

LOCAL SUCCESS IN HUNGARY BASED ON TWO SELECTED DISTRICTS

RÉKA HORECZKI¹, LÍVIA CSAJBI², ILDIKÓ EGYED³, SZILÁRD RÁCZ⁴

ABSTRACT – This article examines the different approaches to settlement success and municipal leadership in the case of Hungarian municipalities. Our objective is to examine mayoral perceptions of success in two selected districts in North and South Transdanubia and its underlying factors. Taking the concept of success used in Hungarian literature as a point of departure, the study compares the results of two primary data collections. By doing so, the paper exposes the key challenges facing rural development, the expectations of the population, and mayoral attitudes and motivations regarding development, as well as their varying interpretations thereof and efforts to achieve success at the local level. Drawing on research conducted in two districts in Transdanubia involving forty interviews, the paper seeks to highlight the differences between fundamentally similar areas dominated by small villages that arise from one being located in a peripheral southern county and the other in a northern, economically dynamic county. In addition to subjective factors of success, objective indicators will also be presented in order to illustrate the main trends of the economy and society.

Keywords: regional development, rural development, success, local government, mayor

INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF SUCCESS IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The relationship between success and failure is generally examined in the context of the centre-periphery phenomenon, which has been discussed in several scientific disciplines, becoming an influential concept in international development studies and the analysis of regional polarization within countries (Prebisch 1950, Wallerstein 1974). A common feature of the various approaches is that the centre, the successful region, always keeps the periphery (the unsuccessful region) in a dependent position, in some cases draining its resources. At the same time, the centre is also a good mentor, as it modernizes the periphery, i.e., it can also play a mediating role. Historical determinism has shown that peripherality can become a permanent feature despite the existence of a certain degree of movement in the case of individual regions and settlements (Horváth-Rechnitzer, 2000; Lengyel-Varga, 2018). When examining success within the framework of regional development, it is also worth paying attention to the specific characteristics of regions with varying economic and geographical conditions, as well as the differences in development level between east and west and north and south. In addition, it is crucial to determine which factors are present or absent in urban and rural areas that are identified with success in a given region or settlement (Enyedi, 1997; Lengyel, 2000; Nagyné Molnár, 2022; Szörényiné, 2016).

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The meaning of success is multifaceted and subjective: researchers assign varying values and assessment criteria to it depending on their field of expertise. Barabási (2018) approaches the concept of “success” primarily from the perspective of network research and scientific performance. He identifies five laws of success, of which Law IV is perhaps the one with the greatest impact on the life of settlements. This rule emphasizes the importance of teamwork, collective intelligence, and cooperation, as well as the fact that teams do not function well without a leader. In this context, his most important observation applicable to the success of settlements is: “Success is about us and how we perceive your performance” (Barabási, 2018, p. 28). This concept can be endowed with both subjective and objective content. In our research, we compared individual municipal leaders’ perceptions of success to what the statistics reveal us, i.e., when we study a given municipality objectively. This highlights the crucial fact that in the majority of cases, success is determined in relation to others, which to some extent encourages competition between settlements, making them comparable and rankable (Horeczki–Póla, 2022). It is also worth noting that a considerable body of literature focusing on the success of settlements treats success as a value category (Enyedi, 1997; Mezei, 2006). According to this interpretation, success is primarily determined by income growth, however, a community can also be considered successful if its residents find it attractive and are able to identify with it. Several researchers have attempted to define rural success, approaching the issue from multiple perspectives, albeit based on similar values. According to Lukács (2008), the basis of success is increasing and maintaining competitiveness. Glatz (2005) considers rural success to be dependent on three main factors: positive geographical conditions, the abundance of natural resources, and the availability of adequate human resources. In Szörényiné’s (2010) interpretation, rural success implies an improvement of the quality of life of the local population. In their research, Böhm and Bódi (2000) and Bársony and Horeczki (2018, p. 75) identified several factors whose co-existence is a necessary prerequisite for success, i.e., “a mayor (influential person) who takes the interests of the municipality seriously and protects them; opinion leaders supporting the mayor (influential person); knowledge of the municipality, a capacity to assess and exploit its assets; identity, empathy, solidarity, adaptability, and innovation propensity.” The measurement of municipal success is constantly evolving; in addition to competitiveness studies, studies presenting and focusing on social values have gained growing momentum (Horváth, 2014). The success of settlements can therefore be interpreted as a complex phenomenon consisting of several factors, in which infrastructural conditions, access to services, the exploitation of local resources, the activity of the population, and the personality of the mayor also play an important role (Horeczki–Póla, 2022).

