

Community-Led Innovation: Lessons from VEB2023, European Capital of Culture Programme

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Abstract: The "Microgrant" funding scheme launched under the Veszprém-Balaton2023 aimed to ignite creativity and innovation within local communities, businesses, and organizations in Veszprém and the Balaton region, as part of the European Capital of Culture initiative. Facilitated by the Veszprém-Balaton Region Public Foundation for Culture 2022-2023, this initiative utilized a unique four-round framework wherein community-driven projects ranging from community gardens to cultural exhibitions were presented and evaluated through a community decision-making process. Utilizing a cooperative board game format, the community decision-making process ensured diverse perspectives were considered, fostering consensus among jury members. The Microgrant project, with a funding pool of HUF 350,000 (approx. EUR 915), sought to empower local communities by supporting small-scaled projects all year round. These projects not only enriched the local cultural landscape but also fostered community cohesion and engagement. The research methodology approached the issue of social innovation from several angles. Structured interviews were conducted with VEB2023 staff (7 people) to map the application process and the community decision-making process, a questionnaire survey measured the opinions of jury members involved in community decision-making (64 people), and spatial and thematic characteristics were used to examine the 241 winning mini-proposals. The paper delves into the practical implementation of community decision-making process, focusing on innovation, sustainability and adaptability. Beyond economic considerations, these initiatives have indirectly contributed to enhancing the subjective quality of life, diversifying the cultural offerings of the Lake Balaton region, and shaping the attitudes of residents towards community involvement and cultural preservation. Based on the outcomes, new inquiries arise: How can we leverage community decision-making, a methodology closely intertwined with the social dimension of sustainability, in forthcoming initiatives? How might this approach be flexibly adapted to various settlement and spatial development blueprints? And what are the key attributes that describe the potential of small-scaled communities?

Keywords: Microgrants, VEB2023, Spatial and Thematic Characteristics, Community Decision-Making, Social Innovation

1. Introduction

Community decisions are often based on the assumption that groups usually make better decisions than individuals. In other words, more eyes see more of the important information; open discussion helps to consider aspects correctly; members of the group feel the decisions made together more their own, and those in charge are also more motivated to implement them (Waldmüller, 2010). At the same time, several authors (Arrow, 1951; Weber, 1978; Czibor, 2014) emphasize that (average) persons, as members of the community, use the information available to them in distinct ways, and in decision-making situations their rational behaviour is also different. Many varying points of view can be discovered regarding the nature of community decisions. According to Arrow's (1951) "Impossibility Theorem" community decisions are never coherent and they are inconsistent. Community decisions are not made in a vacuum: they are influenced by the previous decisions, the practical issues of the given moment, the abundance or lack of information, as well as the credibility, reliability of information, and the low level of time investment and "attention" (Johnson, 1999; Szántó, 1999).

What does community involvement, or in a narrower sense community decision-making mean in practice and how can this be applied in projects that strengthen cultural and social sustainability? What experiences can be drawn from the endeavours of European Capital of Culture (hereafter ECOC) projects in this direction, and how can the methodology of community decision-making be further developed? In this study, after a brief summary of the theoretical background of the concept, the authors present specific ECOC solutions (Wroclaw, Rijeka).

In 2023, in the Veszprém-Balaton region of Hungary, the microgrants served as a functional and applicable good practice. During the primary research, structured interviews were conducted with the grant experts, while the local actors, involved in the jury evaluating the applications, took part in an online satisfaction survey. The study presents the spatial and thematic characteristics of the implemented microgrants, as well as the opinions of the applicants, based on the microgrant reports and a questionnaire survey.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Scientific Background of Community Decision-Making

Community decision-making goes back thousands of years, since it has always been typical in small communities to decide together on matters affecting everyone. With the development of modern societies and the population growth, this form of decision-making has been pushed into the background in most places (Barr-Hashagen, 2000). We had to wait until the end of the 20th century for the big political and economic institutions to rediscover the power inherent in community decision-making – of course, this also required that it has become easier than before to reach and organize people with the development of information and communication technology.

