

Rejuvenating small communities with the help of IS-mentors and WiFi networks – findings of research conducted in 2004 on a Hungarian small settlement

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Content

Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Situation report on Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and the examined micro- regions of the Cserehát area.....	8
1. Social, economic and cultural challenges the community institutions are faced with	8
2. Internet and ICT provision in the region studied	9
Building community infocommunication networks: a possible line of action to rejuvenate small settlements.....	12
IS-mentor – human interface for new infrastructure	14
“Necrologue”	16
Bibliography.....	18
1. Useful sites:	18

Abstract

In 2004 BUTE-UNESCO Information Society Research Institute (ITTK) was asked by the Government Office for Equal Opportunities to carry out a background study for the development programme of three micro-regions in the Cserehát region with the objective of promoting the opportunities offered by information society on a local level. With the participation of four sociologists, a secondary analysis of the region's statistical data was made, and field research and in-depth interviews were conducted. Below is a brief summary of the research findings and our thoughts about the necessity to introduce information society mentor (IS-mentor) network and building WiFi networks. It must be stressed that all the data comes from 2004 or prior to that; however, the problems they reveal are still present, even though in a different way.

Keywords

Cserehát region, local information society, IS-mentor, municipal WiFi

Introduction

It has become common knowledge that a society in Europe can only function successfully if it can retain its populations living in small communities and settlements. This issue is especially important in Hungary, where 36 percent of the population lives in villages owing to the country's special settlement structure. The number of communities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants exceeds 1,700 and within this the number of communities with fewer than 500 inhabitants is especially high at about 1,040, which means that every third settlement in Hungary has a population under 500. There are hardly any countries in Europe with such a disproportionate settlement structure; what is more, the proportion of those living in small settlements in Hungary is three times higher than the European average.

This settlement structure with a large number of small settlements is a major burden on Hungarian economic and social policies. It is a common trend in the financially struggling small settlements that funds are first cut in institutions that play a fundamental role in retaining intellectuals, young generations and families. The budget cuts usually most adversely affect libraries, community centres, local post offices and schools despite the fact that these institutions are essential in exploiting resources and in disseminating innovation.

Social researchers have quoted three characteristics as the main reasons for rural areas lagging behind: recession in the economy (which also results in the closing down of organisations and institutions), low living standards (income, consumption, existing infrastructure and infrastructural deficiencies), and quite unfavourable demographic trends, showing an aging population, a naturally decreasing population, as well as a rapid decrease in the population of settlements. The geographical and infrastructural isolation of tiny villages increasingly leads to their social-economic exclusion and isolation.

The multifaceted problems experienced in small settlements have been known for a long time; however, only sporadic, temporary and partial measures have been taken to solve them. For this reason, an excellent opportunity presented itself to draw up a proposal based on the results of our research conducted in 2004. Regrettably, our recommendations were too innovative for the decision-makers of social policy, who still think in terms of a traditional framework of reference, and were blatantly rejected. Today we can certainly say that time is on our side since e-Inclusion policy now takes into consideration those modern ICT tools that can be effective not only in intensifying existing social differences but also in terminating and reducing them. Unfortunately, the above-described problems still persist in the region we studied in 2004. As no projects have been launched to tackle these issues since then, the problems of social and economic exclusion are stronger in these settlements than ever before.

To this effect, in 2004 BUTE-UNESCO Information Society Research Institute (ITTK) was asked by the Government Office for Equal Opportunities to carry out a background study for the development programme of three micro-regions in the Cserhát region with the objective of promoting the opportunities offered by information society on a local level. With the participation of four sociologists, a secondary analysis of the region's statistical data was made, and field research and in-depth interviews were conducted.

After the research was concluded in 2004 we suggested two main lines of action to the decision-makers in order to improve the opportunities of information society development in the three micro-regions (namely Encs, Szikszó, and Edelény):

- Introducing a new profession or service, called information society mentor (IS-mentor) network, utilising the network of institutions and professionals which has become dysfunctional on the whole but nevertheless retained some of its elements.