METHODS

The success of settlements’ activities depends on the existence of local development regimes and the mobilization of actual local resources; as well as the ability to convert local conditions into resources. Our respondents are members of the local population; we sought to reach individuals who participate in the decision-making processes of their respective settlements regularly and over a long period of time, opinion leaders with a capacity to exert influence by virtue of their network, social capital, or role in the social structure (mayors were consulted in the majority of cases). We are aware that these individuals do not form a homogeneous group, particularly in the study area where a decision-maker in a municipality with less than 100 inhabitants plays a completely different role compared to a person who manages the everyday life of a small town. The function and perception of rural areas has undergone significant changes over the past sixty years (Csatári, 2011; Perger et al., 2016). The traditional role of settlements was shaped by modern agricultural mass production, the changing nature of market relations, new directions of industrialization, the phenomenon of suburbanization, and peripheralization, as well as ageing and depopulation (Csatári-Farkas, 2006; Murdoch, 2000). The conditions, constraints and opportunities for the operation of local governments - as the key actors of various types of regions with different levels of development - are elements of self-governance which, through the provision of public services of different quality and scope, and by means of the physical, legal and local fiscal environment available for economic actors, fundamentally

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influence and even determine the development and growth opportunities of the society and economy of a given settlement or certain types of settlements and regions (Finta, 2019). These opportunities and specificities are key determinants of a country's competitiveness; the competitiveness and success of a country therefore cannot be realistically assessed without a thorough evaluation of the functioning of the settlement system. The dominance of small villages and the fragmentation of the municipal system, despite offering numerous freedoms, also imposes dozens of obligations on local leaders, the mandatory nature of which often generates numerous difficulties. Our study focuses on two districts dominated by small villages with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, located at a relative proximity to a large city (generally the county seat) and smaller centres (two small towns each) within the district.

