



CommUnity Study: Executive Summary

In the CommUnity Study, we conducted 79 in-depth structured interviews with locals and foreigners from four Central European cities: Bratislava, Brno, Budapest, and Vienna. The research covered four larger thematic areas including I. The meaning of neighborhoods and neighborhood boundaries; II. Neighborhood relationships; III. Common concerns in neighborhoods; and IV. Community involvement at the neighborhood level.

With respect to the first thematic area of the research, we found out that the largest number of research participants understand the term neighborhood in social terms and they associate the neighborhood with people who live close to them—their neighbors—and the type of social interactions that they either have or would like to have with them, mainly neighborly help, but often also friendships. The spatial, functional, or administrative understanding of the neighborhood was less common among the research participants. We also identified a new understanding of the neighborhood that was strongly linked to feelings that the research participants had about their neighborhoods. We also found out that when deciding on how to draw the boundaries of the neighborhood, the research participants utilize either the functional logic and adjust the boundaries of the neighborhood to places that they frequently visit, or the spatial logic and adjust the boundaries of the neighborhood to the built infrastructure and the way how public space is organized.

With respect to the second thematic area of the research, we found out that half of all research participants (40; 50%) does not know their neighbors at all, approximately one quarter (19; 24%) knows their neighbors on the superficial level (greeting, recognizing faces), while the remaining one quarter (20, 25%) of research participants knows their neighbors well. We further found out that there is quite a bit of variability among the research participants when it comes to deciding on what kind of neighborhood relationships they are willing to consider as good. While some research participants are satisfied with casual civility, such as greeting the neighbors on the street, others would prefer closer interpersonal contact. We further explored the relationships between the locals and the foreigners and found out that the vast majority of locals (35; 88%) lives in ethnically diverse neighborhoods together with people of other nationalities. However, despite the presence of ethnic diversity the number of locals who said they also knew the foreigners who live in their neighborhood was much lower: only one quarter of the locals (10; 25%) said they knew the foreigners well while another fifth (8; 20%) said they knew them at least on a superficial level. The experience of foreigners with the level of acceptance by the locals and the type of reactions they would typically get were predominantly positive or neutral, although a number of research participants reported to also have had a negative experience. More than a half of foreigners (24; 61%) said the locals typically react to their presence positively, often with a surprise or interest about their culture, while less than a fifth of foreigners (6; 15%) said they had a negative experience, mainly by getting unpleasant reactions to their appearance or facing negative portrayal of migrants and refugees in media.

With respect to the third thematic area of the research, we found out that the research participants were most commonly concerned about the lack of infrastructure in their neighborhood and particularly the green infrastructure, such as parks, picnic places, or urban gardens. Among other commonly mentioned problematic issues were lack of regulations (such as lack of rental regulations), malfunctioning social relationships, insufficiently developed public transportation, or civic passivity and a need for political change. We found out that a bit more than a third (27; 34%) of research participants assumes the initiative should come from above and it is mainly the political representatives of the city, such as the mayor, the MPs, or the municipal or district government who should initiate improvements in the neighborhood, while a bit more than one fifth of research participants (17; 21%) assumes the initiative should be bottom up and it is mainly the citizens who should initiate the change. A number of research participants (10; 12%) further thinks that the initiative could be successful only if it was a joint effort of both citizens and the city.

With respect to the fourth thematic area of the research, we discovered an interesting paradox: although the vast majority (65; 81%) of all research participants consider involvement in the community life at the neighborhood level as an important value, a comparatively much smaller part of research participants (25; 31%) considers themselves to be involved in the community life in their neighborhood and an even smaller part of research participants (18; 22%) has a direct experience with participating in community initiatives. We further focused on identifying common motivations and barriers to community involvement and we found out that the major three motivations that would encourage research participants to get involved in community life at the neighborhood level have to do with a perspective of establishing social relationships, personally benefiting from the involvement, and perceiving the goal of the community initiative as attainable. With respect to major barriers to community involvement we found out that the three major barriers that would prevent research participants from getting involved in the community life have to do with bad interpersonal relationships in the neighborhood, other life priorities, and a lack of personal capacities, particularly time.

These research findings should provide a basis for the formulation of guidelines and recommendations for community leaders who would wish to organize community activities at the neighborhood level. The findings presented in this research should not be generalized to patterns of community involvement at the city level in any of the four cities or generally among the population of locals and foreigners as such—further research would be needed to explore both of these areas in greater depth.

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