- Building WiFi networks, which provides cheaper and free access to the Internet, as well as creating a model for its operation on the community level.

Below is a brief summary of the research findings and our thoughts about the necessity to introduce the above two areas. It must be stressed that all the data comes from 2004 or prior to that; however, the problems they reveal are still present, even though in a different way.

Situation report on Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and the examined micro-regions of the Cserehát area

I. Social, economic and cultural challenges the community institutions are faced with

For many years now one of the severe problems experienced in micro-regions in Hungary has been that of a steadily decreasing population. The greatest rate of unemployment, reaching 20-30 percent in many cases and in some cases even 40-50 percent, can be seen in these villages and communities. The impossible situation villages find themselves in and the high unemployment rates have generated and intensified the migration away from these places in parallel with the aging of the population. Naturally, these changes have an impact on all areas of life, such as cultural life, customs and the institutions of society. It is the socio-cultural sector, including the cultural institutions and professionals employed in the field which has been hit hardest by the changes.

After the change of regime in Hungary, according to a central decision settlements were merged and separated from the town or community that was appointed to be their seat. This resulted in a settlement structure where out of the 357 independent settlements of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (BAZ) County 134 have a population below 500 inhabitants. The problem is that in settlements as small as that public services, education and culture cannot be operated economically given the current system of financing, according to the Department of Education and Culture of the BAZ County Local Government Bureau. The following is a list of indicators to show what difficulties the county is currently struggling with as a result of the above-mentioned change:

- In 2004 BAZ county ranked 18 among all the counties, based on its GDP.
- There were 41 enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants, a significant part of which were so-called “forced enterprises”.
- Those employed by the industry between 1980 and 1997 fell from 225,000 to 53,000 (!).
- The proportion of the economically inactive population reached 64 percent. (One breadwinner supported two dependants.)
- In 1994 every fourth inhabitant in the county needed some form of welfare support.
- Over a ten-year-period the population of the county decreased by some 73,000 inhabitants, which was mainly due to the high number of people migrating away from the county.

The above facts had an impact on the network of socio-cultural institutions:

- In 1990 there were 412 local government libraries, while in 1998 this fell to 258 (63 percent) and the number of registered library members decreased to 69 percent of what it had previously been.

The shrinking of the cinema circuit was even more drastic:

- 1990: 90 screens
- 1997: 31 screens

- 2000: 20 screens

The network of local cultural centres and libraries, which had previously been maintained by workplaces also disintegrated. The three micro-regions we studied are in an especially difficult situation since in the micro-regions of Edelény and Encs, for example, there is no cultural or community centre in every second settlement. In settlements where there is one, it is in a poor condition, which means that community access points are difficult to set up in these places. The number of libraries has decreased by 50 percent in recent years, while in 2004 there were no cultural or community centres in every second settlement.

The 105 settlements of the three micro-regions had a total of 33 operating cultural centres and 25 libraries in 2004 (in eight cases these two types of institutions overlapped). We found hardly any telecottages: in 2004 there were only seven (five in the micro-region of Edelény, and two in that of Encs, while there was none in Szikszó). e-Hungary points indicated with a traffic sign could only be seen in bigger settlements.

In 2004 there was no primary school in 45 percent of the settlements in the micro-region of Edelény, none in 43 percent of the micro-region of Encs, while this figure was 40 percent in the region of Szikszó. There was no Internet access provided within the Sulinet programme in 77 percent of the schools.

The research also examined parishes as places where community Internet access could potentially be built. We found that the highest number of parishes were Reformed (25), followed by the Roman Catholic (14), Greek Catholic (7) and the Lutheran (1) parishes. However, typically one pastor served more than one village, where parishes and church buildings were standing unutilised. Telephones lines could be found in 95 percent of the parishes, while 80 percent were equipped with one or more computers. Internet access varied from one denomination to another: it was over 50 percent in the case of the Reformed, while it was around 20 percent in the Roman Catholic parishes.