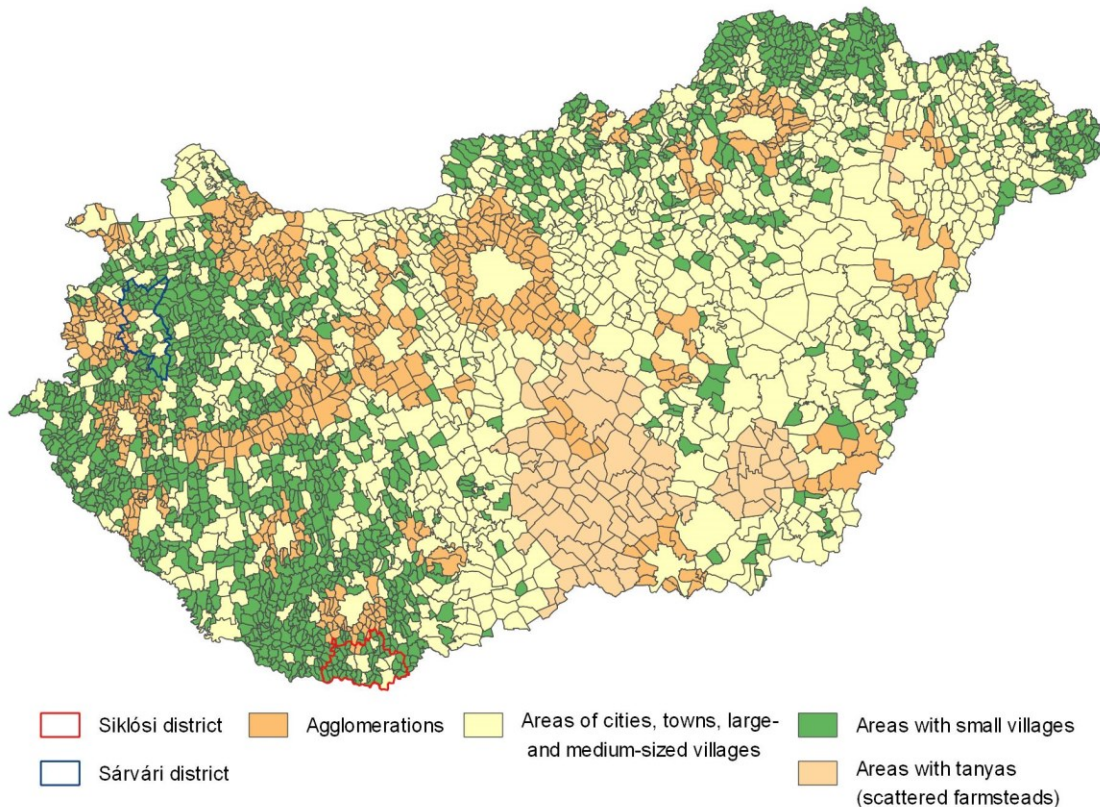


Figure 1. Hungary's settlement network, highlighting small village areas

Source: own editing

Primary data collection in the two administrative units took place in the spring of 2023 and 2025. The aim of the surveys was to identify the subjective characteristics of the development trajectory of the selected settlements as determined by the local elite (mostly settlement leaders), to analyze the disadvantages and advantages playing a role in the development of the settlements, to interpret their success, and to examine its causes. Twenty interviews were conducted with municipal leaders in each district, and two focus group interviews were held with the participation of institutional leaders and municipal leaders. The population was surveyed using an online questionnaire in both regions for control purposes. The population questionnaire was representative of the type of municipality, population age groups, and genders in the South Transdanubia district, but as very few responses were received in the North Transdanubia district, these results cannot be applied comprehensively, except to confirm or reject the opinions expressed by the mayors. The focus group discussions took place in person at the joint municipal offices and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in the North Transdanubia district and in a hybrid (in-person and online) format in the South Transdanubia district. We treated the results of the

interviews and focus group discussions from a comparative perspective, seeking to highlight the similar mindset of local leaders identifying the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the settlements in the two districts as factors of success, as well as the parallels in settlement development. One mayor was interviewed in the Ságvár district in a settlement with a population of over 1,000, and three in the Siklós district. In the 500-1,000 population category, seven people were consulted from the Ságvár district and nine from the Siklós district. Among villages with 200-500 inhabitants, 10 leaders were surveyed in the northern district and 6 in the southern district. In the category of small villages, 2 interviews were made with 2 leaders. A total of eight female mayors were interviewed in the northern district and four in the southern district.

Despite their similar settlement structure and population size, we focused on these two counties due to the remarkable similarity of their natural resources and geographical characteristics. In both cases, the thermal water resources in the region are of national importance. The tourist offer relies heavily on the capacities related to the spa and recreational functions, the Natura 2000 classified and nature-protected sites, and the religious pilgrimage and shrine sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The southern focus of the analysis is Baranya County, which can be characterized as a peripheral region in Hungary in terms of both economy and infrastructure. In terms of demographics, society, economy, and settlement network, it reflects the country as a whole; Pécs has a central topographical location. Public roads and railway lines of national and local importance reinforce the position of the county seat. The county is dominated by small villages (301 settlements). Throughout the county's history, there has been a constant dichotomy between central functions and a fundamentally peripheral region (Hajdú, 2021). Despite the existence of individual success factors and competitive settlements in the region, the vast majority of settlements cannot be considered prosperous based on objective indicators. The district under study, situated far from the dynamic central areas, has two small towns, a number of settlements above the national average, a population density below the national average, and is dominated by small villages. Social erosion is increasingly evident in the villages: the living standards of the population are below the national average, the role of the local power base is decisive, advocacy and interest representation is weak, and their intermediaries are most often members of parliament (Ragadics, 2021; Pámer et al., 2023; Pálné et al., 2023).

