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Long-term Family Support

A Church-based Integration Programme in Rural Hungary

Abstract

East Central European rural areas face diverse challenges of social transformation: rural exodus, ageing, poverty and segregation take effect on countryside as parallel phenomena. Problems are connected with the transformation of agriculture, with the lack of services and the negative trends of migration. In spite of several supportive governmental and EU-projects, lower level of rural life standard and deepening social gaps are existing and deepening problems in post-socialist countries.

”Emerging Settlements” Programme is a new, long-term social programme of Hungarian government targeting the support of families and help children „from conception to labour market”. This unique project is implemented by church-based organizations in the most underdeveloped 300 Hungarian settlements. This paper aims to describe the main elements of proceeding programme on the base of project documentation and interviews with co-working social experts. Based on local experiments we highlight some critical viewpoints for developing supporting interventions, displaying the meaning of social participation of church organizations.

Keywords: Hungarian countryside, rural families, social integration.

Introduction

The rural areas of Hungary remote from urban centres have become gathering places for disadvantaged groups as a result of the migration trends of recent decades. Under-education, persistent unemployment, poor income situation

and inadequate housing conditions are linked to the dominant presence of the Roma population, mostly in small rural border areas and in the inner enclaves that have not been economically developed. Exiting poverty is also made more difficult by patterns of behaviour transmitted within the family and shaped by external circumstances. Social inclusion requires external support and the development of degraded self-help skills.

Several governmental and EU programmes are supporting the development of rural areas in transition, most notably the Emerging Settlements Programme, which is broad-based and long-term development project in Hungary. The programme offers complex activities and interventions on family support implemented by faith-based organizations and church-based institutions. In this paper, after outlining the processes that determine the fate of marginalised rural areas, the individual elements and components of the programme are presented, mainly on the basis of the project documentation. According the governmental plans, 3% percent of Hungarian society will be connected to this integration programme until the end of 2025. The second part of the paper contains critical observations on the implementation of the programme as a short evaluation of the processing project. The aspects presented here are based on interviews with social workers and professionals working on the development programme.

1. Social problems in Hungarian rural countryside

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, rural poverty deepened after the dismantling of socialist regimes. In the background, we find problems related to the restructuring of the economy, the transformation of urban-rural relations and the region's becoming a semi-periphery of the world economy (Macours and Swinnen, 2008, Kovách, 2022, pp. 52–58). In most states in the region, poverty is linked to the segregation, deprivation, segregation and disadvantaged labour market situation of the undereducated Roma population (Virág and Váradi, 2018). Poverty has become a transgenerational phenomenon in the most deprived rural areas, where territorial and social exclusion undermine the chances of social integration. There are forms of criminality that exploit vulnerability (e.g. usury, prostitution, etc.), high levels of poverty among families with children, and inherited family patterns are unable to promote social mobility (Szalai and Zentai, 2014).

In the case of Hungary, the most disadvantaged rural areas are small rural border zones, which follow the borderlines with Eastern Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania and Croatia. Even at the end of the 19th century, these small villages

were unable to provide adequate living conditions for their inhabitants, and in many cases were deprived of their market and livelihood centres by the border demarcation after World War I (Pénzes, 2020). These areas were also excluded from the development of the socialist period and from the job-creation investments of the post-regime change period. Unemployment became particularly widespread with the disintegration of producer cooperatives and state farms. The deepest crisis is threatening regions without developed centres (Virág 2010). The fragmented local government structure that emerged after 1990 has both fostered the spread of democratic values and made it difficult to organise public services and institutions in a logical order (Swianiewicz, 2021). Negative migration trends of varying intensity – outward migration of the educated and young, inward migration of lower status groups – result in the erosion and distortion of the structure of local societies (Ragadics, 2020). In Hungary, the share of low labour-intensive rural households has decreased compared to the middle of the 2000s, mainly due to government public employment programmes. However, the proportion of households experiencing severe material deprivation has continued to increase, with only Bulgaria, Greece and Romania showing worse rates. Hungary's deprivation index (12%) is above the average for post-socialist countries (9.9%); the EU average (5.4%) is more than double (Kovács, 2022, pp. 18–20).

