

When is Time to Act if not Now?!

Participatory action research about housing movements in Budapest

Aims of the project

The School of Public Life is a community-based educational and research center that supports the active citizenship of people experiencing social exclusion. Organizing participatory action research projects is one of our main areas of activity. The participatory action research titled “When is time to act if not now?!” explores a previously invisible part of Hungarian social history, the movements that were organized for decent housing in Budapest over the 20th century.

The need for this research became clear when we took part in foundation of the grassroots advocacy group A Város Mindenkié (AVM) or The City is for All in 2009. At that time we realized how difficult it was to come up with examples of homeless or housing poor people fighting for their rights and learn from their struggles and achievement, which was in stark contrast to the experiences of North American activists who helped us found the group. We were convinced that housing activists in Hungary need similar inspiring stories from their own country’s history to learn and derive strength from to be able to address current problems. The City is for All has since become a movement that cooperates with many other organizations to find systemic solutions to the housing crisis. This research is an integral part of developing the housing movement in Hungary and its most important goal is to support current struggles by strengthening social movement culture and identifying its historical roots.

Grassroots organizing has deep-rooted traditions in Hungarian society, but as these struggles are not taught in schools, nor are they a part of our daily conversations or appear on the news, it is easy to come to the false conclusion that they do not exist at all. The aim of this research has been to disprove this belief and we think that we have succeeded! With our work, we are part of a long and strong activist tradition for the right to housing which is worth carrying on.

Method of implementation

The research titled „Time to act” lasted from January, 2015 to January, 2016 and was carried out by nine people living in housing poverty and two trained researchers. We picked participatory action research as our methodology to achieve three goals: to produce new knowledge about social movements, to improve the conscious citizenship of people living in housing poverty and to encourage grassroots self-advocacy.

During the project we relied on the method of deep participation. In other words, people living in housing poverty took part in every aspect of the project from formulating questions through collecting and analyzing data to disseminating results. By using this approach, the perspectives of people directly affected by a social problem come into full focus, which is not the case in many academic research projects. In addition, the researchers’ critical consciousness and ability to act as citizens is developed, which enables them to find collective solutions to the problems they are experiencing.

The first 12 months of the project was dedicated to the formation of the group, the training of researchers, the collection of data (in libraries and archives, interviewing and visual sources) and analyzing data. This work was followed by an intensive period of dissemination from January to July, 2016. We organized a mobile exhibition consisting of 12 large pieces, which we presented in three social institutions and two community centers. The exhibition was followed by workshops focusing on the grassroots housing initiatives of the past and the present.

At the moment, the exhibition can be seen at the Auróra community center, which is located in the 8th district of Budapest, where a majority of the residents live in housing poverty. It is very important for us to give them access to these traditions, methods and information through a public exhibition that can be accessed 24 hours/day for free. The exhibition is also accessible on the website of the School of Public Life and has also been featured by the media several times.

Focus of the project

„Time to act” aims to initiate changes at four levels. First, we placed great emphasis on the personal development of researchers, especially on strengthening their historical awareness and improving their research skills. Second, our ambition has been to deliver the message of the research to as many people living in housing poverty as possible in order to inspire them to learn from historical examples and stand up for their own housing rights today. Third, our aim is to reach those who are not directly affected by housing

poverty but need to know about the problem and are able to do something about it. Fourth, we also aim to bring about changes in the academic sphere by raising awareness about the value of directly affected people participating directly in research activities.

A few statements by Time to act researchers highlight what this research really meant to them and how they have developed during the project. „Researching historical segments is great! Finding connections and understanding the problems of a certain decade. Learning and changing, making others to change things.” “Research is always a challenge for me. Searching for and finding long forgotten or unpublished photos and written materials. Being a researcher means to be constantly curious and to learn about our history. Presenting our research to the public gives me great satisfaction.” „Being a researcher means for me to be a student again. Learning, reading, writing about something I did not know about before, because I did not have the capacity or simply I did not feel like doing it. It also means exciting meetings, conversations and interviews. Research is constant, which keeps bringing up new, unanswered questions.” „Research means a cavalcade of feelings for me. Reliving my student years. Finding answers to whys that keep popping up on the way. Time travel and talking to ghosts. Exciting investigations. Dusting off closed records. Resurrecting long forgotten, nameless people. Reconsidering and understanding. Research is my home in homelessness, which I leave from time to time and where I always return happily.”

The following are also statements by researchers about what the project gave them „It is a great feeling to share findings with others. Making people accept us, people, who have a degree and look down on us. To be called a researcher is not a social rank. Knowledge is power but experience is something much more than that.” „The research brought such changes in my life that I would never have thought before. I have become more sensitive towards social problems and I greatly enjoy the experience of exploring things. Piecing the puzzle bits of a certain subject together. During the research I learnt many interesting new things and visited a number of exciting places. Our research team turned out to be a great community.” „I have become more open to political and public affairs. I also participated in the first protest of my life (together with my 2-year-old son). In the group I found people whose background is similar to mine and I made friends with people who are somehow different, but still had a lot in common with me.”