The theory of community decisions (public choice theory) is basically a scientific field at the border between political science and economics. The subject of its interest is similar to that of political science, but its methodology differs from that: it uses the well-known and proven tools of economics concerning the study of human behaviour (Szabó et al., 2020). Its fundamental finding is that actors in the government sector behave similarly to market actors and pursue their own individual goals in their actions and decisions, striving for individual profit maximization.

The theory and practice of community involvement (the following terms are also used: participatory decision-making; participatory budgeting; social participation in planning, design; public support for participation in local development) are among today's prominent social issues. In a broader sense, community decision-making is part of the so-called community development, which can also be interpreted as an activity open to interdisciplinarity (Vercseg, 2020). This process can apply to changes in any area of life, and its basic purpose is to involve those concerned in community action, in becoming more active citizens. According to Henderson (2005, 2006), the concept of community development is increasingly being replaced by the terminology of community involvement (community engagement), which assumes social justice, participation, equality, learning and cooperation in the selection of values.

Community decision-making (citizen decision, participatory decision-making) can also be understood as a kind of social participation, where local actors are informed and consulted, but at the same time a more active participation and involvement (cooperation, empowerment, transfer of power, delegated decision-making) is realized from the community's side. In relation to local governments social participation is an active learning process that "provides the opportunity to express various points of view and ideas. Another advantage is that information that was previously not known to everyone is often published, points of view generally converge, and solutions can be outlined that serve to satisfy more and more actors" (Pallai, 2010:11).

The participatory (or participation) decision-making process, which is closely related to the topic, primarily means a freely chosen decision-making method that the manager chooses for the tasks to be solved in a given project. This choice applies to a specific project, so the leader's freedom is not impaired, but strengthened by this option, and the leader's solution toolkit is expanded, which can be used for the benefit of the given community. In his study, Németh (2021) presents the applicability of the method in connection with case studies in Esztergom and Nagymányok.

Dobay-Tzadok (2006) examine the dilemmas of community decision-making in practice in the case of a settlement (Modi'in, Israel) where, as a result of modernization, a difference of interests is formed within the community. In connection with the specific international case study and research results the authors state that human rationality is limited, the expertise and receptiveness of the participants in community decisions is finite, so the experts supporting the decision-making processes must adapt to this.

Examining new forms of cooperation and studying urban development based on social innovation (URBACT programme) experts emphasize active, participatory initiatives (Veresné Somosi – Sikos, 2023). According to their opinion, in a new local government model – in relation to the factors of operation – the acting and cooperating task of local government, the function supporting citizen decision should be emphasized (URBACT II Capitalisation, 2015).

2.2 The Role of ECOC Programs in Community Building and Community Decision-Making (International Examples)

The European Capital of Culture project can be considered one of the most successful initiatives of the European Union: in recent decades it has been proven that, in addition to stimulating cultural life, moreover economic, community and urban development, the event can also play a significant role in tourism in the participating cities (Lőrincz, 2017). Based on experience winning the title improves the international visibility of the cities and a significant tourism activity starts in the towns, moreover the local communities also benefit from the renewed cultural offer, thus the image of their place of residence improves in their eyes as well (Richards, 2020). Since the mid-1990s, and especially in the last decade, many ECOC programs have placed special emphasis on audience development and cultural engagement, which affect both the balance of their cultural programs and the design of specific projects and events aimed at involving local communities (Tommarchi et al., 2018; Demartini et al., 2020).

