

## BBM Gardens: Experiences of a social organization's social garden experiment

*BBM-kertek: Egy társadalmi szervezet kísérlete a szociális kertészkedés területén*

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### Abstract

The question how to revitalise and start to rebuild social relations in an integrated way in an ever-changing urban context is an increasingly timely question. To ensure that individuals do not live alienated and isolated, but socially embedded and organised in communities is a priority. Secondly, to promote their economic well-being, and thirdly, to promote adaptation to environmental challenges are also key goals among those who care about the future. This holistic approach is represented by the Budapest Bike Maffia, a grassroots initiative in the capital city, who use social gardening as a tool to make the relationship between vulnerable groups and their environment more sustainable. In the context of urban agriculture, they are not only building seedlings, but also trust and a network of relationships between the members of the society.

**Keywords:** grassroots initiatives, activism, environmental challenges, community responses, social garden

### Absztrakt

Egyre idősebb kérdés, hogy miként lehet a társadalmi kapcsolatokat integrált módon újjáéleszteni és újjáépíteni a folyamatosan változó városi környezetben. Kiemelt feladat annak biztosítása, hogy az emberek ne egymástól elidegenedve és elszigetelten, hanem közösségekbe beágyazódva és szerveződve éljék az életüket. Továbbá, a gazdasági jólét előmozdítása, és a környezeti kihívásokhoz való alkalmazkodás elősegítése szintén kulcsfontosságú cél azok körében, akik törődnek a jövővel. Ezt a holisztikus megközelítést képviseli a Budapest Bike Maffia, egy alulról jövő fővárosi kezdeményezés, amely a szociális kertészkedést eszközként használja a kiszolgáltatott csoportok és környezetük kapcsolatának fenntarthatóbbá tételére. A városi kertészkedés keretében nemcsak palántákat, hanem bizalmat és kapcsolati hálót is osztanak a társadalom tagjai között.

**Kulcsszavak:** alulról jövő kezdeményezések, aktivizmus, környezeti kihívások, közösségi válaszok, szociális kert

## Introduction

The number of grassroots community initiatives that specifically aim to support vulnerable groups or work to strengthen small urban communities and therefore, neighborhood relations has increased recently throughout the country. Among their objectives is formulating adequate responses to various social problems, including, for example, environmental challenges. The root of this endeavor, according to András Lányi (2022, p. 782), is that “*what we call production is the consumption of our natural and cultural heritage, i.e., we mass produce garbage out of both. We say prosperity is this joyless and compulsory wastefulness; sensible management is the hunt for profit; progress is how we are all enslaved to technological systems and logistical aspects.*” Although nature has played a subordinate role in our society for thousands of years, a significant change of attitude is necessary in terms of mitigating climate catastrophes to preserve biodiversity. Learning about new alternatives and taking immediate action, for example, which also requires the self-limiting behavior of humanity.

The aim of this study is to provide a glimpse into the birth and operation of a community initiative that works for beneficial social and environmental change that affects the locality, with a special focus on its sustainability aspects. In addition, the resulting opportunities and limitations will be explored. In a broader perspective, the outline of an adaptable model based on cross-sector cooperation will be drawn. I examined this in the light of my field work<sup>1</sup> started in 2019 in the scenes of the Budapest Bike Mafia (BBM)'s wide-ranging activities. To learn about the movement's members and volunteers, as well as its programs and projects, I used qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, but I also collected data using interview techniques and photography. During my presence-based work, I tried to initiate spontaneous conversations with as many participants as possible, and the project originator and program coordinator always helped me with the specific programs and projects.

## Theoretical framework

During the establishment of the theoretical framework, I tried to introduce a conceptual apparatus that enables a multifaceted interpretation of the studied organization's specific operating conception and their environmental activities.