2. Internet and ICT provision in the region studied

Information society development took a rather negative turn in 2003-2004. On the one hand, there was hardly any increase in the number of ICT equipment (primarily computers and the Internet) users, and the ICT provision of households hardly changed as compared to the previous year. At the same time, signs of a quantitative change could also be observed among PC- and Internet users: regular users became the majority, the time users spent online increased and more users connected to the Internet via broadband. This indicated new, higher quality consumer behaviour. One part of users used more modern equipment and broader band networks, which resulted in the use of new services (such as the use of streaming media and online e-government services). Here we can see a qualitative rather than quantitative change, signalling the beginning of a new stage of IS development, which – unfortunately – also meant that the digital divide continues to widen in Hungary. This divide has manifested itself the most noticeably, along with some other dimensions, along settlement types.

The Internet use indicators in Hungarian small settlements are very poor. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of Internet access in these places. In 2004 as much as 43 percent of Internet access in Hungarian homes was broadband, and growth continued at a later stage, with the same percentage being 83 percent in 2007, which is an outstanding figure even by international comparison. However, small settlements were almost completely excluded from this vigorous development. 36 percent of the Hungarian population lives in villages, yet only 3 percent of this population have the opportunity to access broadband networks. Analyses show that in Hungary there are a very high proportion of active, young families with children who are culturally open to using ICT equipment and who are also willing to spend the money on it. However, they are stuck

in the pre-digital era because of the low level of urbanisation in their environment, and it seems that they have no chance of breaking out of this situation. This will lead to growing regional differences in regard to urbanisation if no action is taken to effect change.

These differences are perhaps even more visible in the three micro-regions of the Cserehát area that we studied, where considerable differences can be seen in ICT provision in institutions of public administration as well as in the acceptance of ICT equipment and applications. However, the greatest obstacle to development is the lack of broadband networks. Broadband Internet provision was very low across all of BAZ County in 2004, and at the local governments and institutions of public administration we mostly came across an ISDN connection (which is not considered broadband), which provides users with very small capacity and at the same time is expensive. Another important indicator showing the “inaccessibility” of the Cserehát area was the poor conditions in regard to mobile phone use: according to the data of Pannon, the second largest mobile service provider, out of the 104 settlements 24 had access to the service in 2004, which means that 80 percent of the region was inaccessible by mobile phone.

The level of Internet provision in the region was clearly indicated by the number of subscribers. Among the subscribers of Matáv, the largest telecommunications service provider in Hungary, institutions subscribed to the ADSL service in 2004 in only three settlements in the region, except the small towns of Edelény, Szikszó and Encs, which means that out of the 105 municipalities 98 had no broadband Internet access. In the micro-region of Edelény, for example, the second largest settlement, Szendrő, had no ADSL access. Mayor’s offices had a total of 138 telephone lines, out of which 65 percent were analogue and 54 percent were the ISDN2 type. Matáv (which is the single service provider in the region) was not willing to carry out development everywhere because it was afraid that it would not be able to realise a return on its investment (sporadically situated settlements, small populations, not enough demand for broadband). According to data provided by the local governments, Matáv would have only been willing to take ADSL lines to settlements only where there was a minimum of 25 subscribers, which was an impossibly high number in many cases.

It is generally true for BAZ County that local governments do not have enough people competent in informatics, nor do they have an informatics concept. Informatics is mostly regarded as something to be afraid of; a certain level of resistance to change can be felt, and a significant shortage of information is noticeable. Very few settlements employ their own informatics experts so the job is outsourced and commissioned to companies who take a different approach to the various problems than the local government heads and employees would.