Recently several ECOC programs have successfully implemented the microgrants scheme, among which the good practices of Wrocław and Rijeka inspired the staff of VEB2023:

- Thanks to the "microGRANTS ECOC 2016" program in the European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016 project, city dwellers and local communities were able to realize their ideas related to community, cultural and educational initiatives (<https://www.wroclaw.pl/rozmawia/mikrogranty>). In Poland, the slogan "Spaces for beauty" of the microgrant program was the same as the title of the successful ECOC application. In this scheme each winning project could receive financial support of up to 5,000 zlotys (approx. 457,000 forints or 1,170 euros in April 2024). In the ECOC program of Wrocław the range of applicants was extremely wide: private individuals (adults), informal groups with adult representatives, non-governmental organizations, home owners' associations, social cooperatives, church institutions and religious organizations could apply. Applications submitted online were evaluated by an external, independent jury based on a predetermined point system. The microGrants program is successful and continues to this day: from 1 to 15 May 2024 individuals, civil communities and young people can apply with initiatives related to animation, recreation, education or art.
- The Rijeka2020 European Capital of Culture programme also encouraged community participation. The aim of the project running under the slogan "Port of Diversity" was to create the city of culture and creativity for Europe and the future. On the one hand the organizers invited the Rijeka population and civil organizations to propose minor greening projects and to organize cultural and artistic events in the city districts. The invitations also included applications for the "Civil Council", in which members of the local population evaluated the quality of the submitted applications and selected the best ideas deemed worthy of funding. In the framework of the ECOC programme many individuals and civil groups responded to the call, submitting a total of 141 projects. 155 local residents applied to participate in the "Civil Council" ([Partner project • Rijeka 2020](#)). The initiative is still alive today under the name of "active citizenship" ([Active citizenship – City of Rijeka](#)), leading to the participation of the local population in budget planning and adoption of the budget. "Proračun(ajme)" is a budget education game in which the citizens of Rijeka, in addition to learning about the actual budget items, can choose the projects they want to implement that are not included in the existing budget.

3. Case Study of the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 Ecoc Project: Microgrants Programme

3.1 Good Practice of Microgrants in the VEB2023 ECOC Project

The spirit of the Microgrants Program, the objective of supporting communities, was already included in the first application document of the VEB2023 project, the Veszprém2023 Bidbook, under the working title "White Spots Program" (Veszprém2023 BidBook, second round application material, 2018). During the preparatory years (2019-2022) the VEB2023 management consulted several times with representatives of European Capital of Culture programmes and experts, as a result of which the idea of a smaller grant (microgrant) scheme and the decision-making methodology involving local population were further strengthened.

At the end of 2022 the "Small-Scale Community Grants Program" (hereinafter referred to as microgrants) initiative was launched within the VEB2023 program. The microgrants scheme set three priority goals, namely education, simplified support system and practical application of community decision-making.

- Education meant that anyone who had not applied before – be it a non-governmental organization, municipality or economic operator – could try themselves in a simple scheme and achieve a sense of success. This helped these actors to apply for larger sums later and to confidently participate in more complicated procedures.
- The simplified procedure and the standard subsidy (HUF 350,000, approx. EUR 915) made it possible to apply for events and tools that were not possible to get from other sources – due to the scale –, therefore the organizers of the program considered this type of scheme as filling a gap.
- For the sake of more transparent, more diverse and more effective evaluation VEB2023 experts developed and tested the community decision-making process. The practical utilisation of the method, the eight application rounds proved its effectiveness.

The city of Veszprém won in December 2018, together with the Balaton-Bakony region, the title of European Capital of Culture of 2023. The settlements of the region could join from three counties (Somogy, Veszprém, Zala). The intention was confirmed by signing a cooperation agreement, which involved the payment of membership fees. The Microgrants Program was opened exclusively for settlements having ECOC cooperation agreements. In connection with this, the staff of the Public Foundation for the Culture of the Veszprém-Balaton Region, in close cooperation with the ECOC program, held application briefings at nine locations, preparing and informing potential applicants from the local communities. The goal was to support community events and activities with artistic-cultural or local historical values, which responded to real, local needs with a fresh approach in the fields of theatre, music, fine arts, applied arts, movement arts, dance, architecture, cultural history, local history, folk art, landscape culture and ecology.