In order to achieve our second goal, we put together a mobile exhibition which demonstrates the organization and achievements of grassroots housing movements in the 20th century. The exhibition was presented in different social institutions and community centers and was always followed by workshops for the clients, employees and visitors of the given institution about the research and its results. We used various communication methods during these workshops such as focusing on the exhibition itself or talking about the housing problems of participants, exploring the exhibition with the audience in a playful manner or showing them short films about different housing movements which we analyzed together. In one case, during the workshop, participants who had housing problems themselves started to discuss the concrete measures they wanted to take to address their common problems.

After the traveling exhibition, we started to plan a permanent exhibition in cooperation with Kassák Múzeum. While the mobile exhibition was explicitly addressed to those who are directly affected by the housing crisis in Hungary, the permanent exhibition – which will open at beginning of 2017 in Kassák Múzeum – is addressed primarily to middle class people who could be allies of the newly born housing movement and provide support with their knowledge and social impact, thus triggering systemic changes.

Beyond the exhibition we also produced written materials for people living in housing poverty and their allies. A special edition of the free periodical Feketemosó was devoted to the contents of the traveling exhibition in September 2016. This issue was broadly distributed at the 6th March for the Right to Housing organized by The City is for All where around a thousand people marched together to demand decent housing.

Finally, to challenge the widespread approach in the academic sphere that considers people affected by social problems as objects of a research rather than active participants, we participate in different scientific conferences and other academic events. The results of our research will also be published in a number of scientific journals in 2017

The outcomes of the project

The grassroots movements we discovered worked in many different ways and used various methods. A number of movements chose to advocate for themselves by taking their life into their own hands and creating housing from nothing even if this went against the law. These were the people who occupied caves

and squatted land to build shacks for themselves. The aim of other movements was to force the state to provide the necessary legal environment and resources for everyone to live under decent conditions. Such movements included the rent strikes in the early 20th century and the so called rugged revolution, or the movement of homeless people after the regime change in 1989. Although their methods were different, it became clear to us by the end of the project that those housing movements were successful, which 1. took place in the context of a major economic-political shift, 2. were able to build a mass base 3. created strong alliances across class lines and last but not least that 4. were ready to take radical steps if necessary. Having drawn our conclusions, we made an effort to integrate these lessons and strategic directions into the work of many grassroots organizations, especially that of The City is for All and its satellite organizations.

We presented the Time to act project in 2015 six times to a smaller public (Szimbiózis festival for cultural anthropology, Corvinus University, Kassák Museum, Auróra community house) where we reached as much as 100 people. We also made a presentation at the conference of the Hungarian Sociological Association in Szeged in front of an audience of cca. 50 people. In 2016 we travelled with the exhibition to 5 different locations and held lectures, workshops and guided tours of the exhibition 10 times. Through the travelling exhibition, workshops, newspaper articles and our own online forums we have so far indirectly reached cca. 50,000 people.

We also disseminate the results of the research in print: a two-part summary of our study will be published in the periodical called Kovász in the spring of 2017, a study on the results of the research is on its way to be published by the Szabó Ervin Library, and we submitted a tender to the periodical „Tér és Idő” to publish a thematic issue on our subject. The free periodical of the School of Public Life and Kettős Mércé blog titled Feketemosó also published a special issue on the subject.

Finally, the research played a very important role in helping the School of Public Life to become the methodological center of participatory action research in Hungary in the long run. After the completion of the project, one member of the research team living in housing poverty officially became a staff member as a research assistant and continues to work on similar programs in the future. At the moment, building on our experiences in Time to act and in cooperation with disability rights activists, we have launched a new project where physically disabled people study the conditions for independent (non-institutional living), which will serve as the basis for a future advocacy campaign.

Organizational issues

The Time to act project was organized by the School of Public Life Foundation, which provided the financial and logistical background for the project. Our meetings took place at the Auróra community center. We visited many libraries and public collections during the project to find primary data and secondary literature. The project was documented by five photographers and a historian gave us regular professional advice as a volunteer. Financing was provided by private donors and the Norwegian Civil Fund.

Finances

Budget for 2015-2016.

Stipend (9 researchers for 12 months): $9 \times 12 \times 20.000 \text{ HUF} = 2.160.000 \text{ HUF}$

Catering at research meetings (once a week for 12 months): $4 \times 12 \times 5000 \text{ HUF} = 240.000 \text{ HUF}$

Travel support for researchers (5 tickets/month for 12 months,): $9 \times 5 \times 12 \times 300 \text{ HUF} = 162.000 \text{ HUF}$

Implementation of traveling exhibition (design, printing, workshops, organization) = 950.000 HUF

Feketemosó special edition (350 copies) = 200.000 HUF

TOTAL = 3.712.000 HUF

Budget for 2017.

Exhibition in Kassák Múzeum: 800.000 HUF