Internet use in the home was at a very low level in Hungary in 2004. While 23.9 percent of households had Internet access in Budapest, it was only 6.4 percent in villages and only 13.3 percent even in county seats.¹

1st Table: Home Internet access and type of connection used in households in 2003 (as a percentage of all the households)

	Hungary	BAZ	BAZ “rural”
<i>Home Internet access</i>	12	8	6.2
<i>Analogue modem</i>	5.6	3.3	3.8
<i>Cable</i>	1.6	2.1	low number of cases
<i>ADSL</i>	1.6	low number of cases	low number of cases

¹ The analysis is based on the data recorded in 2003 in the joint longitudinal research conducted by Tárki Rt and ITTK. The World Internet Project is a ten-year international research series exploring the proliferation of the Internet and of ICTs. Having joined the American research, it was launched in Hungary in 2001, and in 2003 the third survey was carried out. The representative national survey with over 5,000 participants (Internet users and non-users alike) made it possible to create sub-samples as well as their analysis. Out of the data recorded in 2003 autumn those of the *national*, the *Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (BAZ) County* and the “rural” BAZ County (i.e. not including the county seat Miskolc) were compared.

In Hungary almost every eighth household had Internet access (12 percent), which is a low number by international comparison, especially if we consider that 31.5 percent of these households already had a PC but only about 0.4 of them were connected to the Internet. The percentages for BAZ County (0.3) and the BAZ county “rural” areas (only 27 percent of home PCs were connected to the Internet) were even worse. It follows from this that there were significant unused reserves in the households if we consider that 70 percent of the households had a telephone and free Internet² access was widespread enough so that those households which already had PCs but were not connected to the Internet could have used the dial-in connection.

Naturally, the Internet is not only used in homes but for example at various community access points, which amounts to a seemingly negligible 1-2 percent for all of Hungary. However, in the “rural” areas of BAZ County Internet use in community centres and Internet cafés was almost as high as home Internet use. It is important to note that the survey we conducted allowed multiple answers to this question, which might explain this proportion. It might be surprising at first that rural inhabitants of BAZ County used the Internet at their friends’/relatives’ homes less frequently than the national average. This can be explained by the simple fact, however, that home Internet use in BAZ County was lower than the Hungarian average. Considering this, the 4.5 percent Internet use at friends’/relatives’ compared to the 10.2 percent Hungarian average of home Internet use is far “worse” a ratio than the 2.5 percent Internet use at friends’/relatives’ as compared with the 3.9 percent home Internet use in “rural” BAZ. On the whole, it can be concluded that Internet use at community access points and at friends’/relatives’ as compared with home use played a more important role in BAZ County than in the other parts of Hungary.

When we look at the actual use of the Internet – i.e. do interviewees use the Internet anywhere at all? – it can be seen that Internet use in “rural” areas of BAZ County was rather low, hardly higher than half of the national average (13.1 percent). The socio-demographic data of Internet users shows that the inhabitants in these areas are in a relatively disadvantaged position regarding their level of education and their age, with the exception of the 14-17 age group, in which the percentage of Internet use in BAZ County in 2003 was only slightly at variance with the national average. This is probably due to the school education system, which calls attention to the problem of regions lagging behind and illustrates that it can be rectified through well-planned, systematic institutional integration.

2nd Table: The distribution of Internet users in 2003 according to their level of education and their age (according to percentage of all those interviewed)

	Hungary	BAZ	“rural” BAZ
<i>Internet users</i>	25.3	17.4	13.1
<i>Graduates who completed max. 8 years of primary school</i>	17.1	15	13.1
<i>Vocational secondary school graduates</i>	12.1	8.7	4.8
<i>Secondary school graduates</i>	39.5	25.3	25.5
<i>College and university graduates</i>	58.7	57.1	45
<i>14-17 age group</i>	77.4	77.8	76.2
<i>18-29 age group</i>	50.1	38	28.6
<i>30-39 age group</i>	26.1	17.6	12.5
<i>40-49 age group</i>	20	11.8	6.1
<i>50-59 age group</i>	13.2	9.2	3.9
<i>above-60 age group</i>	2	0	0

² In 2004 Freestart and Index provided free Internet access in Hungary, for example – of course the telephone had to be paid for in these cases, too, and “only” the Internet service was free.

