UPLIFT – Urban PoLicy Innovation to address
inequality with and for Future generaTions

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1 Executive Summary

The present report examines the dimensions and scales of inequality and the strategies that people employ to navigate them at the micro, i.e., individual level. The data presented is based on 4 expert-interviews realized in WP3 as well as the information provided by the 8 expert interviews conducted in WP2 and 40 qualitative interviews with members of the communities living in three marginalised areas in the city of Sfântu-Gheorghe.

The second chapter is a short introduction into the conceptualization of the research and the research questions and it presents the three relevant sub-topics chosen to render an actualized view of the main issues affecting vulnerable people in the city.

In chapter 3 we give an outline of the theoretical background of the research and clarify the framework and basic concepts used in the analysis, followed by chapter 4 which presents the methodological processes of finding our interviewees, the methods of interviewing and of analysis. Our findings are presented in chapter 5 together with a summary of the resource space.[1]

First, we go through a thorough presentation of the characteristics of each section of our target group, i.e., the segregated Roma community of Őrkő, the tenants of the social housing units and the residents of the Csiki district; then we proceed to present the details of our findings regarding the three subtopics considered of relevance.

The first subtopic, that of Path dependency in education and possibilities of breaking out concludes that according to the present research in marginalized communities access to quality education is the exception rather than the norm and several conversion factors at all levels have to allign neatly in order to disrupt the great inertia of educational path dependency. The role of the family is crucial and no institution or NGO can substitute it, because **parental ambition** or **quality parenting** are decisive factors when it comes to schooling. Both the schools and NGOs however have important functions in offering support to the parents in their childrens' education. Therefore, it is important for these organizations to offer the **after school programs** but there is an important caveat: the programs need to be staffed with friendly, accepting and understanding people who can **provide the quality of human interaction** to inform and infuse the methodology of the educational help offered without which the educational process is misguided and pointless. If coupled with some personal conversion factors like **ambition** then we have a powerful enough mix to overturn path dependency in education.

The second subtopic is called Working abroad: solution or trap? Individual conversion factors are **resilience and extroversion**, the family conversion factor is **previous modelling by**

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parents (i.e. the example of somebody from the family having worked abroad previously), while at the institutional level we find **lack of information about working abroad** and **low level of wages**. We conclude that our respondents' ambivalent attitude towards working abroad is justified. On the one hand it offers some, often temporary, solutions to poverty, but it frequently creates other potentially serious emotional, family life and health impacting issues.

The third subtopic called Housing Inclusion or who has access to resources? is a multifaceted consideration of the municipality's project to demolish some of the houses in the segregated area and erect others instead. We look at this issue from multiple perspectives to unearth the unintended consequences of the intervention. First, we examine it from the point of view of the residents of the segregated community, then of other marginalized areas and conclude that implementers, policy makers and researchers should find a way in which it is possible to talk about the multiple disadvantages that the Roma population faces and not create the impression that they are the only ones deserving of resources as it generates social tension and the different marginalized populations perceive to compete for the same resources. The institutional conversion factors which determine this situation are **inadequate living conditions** of the in-work poor and the **instability of housing** for the tenants of the social housing units. Individual conversion factors are **a belief in racist and discriminatory discourses** against the Roma. In regards to the conversion factors that contribute to the members of the Őrkő community being unable to break out of the segregated area we have found that the eligibility criteria and the distribution of **social welfare benefits** is an important institutional conversion factor, as well as **a way of life based on farm animals**, as a community level conversion factor. On the individual level **community, familial ties and a sense of belonging** are powerful forces against change.

In the last chapter we propose a few ideas for the development of a Reflexive Policy Agenda based on the findings in this qualitative research process. As education is on e of the most regulated fields and very little is open to be tailored to local needs we focused our suggestions on training of staff, volunteering and extra-curricular activities, especially in the after-school programs. The soft-skills type of interventions could considerably mitigate the rigidity of the centralized education system. In the field of employment, specifically working abroad, we aimed our attention at enhancing the flow of information and safety of finding employment in other countries. Our suggestions imply information campaigns specifically suited to low-skilled workers and illiterate populations as well as exchange of experience concerning specific jobs. When it comes to housing, the municipality is already directly and significantly involved in changing the housing conditions of its poorest inhabitants, therefore our suggestions concentrate on adjacent activities like a much improved communication campaign to include all marginalized communities as targets of the investments of the municipality, or a series of community conversations to mitigate the resistance to change of the population at large, as well as a couple of concrete changes in the administration of social-housing.

2 Introduction

The current document is the result of the research activities carried out in work package 3 (WP3) of the UPLIFT project[2] in Sfântu-Gheorghe, Romania. It aims to understand which micro, mezo and macro level factors influence vulnerable young people's decisions in education, employment and housing, and how these young people create their own strategies and make choices within the possibilities available in the given locality.

The main research questions we analyse in this study are:

- What are the different factors at different levels (welfare system, intermediary institutions, family background, individual characteristics) that hold back vulnerable young individuals from living the life they would like to live or they should be able to live taking into account the possibilities the locality offers for them?
- Which are the factors that can be changed by means of Reflexive Policy Agenda - RPA - (a co-creation tool that includes vulnerable young people into policy design, implementation and monitoring)?

These two main questions rather serve as guidelines for the analysis, but are too broad to be answered fully, thus we have chosen those sub-topics in this framework that came out to be the most relevant in the local interview process. We aimed to focus on factors that cannot purely be explained by the deficiencies of the welfare systems, rather by the interactions between vulnerable young individuals and institutions as a response to the welfare framework.

Our chosen sub-topics are 1. Path-dependency in education and possibilities of breaking-out, 2. Working abroad: solution or trap? 3. Housing inclusion or who has access to resources?

The methods of exploring the factors behind individual decisions are primarily based on interviews with local policy experts and policy implementers and 40 vulnerable young people: 18 currently young people aged between 15 to 29 and 22 interviews with people aged 30-43 - who were between 15-29 at the time of the financial crisis of 2008. These interviews naturally revealed many, mostly already well-studied deficiencies of the national and local legislations and the welfare systems. Still, this case study report does not have the primary goal to formulate criticism about the general welfare policies and other structurally given resources in Sfântu-Gheorghe (this was already done in another work package of UPLIFT[3]), it rather aims to understand how these structural resources, policies, programmes, and services are implemented and how they influence the life strategies of young individuals. (For instance:

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[2] More information on the project can be found at: uplift-youth.eu

[3] More details about the local welfare systems in 16 urban areas of Europe can be found at: https://uplift-youth.eu/research-policy/official-deliverables

how do individuals use the local social housing opportunities within the frame of the available number of social housing units, and the current set of eligibility criteria.)

The final aim of this case study report and the analysis of the interactions of the behaviour of individuals and the institutions is to discover and suggest topics for a future Reflexive Policy Agenda for each of our eight localities of WP3 of UPLIFT, including Sfântu-Gheorghe. Reflexive Policy making lies at the centre of the UPLIFT project. It refers to a policy co-creation, refining process, which involves the target group of the policies (in our case vulnerable young people). This process aims to explore young people's narratives of their perceived reality about the locally available policies and services, and empower them to be part of the creation of knowledge on the policy framework. Moreover, this process takes young individuals' feedback on possible changes of policies seriously, and also invites them to monitor the implementation of these policies. By nature, it means a power-balanced cooperation between local decision makers and the target group of local policies, which process relies on both groups' interests and knowledge. Thus, the current research aims to deal less with fundamental systemic deficiencies of welfare policies, as it would exceed the competencies of local actors, but rather aims to discover those topics that can be handled locally.

In this report, we first introduce the framework of the analysis in Chapter 3, then we describe our methodology of the research and the analysis in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 first summarizes the main characteristics of the current life situation of vulnerable young people (40 interviewees) regarding their education, employment and housing conditions. Then we describe the main inequality traps we have discovered in our analysis, and the conversions that lead to the current outcomes (positions) of our interviewees. Finally, Chapter 6 contains the main suggestions for potential topics in education, employment and housing for a Reflexive Policy Agenda.

3 Framework of the analysis

This section contains the theoretical framework for the case study analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative research that has been accomplished in eight UPLIFT locations: Amadora, Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Chemnitz, Corby, Pécs, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn.

The framework of the analysis of this case study report is based on the **Capability Approach**, an attempt at better understanding and interpreting the nature of modern age poverty, social inequalities, human development and well-being, devised in the 1980s by the Nobel prize laureate economist-philosopher Amartya Sen. The Capability Approach understands certain life-pathways as results of a complex interplay of various factors: the nature of the system (e.g. economic, housing, education); individual perception of the system and other micro level, individually driven factors. Moreover, the main goal of the theory is to be able to comprehensively capture the factors that are constraining or enabling an individual to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Our analytical framework builds on the Capability Approach; however, it implies some adjustments and complements it with the life-course approach and the transgenerational approach.

The starting point for understanding the life strategies of vulnerable individuals is to define the **resource space,** which is a complex socio-economic environment around individuals, consisting of all formal rights (e.g. laws and legislations) and possibilities (e.g. subsidy schemes, programmes against social inequalities), which defines opportunities for all inhabitants in a given location. This environment might be enabling, e.g. providing work places, subsidies, networks, while it might be restricting as well, e.g. providing segregated school system, unaffordable housing. The resource space, as it is, largely depends on the socio-economic context in which people live: constitutional rights, economic development of the place, degree of inequalities, thus it varies from location to location. In addition to this, the accessibility of resources is conditionally determined. For instance, even if there is a subsidy scheme to buy a flat, it is only accessible in case of having savings (wealth), having a certain income level and under certain circumstances (e.g. having children). Based on individual characteristics, thus we define an **individualized resource space**, in which an individual can navigate. This individualized resource space is what we basically interpret as **real freedoms, real opportunities**.

However, young individuals have their own culturally and socially embedded perception of their possibilities that don't necessarily match the so-called real opportunities: either by holding an unrealistic view or by not seeing those opportunities that theoretically would be achievable for them. This distinction is a new element compared to the original Capability Approach developed by Sen, as our analytical framework places great emphasis on the distinction between **real and perceived opportunity spaces** to understand the origin and the consequence of the gaps between the space of available possible actions and the perceived

possible actions. The mechanisms that cause the gaps between the two (e.g. blind spots, false perceptions or conditioned to illegal interventions) are those that make it difficult for an individual to choose those positions in life that best suit his or her abilities and remain in the widely accepted legal and socio-cultural environment.

Inside the individualised resource space, based on the perceived and real opportunities, one can take different positions: **functionings** (*See in Table 1*). In the original theory, functionings are defined as "various things a person may value being or doing". In empirical terms, this can mean two things: 1) the actual and current achievement/outcome of an individual 2) a desired, valued outcome an individual would prefer doing instead of his or her current life choices. Thus, functionings are practically the achievements in a person's life, which he/she either achieved in reality, or may value doing or being.