The preparation and implementation of community decision-making, the operation of the grant scheme, and the realisation of applications mobilized enormous forces. In numbers this meant that in the four application rounds a total of 600 bids were received, and these were evaluated by a total of 64 jury members in four community decision-making rounds for the city of Veszprém and four additional rounds for the region. Taking into account the judging criteria and the application fund of HUF 84 million (approx. EUR 220,000) the jury members supported 240 winning applications. In 2023, in the Veszprém-Balaton area the programs featuring diverse themes (the most popular being music, knowledge dissemination and folk art/tradition) had an impact on the lives of more than 100,000 people, one third of whom were local residents, and 61% of whom were visitors to the settlement or tourists.

3.2 Practical Implementation of Community Decision-Making

Decisions regarding the microgrants were made based on a new kind of methodology, involving the local population. Although community decision-making (citizen decision, participatory decision-making) is not a complete peculiarity in domestic settlement development, as far as we know, no one has used it yet for application judging. Lukácsné Gergely sociologist and Bogáti Réka lawyer from the PartLab team helped the program owners in developing this innovative form (helloveb.hu, 2023).

The volunteering jury members involved in community decision-making were selected according to demographic factors (age, gender, place of residence) and interests. The decision process itself was assisted by a moderator, furthermore a game table and tokens represented the applications. In the first step the jury members got to know the applications with the help of the presentation put together by the moderator. For each application the jurors received a short summary, a voting aid and a paper notebook, where they could write their thoughts as they proceeded. During the judging they had opportunity to ask questions about the applications and discuss them. The main task of the moderator was managing time and ensuring a tight session.

Jury members representing the population of Veszprém and the region made supportive decisions based on their own value judgments, with the help of tokens, jointly. In this process they had to convince each other, argue, and clash different points of view. At the same time the organizers of the grant scheme asked the public representatives also to rank the applications according to the four parameters of involvement, creativity, community impact and quality project planning, as well as to take into account the objective aspects included in the call for applications. With objectivity in mind jurors had to try to support programs that

- are unfeasible or difficult to implement on a business basis;
- speak to local people about passing on local traditions;
- are created with a lasting community-building intention;
- can possibly have a lasting, tangible end result;

- do not finance daily operating expenses, but use the funds for the benefit of a community.

3.3 The Process of Community Decision-Making – Experts' Point of View

Regarding the community decision-making process itself structured interviews were conducted with several VEB203 employees and experts involved in the application process, as well as with Lukácsházi Gergely (PartLab), the developer of the methodology based on playful elements. The expert discussions (involving 7 persons) touched on

- the main principles of conducting the Microgrants Program;
- the innovative elements and novelty value of community decision-making;
- application criteria (amount, location, purpose);
- the methodology of community decision-making (selection of jury members, location, moderator, playful elements), its advantages and disadvantages;
- proposals and future plans for community decision-making.

The sociologist expert emphasized that during each round of decision-making people unknown to each other sat together, and at the end of the process they achieved the final result by choosing values and in the framework of cooperation. "Judging is a great experience... we didn't know what the actual result of the decision-making would be, it was decided there on the spot." Lukácsházi Gergely emphasized. During the community decision-making techniques used in coaching and board games were used, i.e. the civilian jury members had to choose values, cooperate and then decide next to a game table, with the help of tokens. Conversation, debate, persuasion and argument appeared as key elements, and group decisions were made at the end.



Figure 1: The picture of the board game table used in the jury sessions

Source: VEB2023

The experts working in the framework of the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 programme and conducting the microgrants highlighted both the advantages and disadvantages of the community decision-making methodology (Table 1).