Building community infocommunication networks: a possible line of action to rejuvenate small settlements

In light of the above, we think that the first and most important path of development for small settlements is to create the opportunity for investment into broadband networks; therefore, we recommended that this particular area be promoted primarily through the introduction of modern technology, such as WiFi networks. We think that a small community model WiFi project could be implemented and operated in the Cserehát region.

According to experts, the Cserehát region would lend itself as a suitable and sustainable model for development. In this model local small community institutions (for example a telecottage, a local government non-profit organisation, a civil organisation) could be Internet service providers providing hotspot services for those travelling through the area and Internet services for the local population, too. Small community networks built in this way will eventually become very valuable in the near future since they will create new opportunities for local democracy and publicity. Furthermore, broadband and permanently – and in a lucky scenario freely – available Internet access could promote the use of online services, as well as the introduction of e-government services, and they could also create opportunities for telework, distance education, and the establishment of locally accessible online services. In other words, quality of life would be improved in small communities and their socio-economic development would be enhanced. A further advantage of WiFi networks is their mobility (no cables and sockets are needed) and if it was offered free of charge, it would be attractive to tourists and people travelling through a particular area. In addition, WiFi networks can be combined easily with other technologies (e.g. VoIP, mobile phones, PDA devices, just to mention a few examples). All in all, what we have here is a new and increasingly popular technology that is well established on the market and according to international trends small rural communities could greatly benefit from it since it also holds the key to future development.

Nicholas Negroponte, a media technology professor at MIT and the founder of MIT Media Lab, said at a conference lecture held in Budapest in 2004 that the proliferation of WiFi networks would bring about greater change in societies than anything else. In his lecture he also stated that societies would change significantly in the next 30 years. As he envisions it, the direction of this change will not be the dispersion of the earth's population, which is currently centralised, but rather that the function of towns, cities and villages will assume a different aspect: towns and cities will mainly be places of social interaction visited by young people who want to meet and socialise for example. However, when couples get married and have children they will be more likely to have a preference for living in villages where the cost of living is lower and where they can find security and peace. Professor Negroponte explained that local networks would be spreading at such a fast pace that we would have not hundreds but instead hundreds of thousands of networks built.

Some pioneering WiFi projects have been launched in Hungary, too. However, they are only sporadic, isolated initiatives. The small rural settlement of Csákberény can be mentioned as a positive example: here a WiFi network and service was built from a budget of less than HUF 1 million by a telecottage operated by a civil organisation. In 2004 this network offered Internet access to all the inhabitants of the village at the time for a monthly subscription fee of HUF 4,000³. What is more, this WiFi access was one and a half times better

³ About €16.

than its ISDN counterpart.⁴ Optimally, the system is able to cater to 20 clients, but if there are more than 30 subscribers, technological extension is possible and hundreds of households can get access to broadband Internet. In Csákberény the Telecottage provides Internet access for the primary school, the mayor's office, the parish and various institutions of public administration. A great advantage of the system is that it can be used as a local network (Intranet) with a capacity of 10-20 Mbit/sec speed, offering almost unlimited opportunities for the local community. For example, institutions of public administration and families that are connected to the network can communicate free of charge within the Intranet and can create shared content provision (e.g. young people are already operating a games database), local (video) phones, e-markets, radio broadcasts, local online periodicals, forums, advertisements, community memory as well as a whole range of other services facilitating local and distance education, administration and consulting. In addition, the system also ensures the business sustainability of the Telecottage.