In marginalised rural areas with poor transport links, property is hard to sell and there is a high proportion of empty houses. Properties owned by elderly people who have moved away or died change hands at low prices, sometimes ending up in the hands of the municipality or a local entrepreneur. Local farmers prefer houses with larger gardens that can be ploughed up with their own land. Municipalities also use the uncultivated plots for their agricultural land programmes; the houses purchased can also be used as social rental housing in the municipalities. The motivation for the purchase may also be to prevent the disadvantaged from moving in further. For poor families, poor housing in deprived areas is one of the negative spirals that prevent them from escaping poverty, due to high utility costs, sales difficulties and indebtedness. Winter heating is a heavy financial burden for people living there, which is difficult to bear without external support (comp. Bajomi *et al.*, 2022).

2. Programmes for rural integration in Hungary

The following is a description of complex programmes aimed at improving the quality of life of the rural population. The following government projects,

which have been implemented with a significant share of EU funding, have helped to address the problems of disadvantaged rural populations in a number of areas, but further action is needed to improve the situation of families living in deprived areas and to promote the social integration of marginalized rural groups. A best-known EU initiative to help rural areas catch up and activate the rural economy is LEADER. Acronym comes from the French meaning of “links between the rural economy and development actions.” (Europa.eu, 2023). It is a programme based on initiatives by rural communities and businesses, supporting positive impulses from the grassroots. In lagging, disadvantaged areas, we have seen few successful territorial networks and initiatives (Hungarian National Rural Network, 2023).

Public intervention is of particular importance in tackling the problems of deprived rural areas. By the 2010s, Hungary had implemented one of the most massively mobilising workfare-type public employment schemes. Public employment in Hungary combines work for community purposes with poverty alleviation and entitlement to social benefits. In the middle of the 2010s, more than 200 000 people were working in public employment annually. The rural exposure of the structure is shown by the fact that 30% of those employed in agriculture were in public employment (Szóke, 2015, Gerő and Vignári, 2019). The public employment system is not functional, mainly because of the low income it generates, and it does not help people to enter the primary labour market. By the end of the 2010s, the share of public employment had declined, but then started to increase again in the context of the epidemic situation. The scheme remains of great importance for the under-educated population in small towns with poor transport conditions, especially for workers in poor health and mothers with several children (Ragadics, 2020). Housing is linked to poverty in many areas. In times of crisis, finding adequate housing is a major challenge for new generations, especially in states where home ownership is a fundamental goal. „More than two-thirds of the population of the EU-27 lives in owner-occupied housing, in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia more than 90% lives in owner-occupied housing; with Germany on the other end of the spectrum with only half of the population” (Bolt and Czirfusz, 2022).

Tackling the housing situation, supporting the purchase of new properties and the extension and renovation of old ones have been a priority in recent government programmes. Since 2015, the Family Housing Allowance has been supporting families with children to achieve their housing goals through soft loans and non-repayable grants. A special form of assistance has been developed for rural families, supporting access to housing in villages far from urban centres (comp. National policies). Many old farmhouses, built before the Second World

War, are now in a dilapidated state. The number of beneficiaries of government funds for home renovation and purchase is typically low. Many lack the necessary conditions (continuous social security linked to long-term employment, lack of public debt), the necessary self-sufficiency and creditworthiness. The fate of municipalities with mainly low-value housing is therefore linked to segregation and social exclusion. This trend also defines the specific group of property buyers. The housing situation itself is a complex problem for development programme staff in disadvantaged villages. The solution is also complex, and in addition to regenerating the physical environment, it involves empowering individuals and families to take care of themselves, and proactive planning and management (Bajomi *et al.*, 2022).

The Child Poverty Programme Office and the Children's Hope Programme were established in 2005 to support the integration of children from disadvantaged areas and poor backgrounds, providing complex development for disadvantaged young children in small settlements in rural Hungary with a lack of institutions. The "Sure Start Children's Houses", which were opened in villages, provided early childhood development, play activities, holistic lifestyle education, school drop-out prevention programmes and career guidance events (Bauer, Husz and Szontágh, 2015). The programme has been adapted and relaunched several times due to changes in the resources available and policy concepts. The professional experience gained and the development objectives elaborated by the project are highlighted in the rural development activities of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, which has been involved in the programme since 2010.