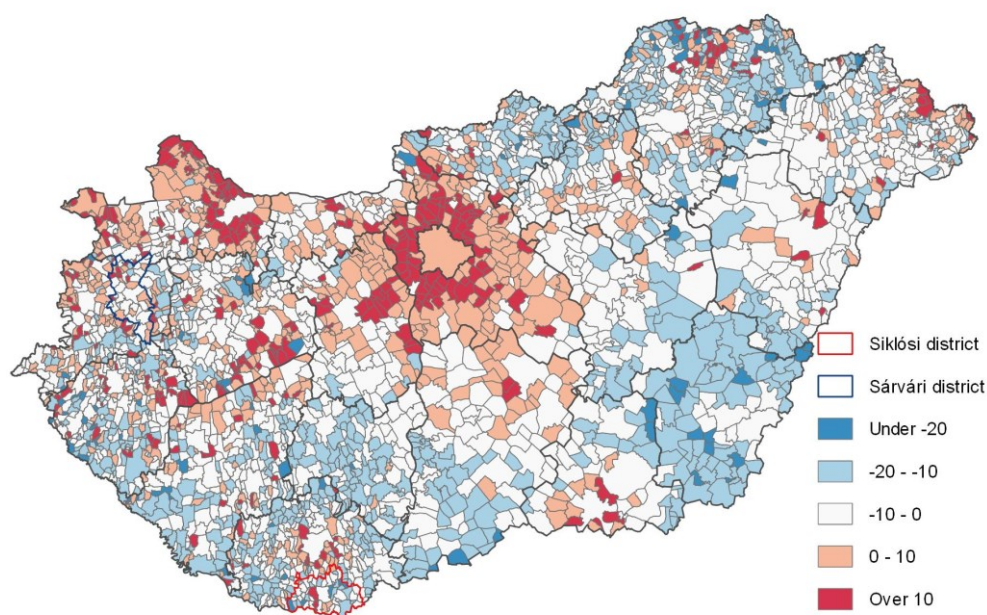


Figure 2. Population change (%) between the 2011 and 2022 censuses, highlighting the districts of Sárvár and Siklós
Source: own editing

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The other district examined boasts a more prosperous external environment (Vas County); population change has been more favourable than the national trend, with a lower-than-average population decline, and is characterized by two developed small towns and a loose network of villages with varying degrees of development. The district is located in the vicinity of a major transport corridor and has a high proportion of light industry and electronics companies, which mainly employ low-wage, semi-skilled workers. As a result, employment and unemployment rates can change rapidly and significantly in the Sárvár district (Bajmócy–Balogh, 2002; Enyedi, 1977).

The change in the population of the district is more favourable than the national trend (Figure 2). Based on census data, the permanent population of the country decreased by approximately 2.75%, while in the case of the Sárvár district, the decrease was approximately 2.35%. In the meantime, a number of settlements in the Siklós micro-region have suffered significant population loss. The internal migration balance in the North Transdanubia region is positive and can be considered high in comparison to the national average, owing to the proximity of the Austrian and Slovak borders and the number of job opportunities. Due to the closed natural borders, the proximity of the Croatian border cannot be considered a dynamic factor; internal migration flows are directed towards the county seat and the capital.

Most of the labour force is attracted to the district centre of Sárvár, which hosts a large industrial park. The positive migration balance in the northern district and the negative in the southern district can both be attributed to the border effect, as numerous job opportunities are available for the inhabitants of the northern district of Transdanubia due to the proximity of the Austrian and Slovak borders, while no significant commuting is detected among the inhabitants of the southern district of Transdanubia due to the similar level of development on the other side of the Croatian border. Both districts have a significant proportion of immigrants from abroad, with the spa towns and more populous villages in the districts proving to be attractive destinations for settlement (Beluszky et al., 2021; Beluszky–Sikos T., 2007). Unemployment is lower in the North Transdanubian district included in the analysis compared to the South Transdanubian district. A much wider range of job opportunities is available to residents of the northern district (e.g., the number of businesses per 100 people is nearly double).