The local government of the village of Aparhant also built up a similar network, enabling households to have access to WiFi broadband Internet access for HUF 3,000⁵ per month in 2004. The village has a population of 1,200 and about 150 houses of the total 350 had at least one PC in 2004. This equates to a 43 percent penetration index, which is above the Hungarian average (the national average being 30 percent) if we consider the households. One third of households had access to broadband Internet, which is significant even in the context of the world's most developed areas, since of all Internet users the proportion of those using broadband was 73 percent (the Hungarian national average being only 30 percent).

The example of Aparhant proves that it is possible to create and operate a modern village in Hungary without significant external support if a settlement's own resources are used cleverly and the local opportunities are exploited. Of course, to implement such projects a leader open to innovative solutions is also essential. In the case of Aparhant it is the mayor György Szűcs, who is also the village's IT manager. The key to the success of this IT development was that it did not start with building a homepage for the village – as is normally the case – but rather with the creation of the village's local, small community and information network. These days the “public discourse” about the various issues of the village is done through the ceefax of the cable television network and via the internal Intranet network. The primary aim in this small community was to develop the skills and competences of the local inhabitants and to introduce an open and fresh approach and mentality. Another key element in the success story of this village of 1,200 inhabitants was the implementation of education that was carried on consistently for years. IT education in schools, which ends with an ECDL exam, has become a tradition of many years. The modern computer room with 14 workstations offers the opportunity for high standard IT education. IT education was a compulsory requirement for employees and civil servants (26 in total). More than one quarter of the employable adult population of the village – totalling 200 people – has a computing exam.

Unfortunately, WiFi was an undeservedly ignored solution in solving the Internet provision problems of settlements in Hungary in the past years. The example of the above two villages prove that it is possible to create an environment even in the most adverse circumstances by exploiting ICT to improve the quality of life, the local economy and public life in villages. We believe that it is a good idea to consider the possibilities for introducing and operating WiFi networks in disadvantaged regions, to launch pilot projects and build experimental networks.

⁴ In order to be able to interpret this data accurately, it must be added that in Hungary a household with Internet access (including the cost of the telephone when the service is used through a telephone connection) spends a monthly average amount of HUF 7,292 (WIP 2004).

⁵ About €12.

IS-mentor – human interface for new infrastructure

After the turn of the millennium the provision of universal access, which includes that of ICT skills, appeared in the EU as a new concept: general education should include those computing, information technology and critical skills that empower users to find their way among the vast amount of information they are surrounded by and give them the ability to put the information they find in this way in the right context. In a wider sense, eAccessibility means the provision of information culture, which focuses on affordability, accessibility and usability as well as three additional factors: ensuring practicable access, providing relevant content, and providing sensible services and useful help for those who need it. Such functions and services are primarily accessible at community access points.

Unfortunately, we can say that the conditions for creating community access points were quite poor in the three micro-regions we surveyed, therefore, we recommended that telecottages and IS-mentor services should be encouraged in these places to effect positive change. A crucial role in development projects is played by human resources, since we saw a rather alarming shortage in this respect. On several occasions we came across telecottages and community centres – and even schools – with an impressive level of infrastructural and technological environment and yet despite this no services were provided. In these places community spaces were standing empty and computers were unused simply because there were no experts who were competent enough in the most basic community and online services. Nobody knew about the opportunities such as development projects available within the Sulinet programme, the expanding services provided by the National Digital Archive (Nemzeti Digitális Adattár), public e-services, the newly available services provided by telecottages, Hungarian eLibraries, etc., all designed to cater to the needs of small communities like the micro-regions in our research project.

During the interviews we conducted we often heard leaders say – in their own defence – that the inhabitants show no interest in these services and that is why they have not been introduced. Interestingly enough, at the turn of the millennium a similar debate took place nationwide: the development of online content and services was brought into question due to an alleged lack of interest on the market. This debate has now been decided since the direction of progress is clearly marked: these developments are very much needed. Of course, the direction of progress could be seen at the time of the debate, too but not so obviously. The fact of the matter is that there is a need for everything that serves people's comfort, saves time and makes life less complicated – and all these are offered by the Internet.

