

Hungarian Romani Youth Empowerment through Sport

Miskolc, Hungary, Summer 2021

International House of Chicago

Sarath Pillai, India, University of Chicago

[Associated Project Blog](#)

PART A. FINAL WRITTEN REPORT

Section I: Narrative

The main goal of this project was to foster student empowerment through sports and recreation at the Dr. Ambedkar School and its associated Martin Luther King Dormitory, located in Miskolc, Hungary. A unique institution in Hungary and Europe, the Dr. Ambedkar School, established in 2007, provides educational opportunities for socially disadvantaged youth, primarily of Romani background. Historically and into our present day, Roma experience discrimination, segregation, and outright violence in workplaces, schools, and in their larger communities. As a consequence, as few as 1% of Roma in eastern Hungary complete secondary education, compromising their wellbeing and employment opportunities. Economic disadvantage compounds the effects of ethnic marginalization. Borsod, the county in which the Dr. Ambedkar School is located, ranks among the most economically disadvantaged regions in the EU and school [dropout rates](#) are among the highest nationally. Empowering students, especially those from socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, to feel at home in their communities and actively engaged in their governance is perhaps the most important outcome of this project.

In consultation with directors at the school, we identified the absence of athletic facilities and recreational spaces as one of the students' most pressing needs. In the past, the school relied upon renting sports facilities at neighboring institutions -- at times even using public playgrounds and parks -- to hold physical education classes, requiring fundraising and imposing financial strains. These were temporary, rather than permanent solutions.

Along with my colleague at the University of Chicago, Roy Kimmey, and key figures at the school, we began devising a strategy to provide greater opportunities for sports and recreation, in spaces the students could call their own. My colleague and I have long shared an interest in the school, its unique mission, and its link to B. R. Ambedkar, the preeminent leader of the Indian Dalits and free India's first minister for Law and Justice. The Davis Project for Peace grant provided an exciting opportunity to help meet this long standing need of the school. Through landscaping work, infrastructural development, and community meetings, the project significantly transformed the school and dormitory spaces in four key ways: 1.) through the creation of a half basketball court; 2.) through building community gardens and caretaking of its already existing landscape; 3.) through construction of an outdoor cooking space; and 4.) through the transformation of previously unused garages into indoor exercise and movement spaces.

When devising our initial application, we identified local partner organizations who could provide expertise in student-oriented landscape architecture and urban planning. These partnerships, we found, proved especially vital as COVID-19 made my international travel uncertain. We discussed the particulars of the project with the school's founders, János Orsós and Tibor Derdák, the director of the Martin Luther King Dormitory, Nóra Tyeklár, and its finance officer, Roland Imre, and brainstormed ways to enhance the project's impact. This meeting made it clear to me that the school leadership wanted to see this project as not just a material enhancement of the school, but one that would establish enduring connections between students at the University of Chicago and the Ambedkar School. As Tibor Derdák noted, such relationships help give Ambedkar students a sense of the larger world outside of their communities. Further, it was clear that any changes to the school's landscape and built-environment must involve the consultation, cooperation, and collaboration of its students.

In order to center student participation in the design process, we partnered with the Hungarian NGO kultúrAktív, an association that specializes in built-environment education. We also worked with kultúrAktív's partner organization, LADDER Living Lab, an organization that encourages students and their communities to collaboratively shape the outdoors. LADDER Living Lab is led by the Institute of Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning & Garden Art of the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life

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Sciences (see our blog for more details about their impactful work with us). Through in-person consultations and collaborations in May and June of 2021, students engaged in democratic exercises to discuss and debate how they wished to see the space transformed. As they moved through it, they enacted short tableaux of the kinds of sports and recreation activities they hoped to see in each part of the school and dormitory yards. These included gardening, outdoor cooking, athletic training, basketball, and other outdoor sports. Consequently, a significant portion of our budget was expended toward transforming the garage into an exercise and movement space and paving the previously weather worn concrete back area of the dormitory. With these facilities, the school will save on expenses incurred each year in renting municipal fields for mandatory physical education classes. They will also make possible intramural activities, providing a contact point between the school and neighboring secondary schools in Miskolc, thus providing opportunities for Roma and non-Roma highschoolers to meet and socialize. And in the final weeks of the project, kultúrAktív and LADDER Living Lab held workshops with Ambedkar teachers to discuss ways of incorporating the outdoors into their lesson plans.