The Unlimited Possibilities programme, funded by the European Union, provided support to families in 5 disadvantaged areas of the country for several years between 2017 and 2022. Caritas Hungarica, Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, Hungarian Interchurch Aid, Hungarian Reformed Church Aid, Hungarian Baptist Aid. The aim of the programme was to reduce the exclusion of families living in segregated settlements through counselling, rehabilitation, programme and community organisation. Linking existing services and strengthening the accessibility of assistance was a priority (Caritas Hungarica, 2023).

3. Emerging Settlements Programme in Hungary

In 2019, the Emerging Settlements Programme was launched to help the 300 poorest Hungarian small settlements with 300 000 inhabitants in social integra-

tion. The Hungarian government committed to implement a long-term integration strategy, which was entrusted to the organisations of the historic churches, coordinated by the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (HCSOM = Hungarian Central Statistic Office, 2022). The methodological support role of HCSOM was based on its decades of active charity work and the fact that the “Presence method” developed by HCSOM served for methodological basement of the 300 programmes in small communities. Executive vice-president of the HCSOM became a Prime Minister’s commissioner in charge of the “Emerging Settlements” programme.

The “Presence method”, which was the basis of the programme, aims to help people living in slums to catch up; it was awarded the Hungarian Heritage Grand Prize in 2016. A key element of the programme is that the organisation’s staff move into a building in a segregated, run-down neighbourhood, and through their accessibility they form a bridge between the disadvantaged residents and the mainstream society. By gradually renovating and refurbishing the property, the organisation is setting an example, while at the same time creating a local framework that provides opportunities for effective community work according to the needs of people living there. A playroom, a laundry room and a community space will be created in the purchased property, while social workers will be in contact with people living there, responding to their immediate needs and problems. They also involve local people who can serve as realistic role models for the local population, especially young people. Developmental play with younger children, learning and tutoring to support school progress and prevent school drop-outs are also an important part of the programme. Social workers help adults with day-to-day matters and administrative tasks. They organise programmes, celebrations and community events, bringing together motivated members of the community in crisis. In addition to small donations and targeted support, the “Presence Method” is all about inclusion, bringing excluded families into the mainstream society. The facilitators channel in support from the outside world try to support the people and families living here to venture out into the world beyond the walls of the ghetto. These steps are designed to help adult family members find work and improve their housing conditions (Leaving nobody behind).

The programme, which will start in 2019, is unique in the history of social care in Hungary in several respects (comp. Kapcsos könyv; 2023):

1. The villages participating in the programme are among the most disadvantaged in Hungary in terms of socio-economic indicators: high unemployment, lack of local services, high proportion of Roma families, low educational attainment of the population and high proportion of people receiving child protection benefits.

2. Various church organisations, associations and foundations are involved in the upgrading of rural settlements, building on the social embeddedness of religious communities.
3. The programme is unusually long-term, supporting children from disadvantaged families from the conception to the labour market.
4. Families with children are a priority target group of the programme. Its main objective is to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty, under-skilling and unemployment.
5. There is no central development programme, as each municipality plans the necessary steps to catch up on the basis of an individual diagnosis. The adoption of effective programme elements and good practices that work in several places does not preclude the need for individual case management.

The centres of outreach work are the so-called Presence Points. These buildings, often empty and in poor condition, are bought and renovated under the programme. These houses are used as community and information spots, children's activities areas and clubs, counselling offices, development activities and training in disadvantaged small communities. Work started in 31 municipalities in 2019 and continued, with some limitations, during the pandemic period, with the programme to be completed in all 300 municipalities by 2025. At present (2023), 118 municipalities have a Presence Points with playing rooms and more than 23,000 families in need are reached. As part of the programme's practice, local facilitators will be involved in each village to ensure stronger embeddedness, reaching out to the people and families living there.

Emerging settlements on the map (Figure 1.) densify in the marginalized border areas of Hungary. These are the most underdeveloped regions of the country with problematic demographic structure and a low level of economic productivity.

“Emerging Settlements Programme” works through a combination of several packages of measures, according to the needs of the settlement. These packages can be combined, but can also be applied individually to alleviate the situation of families living in poverty. This chapter is an outline of the programme elements (comp. Emerging Settlements).