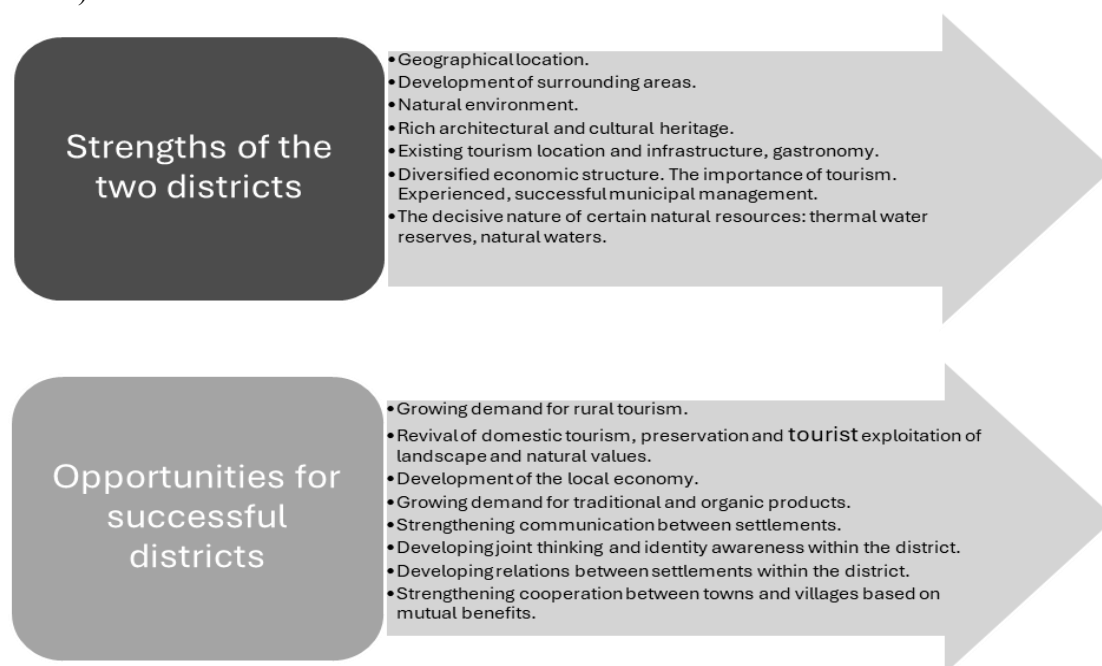


Figure 3. *Strengths and opportunities of the two districts*
Source: authors' own editing based on interviews

The government's family policy has encouraged the movement of a large number of young people to small towns in the examined districts (based on data from csalad.hu), and the number of commuters to regional centres is also significant. Field experience shows that in the villages of both districts, most of the family houses standing vacant for years have been occupied by new, young residents. The geographic location of the districts included in the study is above average and can be considered positive, both in terms of their proximity to the national border (as an opportunity) and the employment opportunities offered by larger regional centres. The districts have an outstanding built and natural heritage, carefully preserved by local residents and municipal leaders and offering outstanding tourism potential. Although population decline entails a risk of vacant properties and a shortage of human resources and skilled workers, experience suggests that in both districts, the community's population retention power is balanced in the case of both small towns and villages (Figure 3).

The ability to preserve the results achieved so far was mentioned by village leaders as a factor of success for their communities in the case of both the North Transdanubia and South Transdanubia regions. Village development primarily serves to strengthen the local community (Bérczy, 2022), with the aim of improving the quality of life of those living in the given settlement and retaining the population. The instruments to achieve these goals include the conventional tools of settlement development, such as infrastructure development, but in addition to these, the tools – and goals – of community development and retention are also paramount importance. Kovách (2012) identifies objective factors that can also bring economic benefits to village development, e.g., development of infrastructure and basic services, community development and the strengthening of social cohesion, sustainable and environmentally conscious developments, and climate adaptation measures. Several of the mayors interviewed emphasized the primacy of infrastructure development, regardless of the size of the municipality or its role in the hierarchy. They identified the improvement of road conditions, the resolution of sewage disposal and treatment issues, and the preservation of locally available health, education, and social services as priority objectives. The interviews with mayors confirm that local leaders generally consider the recently launched governmental measures targeting population retention to be effective. The number of vacant properties for sale in municipalities has fallen to a minimum, while the number of families moving in, having children or planning to have children, and the proportion of foreign settlers has increased (KSH, 2024).