We basically create the system of our social relationships through interactions. Interacting individuals can participate in or integrate into society at different levels (individual, community, social) (Eriksen, 2006). *Grassroots movements* are one form of manifestation of this interactional context, i.e. smaller, spontaneously forming organizations that can be considered a form of activism. Bert Klandermans (2004) distinguished three fundamental reasons for people's participation in movements: some people wish to change their external circumstances; others are motivated by the need to belong to a group; and some are motivated by self-expression and the search for meaning. *Social movements organized “from below”* can be considered a litmus test, since, with their appearance, they not only reflect upon, but also draw attention to the state of the given environment (Szabó, 1993). In other words, they are not only meant to represent social and environmental problems, but their purpose can also be to shape attitudes, exert pressure, transfer knowledge, or reshape the cultural practice of stereotypes in the case of marginalized social groups. In addition, they are heterogeneous

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<sup>1</sup> The field work was carried out within the framework of the Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology Doctoral Program at the University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities.

formations in which diversity plays an essential role (Glied, 2016). According to Mellucci (1966), it is an identity-forming and community-building process at the same time. Therefore, it is not surprising that these organizations are very popular nowadays. Thanks to the advances of technology, the internet and social media, these movements have gained enormous momentum and have become one of the defining tools for expressing social solidarity. In terms of their resources, in addition to the continuous building of a social base, they typically also have financial conditions for their balanced operation. Pavluska (2003) believes that nonprofit organizations, like for-profits ones, create and transfer products, services or ideas. In other words, they wish to elicit a behavioral response from others, which is also one of the most important objectives of their marketing activities (Kotler, 1991).

Community gardens appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to urbanization processes, which began to spread worldwide parallel to the growth of industrial cities (Lawson, 2005). A community garden is an urban, suburban or rural plot of land that a group of people cultivate together: they grow flowers, vegetables or fruits (Walter, 2012). Several advantages of community gardening are known nowadays, such as the support of grassroots initiatives and democratic processes, community building, creating a community space, promoting mutual acceptance, generating collaborations, contributing to environmental justice, beautifying and developing the involved areas, producing healthy food, sharing knowledge, and promoting a healthy lifestyle by encouraging outdoor activities.<sup>2</sup> As Draper and Freedman (2010) put it, the general objectives of community gardens also include creating food security, local economic development, promoting the education and employability of the younger generations, protecting open spaces, crime prevention, nurturing cultural traditions, building social relationships in by bringing together like-minded individuals and generating other community initiatives.

Social gardens, in fact, are also community gardens with an additional special function. In addition to agricultural activities, their main criteria are the involvement of vulnerable groups and attitude formation. According to their own account, the therapeutic benefit of social gardens is also considerable, and they can also reduce the risk of social exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Food insecurity is basically a serious problem worldwide, which is much more prominent in the lives of the needy, such as the homeless. Therefore, among the sustainable development goals formulated by the UN,<sup>4</sup> the eradication of poverty and the elimination of hunger are also of prime importance. From this point of view, perhaps one of the most adequate long-term community solutions is gardening. In terms of their history, community gardens can be interpreted as a response to social and economic difficulties. They have been used in the United States since the 1890s, initially to help unemployed families (Mama, 2018). According to Lanier et al. (2015), in addition to contributing to self-sustainability, they also involve other functions, such as helping community organization and development, the revitalization of the given area or neighborhood, and promoting community awareness and identity, and at the same time, they contribute to the formation of a kind of ownership attitude in the participants. But its role in education as well as meeting social needs is also crucial. So, in essence, community gardens are a method of community intervention that implements complex developmental processes through empowerment.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this is the American Community Gardening Association: <https://www.communitygarden.org/about>

<sup>3</sup> See the Diversity Foundation's Ecological Garden initiative: <https://diverzitasalapitvany.hu/oko-kert/>

<sup>4</sup> The 17 sustainable developmental goals formulated by the UN: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

I will attempt to introduce the practices relevant to the synthesis of theory and practice through a case example of the organization's projects presented below.

### **The initiative**

The story of the Budapest Bike Maffia began at Christmas 2011 as a grassroots initiative against indifference, with the goal of moving away from social apathy. All of this was realized as a joint learning process through a kind of action, in other words as a “community development process” (Vercseg, 2020).