The Focus on the Child programme follows the first 1,000 days of a new-born baby, providing the necessary support to the expectant family and later to the new-born and its environment. Involving midwives and family mentors, they support the mother during pregnancy, ensuring appropriate housing conditions (debt settlement, heating modernisation, etc.) and raising the health awareness

Figure 1. Emerging settlements in Hungary (resource: www.fete.hu)

of the mother-to-be. Drug prevention and victim support are often part of the work. In the case of young children, particular emphasis is placed on promoting physical activity and creating a stimulating environment for development.

The outreach workers run “mobile playgrounds” (bouncy castles and other toys), which are transported by minibus and are not only a fun experience for children in villages with poor infrastructure, but also provide an opportunity for social workers to meet parents. The discussions during the developmental play sessions reveal the problems and needs of families with children and outline a framework for supportive cooperation.

Under the educational component, the support workers support the children’s school progress with the help of teachers. Tutoring, alternative learning methods, excursions and development activities help to prevent school drop-outs and promote successful careers in the labour market. The work involves introducing children to successful people from local and regional backgrounds who have emerged from segregated living conditions through learning and hard work, or who started their careers in a disadvantaged Roma family. In the pandemic period, staff at the Points of Presence helped children to make the transition to distance learning and to use ICT tools properly. The programme also supports young people who have dropped out of school to get into a profession by involving apprenticeships, providing mentored practical training.

Sports activities for children and young people are a priority. Sport is presented as a tool for social work: it helps to involve young people in community work and provides experiences for pupils who face many failures at school. The

role of sport in skills development is evident in many areas. It can teach perseverance, discipline, cooperation and a sense of purpose in other areas of life, while at the same time teaching regularity, which is much needed in families with irregular schedules where patterns of unemployment and hopelessness are inherited.

The Symphony programme puts music at the service of personal and community development. It provides children from poor backgrounds, stressful family environments and often school failure with a sense of achievement and belonging through music learning and performance opportunities. Adapted from Venezuela, the programme is implemented through a partnership between music teachers and social workers (comp. Sistema Europe, 2017).

Within the framework of the crime prevention and drug prevention programme, useful leisure activities and awareness-raising programmes are organised for the target groups concerned. The culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966) is associated with several types of crime (acquisitive crime, usury, prostitution, etc.). The programme aims to strengthen public confidence in the police. The problems of alcohol and psychoactive substances among groups at risk of addiction will be highlighted. A major task will also be the cessation of smoking among pregnant women.

The housing programme element includes a number of parallel measures. One important tool for housing crisis intervention is the so-called roof command. Specialists help to prevent collapses and repair the roofs of buildings in danger of collapsing. The winter season increases problems due to outdated, uneconomical and dangerous heating methods. The aim of the programme is to promote housing that is appropriate to the living conditions of families. One of the biggest problems in this respect is indebtedness, where loans and arrears are charged to the family's property and the houses are auctioned off – evicting the people living there. Handling credit-trap and knowledge of how to make use of the possibilities offered by law (access to various subsidies) are an important element of the assistance counselling services provided by the implementing organisations. From 2022, a new element of the programme will be the construction of social rental housing and the renovation and modernisation of homes. In a pilot programme, a social solar cell park has been set up in one of the Tisza region municipalities to support poor families in meeting their electricity and heating needs. It is planned to connect 40 municipalities and 3500 households by 2025.

Health screening programmes are of particular importance in rural areas with poor health indicators and low average life expectancy at birth. In the municipalities covered by the development programme, there are many unfilled

GP practices, access to health services is difficult and health awareness is poor. Health services are therefore delivered to the villages by facilitators, using screening buses and mobile services (eye and gynaecological screening, vaccinations, medical consultations, etc.).

The responsible animal husbandry component of the programme focuses on tackling the difficulties caused by stray dogs by neutering, de-worming, vaccinating and chipping dogs, and helping dog owners and vulnerable residents in the village.