Looking at the two districts and the municipalities within them, we were able to detect a significant difference in property prices. Field experience shows that in many cases, villages with fewer than 500 inhabitants are still an attractive alternative and young people stay in the area (commuting or finding employment locally); in one-third of the settlements examined, the number of foreigners has increased significantly, due to the availability of job opportunities in the settlement or historically established factors. Most villages, in line with the Hungarian average, have an aging population, but the fact that these people are active members of the community and are satisfied with the quality of basic public services demonstrates that these settlements provide them with an adequate quality of life.

According to a study of Bérczy (2022), the need to develop employment is the most important factor for villages. According to a survey conducted among mayors of settlements in North Transdanubia, increasing employment is less of a priority in settlement leaders' development plans. At the same time, according to non-municipal leaders (institutional leaders, public opinion), widening local job opportunities is one of the most important development needs. The strength of the economy can be considered average in both districts, with major companies (with a number of employees significantly exceeding the national average) located in the North Transdanubian district, while small and medium-sized enterprises tend to operate in the municipalities of the South Transdanubian district. A third of the settlements in the North Transdanubia district show economic activity and income-generating capacity above the national average, while the domestic income forming the basis for personal income tax per capita is average or below average in the rest of the settlements. The economic position of settlements in the South Transdanubia district is less favourable, only three settlements' income-generating capacity exceeds the national average.

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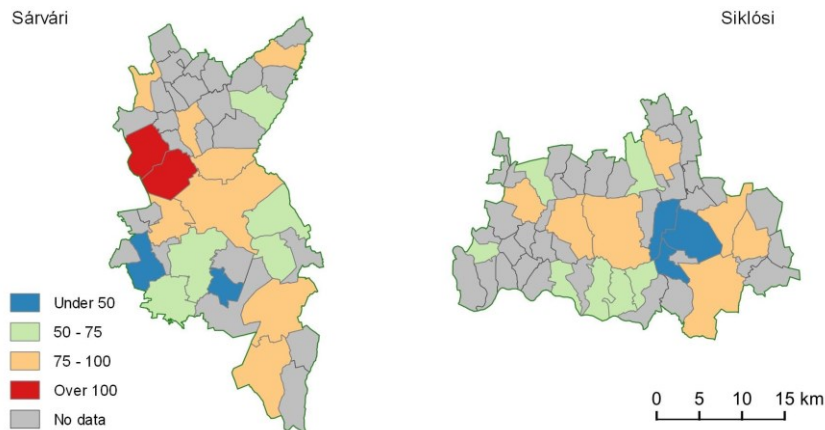


Figure 4. Children per 100 kindergarten places, 2023 (persons)
Source: KSH

In terms of infrastructure, basic services such as piped drinking water and natural gas supply are available in all settlements. The sewage network has been completed in 80% of the settlements, and the micro-regional centres also have kindergartens, family doctor's offices, and elementary schools. The biggest shortcoming identified by local leaders is the lack of a sewage network. In settlements where a sewage network has not yet been built, its construction is a primary development goal. In both districts, half of the settlements were able to maintain the functioning of the small post offices destined for closure by Magyar Posta, while the other settlements are served by mobile post offices. The objective success indicators for both districts (based on Horeczki-Póla, 2022) can be considered average or above average in the county under review. The region is characterized by a well-developed transport network and a diversified economic structure, with industry, tourism, and agriculture all present. The geographical location, natural capital, infrastructure capital, and local economic strength of the settlements are all favourable. All these objective factors reinforce the subjective opinion expressed by local leaders that the settlements can be divided into two distinct groups: the "big ones" (with a population of over 1,000) and the "small ones" (villages with a population of less than 1,000), which differ not only in terms of size, development and strategic directions, but also in terms of management style and future plans. At a first glance, the difference between the two groups of settlements is not significant in terms of population indicators, but it is clearly evident in terms of infrastructure and locally available public services.