In our opinion, the aim of developments is not to familiarise every single inhabitant living in small settlements with online services and the opportunities offered by the Internet. It would be sufficient if there were one or two experts (IS-mentors) at community access points who are able to link individual people's problems with online services and applications. To this effect, we suggested that community access points should be built in these places and IS-mentor training and the launching of an IS-mentor service should be focussed on in addition to creating the technical and infrastructural conditions. Local institutions must be sought out where in addition to ICT equipment as well as community spaces and functions, competent and skilled local (community) experts are available to work as IS-mentors.

An IS-mentor is a qualified and experienced facilitator who can provide customised help, for example in community access points, for people to improve their situation and chances in life primarily relying on ICT equipment and network services. The most important task of IS-mentors is to help those who are unable to

exploit IS services on their own and cannot use and exploit the opportunities offered by ICT. Being familiar with the needs and cultural traditions of particular communities, IS-mentors could link these communities with the new services and opportunities offered by the digital world by bringing them closer to those that are unaware of their benefits.

The most important task of an IS-mentor is to help people overcome mental barriers in regard to ICTs, in order to stimulate digital literacy. The IS-mentor would bring ICT equipment, as well as the contents and electronic services they provide access to, closer to those disadvantaged people, in a traditional sense and in a digital context. Primarily, IS-mentors would provide help to those people that are unable to use the services offered by the IS independently and cannot use and exploit the opportunities of ICT. This means that IS-mentors would be a kind of human interface mediating between users and non-users.

Choosing a suitable location and providing technical equipment are only one part of promoting equal opportunities since they alone cannot solve the problem of the lack of information and skills necessary for accessing and using digital contents and services – this is only possible if an IS-mentor network and service is built. In the IS-mentor programme an IS-mentor would function as a mediator between a location and the computer and the users.

The experts and managers we interviewed said they did not find it necessary to have an IS-mentor in every settlement but they did think one would be needed in every region. They believed that this service should be targeting those villages and towns where the leadership is open to new solutions, and where there are institutions suitable to be used as community access points as well as experts qualified and competent to do an IS-mentor's job. Municipal governments should also be targeted since with an IS-mentor system they would be able to lend assistance to those that go to them for help; thus, an IS-mentor would effectively be able to help people by facilitating the work of the local government employees. In addition, they would also provide help for entrepreneurs in their administration work.

In 2004 some 2-3,000 experts who due to their qualifications and experience could become IS-mentors were working in the field (librarians, cultural managers, teachers, community developers, social workers, etc.). Despite their high number, the establishment of the IS-mentor profession and its practice have only been launched as a civil initiative in one or two places (e.g. in the Telecottage in Budaörs). Therefore, we do not have enough experience in Hungary to draw up the professional requirements of this new profession and define the minimum sphere of the services that should be offered in the system. Nor is it possible at this point to specify the budget necessary to operate and maintain such a programme. What is still missing is for the IS-mentor profession to be officially declared as a public responsibility. In addition, normative financing enabling access at community access points should be put in place, local government should be encouraged to take an interest in an IS-mentor programme, and the entire IS-mentor profession should be designed and related trainings launched.

“Necrologue”

So what has happened in Borsod County, and within that in the three micro-regions we studied, since 2004? In regard to e-Inclusion no serious steps have been taken, even though it was already obvious in 2004 that taking technological equipment and creating public access to them only makes sense if they trigger some kind of favourable socio-economic impact. Perhaps one such impact could be the strengthening of small settlements that are struggling and powerless. The point is that if a photocopier, a computer and broadband can be accessed at an eHungary point, in a library, at a local post office or a telecottage but they have no invigorating, regenerating impact on the community, all the money invested is as good as wasted because the only people that will use these facilities are the ones that did so to start with (students, young people, graduates). The most severe problems are faced by small settlements where there are hardly any human resources to rely on, therefore, the power of the communities in these places to retain their population is fast decreasing in Hungary. Many fundamental sociological works address the problem of how damaging it is when the basic fabric of a society starts wearing away and communities no longer fulfil their functions such as the preservation and passing down of norms, behaviour patterns and values.