Table 1: Potential functionings (either current or desired) by domains

Education	Employment	Housing
Qualification (completed and on-going education)	Working conditions (legal/illegal, full time/part time, one shift/three shifts)	Tenure type (public rental, private rental, owner occupation)
Quality of qualification (value of qualification depending on the specific school and dropout history)[4]	Salary level	Quality of housing (neighbourhood, affordability, density)

The main question of the case study analysis in UPLIFT is the mechanism with which these functionings (outcomes/positions/choices/desires) are chosen in the local resource spaces by vulnerable individuals.

According to the original Capability Approach, individuals ideally choose from real opportunities based on what they value or desire. However, it is not necessarily possible to interpret the decisions made by individuals in a vulnerable life situation as value-based decisions, as they could be based on their everyday life difficulties (compulsion), or also be a consequence of past decisions. Hence, two ideal types of decision chains can be identified: 1) value-based and 2) path dependent – which are not easy to distinguish, as values are born by internalising the circumstances. In case of value-based decisions, the individual can live a meaningful and fulfilling life, while under the notion of path-dependency we understand patterns of past outcomes which, in time, increase the likelihood of a limited number of future choices that are not necessarily advantageous for the individual. Understanding the outcomes from the perspective of a life-course approach is essential to be able to evaluate the agency

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[4] The quality of a school is interpreted in a wide sense, outside of education, having socialising effects on students (e.g. functions/dysfunctions developed in schools that enable/disable functionings in the labour market or the housing market).

potential and the role of agency in the life-path of an individual. Thus, the **Life-course Approach** is an important additional component to the Capability Approach. Among the past life events and experiences, the behaviour of the family system and the childhood home environment play a key role, which provides a potential to understand what trajectories and possibilities an individual has. The theory of the **Transgenerational Mobility** contributes and valuably complements the capability approach by emphasizing the role of socialization and the parental experiences and behaviour as conversion factors.

The routes (conversions) i) from formal resource space to real opportunities (CF1 on Figure 1), ii) from real opportunity space to perceived opportunities (CF2 on Figure 1), and iii) from perceived opportunity space to chosen or desired functioning (CF3 on Figure 1) are paved by **conversion factors**: the interference of institutional and individual conditions that lead to the creation of individual life-strategies. Conversion factors refers to the fact that different individuals have different capabilities to convert public policies and formal rights into valuable opportunities (Kimhur, 2020: 4, CF1 on Figure 1). Certain conversion factors enable some elements of the opportunity space to be made visible and usable, while other factors have the ability to conceal the real opportunity space, resulting in a gap between the real and perceived opportunity space (CF2 on Figure 1), and a distorted decision about chosen functionings (CF3 on Figure 1).

One may think that the perceived resource space is part of the real resource space, and the conversion from real to perceived necessarily results in the reduction of choices. According to our research however, vulnerable young individuals tend to see options for themselves also outside the social norms and legal framework (real opportunities), thus are able to widen their space of options even if it is not realistic from an external viewpoint or not valued positively by the society.

Figure 1: A modified concept of the Capability Approach
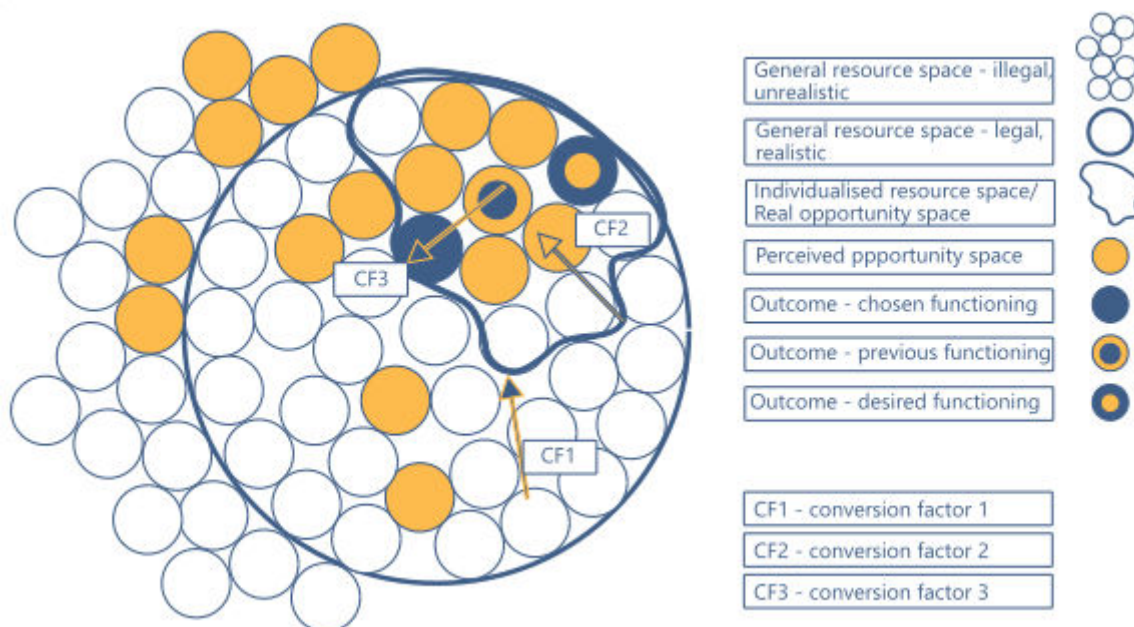
Source: Own elaboration

Our analysis of the interviews was based on four sets of conversion factors:

- **Individual conversion factors** (micro level conversion factors) focus on a person's psycho-social set, domain-specific capabilities, individual character (e.g sex, intelligence, financial literacy, learning abilities, work ethics), things a person values (e.g. attitude towards education, certain professions) and his/her social network (including the secondary social group where an individual belongs to: neighbourhood, schoolmates, friends, etc.).

- **Family conversion factors** (micro level conversion factor as well) focus on the original family system[5], where he/she was brought up, family's educational/employment background, values, believes and attitudes in the family, psychosocial environment.

- A special focus is given to **institutions** (meso-level conversion factors), where we are interested in how institutions narrow down, or rather correct, the perceived space of possibilities in their interactions with individuals. Institutional conversion factors focus on attitudes and behaviours of an institution[6]. Just as the individual conversion factors,

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5 Family system includes the position of the individual in the original family dynamics. For instance, whether it's a supporting and functional or a negative, dysfunctional environment.

6 Institutionalized norms in our interpretation are the ones that are followed by most members of an institution. One widely known example is institutionalized discrimination, when a large majority of the members of the institutions systematically behave differently (in a negative way) with people belonging to a certain social group e.g. ethnicity or gender.

institutional conversion factors work out differently for (different groups of) people (see exposure to institutional dysfunctions).

- Even being embedded in individual behaviour, institutional response or family event we consider **crucial life events** as independent conversion factors, some of which may have a decisive role in widening or narrowing down the choices one has in certain situations.

4 Methodology

In this chapter we will present our process of obtaining the data at the basis of this report, starting with the conceptualization of the fieldwork, to the contacted gatekeepers as well as our interviewing methods and those of the analysis.

4.1 Interviews with Policy implementers/experts

In addition to the 8 expert interviews conducted for the Urban Report in WP2, we have conducted interviews with four more policy implementers representing the Social Assistance Department (DAS) in the city of Sfântu-Gheorghe, both at the level of decision-making and the level of implementation, as well as a representative of an NGO and a school. One of the representatives of DAS participates in the decision-making process of local decisions and the school representative is also a relatively high-level administrator of a middle school specifically catering to the less affluent children of the Csiki district; but considering how centralized the school system is, their power of influence is limited. The other two individuals were implementers, directly involved in dealing with the beneficiaries.

4.2 Interviews with young people

We have conducted 40 interviews in total, with 22 people in the formerly youngsters' category while 18 among the currently youngsters[7]. A similar situation is present in the distribution of genders. We have conducted 17 interviews with men and 23 with women.

In order to gain access to the vulnerable populations from the marginalized areas we reached out to three NGOs, the Social Assistance Department and two schools. The role of the gatekeepers figured differently for all three categories of respondents. In the segregated community of Őrkő we have collaborated with the social worker of an NGO offering mostly job qualification courses for adults and schoolwork support for children. Through them we have managed to interview mainly older adolescents and parents of young children. The other gatekeeper for this area was one of the Roma community facilitators. Through him we have talked to the families that were in the area intended to be demolished. For access to the social housing tenants, we have worked closely with the local administrator of the social housing units and his supervisor, which although a relatively wide net, it may have involved the filter of personal preferences but managed to reproduce the variety of people living in the social housing units. The residents of the Csiki district were contacted through the local school, which means that we mostly talked to mothers and a few former students, but completed by a few interviews with the snowball technique we managed to get a sufficiently balanced cohort from

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[7] Despite the fact that in the planning phase of the research we aimed for an equal number (20-20) of interviewees from both age groups and genders, field realities related mostly to gatekeepers and openness to participate modified this neat distribution by 2 more interviewees in the formerly youngsters category and an additional number of 3 women in the gender category. We are confident that this adaptation did not affect the outcome of the research overall.

this area. We didn't use quotas, but instead strived to obtain a balanced view both form the perspective of the age groups, as well as gender. At the beginning we were planning to have equal numbers of people from all three marginalized areas, but fieldwork quickly revealed that these groups are not so neatly differentiated as we thought and there is significant overlap between the community in Őrkő and the social housing tenants as well as the Csiki district residents and the parents living in the social housing units. Therefore, the number of people from the social housing units is somewhat distorted, reaching 16 persons, while the Őrkő community is represented in our sample by 11 people, the Csiki district residents by 9 while the other 4 respondents are from other residential areas and villages close-by.

All the interviews were conducted and processed by one researcher, 37 of which have been organised face to face while the other three online. Three of the interviews were double interviews, meaning that two people have been interviewed at the same time, on the basis of the translated interview guide – that was used in all 8 WP3 locations - and each taking turns in answering the questions.

4.3 Analysing the interviews

For the analysis of the interviews, we have transcribed the recorded material with the help of Azure Cognitive Services which we later corrected for misunderstandings. We then used the Analytical Excel Sheet to compile all the relevant data about our interviewees and used the method of thematic coding and analysis to decide upon the most relevant aspects to tackle for the purposes of the present report. We would like to mention that the perspective of the researcher usually filtered for relevant points from a discourse analysis point of view.

