a plot is expensive and connections are needed to get in.

2. In my research, I have explored how community gardens affect the development of urban communities.

My results show that the two studied community gardens make only a limited contribution to strengthening the social cohesion of neighborhoods. The reason for this is that although initially the motivations of the joiners are the same, later the community aspects are not strengthened and smaller groups of gardeners become a real community. Becoming a community is hampered by the fact that in many cases the internal order of the gardens did not exist, conflicts of power initially arose and overlapping roles can lead to further conflicts of power. Although there is strong solidarity among gardeners, this is most evident in the temporary care of each other's plots and the sharing of gardening relationships. The lack of community events is a problem and the performance of community tasks often results in internal challenges. That is, overall, community gardens are difficult to become a space for the development of urban communities.

3. During my doctoral research, I explored and examined the location and operation of community gardens in Hungary.

My results show that the vast majority of domestic community gardens appear in metropolitan areas. The geographical concentration of gardens is the highest in Budapest and its small agglomerations, as well as in the county capitals. Occasionally, community gardens were organized in small towns as well. Examining the temporal distribution of the gardens, I found that their distribution started from Budapest, but did not follow a clear hierarchical distribution model. Based on the location of the gardens within the cities, the dominance of the community gardens in the outer residential

belt and housing estate can be determined. Of the 44 domestic community gardens explored, 40 were established in these neighborhoods or their immediate vicinity, and only 4 community gardens were established in the inner living belt. I identified the available area, the low quality of the green areas in the housing estates, the lack of community spaces, and the high number of user groups as the reasons for the arrangement. I have observed that community gardens created in the inner residential zone can appear mostly in connection with the transformation of certain parts of the city. In Budapest, for example, dental bridges appearing as a result of an urban rehabilitation investment were used on a temporary basis, and elsewhere they were created in the courtyards of temporarily dysfunctional buildings.

Based on my experience, the way the gardens are organized and operated has been largely determined by the municipalities. The reason for this is that primarily municipalities have become actors providing plots for community gardens. This also results in the fact that the model of organization and operation of community gardens is very different from that of western, North American community gardens. Out of the 44 community gardens explored, I managed to determine the organizational and operational models in 41 cases, and I found that in 33 cases local governments play a significant role in the operation of community gardens. Of these, 13 gardens are operated directly by the municipality, in 17 cases by the municipal non-profit association or by non-governmental organizations financed by the municipalities, and in 3 cases I supported local communities in organizing the garden. The significant role of local governments has also resulted in community gardens being seen as a tool for urban development. In several cases, gardens have become specifically elements of neoliberal urban development practices. The gardens were expected to clean up the public spaces and outsource their maintenance, but they also recognized the groups that appeared in the public spaces of the gardens and the regulatory nature of the behaviors. This means that in some cases, a reduction in public crime has also been documented. In addition, municipalities have recognized the impact of gardens in mediating middle-class values. That is, the gardens contribute

to the generation of desirable settlement processes for them (flower planting, garbage collection, public space supervision). It is also particularly important to mention that gardens are also used for political mobilization and legitimacy. Gardeners are invited to municipal events and are expected to appear. That is, overall, among domestic community gardens, the way and effects experienced in the West were significantly distorted.

4. As a result of my research, I determined the points at which Hungarian community gardens differ from their Western, North American counterparts.

The biggest difference between Western-type and domestic community gardens is reflected in the ways of organization. While the literature reports bottom-up community gardens and describes them as autonomous civil spaces, the number of such initiatives in Hungary is extremely low, and most Hungarian community gardens are limited in their decision-making. That is, in professional discourses, the roles associated with community gardens, such as the ability to change the functioning of cities, or the appearances of environmental and social justice political ideologies, have no or only limited roles in domestic community gardens. As a result, the settlement effects of the initiatives will be different from those in the West. Another important difference is that their layout within the settlement is also different, while in North America the dominance of downtown gardens is decisive, while in Hungary the vast majority of gardens are concentrated in the outer residential belt, in housing estates. In addition, a difference is that in the case of community gardens in inner residential areas, local, disadvantaged groups do not appear as cultivators in the gardens at all.

V. Application possibilities of the research results

During my doctoral research, I placed considerable emphasis on identifying factors or aspects that can be applied in practice. I grouped the usability of my results along some aspects.

- The dissertation can be useful for urban developers and planners, as I have systematized the settlement impacts of community gardens, which can help them identify the expected impacts when designing community gardens.
- The results of my research can be useful for urban development and planning professionals as well, from the point of view that I identified the critical factors of community cohesion in the case studies of Szeged.
- My results are most useful for the scientific sphere from the point of view of documenting the integration of community gardens into neoliberal urban development practices, and showing how they can become a tool for the exercise of urban power.

Publications in the research topic

- BENDE Cs. – NAGY, GY. 2020: Community gardens in post-socialist Hungary: Differences and similarities.–*Gegoraphia Polonica* 93. 2. pp. 211–228.
- BENDE Cs. 2018: A közösségi kertek poszt-socialista átmenetből eredeztethető sajátosságai Magyarországon. – *Településföldrajzi Tanulmányok* 7. 1. pp. 38–53. (*Peculiarities of community gardens in Hungary as a result of the post-socialist transition – Settlement Geography Studies*)
- BENDE Cs. 2017: Szeged lakótelepeinek közösségfejlesztése közösségi kertekkel. – *Településföldrajzi Tanulmányok* 6. 1. pp. 24–40. (*Development of local communities with community gardens in large housing estate areas in Szeged – Settlement Geography Studies*)
- BENDE Cs. 2016: A közösségi kertek, mint a nagyvárosi dzsentifikációs folyamatok produktumai? – *Településföldrajzi Tanulmányok* 5. 2. pp. 38–52. (*Community gardens as products of urban gentrification processes? – Settlement Geography Studies*)
- BENDE Cs. – NAGY, GY. 2016: Községi kertek Szegeden: Empirikus vizsgálatok és esettanulmányok. – *Földrajzi Közlemények* 140. 1. pp. 55–72. (*Community gardens in Szeged: Empirical researches and case studies – Geographical Review*)
- BENDE Cs. – NAGY, GY. 2016: Effects of community Gardens on local society – The case of two community gardens in Szeged. – *Belvedere Meridionale* 28. 2. pp. 89–105.

BENDE CS. – NAGY, GY. 2016: Közösségi kertek helyi társadalomra gyakorolt hatásai a szegedi közösségi kert példáján. – In: KERESZTES G. (szerk.): Tavasz Szél 2015 / Spring Wind 2015 Konferenciakötet: I. kötet, pp. 485–500. Budapest, Magyarország, Eger, Magyarország: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ) 642 p. (*Effects of community gardens on local society on the example of community gardens in Szeged – Spring Wind 2015 Conference paper*)

BENDE CS. 2016: The inner cohesion of community gardens in Szeged. – In: HAFFNER T. – KOVÁCS Á. (szerk.): Absztrakt kötet: III. Fialatok Európában Konferencia. pp. 8-9. Pécs, Magyarország: Sopianae Kulturális Egyesület (*conference abstract*)