

Conclusions of the demographic analysis and strategic tasks



Publication

Local people and local products without borders

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Changes in the demographic situation of the Bácsalmás district

A demographic analysis of the Bácsalmás district and the town of Bácsalmás clearly confirms that the region's demographic trends indicate a lasting, structural transformation, which will determine the economic, institutional and social viability of the settlements in the long term. Based on data from the period after 2000, **we can speak** not of temporary demographic fluctuations, but **of a stable trend of population decline**, resulting from the combined effects of natural decline, ageing and migration.

The analysis of the situation also clearly shows that demographic processes form a self-reinforcing mechanism. The emigration of young people reduces the size of the population of childbearing age, which leads to lower birth rates. Low birth rates further accelerate ageing, whilst the increase in the mortality rate is compounded by

the fact that the stress tolerance of the working-age population is finite, and mortality in this age group is rising alongside the elderly population. Taken together, these factors ensure that natural population decline persists. This so-called demographic spiral creates a self-perpetuating process which, without external intervention, will result in a further sustained decline in the population in the long term. The main conclusion is that demographic stabilisation cannot be achieved solely through settlement programmes; improving the conditions for natural reproduction is a key issue. It can be said that the consequences of ageing are multi-layered. From a demographic perspective, a high proportion of elderly people in

itself increases the number of deaths, which further exacerbates natural population decline. The

low proportion of the child population, meanwhile, foreshadows a further decline in future birth rates, as the size of the generations entering childbearing



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age is already lower. This means that **ageing is not merely a current state of affairs, but also a predictor of future population decline.**

Ageing is therefore not an isolated demographic indicator, but a structural challenge that determines the functioning of the region as a whole. The distortion of the age structure will, in the long term, affect economic performance, social cohesion, institutional sustainability and the direction of local development.

The region's development policy must adopt a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it must adapt to the reality of an ageing society by strengthening the health and social care system and supporting programmes for active ageing. On the other hand, it must encourage the retention and attraction of the working-age population through targeted measures, with particular regard to young families and the skilled workforce. Demographic adaptation and the strengthening of younger generations can only together form the basis for the region's long-term stability.

An analysis of natural population decline shows that

- Natural population decline is structural in nature and therefore **cannot be reversed by short-term measures**. Strategic planning must adopt a long-term, generational perspective.
- The demographic spiral is a real and self-perpetuating mechanism that **will continue to deepen without external intervention**. Ageing increases mortality, whilst the lack of young people reduces the birth rate, which further accelerates population decline.
- **Family policy and economic development measures must be applied in a coordinated manner**, as neither can bring about a meaningful turnaround on its own.
- **Retaining the young, childbearing-age population is a strategic priority**, because without them the rate of natural decline cannot be slowed.
- **Planning must also account for a scenario of sustained population decline**; in other words, it is necessary to develop an adaptive development model that is in line with demographic realities.

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The success of strategic interventions depends on whether they can simultaneously address the distortion of the age structure, the decline in the younger age group, and the improvement of conditions for long-term reproduction

Strategic conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of migration

- Positive migration primarily **represents a regional reorganisation** rather than genuine demographic growth, and therefore has only a partial stabilising effect.
- **Bácsalmás's role as a regional centre is a real asset upon which development policy** can be built, particularly in strengthening its service and institutional functions.
- **Migration alone cannot offset natural population decline** and therefore cannot be regarded as a primary demographic solution.
- **Retaining the population**
- **is more important than internal redistribution**; in other words, the strategy must focus on retaining
- and attracting the working-age population.
- **It is necessary to create targeted incentives** to attract **migrants**, particularly young families, the working-age population and skilled workers (through the coordinated development of housing, employment opportunities and services).
- **Strengthening centre–periphery cooperation is crucial**, as stability at district level can only be ensured if the complete depopulation of smaller settlements is prevented.

Bácsalmás's role as a regional hub is an important stabilising factor, but relying solely on internal migration is not sufficient to reverse demographic trends. Population stabilisation can only be achieved if **the strengthening of the hub function goes hand in hand with expanding economic opportunities, retaining the younger generation and increasing the region's external appeal.**



Strategic implications of structural human capital loss

- The emigration of young people is not simply a decline in population, but a **structural loss of human capital** that has an impact at economic, demographic and social levels alike.
- **Retaining the younger age group** is a prerequisite for mitigating natural population decline, as without them the birth rate cannot be significantly increased.
- A central element of the economic development strategy must be **the creation of attractive jobs for young workers**, particularly for the group possessing skilled, competitive knowledge.
- **Housing and quality-of-life factors** must **be integrated** into development policy, as young families' decisions on where to settle are not influenced solely by the labour market, but also
- by the quality of services, public spaces and infrastructure.
- A **life-course approach** is warranted, treating the chain of education–career entry–starting a family–stable employment as a unified whole.
- **Encouraging return migration** is a strategic opportunity, particularly in the case of young people with higher education qualifications who have ties to the region.