One of the key elements of the complex programme is economic development, placing disadvantaged workers in jobs to help them earn a living and develop their self-esteem. Success in the primary labour market is influenced by a number of problems: lack of qualifications, skills shortages linked to long-term unemployment, lack of local businesses and job opportunities, etc. In catching-up municipalities, efforts are gradually being made to rebuild the missing skills. Gardening programmes in the framework of public employment, the provision of small-scale, lower-skilled local jobs, support for small businesses, factories, local innovation, etc. are interdependent elements of support for recovery from the crisis. The diagnosis, which assesses the specific situation of the municipalities, also includes economic development proposals for each village. A café and a shop have been set up in a well-known market in the capital to sell handicraft or gastronomic products prepared under the social programmes for economic development.

The programme elements listed above form the backbone of the Emerging Settlements Programme, but a number of smaller, locally developed activities and sub-programmes can be linked to catch-up development as it progresses. The programme was launched in 2019, but the infrastructure for development and inclusion is still being built up until 2025. The effectiveness of the programme is difficult to measure and can only be measured in the longer term.

The following are some constructive suggestions and constructive criticisms, based on interviews in a development sub-region, as a result of a kind of evaluative pilot research.

4. Interviews – methodological aspects

The ten interviews presented here were carried out in five small villages located in one of the peripheral regions of Southern Transdanubia. Our subjects were social workers and support staff participating in the Emerging Settlements Programme, working in villages with a population of 2-300. In this region, the

programme started in 2019 in a few settlements and has since expanded to 19 villages in the peripheral areas of the Drava. The semi-structured expert interviews took place in 2022–2023 as a complement to a questionnaire survey (programme: Families in catching-up municipalities). We focused on the villages where the project under study was among the first to be launched. The main questions of the interview focused on the difficulties on the ground, the problems of local families and the changes that the complex assistance programme had brought to the villages. How were you able to build relationships with the families you helped? What do you see as the most important problems in the settlement? To what extent can they strengthen self-help skills within the framework of the programme? In the following, we will draw attention to some difficulties and conflicts based on the above aspects, which, if clarified and resolved, can increase the effectiveness of the programme. Based on the responses, we have focused on aspects related to the framework of the assistance work, the involvement of families and the shaping of self-help processes that make the programme effective. Due to the small number of interviewees, we did not attempt a detailed comparative analysis. The quotations provided here are intended to shed more light on the issues.

5. Difficulties in setting up the framework

In addition to building an infrastructural framework, the effectiveness of the facilitation work depends mainly on the qualities, attitudes and motivation of the facilitators involved. Local societies, burdened by many problems and conflicts, are often divided. It is therefore of great importance whether the programme succeeds in recruiting a local facilitator who, in addition to strengthening the embeddedness of the programme, will be able to act as a bridge not only between the village and the facilitators, but also between the people living in the settlement. In the event that the selected one is not able to fulfil this role, he/she may further widen the gap between the groups living in the settlement and social inequalities through his/her aid distribution power.

Another important aspect is the religious nature of the implementing organisations. The majority of the 28 implementing organisations are church-affiliated NGOs. Typically, the historic churches are aid organisations of other small Christian churches, but they also include dioceses and monastic orders. An important issue is the extent to which a government-funded programme open to all families in need can incorporate a religious element and evangelisation. To what extent is it acceptable to include religious considerations in the recruit-

ment of the professionals involved? Is it possible to include religion and faith in the cultural programmes and festivities organised? A key question is whether religious organisations can miss this important opportunity for evangelisation. Developments so far suggest that they can. Evangelisation can come from the personal faith of the staff, but the organisational framework of the programme does not go beyond this.

The programme staff did not arrive in a vacuum. Due to the deepening social problems, previous governmental and non-governmental organisations worked in underdeveloped rural areas. Defining responsibilities and competencies and avoiding duplication was a major challenge in the early period of programme implementation. Over time, the Emerging Settlements Programme has absorbed most of the functions and some of the staff from previous projects have joined the programme.

6. Difficulties in involving families

Several interesting aspects of family involvement came to the fore during the interviews. Because of the lack of opportunities and social patterns, it is not natural for local people to use certain services, so they do not necessarily value them. For example, a speech therapist or a development teacher is paid by the organisation providing the service, while social workers ask parents to allow their children to attend these sessions. “They can make a difference if they want to change this. But they don’t feel it. I pay for the same at home, and here I ask the children to ask their mothers to tutor them...” For families, ad hoc support to alleviate the emergency situation (food at the end of the month, firewood, repair work, etc.) is important. But the solution, the way out of the disadvantaged situation, requires persistent, ongoing changes that are missing in the socialisation of individuals and families living here. It is difficult to convince parents that ongoing contact and joint work is in the best interests of their children’s future. At the same time, parents make many sacrifices for the benefit of their children. “... anything for the children! I’ve had fathers volunteer to make sandboxes.”