During the first action of these people fond of cycling, in those days, a small group of friends, but now a well-established organization, they packed and delivered approximately 150 portions of food, mostly sandwiches, to homeless people living in the streets. The main motivation of the founder and initiator, Zoltán Havasi, was a feeling of anger stemming from the lack of solidarity within society.<sup>5</sup> He saw a possibility to relieve anxiety in the implementation of continuous collective humanitarian actions. In his own words:

*“I had a few powerful years when I often spoke about homelessness, the lack of understanding one another, apathy, and about everything that surrounds us. 10 years later these all seem to be even more prevalent in our lives. To tell you the truth, BBM was created by chance. It was Christmas, Christmas Eve, etc. We are bikers, let’s do something, let’s help people. The idea was warmly welcomed, and I thought to myself, we need to do something with this in the future.”<sup>6</sup>*

Initially, meals were prepared and delivered by just a handful of volunteers. Using only bikes, these meals were transported to the needy and the homeless living within the limited frameworks of the social welfare system. Following this, the group started to significantly expand in terms of creativity and as an informal organizational level while diversifying their innovative activities. Finally, the informally organized group has turned into a formal organization. The rich creativity of the founder, who previously worked in the creative industry, is reflected in the variety of programs and projects implemented by the organization. These can currently be divided into three groups: continuous, periodic, or one-off activities. These are transparently presented in detail on the organization's website,<sup>7</sup> as well as on various social media platforms. Due to the limitations of this study, I can only list these, except for the community garden program, which is described in more detail. Among some of their current projects are initiatives such as the Vitamin Commando, Vitamin Commando Junior, +1 Sandwich, Save a Meal, The Other Room Cafe, BBM Farm, BBM Gardens, Lake Balaton Project, Charity Fest, Refugee Crisis, My Budapest Photo Project, Social Leisure Park, EU Opportunities, the film “Szállóige”, Save 2020, High Five and Team Building.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these, they also help within the framework of various activities, such as 1000 People’s Dinner, 4000 People’s Dinner, Fat Thursday Dinners, Guerilla Picnic, Long Live Women, 100 Coin Party, Budget Wellness and Mall, Crisis!, and Going Like Sheep.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Zoltán Havasi held a lecture entitled *Anger is a Gift* in 2015, at the Heroikon International Festival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeQyITVLkj0>

<sup>6</sup> Quote from my career interview with Zoltán Havasi (Budapest, 25 August 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://bikemaffia.com/whatwedo/>

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://bikemaffia.com/projektek/>

<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://bikemaffia.com/akciok/>

BBM boasts an extensive network of contacts and inter-institutional collaborations. Using creative, attention-grabbing means they try to mobilize the social sphere, which the founder identified in another interview (Nyers, 2020) as the “rusty mothership”, characterized today by rigid institutional care. The essence of what the Bike Maffia is can be truly understood in the light of these complex and diverse activities, perfectly expressed by the organization's slogan: “radical acts of kindness”. In addition, their operation is characterized by a kind of movement-like repertoire, which appears in their demands and objectives, in their communication, in their campaigns, and in their network-building operative efforts. Based on the practice in the capital, similar cycling initiatives have also been established in several Hungarian cities (Debrecen, Pécs, Székesfehérvár, Szeged, Miskolc) and abroad (Pereira).<sup>10</sup>

## **BBM Gardens<sup>11</sup>**

*“I think this is the most important thing, that they feel useful, that it makes people human, that they can create something even here in the garden.”<sup>12</sup>*