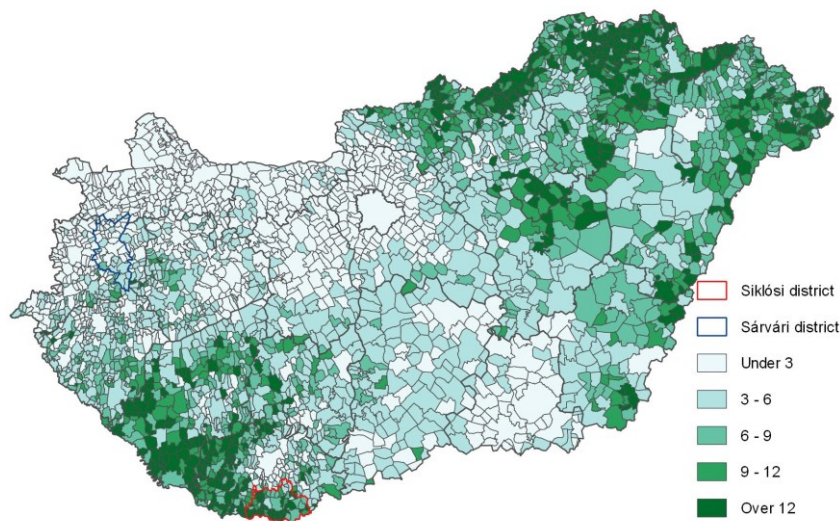


Figure 5. Unemployment rate (%) among the population aged 15–64 in Hungarian settlements
Source: KSH

Based on responses from municipalities perceived as successful, infrastructure development and investment in industrial parks are highlighted for their contribution to maintaining high levels of employment, which is mentioned as the major prerequisite for a positive outlook. In the case of the most successful settlements, such developments have uncontestedly taken place and are still characteristic (in the case of small towns and micro-regional centres). Another key success factor mentioned by our interviewees is the presence of a consistent leader with a clear vision, alongside the retention, attraction, and support of young entrepreneurs. Interestingly, grant funding is considered to be more important for all our interviewees than those living in the most successful settlements. This is likely due to the commonly observed fact that successful settlements attribute their development not so much to higher levels of external funding, but a better ability to mobilize their internal resources and the more efficient use of funds tailored to their strategy. On the other hand, the quality of infrastructure is considered to be more important by residents of settlements labelled as successful than the sample as a whole.

Based on the responses concerning the development path, all respondents believe that the conditions for a successful future are resource acquisition (40%), good leadership, and activity (25%-25%). In successful settlements, resource acquisition is also listed among the most important yet less frequently mentioned factors, while leadership ambitions and competencies are considered more important than average (33%). A significant difference can be detected in relation to infrastructure, which is the key prerequisite for sustained development in successful settlements. These include road developments, the creation of industrial areas and the provision of public utilities. The map (Figure 6) reveals notable differences in this area, which are reinforced by the opinions and development efforts of the mayors.

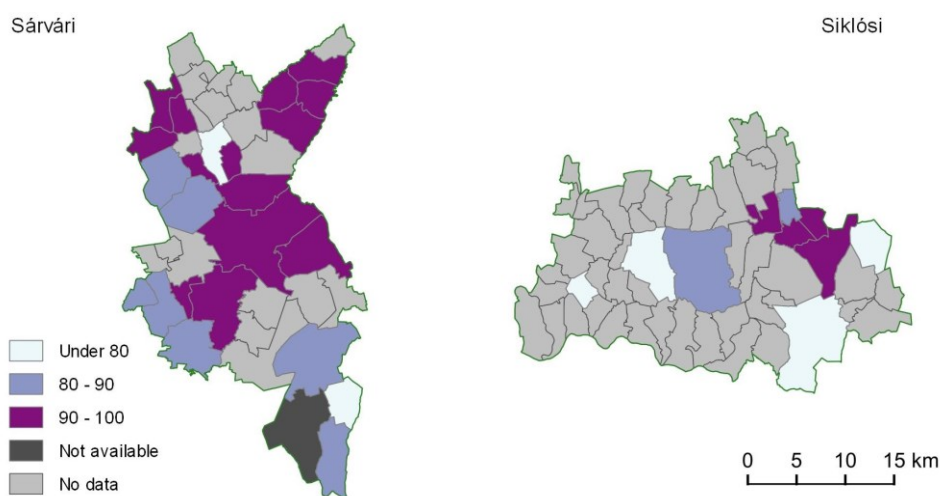


Figure 6. *Percentage of dwellings connected to the public sewage network, 2023*
Source: KSH