Timing is important when organising programmes for adults. From spring to early autumn, many people take on casual jobs in agriculture, and it is not possible to reach the officially unemployed target group. The advantage of undeclared work is that the income of indebted families cannot be formally deducted from their debts. In black employment, they receive the wages earned on the day in cash. “In summer they are on day work, we can’t reach them. Until the end of the melon season.”

Overall, however, there has been an improvement, as many well-known and well-established programmes are seeing more local participants and people getting involved. Women's club sessions for mothers with young children, developed in the researched area, are expected to be replicated as good practice in other developing districts of the country (Boros and Bucher, 2023).

Dependency from supporter could be a normal but problematic consequence of development interventions. Regular help, children care, material support become the part of everyday life by infiltrating the survival strategies of poor families. "If you think that you have done a lot for that family, everything that you could do for them, they are the most malcontent and dissatisfied, and want you to do more..."

7. Efficiency of social work

Behavioural outcomes are very slow to materialise, and patterns of behaviour passed down through generations – which help people survive but prevent them from leaving poverty – bind them. There is very little return on the programmes implemented in terms of changing behaviour and attitudes. "But they don't think a week in advance that I'm going to cook this and this and buy this somewhere cheaper. No, only day for day. You don't look ahead." Elsewhere, "They can't really save for the last week."

One respondent to the research said, "The ones I think you can focus on are the kids. I let people go from 20, 30 upwards." For the children, staff also report a number of success stories: improved behaviour, better grades at school, successful further education, etc.

The effectiveness of the work is most clearly reflected in children's further education and parents' access to work. Typically, both events are linked to a destination outside the municipality. People living in closed small communities are reluctant to let their family members go to the unknown and therefore dangerous city. "Children are kept in a cocoon at some level. Many times they don't want to let the child go to the larger area because of fear." Elsewhere, "Usually the father works, and sometimes he earns more than me (support worker), but it doesn't show. The money just disappears. The mother sits at home. She stays at home, because then she won't be seduced. That's the stupid fear of jealousy."

Labour market training and motivation can make a difference to disadvantaged workers. However, it is also necessary to change the structural framework of employment and to ensure the availability of better paying jobs. These are

tasks of national importance that go beyond the scope of a municipal development programme.

8. Summary

In terms of the evaluation of the programme, our interview study was limited to a few aspects and a narrow range of interviewees. It is important to extend the study and to summarise the national experiences. In this light, our results are of limited use, but they also draw attention to some sensitive areas of support work that need to be addressed as a priority by the participants. Church presence is a cornerstone of the programme. The social role of church-related aid organisations in Hungary has tended to be limited to filling 'gaps' left by state and local government activities. In this programme, the church organisations are seen as allies of the government, with funding and professional control linked to the government and the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, which plays a key role. At the same time, social action is an important opportunity for marginalised churches to present their values in a credible way to non-believers in society. The study shows that this national programme does not have an evangelising role, but it offers a significant opportunity for the participating organisations to build capacity and thus lay the foundations for further social activities. The inclusion and integration of marginalised families is a common concern of society, and the framework of the government-church programme presented here is suitable for laying the foundations for long-term, effective outreach work. The effectiveness of the programme depends on the extent to which it is able to shape the target group into self-reliant, self-sufficient people: those families in a segregated situation, those who are permanently dependent on social transfers, those who are in need and those who are in a situation of passivity, exclusion and powerlessness. Another key factor for success is the ability to apply the good practices generated locally and the sustainability of the programme. The envisaged 20–25 year interval may indeed be sufficient to generate profound changes among families in social exclusion, but it also requires sustained socio-political will.

There are several reasons to extend the evaluation research that has been launched. On the one hand, the experiences of fieldworkers can nuance and update our knowledge of disadvantaged rural populations in a number of areas, and on the other hand, a more in-depth interview analysis can support the preparation and implementation of more effective outreach work. This will also require a broadening of the scope and methodology of the research.

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