Since 2018, the Budapest Bike Maffia has created experimental social gardens at several homeless shelters in the capital with the help of the institutions, and with the involvement of external volunteers. The green islands created after recultivation have complex functions and can be considered both social and recreational gardens. Using the activists' and participants' own words, one of these (BMSZKI – Táblás Temporary Shelter) operates as a social leisure park, where the infrastructure, in addition to gardening activities, provides opportunities for recreation. The idea of BBM Gardens was provided by the international volunteer initiative Serve the City,<sup>13</sup> which is a movement made up of volunteers who believe it is important to implement good practices that reflect the needs of the community on a local level, primarily in an urban environment. They create networks by performing a kind of local charitable activity. In other words, they build social capital, set a positive example, and provide opportunities for others to participate. The desire to do something and involvement in reciprocal relationships are basic human needs. At least this is what is reflected by the international movement and the growing volunteer base of the Budapest Bike Maffia. According to the initial concept, they tried to transplant a good example of a farm – learnt within the context of the above-mentioned Serve the City program – into a domestic environment. The first social garden was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> District Shelter Foundation Family Transitional Home. They needed only volunteers, the partner organization, and some donations during the implementation phase. First, the Budapest Bike Maffia contacted the partner institutions by phone or e-mail, and later the whole process worked automatically, and the institutions nominated themselves. In many cases, the initiative, enthusiasm, and activity of the social workers determined the success of the process.

*“A social worker and I started sowing and weeding, whatever needed to be done at the time. Then the residents came by and asked, »– Excuse me, do you know...? – Come, let's talk.« Then we quickly put the spade, small hoe or a packet of seeds in their hands and involved them in the*

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<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://bikemaffia.com/bemutakozas/kik-vagyunk/>

<sup>11</sup> An introduction to BBM Gardens were published in Hungarian in the special green issue of the Pólusok [Polarities] journal See: Nyers & Glied (2023). Published here in an extended form.

<sup>12</sup> The quotes describing BBM Gardens all come from interviews with the coordinators of the gardens.

<sup>13</sup> For further information about the program see: <https://www.servethecity.net/>

*gardening. Eventually they no longer came there just to talk about things like when to water the plants or why tomatoes rot. I talk to them a lot; I listen to them. They can also tell us what they cannot tell their own social workers. As I always say at the Aszódi Street garden as well, what is said in the garden stays in the garden.”*

Structuring or permanently changing the everyday activities of homeless people is a particularly difficult task. On occasion, they can be effectively involved and motivated but for a short time, but due to their life situation (e.g. frequent moving, addiction or even death) they can only take responsibility for a plot for a much shorter period.

*“At the beginning our relationship was intimate, but over the years, it has changed a lot. On the one hand, this happened because many residents we had met there died or simply disappeared. They moved to places where we could not meet them anymore.”*

At the same time, it is important to mention that one of the difficulties is the rigid adherence to the gardening methods they know. The methods used in gardens that integrate permaculture are fundamentally foreign to them, so in their case it takes much longer to shape their attitude, including gardening techniques such as mulching or understanding the use of mound beds. The next challenge was to maintain the continuous enthusiasm of the people involved. The role of social workers in involving the institutions' clientele is crucial, as they can significantly influence group dynamics with their behavior. *“It is essential to always have a social worker present, one who is willing carry this on their shoulders and for whom the work is a joy, not a burden.”*

To illustrate this, one of the most effective gardens is the BMSZKI – Aszódi Street Housing and Daytime Warming Shelter, where the coordinator of BBM Gardens also works.<sup>14</sup> Logistical problems may also arise, such as the transportation of raw materials, or volunteer recruitment, i.e. having enough helpers for all types of work, including the more difficult physical tasks. Finally, the lack of community planning was also a challenge, as it was almost impossible to involve the residents of the shelter in its process, due to the above-mentioned individual life situations and fluctuation within the institution. Despite these problems, the effectiveness of the gardens is reflected in the fact that the participants could all feel socially useful, and even if only for a short time, their well-being improved, and new relationships were formed between the volunteers and the residents. In addition, they increased their knowledge and contributed to their own self-sufficiency.