4.4 Group meetings

The Youth Town Hall meeting, in Sfântu-Gheorghe was organised as a series of three focus groups with a group of highschoolers from the local vocational schools, followed by a not so successful invitation extended to the social housing tenants and lastly by a group discussion with the members of the segregated area of Őrkő. In the first group we discussed all three domains of the research, but given the specific age group of the participants we focused more on the issues surrounding education than anything else. The second meeting was unfortunately hijacked by a rainy day and a not so perfect location and only one person showed up from the social housing units with whom we went through the interview guide focusing mostly on work issues as his most urgent subject. Finally, the last meeting took place in the Őrkő community and as it welcomed a diverse range of participants we had an in-depth discussion about all three domains, especially housing and work and concluded that there is little overlap in the nature and degree of vulnerabilites experienced by the Roma and the non-Roma populations which requires distinct models of analysis. These two focus groups have provided us with enough references to the link between the people living in Őrkő and the beneficiaries of the social housing in the Csiki negyed area.

The Storytelling workshop took place with 11 participants out of the 34 invited from the three vulnerable population categories we interviewed: i.e., people living in social housing, poor working-class residents of the Csiki district and members of the segregated Roma community of Őrkő. The location for the workshop has been strategically chosen as the Gödri Ferenc Middle School because at least two of the above categories send their children to school there, making it a conjunction point for disadvantaged children.

The discussion was structured on the three main domains in the research, i.e. education, employment and housing and the participants were invited to present their opinions on the researcher's connections and conclusions. In education we concluded that at least 8-10 years of school is the minimum in order to find employment as an adult; therefore, a parent's biggest gift to their children is consistency in school attendance. Even if the adult literacy program has a very limited reach, it is the only possibility through which adults can get the minimum amount of education. Unfortunately, the program is not set up with the beneficiaries in mind and most of them quit before they graduate, but this is a systemic issue that cannot be changed at the local level so the only thing that schools can do is to employ friendly and highly competent staff in order to compensate somewhat for the blind spots. The participants agreed that the local school plays a central role as a stabilizing factor in children's lives. In regards to employment the participants established that people in disadvantaged communities resort to a great variety of formal and informal work. One of the most important aspects of employment is the dignity of work whether it gets expressed through friendly colleagues, or a kind boss or a supportive work environment. We agreed on the precarious nature of minimum wage employment; which – despite the struggle and the long hours – fails at impacting poverty. In terms of housing, we admitted that it was a very loaded subject, because it is a source of major instability in people's lives and everybody's most daring dream is to own their own homes. The municipality's focus on allocating resources for the segregated Roma is creating conflict among different marginalized communities. Even if social housing is a dead-end, it is understandably the only option for certain categories of people. Our biggest takeaway from the Storytelling Workshop is that focusing on the structural limitations of the living conditions as experienced by the different categories, instead of just comparing the benefits received, managed to change people's perspectives to a certain degree and engendered more empathy among the different social categories.

5 Findings

5.1 Outcomes: what have vulnerable young people reached

In order to gather as comprehensive an image about the marginalized groups of people living in the Sfântu-Gheorghe FUA (functional urban area) we have reached out to different social and educational institutions and NGOs working in the area. For the purposes of this qualitative interview process we targeted three more or less distinct categories of people, i.e. the ones living in **the segregated Roma community** (Őrkő) 11 persons, the **tenants of two social housing units** -16 persons, as well as the **inhabitants of the Csiki district** – 9 persons, complemented by two interviewees that live outside the city in villages close-by, as well as two people from other neighbourhoods in the town.

Originally, the research plan was to equally represent these three categories of vulnerable populations in the locality, but during fieldwork it has become clear that there are relatively significant overlaps between these categories and they cannot be so neatly distinguished as we would have intended in the first place. For example, the interviewing process clarified that the category of people from the segregated community of Őrkő extends to a certain degree to overlap with the one of the social housing tenants as many beneficiaries originate from there and these networks continue to be active. Also, the category of people from the Csiki district, whom we reached through the local school are – to a much lesser degree – also the social housing tenants we identified as category number two. We believe that these overlaps carry a marked significance in that they contribute to the specificity of marginalization in the FUA of Sfântu-Gheorghe as it will become clear by the end of this chapter.

The segregated Roma community (Őrkő) is situated on the outskirts of Sfântu-Gheorghe and is comprised of about 2000 people living in an informal settlement in self-built dwellings of all kinds, from brick-and-mortar houses with water, electricity and gas heating to improvised homes (containers) with no water, "borrowed" electricity and wooden stove heating. Among the 40 interviewees of the research there are 11 inhabitants of this segregated community. In choosing them we tried to reflect the main lines of differentiation being instrumentalized by the community. Therefore, we have interviewed both men (4) and women (7), from better quality houses as well as lower quality dwellings, from the lower end -which is considered to be better off as it is closer to the city – as well as the upper end – where the newest/poorest members of the community are situated. These dwellings are owned by the people they house, but as we are dealing with an informal settlement, none of the owners have legal documentation on their houses, even if they purchase them with a considerable amount of money. This is a very precarious situation not at all comparable with real property ownership.

It is important to mention that at the time of the interviews the segregated community of Őrkő is undergoing important social and infrastructural change as the municipality is running a project to demolish some of the informal houses at the upper end of the community and build new social housing units in an attempt to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants. We

observed significant turmoil around this issue in the field, both in Őrkő as well as in other vulnerable communities in town. We develop this idea in the third story of the present chapter.

In regards to the area of education, our interviewees from the Őrkő community are the lowest educated cohort of all. Despite the fact that there is a middle school, the Néri Szent Fülöp, in the community trying to cater for the needs of about 500 children, most of our interviewees spent less than 8 years in school and a significant proportion had trouble with reading and writing. Very few young people from the community continue their studies after 8th grade, but in our sample, we managed to include 2 from this category one of which has successfully graduated from vocational school.

For this category the field of work is just as fraught with insecurity. Recent changes in the legislation and lifestyle have meant families struggling to find new ways to make ends meet on a regular basis. Originally a community of brickmakers and horse breeders, the people in Őrkő are now faced with the impossibility of earning a living through traditional means. Brickmaking has become obsolete, while trading in horses and occasional work with the help of a horse and wagon has been majorly impacted by a law which prohibits horse-pulled wagons from riding the streets in and around town. Some families still hold onto their animals, but it isn't a profitable business any more, even if owning horses is regarded as a sign of wealth. The majority of the people we interviewed didn't have a formal job, two were mostly working abroad in Austria and Germany, two had their own business (a local store) and one has just finished school. Most of the respondents have been involved in different informal income generating schemes, from short begging trips abroad to seasonal agricultural work.

The second relevant category of vulnerability identified consists of **the population living in two social housing units**. For the purposes of this research, the persons who occupy the 137 apartments (18m2 and 34m2) are represented by a number of 16 interviewees. Trying to cover the variability within this population we interviewed both for the younger cohort and the older one, both men and women, family people, single mothers and individuals living alone. What the field-work revealed is that on the one hand there is still a strong (familial) – even if gradually weakening – connection between people living as social tenants and the Roma communities in the area, including the segregated community of Őrkő. On the other hand, there is an observable demarcation line between the social tenants of Roma origin and the non-Roma. Living in two three-storey apartment blocks in a non-residential area of the town, surrounded by a metal fence and a security guard as a doorman, the tenants are housed either in the "good" block or the "bad" block with the majority of the Roma ending up in the "bad" one (poor maintenance, broken windows, noise and trash).

In regards to education, the social housing inhabitants present a better, but still weak educational background from a total lack of schooling (esp. for people of Roma origin) to working class individuals with 8 grades and even two vocational school graduates among our respondents. There are several paths that lead them to occupy a social housing unit, the most popular being that they were born into a big family with extremely limited means so inheritance wouldn't be a possibility; but also experiences of domestic violence in the past

(esp. for single mothers), mental illness and disability as well as homelessness. When applying for social housing only the criterion of limited income is taken into consideration, the allocation criteria being blind to most of the aforementioned situations. There is of course an advantage resulting from being familiar with other services of the welfare system as interviewees from this category had access to the right information and to the assistance they needed to apply for social housing.

In the matter of employment status, the social tenants presented a higher variability than the population of Őrkő: from people who couldn't find stable employment (and are now amassing serious debt and are facing imminent eviction), people struggling to live on social welfare benefits (single mothers hassling to cover the expenses of the social housing unit), people in precarious employment (minimum-wage arrangements) to persons who live off of a moderate salary. Based on the observations from the field, young people living as social tenants cannot afford to be unemployed (unless they live in a family with double income) or even to try to survive on social welfare benefits, because the money often doesn't cover their daily expenses.

The third category of vulnerable populations, **the residents of the Csiki district** is the most eclectic mix of all three. Represented in this research by 9 interviewees (8 women and 1 man) we find both Roma and non-Roma, mostly working-class families of a similar origin, but also teenagers, young mothers and single parents. This is the cohort with property owners in it, i.e., 3 interviewees own their own apartments of which 2 have inherited it, while one family managed to acquire their apartment with bank credit. Two other families are still in the process of paying back the bank loan on their homes. The majority of our respondents are living in four-storey, small apartment blocks, in relatively crowded conditions (3 people in one bedroom, 6 people in two bedrooms).

In terms of education this cohort presents the best comparative educational situation, with most people having graduated 8 grades, while 4 of them also have studied further (job qualification courses or vocational school diplomas). They all have a strong discourse about the necessity of schooling, so in quite a few cases it is evident that the parent's ambitions are manifesting itself in the higher educational success of their own children. It is important to mention that there is a middle-school in the district, Gödri Ferenc Middle School, which seems to be at the conjunction point of at least two of the studied categories (social housing tenants and Csiki district residents) and it caters to the needs of the children whose parents didn't have the means to take them to more central "stronger" schools in the city. The school has made considerable efforts to assist the parents in raising their children, an effort that is widely recognized and appreciated.

The residents of the Csiki district present a larger variability in terms of income and, consequently, quality of housing. However, the most widespread situation is that of double income family working in 2-3 shifts for a moderate salary, occupying a small apartment, struggling to cover their regular expenses with no possibility for making economies. Especially if they are paying back a bank loan, then ¾ of their total income is spent on covering the

expenses incurred by their homes. 3 of our respondents were involved in the informal economy.

Lastly, the 4 persons that don't fit the previous categories are four men in the currently youngster category, all originally from the countryside, either studying (2) or moved to the city (2) with a relatively stronger educational background. One of them is a student at the local university, brought up in the foster-care system. The other three are people with vocational school training, all living either in their own property or with their parents/foster-parents. Two of them are full-time employed family men, while the other two are student and highschooler.

Based on the 40 interviews and the field-work observations we have concluded that while the presence of other marginalised groups in the city is a certainty and deserves serious attention, the Roma, especially the ones living in the segregated area are by far the most vulnerable to the present social and economic conditions as they face an increased accumulation of disadvantages. The gap between the situation of the local Roma communities and the vulnerable non-Roma is so significant that it would warrant an entirely separate analysis that would not involve inequitable comparisons.