CONCLUSION(S)

The study sought to assess the success of settlements in several dimensions. In addition to the personal motivations revealed by the interviews (the factors behind choosing to settle and stay in a given settlement), external conditions, the development path of choice, and its explanation also featured among the elements of subjective success. The ability to preserve the results achieved so far was mentioned by village leaders as a factor of success for their communities in the case of both the North Transdanubia and South Transdanubia regions, who often formulate settlement development goals and strategies to ensure the quality of their public services, infrastructure, and the functionality of the settlement in the future. The concept of village development differs from settlement

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development in that personal conditions are often prioritised over other factors of settlement development.

Overall, it appears that the key prerequisite for success is the existence of an economic base. Naturally, various other important factors (settlement management, resource mobilization, lobbying, etc.) also serve to create and strengthen this base. The elements most commonly associated with the economic base are industrial park developments, investments with a high job creation potential, the arrival of foreign investors, active local businesses, and job creation programs. A large employer operating in a small municipality fundamentally determines the success of the given municipality. It was frequently noted that a key factor of success is linked to local government. Many consider the municipality to be successful due to the figure of the mayor (his or her activity, preparedness, awareness). It is also worth highlighting the significance of the political network, which often appears in connection with tender funds and job-creating investments. In terms of success, the role of local government with good political connections or an influential local "strongman" was often mentioned in the responses. Finally, two key determinants of success deserve special mention. The location of the settlement - central or in the proximity of a main road - is considered to be an asset, as this geographical position makes it more suitable for receiving investors and more attractive for urban residents moving out of the city; and the natural environment and natural values, which, on one hand, establish the settlement as a tourist destination, and, on the other hand, enhance its residential function.

Our interviews with mayors confirmed that, regardless of geographical location, local leaders have very similar ideas about community development and community success. At certain levels of the municipal hierarchy, the distinction between small towns and villages becomes blurred as the problems and obstacles to development are almost identical. The threshold is around 1,000 inhabitants at which mayors acknowledged having achieved success in terms of different types of development and grant applications. In the case of both regions, the expansion and upgrading of infrastructure is considered to be one of the most important development directions by almost all types of settlements, followed by the strengthening of community life and the need to retain the population. Whereas a significant proportion of respondents consider domestic resources to be the most essential financing tool, the involvement of own resources also plays a role in village development plans. As indicated by the results of the research, despite the adequate level of motivation and preparedness of the respondents, a major barrier to settlement development is the lack of financial resources. However, individual assessments of settlement success are not proportional to the level of financial success. In addition to the interviews, the feedback obtained from the questionnaire also confirms the tendency of village leaders to define the concept of a successful settlement primarily in terms of the satisfaction of the local community – as a "soft" factor – followed by the implementation of tangible developments – as a "hard" factor. It is the satisfaction of the population that reflects on mayors and institutional leaders; hence, the needs of the population and their greater inclusion are given key emphasis in the municipalities surveyed. Satisfaction was much more prominent among respondents in the North Transdanubia district, appearing as a success factor for most mayors, while in the South Transdanubia district it was a significant albeit not a primary factor.

The results obtained allowed us to identify the most significant challenges facing rural development, the expectations of the population, and mayoral attitudes and motivations regarding development, as well as their varying interpretations thereof and efforts to achieve success at the local level. Overall, areas with similar settlement network characteristics (in the small villages and border districts studied) in Hungary are found to be heavily reliant on their local leaders, consider population retention to be the most tangible definition of success, and develop their development plans accordingly.

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