BMM currently operates 4 gardens, two of which, the ones in Aszódi and Táblás Street, are where the residents are active. They are also present and provide support when needed at the Red Cross Shelter in Madridi Street, as well as at the Csepel Homeless Shelter, in accordance with their previous plans. This year they will only provide these locations with seedlings and, if necessary, information: *“We would like them to operate in a self-sustaining manner, but of course we will be there in the background if necessary. Now we part ways with the institutions, so they will have to operate the gardens themselves.”*

The capacities released in this way will be transferred to the so-called “social farm” project in the 11<sup>th</sup> district. The farm is situated on two adjacent land areas of a total of 2400 square meters, where the planning phases and implementation are proceeding concurrently right now. In terms of the concept of the farm, and from a financial point of view, it is a much more

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<sup>14</sup> Video report: The residents of the Aszódi Street Shelter have their own garden now: <https://nlc.hu/otthon/20230730/munkasszallo-vetemenyes-budapest-bike-maffia-delkerteszi/>

complex endeavor. In the case of the target group to be involved, the focus shifts from intervention to prevention and recreation. Another important aspect is the transformation of the farm into a community space. For this, it is essential to create the appropriate infrastructure. The team of volunteer participants is already, though partially available – thanks to BBM Gardens. Some are primarily committed to the cause represented by the organization, some are committed because of the company, and some are attracted by the love of gardening activities. Among the long-term objectives is the sale of produce, that is, the integration of a stable economic footing, through which socially responsible, short supply chain, solidarity farming can begin.

In the case of BBM Gardens, the land is cultivated in partnership with the institutions of the social care system, with the involvement of residents, workers, volunteers, and other professionals. Therefore, the project is realized as an inter-sector cooperation from which all parties can mutually benefit. From the point of view of the institution dealing with vulnerable groups, this can mean favorable changes in the natural, as well as the built environment. As an example, in most cases the process of creating social gardens began with the improvement of compacted, poor-quality soil reminiscent of railway embankments. With the support of players in the market sector and the channeling of donations, most work processes became feasible, such as acquiring farmlands, seeds, tools, or even pallets and geotextiles necessary for raised beds. Then the distribution of seeds, the raising of seedlings and the urban management began. The members of the groups involved reached a consensus agreement among themselves about all these.

Within this conception, the goal of the organization is primarily not a quantitative but a qualitative change, the focus was on the creation of so-called “model gardens”. According to the coordinator of BBM Gardens (2023), the impact of such gardens is clearly positive. On the one hand, these gardens create a partnership between the cooperating institutions and their employees, and the volunteers involved. On the other hand, they involve shelter residents, which is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for BBM Gardens. The everyday problems of the homeless and the needy are particularly complex. In addition to housing poverty, they are also struggling with existential difficulties, are often involved in some kind of crisis, and their health is deteriorating – not to mention the social stigma surrounding them. It is difficult, therefore, to achieve significant change in the lives of homeless people.

*“We didn’t see a radical, permanent change in their lives. Such a huge, fate-changing thing has never happened to anyone, but if people feel even for a little while that they can be productive, that they can have something they created with their own two hands, something that is the result of their own work, that is a big deal. Motivating these people is an art, to get them to work hard for something is very difficult. Then, to ask them to structure their free time, which they spend wandering, begging, loitering, and drinking. Now this is a challenge to overcome.”*

## Summary

According to Ágnes Molnár (2022, p. 15), “*understanding the human factor and seeing how society works is what can make a business or other organization dealing with people really efficient.*” In relation to community and social gardens, this also means that the focus is not only on the produce, but on the people and their communities who cultivate the land, without whom there is no change. In summary, we need grassroots initiatives and innovative approaches that contradict the economy dominated by market logic. Their activities draw attention to the

problems of our society. Although, for many this is still just some kind of marginal movement practice. In 2024, it still seems far-fetched for Earth's population to live their everyday lives in an ecologically conscious way. Therefore, in addition to community solutions, it is extremely important to connect social and environmental justice, that is, to expand the broader interpretation of well-being/welfare (Woods, 2021). This, however, requires more and more helping professionals who are also experienced in environmental issues.

**Figure 1**

*One of the plots of the BMSZKI Aszódi Street Housing and Daytime Warming Center (photo taken on 8 July 2023)*



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