5.2 Resource space: formal freedom of choices for young people

The results of WP2 in the UPLIFT project were presented in an Urban Report of Sfântu-Gheorghe[8] which contains data about four dimensions of study, i.e., education, employment, housing and social protection both at national as well as local level. What follows is a short summary of these findings completed by the information from the expert interviews we conducted in WP3 in order to have a clearer understanding of the resources and possibilities that the residents of Sfântu-Gheorghe could rely on.

Sfântu-Gheorghe is a relatively small town of 64,428 inhabitants (January 2018) located in the central region of Romania (Szeklerland) with a majority of Hungarian language speakers (77%) and Romanian speakers (22%), while the Roma, who also speak Hungarian, are unofficially estimated to comprise about 8% of the population.

The main economic activity in this functional urban area is concentrated around the textile and clothing industry, the milk and meat processing and woodworking industry, or in the field of trade and services, but also tourism. Even if Sfântu-Gheorghe is a typical Eastern-European town, it stands out by the highest level of spending on cultural events of all the localities in Romania. It concentrates many highly regarded institutions and communities in the cultural field – two theatres, a county library, two museums, two art galleries, as well as the most prestigious professional folk-dance ensemble *The Three Chairs* and contemporary dance company *The M Studio* – making Sfântu-Gheorghe into the Hungarian cultural hub of central Romania.

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[8] The Urban Reports of the UPLIFT project can be found at https://uplift-youth.eu/research-policy/official-deliverables

According to the Urban Report the most ardent issues the FUA of Sfântu-Gheorghe is facing are the increased outward migration of young people both internally and externally, the lack of well-paid jobs and increased social inequality among its residents. The age group registering the most spectacular shrinking in recent years is the one aged 15 to 24 which decreased by 48% from 2002 to 2016. An ongoing process, this rapid restructuring of local demographics has been very impactful on all areas of social life determining the municipality to devise policies in an attempt to retain and attract young people back to their home town.

In regards to the field of **education**, in Sfântu-Gheorghe, as all over Romania, education is both very centralized and very polarized. The central, more prestigious schools in this city have above the average performance indicators, while the ones considered to be lower quality are on the other end of the spectrum performing poorly and concentrating pupils with low socio-economic background with limited access to existing educational, economic and cultural resources. The school drop-out rate in the region is the highest in Romania with the Roma population and children from rural areas bearing the brunt of those statistics: ¾ of school drop-outs are Roma. Considering that the number of years spent in education are twice lower for the Roma than for the non-Roma, the 2016 education reform banning school segregation was a welcome initiative. However, in practice, by automatically enrolling children to a certain school in the respective district has had the effect of strengthening the phenomenon in segregated areas while determining the more affluent families to find legal ways to enrol their children into more prestigious schools effectively separating them from the population with fewer resources. Schools in themselves have very little lee-way in deciding what and when to teach. The methodology of teaching and extra-curricular activities are the only ones that a school has the authority to customise according to the needs of the children and the parents it is attending to. Therefore, in our case study, as it will become clearer in the next subchapter these areas gain added significance in providing education to children from marginalized populations. Intergenerational mobility regarding the choice of schools is very low, the high grades are all concentrated in better performing schools, while the lower grades in less prestigious schools which leads to school performance being strongly dependent on sociocultural homogeneity. Not only has centralized decision-making made it very difficult to personalize the educational process, but Romania also has the lowest spending on education in the EU, i.e., 2,8% of the GDP, which severely limits the practical implementation of sustainable reforms.

It is specific to Romania in general, and to the central region as well, that the **employment** rate is relatively high (67%) and, consequently, unemployment is relatively low (4,5%) in official statistics. Unfortunately, the official numbers do not account for many situations with possibly greater impact on the employment situation of the population. Romania has the highest share of the working population at risk of poverty – with an in-work rate of poverty of 17%. This is specifically relevant, as we will show in the next subchapter to the third category of vulnerable people, the residents of the Csiki negyed. The rate of inactivity is one of the highest in Europe, for young women reaching 41%, while NEET youth (not in education, employment or training) being very high for Romanian citizens in general but the central region, to which Sfântu-

Gheorghe also belongs to, reaching the highest level in the country. Romania is also characterised by having the highest relative poverty rate and the lowest poverty line as well as high levels of income inequality with not too high rates of unemployment (reaching 21,3% in March 2021, during the Coronavirus pandemic and affecting primarily the young). One of the most significant aspects of the Romanian labour market is that Romania has been practically providing the workforce for Western European countries and outward migration of especially young people is very prevalent. According to official statistics 2 million Romanians have formalized employment in another European country, However, this figure does not account for the Romanians active in the informal economies of other European countries. The next subchapter will clarify that working abroad is a very popular option among the interviewees of this research, but their experiences vary greatly in complex ways. As a hub for the Hungarian minority, the residents of Sfântu-Gheorghe have close ties especially with Hungary, which figures like a portal to the West, with the majority of people first finding work in this country and only then moving further West. One of the most popular type of jobs that migrant Romanians hold is that of domestic worker or personal assistant an area in which even non-qualified people can find employment. It is primarily women that perform as domestic workers and caretakers on a rotational basis (for e.g., one month working abroad, one month at home) but we have also found a few men in this field. Both the central as well as the local Employment Office is trying to take measures to stimulate youth employment for e.g., by offering tax facilities to companies hiring recent graduates or by providing all kinds of free job-training courses, but these have not managed to change the trend of outward mobility for young people. Studies have shown that some of the reasons for their moderate success is the weak connections between the offer, the labour market and the real expectations of potential beneficiaries. Both the local Employment Office as well as the municipality of Sfântu-Gheorghe have made several attempts, implemented programs in order to retain their young workforce or at least motivate them to return after their graduation. There has been a very low absorption rate for these initiatives locally. For instance, the job-qualification courses reach an average of 100 people yearly while the free-lot distribution for young families to erect houses has managed to reach not more than 20 beneficiaries in the past 10 years. As employment is closely linked to that of the level of education it follows that the Roma ethnics face the most difficulties in getting employed. Observation in the field made it clear that there is a communication and human resource issue when the local Employment Office attempts to attract beneficiaries to its qualification courses. On the one hand the information usually doesn't reach the most vulnerable beneficiaries, nor do the beneficiaries fully understand the necessity of attending one of these courses. In our cohort of interviewees neither the members of the segregated community nor the social rental residents were aware of the functioning of the Employment Office, while the residents of the Csiki negyed were better informed but occasionally failed to understand the benefits of signing up. Keeping the young at home and combatting poverty is admittedly one of the priorities of local policy making as it has been included in the Local Development Strategy in 2020 as follows: human resource development and employment growth for people in poverty. Lastly, it is important to mention that unemployment as a status and the benefits that come with it is virtually inexistent in the

vulnerable groups our respondents belong to. The conditions for qualifying are so restrictive and the benefits are handed out for such a short span of time (6-12 months) that among our respondents there were none in this situation at the time of the interview. In conclusion, as among the people interviewed for the present research only 2 persons have benefitted from it in their lifetime, we can confidently say that unemployment benefits have virtually no impact on the most vulnerable.

Concerning the situation in the domain of **housing** in Romania poverty and social exclusion have a direct connection to housing deprivation. Statistics show that more than 5 million Romanians live in poverty and more than half live in crowded households. Actually, Romania ranks first for the fewest square meters of living space in Europe. The privatization characteristic of the post-socialist period and the highly competitive development of the real-estate industry has led to a severe decrease of housing in public ownership (2%) in the whole country. High real estate prices, very low social housing stock and the increased number of evictions lead to the formation of marginalized communities like the three target groups studied through this qualitative research. Municipalities lack the political motivation and the financial means to build social housing units, while investment boosting legislation is primarily supporting investment rather for profit than for social considerations. All the above circumstances have led to the situation where 40% of young people aged 25 to 34 live with their parents and the lack of social housing units as well as the qualification criteria for such housing is deterring people from applying repeatedly for many years. There is a general lack of housing support policies. In Romania, at present, it is estimated that about 200,000 people live in informal settlements usually at the outskirts of different towns. Very relevant for the situation of our interviewees from the segregated Roma community, in practice these self-built, unofficial dwellings are examples of housing exclusion, adequately exemplified by the infrastructural changes that the municipality of Sfântu-Gheorghe is enacting now in the segregated Roma community of Őrkő. The Roma population is the most vulnerable to homelessness, inadequate housing or evictions and this situation can only be impacted by a new definition of homelessness and an intervention-based approach. The houses in public ownership in Sfântu-Gheorghe are as follows: 137 social housing units comprised of 18m2 and 34m2 apartments in two apartment blocks (second group of interviewees), 126 residential houses[9] in Campul Frumos (Szépmező) district as well as 33 service apartments for the employees of the municipality. According to one of our expert interviewees, when applying for social housing potential beneficiaries come to face the reality of a long waiting period (from 2 to 5 years), and a waiting list that depends on how many empty units there are (varies from about 100 to 20 applicants). The qualification criteria are treating more favourably married couples (in one instance one of our respondents married officially just to increase their chances at becoming a social tenant) and the existence of children. Although significantly subsidized, the expenses incurred with holding onto the social housing unit prove, in quite a few cases to

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[9] Residential houses are apartments owned by the local authority, but are not in the social housing circuit. People living in them are the tenants of the municipality.

be unmanageable, especially by people who have a difficulty finding and holding down a job, i.e., for the most vulnerable mostly Roma families social housing becomes an empty promise because instead of a solution to housing deprivation, they find themselves in another vicious circle, a temporary situation in which they amass so much debt that they end up being evicted from the social housing. The issue of debt figures threateningly in the discourse of our social-housing respondents, as families with a single income and several children are stretched very thin to cover the average monthly expenses of about 550 RON (approx. 110 EURO) related to the apartment. The opportunity to pay four-five times a month is a measure that the administrators initiated in order to make payment easier, but, as our respondents attested, they are penalized with 0,2% interest a month for being late and a vicious circle is initiated the moment they are late with the payment. Locally, there are a couple of programs designed to help the young find/build houses for themselves. For instance, the Come Home! (Vino acasa!) program of the municipality is distributing plots of land to young families with the goal of building their homes there. It has been running for 10 years, but only 20 parcels were assigned up to this point. This program is mostly suitable for people with relatively high financial means who can afford to invest into building a house and the application criteria favours highly educated people, effecting in practice a negative selection against the Roma. There is also the ANL national program for youth with means which has been running since 2016 and has the great advantage of an income dependent rent. Unfortunately, there are too few units to cover the needs of youth and it cannot cater for the most vulnerable. In the city of Sfântu-Gheorghe there are about 50 homeless persons, mostly middle aged and elderly men who are unable to work. The night shelter run by the municipality and an NGO succeeds to offer everyone a roof over their heads.