Overall, it can be concluded that retaining young people is not merely a demographic issue, but a fundamental prerequisite for the region's long-term economic competitiveness, capacity for social renewal and institutional sustainability. If retaining the younger generations does not become a central priority of development policy, the processes of natural population decline and ageing will continue to accelerate, and the region's adaptability may be permanently weakened.

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Strategic conclusions to be drawn from the need for institutional and economic adaptation

- Demographic changes necessitate a long-term institutional redesign, in which flexible operation and multifunctional institutional models take precedence over capacity expansion.
- **Strengthening the regional role of the education system is justified** (by integrating community, training and lifelong learning functions) so that institutions remain sustainable despite declining child numbers.
- **The development of elderly care is becoming a strategic sector**, representing not only a social policy task but also a potential opportunity for employment and service development.
- **Increasing the economy's adaptability is a key issue**, particularly in addressing labour shortages, by strengthening cooperation between training systems and local businesses.
- **Development policy must be based on the logic of 'fewer residents – more sustainable operation'**, i.e. maintaining the quality of services even with a smaller population.
- **The role of regional cooperation is becoming increasingly important**, as the effective provision of services is increasingly reliant on the joint operation of multiple localities.
- **Stabilisation does not mean passive adaptation**, but conscious, forward-looking planning that treats demographic trends as a starting point.

The institutional and economic pressures to adapt resulting from demographic changes necessitate a new paradigm for settlement development in the long term. Future developments must be based on an 'adaptive settlement model' which does not assume population growth, but aims for sustainable, flexible and liveable settlement functioning even in the face of a persistently declining and ageing population.

Strategic conclusions to be drawn from the dual role (simultaneously fulfilling the role of a district centre whilst being in a peripheral position at regional and national levels)

- The development of Bácsalmás **should be understood within a regional context**, not as an independent urban growth model. Strategic planning must be considered at the district level.
- **The central function needs to be consciously strengthened**, particularly through the stable maintenance and development of educational, healthcare, commercial and administrative services.
- To mitigate the disadvantages arising from the peripheral location, **connections** – in terms of transport, the economy and digital infrastructure – to larger regional centres **must be improved**.
- **Regional cooperation is becoming a strategic resource**, as the sustainability of services and economic viability increasingly depend on the joint operation of multiple settlements.
- The settlement **must assume an integrating role**, acting not as a competitor but as an organiser and service centre for the surrounding villages.
- **This central role acts as a demographic stabilising factor**, as the concentration of services can slow down out-migration and increase the likelihood of people staying in the area.
- **The aim of development policy is not to replicate the metropolitan model**, but to establish a sustainable small-town and regional centre model that builds on local conditions.

Bácsalmás's future lies not in an isolated urban development path, but in the conscious strengthening of its role as a regional centre. The centre–periphery dichotomy is not merely a constraint, but also a strategic opportunity: the settlement can become a stable and sustainable hub for development only if it functions as an integrating, service-providing and collaborative hub for the entire district.

Summary of the situation analysis

Based on the situation analysis, the demographic trends in the Bácsalmás district clearly paint **a picture of an ageing, shrinking and structurally transforming region**. The main cause of population decline is not migration, but an unfavourable age structure and sustained natural decline. Migration merely slows down, but does not reverse, the trend.

From the perspective of strategic planning, the most important conclusion is that the region's future lies not in restoring population growth, but in:

- demographic adaptation,
- retaining the younger age group,
- strengthening the working-age population,
- and providing sustainable care for an ageing society

.Demographic trends should therefore not be viewed merely as background data, but as key framework conditions for the region's overall economic and social strategy.

Based on the data and information revealed in the situation analysis, it can be concluded that since the change of regime, Bácsalmás has been struggling with a continuous decline in population, driven by a combination of natural decline and emigration. One of the most significant causes of Bácsalmás's population decline is natural decline, that is, the phenomenon whereby the number of births consistently falls short of the number of deaths. Another key cause of Bácsalmás's population decline is emigration, that is, the process whereby more people leave the town than settle there on a sustained basis.