While our team is proud of the physical improvements to the school and dormitory, we are just as proud of the personal and institutional connections the project planning and implementation created. Through the LADDER Living Lab, students participated in all aspects of the project's planning, expressing what they would most like to see in the space and how they might better feel at home in it. As part of the LADDER Living Lab method, students actively engaged in debate over the space's use, cultivated public speaking skills, and learned democratic decision-making practices when identifying and selecting priority concerns. Through these partnerships and collaborations, we established channels for mutual understanding and expertise sharing on the one hand, and strengthened our shared commitment to building contacts between Roma and non-Roma youth on the other.

Unfortunately, due to travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19, and due to my Indian nationality, I was unable to obtain the required visa to travel to Hungary in person. Thus, the pandemic stood in the way of meeting students in person and hearing their perspectives. However, I was able to spare considerable expenses that would have otherwise gone to offset my travel and living costs for this project. Thus, we found a financial silver lining.

The project blog became a virtual project site where I could be present. In ways characteristic of this project, the blog, too, became a collaborative space in which we presented to the world the multiple voices and hands that helped carry out the project. The blog will continue to remain active, especially with reflections written (in translation) by students and other project partners. Planning meetings for the project were held over Zoom, and events on location at the school and dormitory were arranged by the LADDER Living Lab team once in-person classes resumed in May. My colleague at the University of Chicago, Roy Kimmey, who conducted archival research in Hungary and has a standing relationship with the school, traveled to Miskolc in August to meet with students and assist with the project's implementation.

In general, work progressed smoothly, in part because of the active engagement of representatives of each of the participating teams. The dormitory director, Nóra Tyeklár, proved particularly tireless in her determination to find a work crew who would perform all the required tasks within the project budget, to source materials at the best price from local suppliers, and to encourage students to participate with the LADDER Living Lab and kultúrAktív team. Nóra even went so far as to rent large delivery trucks to move construction materials to the building sites. Roy's presence onsite also gave me a remote set of eyes to watch as the work unfolded.

For me, peace is an action-oriented disposition or attitude toward mutual respect and understanding. Peace is a reconciliation, a reconciliation between oneself and another, between one group and another, one caste and another, one race and another, one nation and another. Empowering another -- as an individual or a group -- to realize their full potential is key to establishing and maintaining peace. The Davis project that we conceptualized and successfully implemented places this conception of peace at its heart. In this multinational, multicultural, and multilingual collaboration, peace has no linguistic or

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national borders. It is rather a shared belief in the worth of human and non-human things and beings. Peace is not just a human category; the relationship between humans and the environment are important, too. By relating peace with the built environment in our age of climate change, we hope that our project will continue to serve this community in Hungary for many years to come.

I am gratified to have learned a great deal more about a place and people I previously knew little about -- its customs and values, its ways of doing things, but its challenges, too. I was especially excited to learn how, despite their great geographical distances, India and Hungary share points of cultural and historical contact. The more I talked to people like Ralph Austen (in whose name I am a fellow at the International House) about this project, the more I realized the historical, anthropological, and ever-growing ties between India and Hungary. In the near future, students from the school will be able to travel to India for higher studies and learn Indian languages and culture. Hungary has had a long tradition of studying the culture of India, unique among countries of east-central Europe. I am particularly eager to continue following these points of exchange and make myself available as a resource to the school in the years to come. Further, in consultation with the International House at the University of Chicago, I would like to see how our institution here in the US might continue to support the school from afar -- through, for example, online tutoring in English.

The outcomes for this project followed closely to our original plan, despite numerous changes in its execution necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through meetings and planning sessions with partner organizations in Hungary, we successfully shifted to an online format, with in-person components carried out by teachers at the school, as well as kultúrAktív and LADDER Living Lab. For future grantees, it cannot be overstated how important it is to have reliable and competent partners specialized in relevant work areas, whether or not you are able to travel in person. The project period is limited and engaging a community can be difficult. In sum, the project's success will depend a great deal upon how readily you can find support locally when the project implementation period begins.

It was a great disappointment that I was unable to travel physically to the school and dormitory. As the school founders noted in an early meeting, in-person connections with people outside their community are critical to give students -- especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and marginalized communities -- a sense of the larger world and the possibilities it holds. I look forward to continue cultivating relationships with the founders and students of the Ambedkar School in the coming years.

As we face a world challenged by climate change, race-based violence, and hyper partisanship, it is incumbent upon us to reflect on what peace means for us and for our communities. Through this project, I learned to think of peace as a practical exercise in empowerment. We can find peace in many places, in our built environments and in nature, places that can foster inclusion and mutual understanding amongst youth and adults alike.

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Section II: Photographs