In terms of **social protection** Sfântu-Gheorghe is not different from any other municipality in Romania. There is a great variety and complexity of all the social protection benefits that exist, but they are all determined and decided at the national level and local authorities don't have the legal means to customise them. Contrary to the great variety of the social benefits, these do not succeed in catering for the needs of the most vulnerable groups as they prove to be ineffective in reducing poverty, rather creating a social strata of subsistence beneficiaries of social protection unable to change their situation. In case of the social benefits for example the biggest culprit for their inefficiency in tackling poverty is their lack of indexation. These are calculated on the basis of a Social Reference Indicator, which has been established at 500 RON (100 EURO) in 2008 and since then it has substantially lost value so that now a single mother with two young children living in social housing in Sfântu-Gheorghe is unable to cover the expenses incurred by the apartment with her social benefits, leaving her in the conundrum of amassing debt and getting penalized for being late while fearing eviction. The amount of the so-called Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) is also unrealistically low and access to it is restricted to families with young children and no income whatsoever, as even a single minimum wage would disqualify the family. In the segregated community of Őrkő there are 255 families benefitting from GMI, forming the subsistence social-beneficiary strata, who also have to work 40 hours/month for the municipality in order to continue receiving the benefits.

The social protection system is administered by the local DAS (The Social Assistance Department) subordinated to the local council and collaborating with the different NGOs active in the city. The interest of the different stakeholders in tackling poverty is shown by the municipality's willingness to partner with different NGOs and apply for funds to develop integrated services for the city's poor. One example in this regard, the Prospera Sepsi program, is a very ambitious one. Developed by 6 organizations in collaboration with the municipality, it aims to reduce poverty and combat discrimination in the municipality of Sfântu-Gheorghe while combatting the social exclusion of disadvantaged communities identified in the Local Development Strategy. By offering fully integrated services at the family level and mostly targeting youth the program has a great potential. However, its impact remains to be felt and measured in time.

5.3 Why young people cannot fully exploit their potentials

In this sub-chapter we will describe and analyse in depth three facets of vulnerability which are considered to be the most relevant aspects of marginalization in the city of Sfântu-Gheorghe at this time. We have chosen a topic for each of the researched domains, education, employment and housing looking to shed light on the less evident interactions between the meso and micro levels of analysis, i.e., the institutions and the family/individual resulting in often unexpected or contradictory effects compared to the original goals intended in the design of systems, policies and processes. The selected topics are as follows: 1. Path-dependency in education and possibilities of breaking-out, 2. Working abroad: solution or trap? 3. Housing inclusion or who has access to resources? Additionally, our selection has been informed both by the findings of the Urban Report carried out in WP2 as well as by the intention of putting forward practical, evidence-based suggestions for a reflexive policy agenda that the local authorities and institutions would be able to apply in the confines of the present system. These will be the subject of the following chapter.

5.3.1 Path-dependency in education and possibilities of breaking-out

In the previous chapter we have described the education system in Sfântu-Gheorghe as similar to other parts of Romania, as being both very centralized and polarized. This time we will closely examine the situation of two institutions of primary and secondary education, one located in the segregated community of Őrkő, while the other in the Csiki district catering to children of low socio-economic background as they feature in the discourse of parents and children interviewed for the purposes of the present research. Next, we will present a profile of the generic student of these institutions to highlight the popular typology followed by the presentation of two cases that broke with tradition and have become examples of intergenerational mobility.

The Néri Fülöp Middle School is located in the segregated community of Őrkő and is catering to the educational needs of about 500 children from the local Roma community[10]. Although it is a state-owned school and the 2016 education reform banning segregation should also apply to this institution, the method through which desegregation was designed to happen – enrolling children automatically – to the assigned a district school, actually managed to strengthen segregation in this case, as all Roma children from Őrkő end up being enrolled in this school, effectively stopping parents from being able to enlist their children in other more desegregated institutions of education in town. In the discourse of parents and pupils it is very evident right at the beginning that they have fully adopted the school as theirs and call it *'the gypsy school' ('a cigányiskola')*. This attitude allows for a certain sense of familiarity, adequately responding to the need of safety and dignity of a population that carries the least prestige of all ethnic groups.

As we stated above, education levels in this target group are very low and traditionally gendered – as in it is mostly men who were thought to need some type of formal education by the previous generation, while women were taught at home because they needed to learn first and foremost the tasks involved in housekeeping and childrearing – but whatever little education the parents of the currently enrolled children have, they had got it at this school. The traditional gendered view on the necessity of formal education is slowly starting to dwindle primarily in response to the transformation in the legislation (establishing minimum compulsory education as a prerequisite for employment) and the economy with more and more people recognising that families cannot survive on a traditional single-income model, therefore women also need to get engaged in more or less formal income generating activities. At present, children of all genders seem to be getting enrolled and sent to school, but the drop-out rate is very high and many of them do not manage to finish the mandatory 8 grades, the minimum requirement for formal education on the job market. Traditions like early marriage and childbirth still impact the community, especially in families where the parents also married at a young age, but this is also starting to be less prevalent than it used to. In adolescence young people are considered to be of marriageable age, which brings up a protective attempt of the young girls especially by keeping them around the house. As this starts happening around the age of 12-14, the girls' dropout rate is highest at this age effectively stopping them from obtaining the minimum educational requirement for

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[10] It is important to note that the Roma community of Őrkő is comprised of exclusively Hungarian speaking population. On the one hand this creates a sense of familiarity with the Hungarian ethnics that populate the city, while at the same time effectively creating distance from the Romanian speaking majority population. For the Roma, as a distinct ethnic group, spoken language is less relevant in designating lines of hierarchy and demarcation, as opposed to social stratification based on belonging to different subgroups related to original professions. For instance, the Gabor Roma are considered more affluent than the Caldarar Roma, while Corturar Roma are generally thought of to be one of the least prestigious positions. An in-depth analysis of how the different Roma subgroups of Hungarian and Romanian speaking Roma relate to each other would require a separate complex study and it would fill a great and immediate void, especially in the wake of the Roma identity movement and political organization. In the specific case of Őrkő it could be revelatory to study the position of brickmakers and horsebreeders in the ethnicity's social structures in order to assess what degree of loss of prestige does the impossibility of practicing these professions imply.

employment. Also partnering at a young age results in early pregnancy and childbirth which leads to the thwarting of girls' education. While the same conditions do not necessarily apply to young men and they are relatively free to continue their studies, the school dropout rates are very similar possibly influenced by several socio-economic and cultural factors (for e.g. a preference for money generating activities or taking on the role of an adult in their family).

Based on field observation one of the biggest disadvantages when it comes to school attendance is the fact that parents are unable to assist their children in their school work nor do they have a very strict policy around daily attendance. Local NGOs have programs that attempt to tackle this issue (e.g., group for homework, career counselling, direct assistance) but with moderate success, as it seems that path dependency in this area is notoriously hard to overcome from the outside.

One of the most interesting, recent developments is the fact that in certain interviews with more affluent or more schooled parents there is a critical discourse towards the local school. Parents are voicing an ambivalent opinion in which they really appreciate the familiarity and sense of belonging that the Néri Szent Fülöp provides but are dissatisfied with the level and quality of teaching. Based on previous experiences and examples from the community they know that their children will not be able to pursue their studies further if they graduate from this institution. This is the typology. It is an attitude mostly adopted by parents with above the average means and networks who can imagine taking their child to another school in order for him/her to get a better education. We believe that this is a great opportunity for the NGOs and the municipality to support and encourage as it will lead to decreased levels of segregation and better school performance if they can incorporate this already existing desire towards local policy development. Strengthening the discourse around encouraging students to study further after the 9th grade and offering a more robust program of direct assistance (shuttling the students to and from school, assistance with homework and a targeted awareness raising campaign in the schools) could prove to be exactly what is needed for a few parents to start sending their children to a desegregated school.

The Gödri Ferenc Middle School in the Csiki district is another state-owned institution that is subject to all national education policies, including the one about de-segregation. Located in an area with low-income families the school caters to the needs of the children of poor working-class families, of the Roma families living in the district, as well as the children living in the 137 social housing units. As a result of more affluent families that reside in the district succeeding to enlist their children into more prestigious institutions in the central part of the town, the Gödri Ferenc Middle School holds a high concentration of students of precarious means, a fact attested to by the school principal herself. This is also the school that runs the Second Chance (A Doua Șansă) program – an education program that is intended for both

children and adults who have not had the chance to finish 8 grades of mandatory education[11]. What is important to mention that both in the discourse of the pupils and that of the parents an appreciation for the extra efforts made by the school is palpable. It seems that Gödri Ferenc Middle School has accepted their role as the conjunction point of different marginalized populations and attempted to assist the parents and children by creating cheap afterschool programs that would fit the working parents' schedule, complete with school lunches and homework activities. In the discourse of our interviewees, the quality of the human resource, the teachers and school administrators has also been painted in favourable colours, even by the former students. A general attitude of good-will and understanding is permeating these stories. Even in the restrictive confines of the centralized system of education Gödri Ferenc Middle School has managed to provide specific assistance to struggling families in order to facilitate the daily attendance of children. What is more, they have a moderate success even in the adult education, with one of their former students being currently employed as a reliable maintenance man for the school. As for performance, academically speaking the results are below average, but the staff at the school counsels the students in a realistic manner as most of the ones who successfully graduate enroll into a vocational school of their choosing. The drop-out rate is still relatively high, but lower than in the Néri Szent Fülöp Middle School. The typology of the generic student in this area is highly independent children of parents working three shifts go to Gödri Ferenc from first grade to 8th grade, befriend the teachers and the administrators, participate at the after-school program, graduate with lower-than-average grades and go on to enroll in one of the vocational schools in town.

Our first example of intergenerational mobility comes from the segregated area of Őrkő and has just graduated 11 grades in a vocational school. She is one of the success stories of the local NGOs and one of the people with the highest educational levels in the community. Coming from a background of a traditional schooling pattern: mother – no schooling, father 8 grades – she admits that the biggest impact on her schooling had the mother's ambition to keep her in school. This is one of the first conversion factors CV that derailed her from the typology of her community. Admittedly, the mother's ambition is engendered by her own belonging to a family of folk musicians which is an indicator of prestige and wealth, as well as her own conviction about the absolute necessity of schooling. By moving her daughter from the Néri Szent Fülöp School in 5th grade to Varadi Jozsef School, the mother effectively interrupts the path-dependency proving that even if difficult, leaving the community school and transitioning to another serves as an important CV in the educational path of her children.