Table 1: Experts' perception of conducting the microgrants and the community decision-making method

Advantage	Disadvantage
close to people, humane way of working	there is not necessarily an insight into the (application) interests when selecting the jury members
impartiality, independence	registration process for jurors: the sample could not always be taken from the region
makes decision-making transparent	jurors' sensitivity to social problems – this often diverted the decision in a different direction
diversity prevails	in terms of jury members there were 1-2 repetitions, i.e.: some jury members were called for evaluation more than once.
strong community-building role	question of professionalism and competence – civilians decide
people unknown to each other sit to a table	the decision-makers do not know the applicants / the background of previously awarded amounts, they decide based on the title and content of the micro-application
jury members feel the program their own	time- and resource-demanding process
the active jury member is usually an "influencer", opinion-leader in his or her own environment	
togetherness	
the opinion must be assumed	
local patriotic spirit	
small communities see that it makes sense to get started – we pay attention to the MATTER	
the application procedure is simple and non-administrative	

Source: Own editing based on structured interviews, 2023

3.4 Thematic and Spatial Analysis of the Microgrants

The winning microgrants were analysed based on the data of simplified application accounting (data received by the Public Foundation: implementers of winning applications, locations, themes, timing, type of program, target group's size, age and locality). In this study, we present the thematic and spatial pattern.

During the year 2023 – in quarterly cycles – 240 winning applications were implemented in the settlements of VEB2023. The impact of winning applications is diverse, but focused basically on the smaller communities operating in the given municipality. Based on the professional reports received it was confirmed that the microgrant applications conveyed meaningful recreation, positive experiences and new knowledge, while the sense of identity and the local community strengthened within the settlement, the relationship among generations and between new settlers and deep-rooted residents developed in a positive direction; the passing on of traditions, the revival of forgotten habits was realized. The awareness-raising programs were characterized by joint design-creative work, and they were implemented in good, familial-friendly atmosphere. Several participants reported that they were planning to continue.

The microgrant winners (N=43 persons) named the three most characteristic terms related to the application scheme. Based on the answers, a visual word cloud can be drawn, where the expressions "simple, fast, community, creative, useful" are the most typical ones (Figure 1).

**Figure 2: "What comes to mind when you think of the term 'microgrant'?" – the most typical answers of the winners (N=43)**

Source: Public Foundation for the Culture of the Veszprém-Balaton Region, 2023

About the spatial distribution of microgrants it can be said that most of the programs (58) were implemented in Veszprém, followed by Balatonfüred (17) and Várpalota (10). In terms of population-application ratio we can highlight Vászoly (283 people) with 7, Balatonudvari (350 people) with 6 and Balatoncsicsó (261 people) with 5 winning applications (Figure 2). Out of the 116 settlements (approx. 300,000 residents altogether) that joined the programme, 63, i.e. 54% of the municipalities, received support from the microgrants scheme.