It is unfortunate that for many years no progress was made in Hungary at the political and state administration levels along the line of introducing an IS-mentor profession. Then, at the end of 2006, an Information society Consulting (ISC) training was launched with the support of the Ministry of Economy and Transport. The objective of this programme was to provide special, consulting training for professionals working in the IS field (or taking an interest in it) which they would be able to use during their everyday activities.

The IS-mentor and IS-consultant concepts differ from each other in fundamental details. IS-consultants are trained to persuade people that the Internet is not the work of the devil and it even offers services that can be used in everyday life. Such a task can be carried out by a consultant sitting in a library; however, it will have no community building impact and thus will not serve the purpose of social integration. The service rendered in this case is a reflective one: someone asks for help – typically at a customer service –, i.e. they are specifically looking for an answer to their question, and it will be answered with the help of ICT equipment. This means that an IS-consultant providing help in this way only comes into contact with those who are motivated to start with, who take an interest in the digital world but do not know enough about it or have no equipment and access to various ICTs. In contrast, an IS-mentor is proactive: he tries to reach those who are not even aware of the benefits offered by ICTs and online services. An IS-mentor focuses on needs and expectations. He is able to identify the range of problems a community is facing and tries to take a fresh approach and use innovative tools when addressing these issues. This means that while an IS-mentor renders services that a community can benefit from and basically focuses on community-level problems, while naturally also catering to individual needs, an IS-consultant can only provide help and advice on the level of individuals.

Let us revisit the issue of the three micro-regions in Borsod County and the other line of development we recommended in 2004, i.e. building locally operated WiFi networks. In 2007 the “Fair Trade, Not Charity” programme launched by LOGIN⁶ elicited a strong response from the profession and the press. The central idea of the initiative in which instead of 100-dollar laptops, 80-euro renewed PCs and wireless Internet access was provided to disadvantaged people, which was created by András Nyíró, who believes that such programmes could be the EU’s version of Nicholas Negroponte’s initiative in the Third World. Nyíró’s system has already been piloted in real life in three tiny villages in the Cserehát region of Hungary in 2007: Romany people in the village of Tomor were able to use the Internet through a WiFi network on Ubuntu Linux PCs they bought themselves.

⁶ For more details visit <http://logininitiative.eu/>

In Hungary the problem that gives the most reason for concern is that of digital equipment owned and used by Romany people: while in 2006 of all the households 38 percent had a PC, this percentage in the case of the Romany population was only 13. There are virtually no computers and Internet access in the case of rural, unschooled layers of society, which leads to further difficulties when they wish to enter the educational system and the labour market on top of their generally desperate situation.

In the LOGIN project PCs fitted with WiFi cards can be purchased through civil organisations, which offer favourable hire purchase deals. For example, the participants of the pilot project pay HUF 5,000 per month for a duration of four months for the configuration. Individual Internet-access cannot be paid by most of these households, therefore a community-level solution was needed: in Romany villages and settlements people jointly subscribe to a broadband line, which can be shared with the help of WiFi antennae. Currently, the project is run in three villages, with the participation of 30 Romany families, and from the end of 2007, an additional 150 small settlements from two counties of Northern Hungary are going to join.

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I. Useful sites:

- Central European Local Development Information Network: <http://www.celodin.org/>
- Hungarian IS mentor project: <http://itmentor.hu/>
- Institute of Culture and Tourism in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County: <http://www.kult-tura.hu/index.php> (in Hungarian)
- Login Initiative (Help young Romani people to get access to the Internet): <http://logininitiative.eu/>
- National Institute for Public Education: <http://www.oki.hu>
- Settlements of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county: <http://www.olh.hu/borsod/> (in Hungarian)