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[11] The Second Chance (A doua șansă (ADS) program aims at reducing the effects of marginalization and social exclusion through including children/youth/adults that have left the education system or have never enrolled in the first place. The program has been running under this name since 2005. Only one or two schools in each city are running this program with classes mostly in the evening. It is a welcome addition to the education system, as there were no other avenues to obtain an education for people that dropped out long ago. The graduation rate is quite modest e.g. in Covasna county as part of the REAL project, in 2021 there were 327 students enrolled in the program with only 68 having graduated at this time. (01 ian 2021- 31 dec 2023) https://www.edupedu.ro/aproximativ-600-persoane-din-harghita-si-covasna-care-au-abandonat-scoala-au-revenit-la-cursuri-printr-un-proiect-european-merg-la-scoala-parinti-si-copii-din-aceeasi-familie-sau-parinti-bunici-si/

By admitting to a particularly difficult transition in which she had to bear being mocked for at least the first 6 months, she points to the fact that the population of Sfantu Gheorghe may not be ready for the experience of desegregation. In the words of the daughter *'my mother was always picking fights with me not to stay at home'* on a schoolday or *'in grades 5 to 8 I had to go to school even if I was sick'* and admits that without her mother's encouragement she would have quit too. Thus in the case of education **parental ambition and consistency** becomes a highly impactful family conversion factor. It is probably also relevant that the mother married relatively late (20 yrs old)[12] and she is also the member of a neoprotestant church. Interestingly, we can see that churches with their own straightforward ethics could be better positioned to influence traditional lifestyle choices like early marriage and childbirth than any state institution or NGO, maybe even more likely to break path dependency. The changing of schools was a very difficult period and the school she attended grades 5 to 8 created more insecurities and unconfortable experiences than the one she started in 9th grade. Interestingly, children from rural areas are perceived as more similar than children from other areas of the city. In regards to the school experiences, it seems that **the quality of human interaction** features as another highly impactful institutional conversion factor, because she ends up enjoying the teaching of the courses related to the profession, even if this line of work wasn't her first choice and she perceived it as *'boyish'* at the beginning. A good teacher or educator has the capacity to act as a conversion factor in keeping children interested in school as she put it *'He was a very nice teacher'*. Another encouraging factor to break path dependency in this case is the homework group of the local NGO, which managed to offer the support needed with schoolwork that the parents were unable to provide. The quality of human interaction comes into play again as NGO workers were available even on the phone or on instant messaging for help. Thus school assistance programs are an important feature of the resource space which is able to fulfill its goal if the staff is friendly and approachable. It would be a misrepresentation to purport that the after-school programs depend only on one factor. Although freely available, children from the community are not storming to them, rather there is a consistent set returning regularly. There must be other individual and familial factors at play. Often friendships and good relationships formed between classmates have also a reassuring and supportive effect related to school attendance. *'It is very nice to remember those years. I have lots of beautiful memories. I still keep in touch with them.'* As far as opportunities for regular interaction are created, young people will form (especially in teenage years) strong bonds which will act like buffers against other types of hardships (emotional or academic). Therefore **peer support** can also be listed as both an individual and institutional conversion factor impacting school attendance. It is important to mention that adolescent bonding in this case contributed to keeping the girl in school, while in other contexts it could have contributed to totally different outcomes including pushing someone towards path dependency.

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[12] In this context 20-year-old to marry is considered to be quite late because partnering up is usually happening in adolescence 14-17 years of age.

The other example of intergenerational mobility comes from a working class family with three school-aged children. Both parents work in two shifts often even in the weekends and the children used to be left in the care of the grandmother. The mother appreciates the school her children attend and trustingly leaves them in their afterschool program. She is closely monitoring her children, for e.g. doesn't let them go alone to school until they are 12 years old, in spite of the fact that they only have to walk for less than 10 mins. The parents' educational background is 8 grades and qualification courses and the mother reveals that she was an average student that didn't want to pursue school because her family was poor and they needed the money. In this case parental ambition for the academic performance of their children is not so obvious as in the previous one, but the mother's attention and her endevour to attend to the needs of her children effectively furthered her son's ambition in regards to school. The Godri Ferenc Middle School has a policy of counselling children to choose high-schools or vocational schools based on their school peformance and the teacher's estimation of what a realistic choice would be. As he was one the best students of the school with outstanding academic results he was encouraged to enroll to one of the high-schools in town. He has just graduated high-shool at one of the most prestigious schools and is enrolled in a university in another city in Romania. Although a very clear example of intergenerational upward mobility, it was more difficult to pinpoint what conversion factors came into play to disrupt the oldest son's path dependency, especially that he attended the local Godri Ferenc Middle School. There are a few possibilities that can be put forward mainly related to **the quality of parenting,** which turned out to be attentive and nurturing enough without being overpowering and **the quality of human interaction**[13] in the school, as well as some individual qualities like **personal ambition**. In this case it seems like the difference is brought on more by an individual quality rather than family or institutional input, because the other two children of the same family do not present the same exceptional academic results. Admittedly, especially if we are to compare the two success stories, the process of the boy from the working class family was made easier by the fact that he passes as a member of the majority (Hungarian), while the girl is readily identified as Roma.. Another aspect to consider could be that upward mobility could be less difficult if there is some history to build on, in other words it is easier to continue studying if your parents graduated at least the mandatory 8 grades of education[14]. It would be a worthwhile object for further research.

In conclusion, the research has shown that, in marginalized communities, access to quality education is the exception rather than the norm and several conversion factors at all levels have to allign neatly in order to disrupt the great inertia of educational path dependency. The role of the family is crucial and no institution or NGO can substitute it, because as we have seen **parental ambition** or **quality parenting** are decisive factors when it comes to schooling. However both the schools and NGOs have important functions in offering support to the

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[13] In this case quality of human interaction refers to the fact that in this school he was celebrated for his academic performances. His teachers were cheering him on as the exceptional student.

[14] In the sample for this study there is a perceptible tendency towards children getting more education than their parents if they are already educated

parents in their childrens' education. Therefore, it is important for these organizations to offer the **after school programs** but there is an important caveat: the programs need to be staffed with friendly, accepting and understanding people who can **provide the quality of human interaction** without which the educational process is misguided and pointless. If coupled with some personal conversion factors like **ambition** then we have a powerful enough mix to overturn path dependency in education.

5.3.2 Working abroad: a solution or a trap?

One of the most painful demographic trends characteristic to this town is the outmigration of its youth. It is a highly significant process which has been ongoing for more than two decades now and which has resulted in the shrinking of the city's young population by more than 40%. Sfântu-Gheorghe experiences both internal and external migration of its youth. Internal migration is mostly happening when young people decide to pursue their studies in bigger cities in the country and decide to remain there after graduation. The destination of internal migration are prevalently Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca. Additionally, following the national trend, there is a high percentage of young people who grow up dreaming about working abroad and a considerable percentage of the people we interviewed have had this experience.

As described in the resource space attempts have been made at both national and local level to curb this trend of young people leaving, or at least to attract them home, but with little success. The local initiatives in this regard in Sfântu-Gheorghe show the municipality's concern about this issue, but the measures have failed to address the problems encountered by vulnerable communities and it is only catering to either highly educated or affluent members of its residents.

In the discourse of our interviewees working abroad gains an intriguing ambivalence that makes up the focus of this subchapter which tries to answer the question if working abroad is a solution or rather a trap as there are a multitude of experiences with both positive and negative. First, we are going to describe some of these experiences, followed by an analysis of the factors that determined if it was a successful and worthwhile experience or not and we will conclude with some possibilities for change.

The popular attitude toward working abroad, especially prevalent among the adolescents is one of aspiration. Working abroad is associated with wealth and prestige, a sure way to make enough money for upward mobility, but this perception gets modified when people actually go through the experience. Usually, they are first and foremost attracted by the money and agree to work even in strenuous conditions, because it is perceived as temporary. But on the longer term, as they repeat this experience they slowly realise that it has become their life and creates a powerful ambivalence because they become acutely aware of the price they are implicitly paying.

Once the border to the West opened, but especially after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 all categories of people from Romania looked for and found ways of engaging in income generating activities in the Western countries. In the case of Sfântu-Gheorghe, for the majority

of people this meant first trying their luck in Hungary, but eventually they moved further West to Austria, Germany and the UK in hopes of better payment. One of the most simplistic and least dignified methods for working abroad is the so-called '*gyulázás*' which is a made-up word that refers to a small group of people from the segregated community getting together and paying a fixed fee to somebody with a van to take them to several small villages in Austria. The van would serve as their accommodation too and the driver will ask for payment each night spent in the van. During the day, people were free to make income any way they wanted. Some of them went begging, some of them went from house to house in order to offer their help in the household. Some of them were more outgoing and luckier while others, by their own admission, suffered greatly from the undignified situation, feeling forced to return home by train. One trip would last about 2 to 3 weeks after which they returned in the same van. The amount of money they made this way varied a lot and sometimes it was barely enough to pay for the trip and the accommodation still there were/are people desperate enough to repeat the experience several times. There were no interviewees in our sample that had a direct experience with this, but most from Őrkő knew somebody who did. This way of working abroad is surrounded by shame especially when talking to people outside the community. It is still practiced as a way of emergency money-generating activity, probably influenced by factors like lack of financial planning skills and amassing debt coupled with reduced access to the local job market and a willingness to suffer on the short term for a few months of financial security.

Another hugely popular way of working abroad is seasonal work especially in agriculture. It seems like there is a slowly forming social strata in Romania who is spending about four months on a farm in Germany, Italy or Spain and then comes back home for the rest of the year. These experiences can be both positive and negative, depending on the working conditions. If exploitative, Romanians will be dissatisfied with the employment, but at least three of our interviewees managed to establish recurring job offers with the same employer and return regularly for the same type of job. Often this arrangement is made by the men, leaving their partners and children behind sometimes for months on end. Their families practically live off the remittances these workers send home. Even if they are satisfied with the agreement, the price they feel they are paying, especially if it is a long-term activity is often emotionally crippling. In the words of one of them '*I feel like my own children don't know me*'. The main reason for accepting and staying in this situation is the fact that in a few months people make enough money to not be constrained to work the rest of the year. In time a significant part of agricultural work becomes official, i.e. they will sign a contract, esp. if they are repeatedly returning to the same employer. While in Romania, they rather invest their time and money in spending time with their family or renovating their house. Some of them perceive this activity as putting money aside for a big project (like building or buying your own house) and this approach feels more efficient especially when compared to the dead-end subsistence of working for minimum wage in Romania.