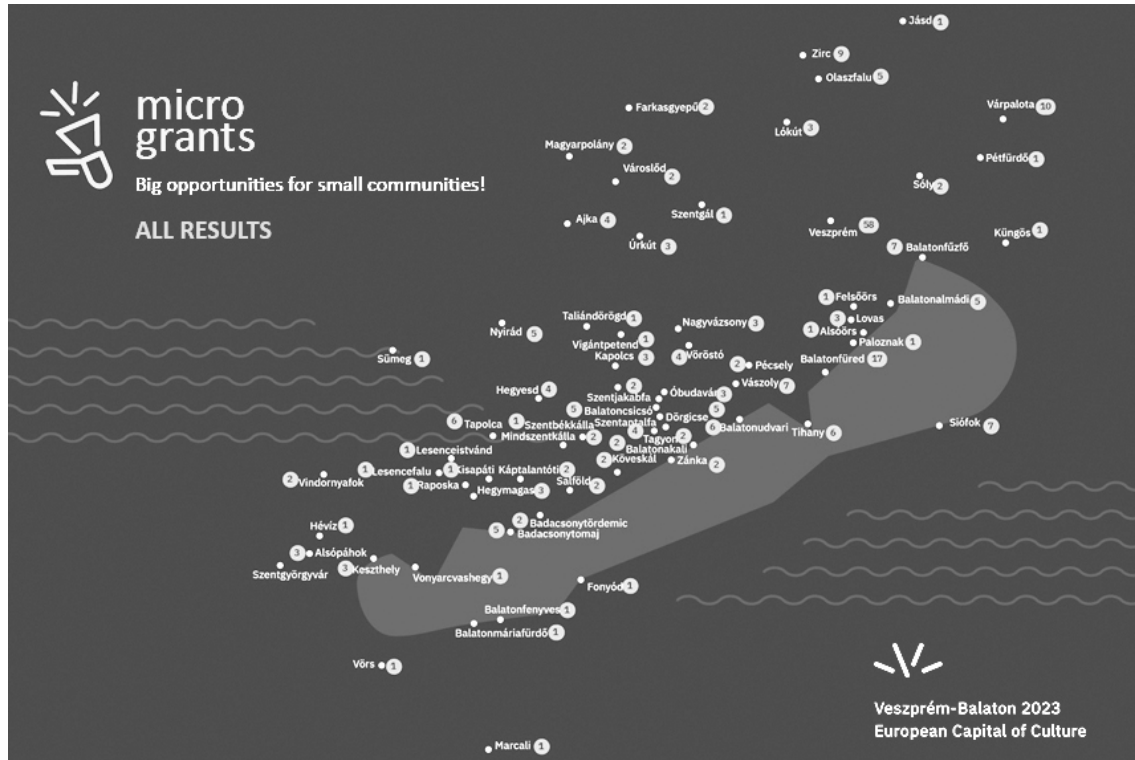


Figure 3: Spatial distribution of the microgrants

Source: VEB2023

3.5 The Opinion of Jury Members Involved in Community Decision-Making

Based on the sent invitations and contact information, each jury member was given the opportunity to evaluate the process of community decision-making and to express his or her opinion anonymously. After the judging the questionnaire sent out by the moderator concerned mainly the assessment process (fun, exciting; easy to understand, to follow; transparent; efficient and smooth), the final result of the judging work (satisfaction with the selected applications), as well as the evaluation of their own role and of the community participation experience (team spirit; moderator's work; organization; proposals for the future). Respondents rated each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, and sent their suggestions and criticism replying to open questions.

Based on 64 responses the jury members rated the jury day a total of 4.91 points on a scale of 1 to 5, which clearly shows the positive assessment. Those participating in decision-making were most satisfied with the quality of preparation, organization and execution, and least satisfied with the selection of location, the services provided on site and the "tiring" aspect of the judging process. In general it can be said that the respondents from Veszprém spoke more critically than the residents of the regional settlements (Figure 3). From another point of view, 67 jurors would gladly participate in a similar event in the future as well or recommend it to a friend or acquaintance.