Understandably, there are more balanced versions of this story as well. For example, for women who go abroad to take care of elderly people and their households, the perception of success

mainly depends on the work environment of that particular job, i.e. if the family is supportive and understanding, if the elderly person is agreeable and there isn't a lot of heavy lifting involved. Domestic workers and care-takers usually work in a rotation of two by switching each month. This way they get to spend a month at home and a month abroad managing a delicate and exhausting balance between home and work. For this type of employment people usually do not go further than Hungary or Austria as it would be uncomfortable and expensive to travel so much each month. One of our interviewees met an Austrian family during a short emergency money-making trip and the relationship worked out so well that he has been officially registered and working there for the past 5 years, occasionally visiting, but regularly sending money home and bettering his living conditions substantially. He is also taking German lessons paid for by his employers. He admits to missing his family but is understandably proud of his accomplishment and doesn't know when he will come home indefinitely. He is not planning on moving with his family abroad. This type of ambivalence is characteristic of people when disclosing about their working abroad experiences. For members of the Roma community access to a job that pays so well has been completely inexistent previously. For members of other ethnic groups (Hungarian) can be coupled with some type of scheme to increase stability at home like early retirement, retirement for health reasons – greatly contributing to the corruption surrounding it – as well as a particular familial situation that requires their presence (the birth of a grandchild, taking care of family members in rotation etc.)

Working abroad can also be more formalized. For example, in our cohort of respondents we have people who have been officially employed in the host country (Hungary and the UK) and for a while this was their only income generating activity. They visited as often as they could and spent their time devising plans to bring the family together. It is frequent in this group that fathers usually return indefinitely when there is a new child or they decide to settle down and start a family of their own.

The highest degree of assimilation into the society of the host country happens when young people find such reliable employment that they decide to bring their families with them too. These people are practically living in the host country, but their connection to their country of origin gets expressed through the fact that they spend every single day of their summer vacation in Romania with relatives. From this perspective their ambivalence makes sense and keeps them in the emotional limbo of not fully integrating in the host country while also intensely investing in keeping up their relationship with the country of origin.

If we are to look for conversion factors in these specific circumstances there would be high levels of variation. At the individual level, more **resilient and outgoing** people seem to have less difficulty in overcoming the discomforts of adjustment to new conditions at the beginning. At the level of the family, **previous modelling by the parents** almost always results in children following in their footsteps. More interesting would be to think about the mezo level conversion factors, the institutional ones that account for people's decision to engage in working abroad. The improvised trips like '*gyulázás*' are happening because people's perceived

opportunity is that this is the only way that unqualified people can work abroad. The lack of information about low-skilled seasonal jobs abroad for example gives ample opportunity both to occasionally unscrupulous intermediary agencies and for people to take matters into their own hands. **Lack of information about jobs abroad** puts people at potential risks and it can be identified as an institutional conversion factor.[15] **Networking, or peer support** on the other hand is also a conversion factor that allows people to be more confident in taking up jobs in other countries. The conditions of the work environment and the quality of human interaction plays an important role as well, but they are extremely difficult to control from Romania. Another mezo level conversion factor for working abroad is the **low level of the wages** people from marginalized communities (low-skilled, poorly educated) have access to here in the country. If income inequality could be lessened fewer people would be motivated to leave the country.

In conclusion our respondents' ambivalent attitude towards working abroad is justified. On the one hand it offers some, often temporary solutions to poverty, but it frequently creates other potentially serious emotional and health impacting issues. The category that is benefitting the most from working abroad is made of people without families, the one who manage a careful, albeit exhausting work-life balance or the ones that practically live in the host country. It is obvious that if these people would find dignified and sustainable employment in the region most of them would not want to leave.

5.3.3 Housing inclusion or who has access to resources

The housing situation in the city of Sfântu-Gheorghe is at present registering one of its most impactful reorganization moment, occasioned by the municipality's decision to demolish some of the makeshift houses in the upper end of the Őrkő community and build new, better quality social housing units instead. The level of complexity and upheaval it involves is fraught with high emotion almost at all levels of Sfântu-Gheorghe residents. The aim of the municipality and the Sepsi Local Action Group Association (GAL Sepsi) is to better the living conditions of the most disadvantaged Roma community in town. There are, however several unsolved/ unsolvable conundrums that this initiative engenders. In what follows we will present some of the effects that the municipality's decision has had on different groups and we will try to identify the conversion factors that allowed them to happen from the perspective of the respondents interviewed in this research.

Given the housing situation in Sfântu-Gheorghe, which is not markedly different from other similar localities in Romania, characterized by high prices of real-estate, very low rate of

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[15] There are of course more regulated ways of finding employment abroad. One can turn to the National Employment Agency that manages EURES, an online aggregate of employment facilitation abroad dedicated to Romanian citizens. Alternatively, private companies can recruit worforce for different companies abroad, but corruption and exploitation are frequent occurences. In our sample people trusted more the information gathered through informal channels (peers or family) than anything official. Also in our sample of interviewees it is glaringly clear that the outreach of the National Employment Agency is very limited. There were only 2 persons that have had any experience with this institution, with most not being aware of the services they offer.

publicly owned property as well as low expenditure in this field, most people of low socio-economic status struggle to get or keep a stable roof over their families' heads.

The plan is the following: to demolish a handful of houses situated in the upper end of the Őrkő community and build 5o social houses instead full with amenities (water, heating system and electricity) and a community center and rent them out to the families from the Őrkő community, including those whose homes have been demolished. For the community members, but especially for the people directly affected, it has become clear how vulnerable they are to political decision- making if they don't own their houses officially. The segregated Roma community of Őrkő is an informal settlement that has formed through decades of erecting/improvising dwellings at the edge of the city on a plot that is partially owned by the municipality, by the army and a few private ownerships. Given that this process has been going on unencumbered for a relatively long time the community grew in size - around 2ooo people at present – that live in illegally built, undocumented constructions (no construction permit, total lack of ownership documents). Informal settlements like this face a conundrum of disadvantages for e.g. no official addresses exist, because these contructions have never been included in the official urban planning of the city, creates a serious problem when issuing identity papers for the members of the community – in Romania, identity documents are conditioned by a place of residence, the impossibility of signing contracts with electricity providers or the local utility infrastucture has led to the creation and maintenance of appaling living conditions. The municipality is facing a very complex social issue and will have to navigate a convoluted entaglement of factors in order to bring clarity to the legal status of these buildings.

One of our young respondent's families has recently (less than a year) paid for the house they are living in by selling all the horses the husband owned and even asking for a loan from one of their relatives. Given the fact that the buildings in this area are undocumented, the purchase itself was not official, nevertheless, for the people involved it had concrete, real-life consequences. Their house will be demolished even before they manage to pay back their debt. Understandably, they were adamant that this is a bad decision and did not want to give up their house. Living in an informal settlement has determined people to behave as if they had ownership rights on their houses, especially that some of them would be sold for about 10000 Euro, much cheaper than in other parts of town[16], but still a considerable amount of money for the members of the community. Being able to spend 10000 Euros on a house in Őrkő would in theory make it financially possible for them to move into the city and rent a flat on the free market for about 150 Euros/month one bedroom, 200/300 Euros for two bedrooms. However, there is a multiplicity of factors that contribute to upholding the status quo. On the one hand most of the members of the Roma community do not have a stable income, but live off very little social welfare benefits. In our study there is evidence that social benefits like Guaranteed Minimum Income (welfare) are not enough to pay for the monthly expenses incurred by a social housing unit, let alone cover other needs. In practical terms, the

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[16] A two-bedroom apartment of about 5o m2 in a better area of the city costs around 7oooo Euros.

only way to survive on social benefits is to live somewhere where the costs of living are reduced to a minimum. As people in Őrkő don't have utilities of any kind, except electricity for a few, makes them into the perfect recipient of social welfare benefits, while at the same time it actively prevents them from contract-based employment (just one person from a family of 6 getting employed would make the whole family loose their eligibility for welfare benefits.) The only place in the city where one can survive on welfare for a longer period of time is the informal settlement. In this manner the eligibility criteria and the distribution of **social welfare benefits** in this context become an institutional conversion factor that effectively stops people from attempting upward mobility through housing desegregation. The other important consideration discouraging change is **a way of life based on farm animals**, which are an important resource for many members of the community in Őrkő. Horses are bred both for trading, workforce, as well as important symbols for relative wealth and affluence. But there are also pigs, chickens, goats etc., that contribute to the sustainability of their lives. The type of rental housing available on the free market would not be appropriate for these types of activities and because they don't perceive having any other opportunities in the resource space for making a living, they are not ready to give them up. This way of life, at the same time, could also be identified as a mezo-level (community) conversion factor preventing the members of the community from attempting change.The last important factor that pushes the members of the Roma community to continue to live in the segregated area is one connected to **community, familial ties and belonging** as individual conversion factors. There is a very strong sense of community and familial relations are very active in Őrkő. Living together as a marginalized group confers a sense of safety and security to its members. Concerted with the social difference, misunderstanding, fear and discriminatory behaviour of the majority Hungarian population, the Roma from Őrkő are apprehensive and are being effectively deterred from moving to a desegregated area where they could have more opportunities.

Based on the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapters it seems like upward mobility which means breaking out of the segregated area is more readily starting to happen through educational mobility and growing potential for earning income/employability mostly abroad. Moving into desegregated housing seems to be conditioned by the improvements of these other areas.

For the period of the construction 35 families will be moved to different parts of the city and even to the countryside – each of them has been counselled and has had an individual needs assessment in order to find the most adequate temporary housing solution for each[17]. The

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[17] In the Romanian system of social protection there are two types of housing solutions. The first is social housing, which is thought of as a longer term, but temporary solution for the precarious housing situation of vulnerable families. The other is the so-called housing of necessity (locuință de necesitate), which is a short-term housing solution offered to families in crisis (domestic violence, natural calamity, demolition). The contracts are usually 6 months to 1 year long with a possibility to renew. According to the law, people can stay in these units of necessity housing as long as the crisis persists, therefore if the municipality decides to give the opportunity to the families to remain in the desegregated areas and not return to Őrkő, they would have to officially modify the legal status of the dwellings from necessity housing to social housing.

professionals involved were dedicated and well-intentioned, but there were situations that pointed out the inadequacies of the social protection system. For example, one of the unintended, but logistically necessary consequences was the separation of multigenerational families with some very young mothers required to take on more responsibilities than they used to previously, which created additional hardships in managing this change, even if the family consented to live separately from the father's family.

One of the questions complicating the conceptualization of this endeavour is whether the strengthening of the infrastructure and housing conditions in Őrkő will have a desegregating effect or the opposite. Although it makes logical sense that the new houses will be occupied by the old residents of the area the fact that the new social housing units will only be available to the Roma from Őrkő is creating the impression that it is contributing to the further segregation of the community, while also carrying the risk of higher monthly expenses with the utilities, which may exceed the families' budgets. On the other hand, the fact that these families are being moved to different parts of the city and countryside for a longer period of time may give them the opportunity to establish connections and networks outside the community which can be one of the conversion factors for upward mobility. As these are very recent developments, we cannot ascertain at this point the advantages and the challenges of this solution. However, the profile of the 35 families in this situation varies greatly. There are families that welcome the opportunity to live outside Őrkő, while others, especially the ones with livestock (horses) are very resistant to the idea of giving them up.