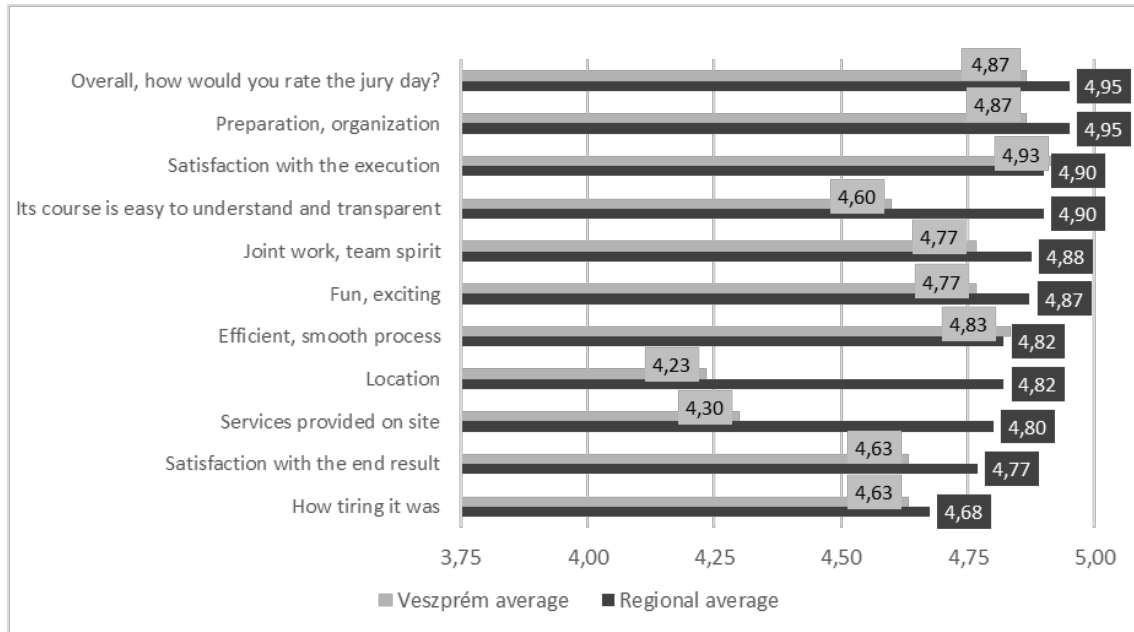


Figure 4: Judges' satisfaction with different features of the jury day, by area (N=64)

Source: Own editing based on Part Lab, 2023

4. Summary, Conclusions

Based on the results it can be said that the implemented Microgrants Program contributed to the expansion of event offerings of the European Capital of Culture thematic year, to the involvement of people living in the area of Lake Balaton, as well as to community building and awareness raising. Despite the fact that the HUF 350,000 (approx. EUR 915) standard subsidy can be considered low, 15% of the winning applicants were businesses. Starting with the second round of applications identical programs implemented in several settlements appeared, with the cooperation of municipalities. The target groups were coloured by the disadvantaged, by those who "newly settled in", as well as by the different generations. Some of the programs dealt specifically with environmental awareness (planting trees, building bird feeders, manufacturing briquette bricks, etc.), but sustainability elements (recyclable cups, plates, selective waste collection) were also often emphasized during implementation. The continuation of the realized events and making them a tradition were expressed many times as a demand.

The opinion of experts participating in the process of community decision-making and in the execution of the microgrants is unanimous regarding the continuation. In their view the methodology and approach tested also in practice can be extended and adapted to the community development activities of Hungarian settlements. In relation to the application conditions specific proposals were formulated, affecting the following criteria:

- Grant amount: a minor (inflation-adjusted) increase of the eligible grant amount, namely to HUF 500,000 (approx. EUR 1,275) for 2024.
- Time schedule: quarterly periods, a schedule adapted to seasons and special holidays as well is recommended.
- Regional distribution of the application framework, mitigation of regional disparities: if the program continues in the VEB2023 region, the proportion of the application fund between Veszprém and the settlements in the region should be one-third to two-thirds. Encouraging application activity and increasing initiative is specifically recommended for the settlements of Bakony hills and of the southern shores of Balaton.
- Application topic: the current goal – community building, development of creativity – can be extended to other areas, for example to support civil associations. The priority task of the future is to separate the goal and the means (what result the community expects and through which type of activity or program it is effectively achieved) during the presentation and development of the application idea.

- The jury involved in community decision-making: the composition of the jury, which should consist of persons selected from the community given on the basis of socio-demographic aspects, is still a determining factor for success. It is worth giving priority to diversity and the different interests of jury members, therefore a larger campaign and effective communication are recommended in connection with the recruitment of jury members.

The closing of the VEB2023 program provides an opportunity for a kind of knowledge sharing, the transfer of experiences and good practices. The experts of the microgrants plan to publish the entire methodology of participatory community decision-making (from the call to the end of applications) in a detailed guide. According to the plans the eBook format document will be delivered to as many municipalities, non-governmental organizations and grant scheme decision-makers as possible, with the intention that they will also benefit from the advantages of community decision-making. The primary academic and practical contribution of this endeavor will be the decision-making guide upon its release.

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