Another consideration that our respondents were preoccupied with was the issue of the sustainability of the new houses. They like the idea of having heating and running water and electricity in their homes, but were legitimately scared that this will involve an increase in expenditure of the houses. They were unsure that their present income will be able to cover all the utilities and the rent, especially that some of them are part of what we called the category of people living off of subsistence social benefits, barely being able to make end meet with far fewer expenses in the present.

For the segregated Roma community in Őrkő, this transformation is a major change in their lives, for some of them a major crisis that is eloquently pointing out their extreme vulnerability and the limits of their rights which can create the experience of helplessness and further vulnerability.

While the members of the Őrkő community are genuinely afraid that their houses and their savings could easily disappear one day, the other marginalized communities, like the one of the residents in the Csiki district resent the fact that the municipality is prioritizing spending resources on the Roma community from Őrkő, and resort to prejudiced and racist remarks to explain their point of view. In the words of one of the respondents: [The municipality] '*should be helping those who are working! They are paying the Gypsies from our taxes, but people who have regular jobs and barely make enough money to avoid going into debt are crushed and trampled upon.*' Setting up employment or education as the more moral position is one of the most popular ways of discrimination against the Roma. While failing to understand the

structural reasons for low education and employment levels in the Roma population this attitude also constructs a false dichotomy presenting the two vulnerable populations (the members of the Őrkő community and the poor working-class residents of the Csiki district as competing for the same resources.

The other vulnerable category that we studied for the purposes of this research comprises the tenants of the social housing units. They are even more directly impacted by the municipality's plan in Őrkő, as many of them have familial ties to the community. The biggest fear of people living in the social houses is that they are going to lose their unit and the possibility of even more families who could possibly fit the eligibility criteria even better is an added stress, especially if the family has incurred debts and finds itself in the vicious circle of constantly growing debt. There are many regulations and a considerable amount of paperwork that need to be renewed every year to prove to the administration that the beneficiaries of the social housing units still qualify for housing support. Our respondents felt that now they will be strictly examined from this point of view because this is the only way the administration can stop renting out the social housing units to them. The phenomenon of getting stuck in social housing is a very real one, as none of the respondents had any alternative accommodation in case they had to leave the social housing units. There is a general sense of instability as social housing feels less safe than before. Consequently, we could say that the municipality's decision has had a ripple effect upon all the marginalized communities in the city which can give way to social conflict if it remains unaddressed.

Another important consideration that we feel has to be confronted is the fact that there is barely any overlap in the living conditions of the segregated Roma community and the other marginalized communities in the town of Sfântu-Gheorghe. As mentioned in the chapter about outcomes, the Roma face multiple disadvantages that are not characteristic of other marginalized communities and their situation is hardly comparable to anything the present research is covering. Therefore, we feel that this population should have a separate framework of analysis, that doesn't force unequitable comparisons upon different marginalized communities. Through these comparisons that are made throughout, the members of the Roma community are inadvertently made to be the winners of 'the vulnerability competition' which is setting them up as targets of resentment and unfair expectations. Both the municipality, the researchers, the policy makers and the implementers have to find a way to be able to talk about the multiple disadvantages (both ethnic and language barriers) that these people face without creating the impression that they are the only ones deserving of social support services. The other marginalized populations of the city should be reassured both discursively and in practice that their needs are also tended to.

In terms of mezo-level conversion factors that contribute to the present situation and the resentment that different communities feel against the members of the segregated community, the most relevant are: the **inadequate living conditions** of the residents of the Csiki negyed and the **instability of housing** for the people living as tenants of social housing. The fact that the municipality is investing in constructing well equipped homes for the Roma

has stirred powerful emotions in all the residents that are unhappy or dream about better accommodations for themselves. As for individual conversion factors these are mostly connected to the level individuals sign up to **believe in the racist and discriminatory discourses** in society against the Roma.

In this chapter we have presented a detailed analysis of the outcomes, resource space and conversion factors that allow/determine young people to make certain choices in the municipality of Sfântu-Gheorghe. As the issue of why a certain decision is made is showing heightened levels of complexity and is under the influence of numerous macro mezo and micro level factors we have selected three of the most actual and impactful processes that we observed in the field and attempted to explain them through the perspective of our respondents. Taking an aggregate view on typology of conversion factors that we identified it is revealed that interpersonal or 'soft' conversion factors related to emotional well-being like encouragement from a parent or peer support or quality human interactions at work or at school have a significant impact on an individual's decision-making process. This is not to say that other more structural, logistic type of conversion factors do not play into the decision-making process but, surprisingly enough the soft conversion factors can act like buffers to mediate the negative effect of structural disadvantages. Based on these findings, in the next chapter we will present a few ideas regarding some of the issues that could be improved locally in the confines of the systems already at work in this region.

6 Discussion points for (a potential) Reflexive Policy Agenda in Sfântu-Gheorghe

The previous chapter revealed that to give an explanation of the choices an individual makes in the course of their lives is a very complex and nuanced endeavour. Based on the 40 interviews and the expert interviews we conducted, we identified the relevant turning points that influenced our respondents' decision-making processes in three different areas impacting their lives, i.e., path-dependency in education, working abroad and housing inclusion. We selected these three because, on the one hand, they permeated as crucial processes during the mezo-level analysis in the Urban Report, and, on the other hand, they present realistic possibilities for a Reflexive Policy Agenda. The ideas for improving the conditions of marginalised populations through micro-level local policy making within the confines of an - often inadequate - system are presented in this chapter.

The field of education is probably the most restrictive domain of all three, so, unfortunately, there is little room for manoeuvre that local institutions can implement in order to strengthen their role in the children's education:

1. It is clear from the data that school-children greatly benefit from parents and schools (teachers and administrators) developing a reliable, mutually collaborative relationship. To this end, maintaining a close relationship with the parents is crucial and the goal should be to assist parents and strengthen them in their role to be able to offer good quality parenting to their children.

2. It is very important to have friendly, understanding and competent staff that can be role-model educators for youth as it is revealed through the interviews that it is one of the most powerful mediating factors of hardships. This could be accomplished by relevant and insightful trainings offered to teachers, especially in the area of conflict management, group dynamics of inclusion and bullying. Another idea is to strengthen the school's collaboration with NGOs in order to have alternative human resources that could be engaged in the less regulated activities of the after-school program.

3. A city-wide volunteering program could be created in the community focusing on the schools that take a central role in tending to vulnerable populations. (e.g. mentoring by older children in a buddy system, cleaning and maintaining the school grounds, accompanying children in field trips, etc). This would strengthen the networking capacities of everyone involved and it will potentially lead to better mutual understanding as well as relief some of the teachers' burden.

4. Develop as cheap as possible after-school program in the school that fits the parents' schedule. Consult with the parents when developing it to understand the most urgent needs and ascertain their financial capabilities. The program should include lunch and tackling homework, because in many of these families help with homework is very

difficult to obtain. The municipality could offer financial support in organizing the after-school programs focusing on the schools with the most disadvantaged students.

5. Collaborating with different NGOs for services can always enrich and better motivate students, especially if the school staff is already stretched thin. A stronger network between education providing organizations should make the service provision more effectively targeted. Workshops and trainings about emotional intelligence and communication skills would benefit all stakeholders involved (children, parents, teachers).

6. Take measures to build a strong student community through social and cultural events and other bonding possibilities. Strong peer-to peer relationships are vital especially in the teenage years and greatly contribute to successful school attendance. These activities could be initiated by the schools themselves, but, ideally, they would be outsourced to NGOs or volunteers so as to lighten the workload of the educators.

In the field of employment, we have chosen to discuss the phenomenon of outmigration for work and school of a significant proportion of the city's youth. More specifically we described the different ways our respondents have chosen to engage in income generating activities in other countries and although usually coveted as the ultimate solution, ultimately it becomes regarded with ambivalent feelings. Being a highly centralized domain there isn't much wiggle room for local authorities to curb the trend, but they could contribute to making it safer.

1. Both the Local Employment Agency and the municipality could devise information campaigns to inform people about the dangers and opportunities of working abroad, making sure to present solutions even for low-skilled or unqualified people. This campaign would strengthen the outreach of the Employment Agency as well as the access to information of the population.

2. Facilitate the finding of jobs abroad, develop relationships with employment agencies and social service providers in the most popular regions the residents of Sfântu-Gheorghe visit for work.

3. Train the staff of the Local Employment Agency to be able to be receptive to and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable, especially in the context of final examinations of accredited trainings.

4. Develop job qualification courses on the basis of the needs of the local labour market as well as in consultation with the potential beneficiaries and in collaboration with local employers.

5. Support networking and peer-support by organizing experience sharing events when workers with experience can genuinely describe what is it like to work in a certain industry. It could be developed further into immersive experiences by offering job-shadowing opportunities for 1-2 days.

6. As the central impact on the decision to work abroad is due to the low-level wages available to low skilled populations in the city, devise a plan to subsidise their employment for greater job satisfaction in order to keep them in the city. The incentives

at the national level are not effective enough, they should be complemented by local strategies.

The municipality of Sfântu-Gheorghe is already deeply involved in the field of housing, by taking on the project of building better housing units for the residents of the Őrkő community. Some suggestions for building stability around the local housing system include:

1. Devise a communication campaign that is able to address at the same time all marginalised communities, so the Roma don't have to endlessly stand out as the poster-child of vulnerability. This should be supported by concrete measures that specifically target other marginalised groups in the city. However, a most important first step is to admit and bring into discussion the tension that exists in this area.

2. Tend to the social tensions created by the apparently unequal distribution of resources by creating small social events for e.g., a series of community conversations for the inhabitants of the city. Offer the opportunity for people from different types of marginalised areas to come together and present their situation in order to elicit understanding and sympathy from other groups. Strive to show the human side of the local authorities by including the perspectives of different departments of the local administration involved in the housing project. Involve the NGOs in the organization of the talks and include their perspective as well.

3. Devise a program/project that offers incentives for people who renovate their houses or introduce centralized heating. Prioritize low-income families.

4. In order to strengthen the stability and security in the social housing units calculate rent according to the income level of the beneficiaries with particular care to the ones living on Minimum Guaranteed Income; cancel the penalties for being late with payment, reconsider if the 40 RON/per capita introduced 3 years ago is necessary to be paid even for children.

These are a few suggestions in the direction of the development of a Reflexive Policy. Agenda, based on the 40 interviews and expert interviews we conducted in the period September 2021 -October 2022. These will constitute a guideline for the bilingual Policy Brief which will be sent to the relevant institutions and policy makers.