The most critical issue for Bácsalmás's future is whether the town can retain and attract the human resources that ensure the long-term stability of the local economy, public services and community life.

The development strategy is therefore built on three mutually reinforcing pillars:

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1. Demographic and human resources pillar: reducing the out-migration of young people and attracting young professionals (the document's specific focus).
2. Local economic and regional pillar: job creation and economic diversification, the development of regional cooperation and the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.
3. Livability and community pillar: strengthening quality of life, services, identity and community participation (particularly by involving younger generations), which keeps people in the area in the long term and makes it attractive.

Together, these three pillars provide the rationale for Bácsalmás to move away from developing as a series of one-off projects and instead progress towards a sustainable, flexible settlement system through measurable goals and interventions that build on one another. The strategy's operating principle is a simple yet consistently applicable three-point approach:

- **Retention:** local young people should have a realistic vision of their career path in Bácsalmás (work, development, community, prospects).
- **Attraction:** the town should be able to attract target groups from outside (remote workers, young professionals, entrepreneurs) who bring new knowledge, networks and consumption.
- **Strengthening:** building on the human resources attracted and retained, the local economy, the standard of services and the quality of community life should be strengthened.

A key pillar of Bácsalmás's strategic development concept is based on retaining young people locally and attracting young professionals, aiming to strengthen the town's future human resources (the collective knowledge and employability of the population). The central idea of the first pillar is that the town's long-term sustainability depends on its ability to offer prospects to the younger generation: it must make sense to study, work, start a business and build a community here. At the same time, it becomes clear during strategic planning that retaining young

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people is not in itself a sufficient condition for demographic and economic stabilisation. This is because young people's decisions are fundamentally influenced by the social and economic environment, which is determined by the living conditions of the working-age population.

One of the most crucial elements of Bácsalmás's long-term development strategy is improving the quality of life for the working-age population – those aged between 25 and 60.

The social sustainability of the town can only be achieved if the strategy not only supports young people's start in

life and the stability of the working-age population, but also guarantees security and dignity in old age.

The true liveability of a town can be measured by whether its residents are able to remain in the area throughout their entire lives, live within the community and remain active members of society. This pillar therefore does not appear as a separate social programme, but as a natural continuation of the previous two pillars: whilst the first pillar strengthens the next generation, and the second stabilises the working-age population, the third pillar focuses on the stage of life's fulfilment: old age. This approach creates a generational balance in which all age groups become mutually reinforcing actors in the development of the community.

Overall, it can be said that an ageing society is not a single problem, but the result of several mutually reinforcing demographic and social processes: low fertility rates, emigration, increasing life expectancy, labour market transformation and the weakening of community structures. For this reason, it is not a single measure but an integrated, multi-level strategy that can slow down or partially reverse these processes.



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Ageing cannot be halted by demographic measures alone. **The key to success lies in devising an integrated development strategy comprising operational measures that takes account of demographic, economic and social factors, aims to establish and maintain economic security, strengthens community ties, ensures mental well-being, deepens the sense of local identity, promotes lasting and effective cooperation between generations and between the public, civil and economic sectors, and utilises funding opportunities for the development of the settlement as a comprehensive programme.**



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Dear Reader,

My name is Ágnes Gáll, née Tiborné Barta. I am the managing director of Bácsalmási Önkormányzati Közszolgáltatási Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft. and the head of the Bácsalmás public employment programme, and I have been working for Bácsalmás for nearly 20 years. Based on my work experience to date, I can see that in this peripheral settlement located in a disadvantaged region, socio-economic relations are stagnating and moving in a negative direction, despite all efforts. The most serious problem is the decline and ageing of the settlement's population.

As part of the LP2WB project, a comprehensive situation analysis was carried out within the framework of demographic research, from which we were able to draw a number of useful conclusions. Demographic data for the settlement and the region were collected, conclusions were drawn from these, and a strategy was formulated based on them.

In a disadvantaged district, far from the country's centres and situated along the border, halting negative trends and kick-starting development presents a huge challenge. Our analysis revealed that reversing demographic trends is essential for initiating other forms of development. If there is no one to develop for, the settlement will drift in a very negative direction.

The strategy has established that the problem is complex and has a synergistic effect on public administration, economic life and services. A comprehensive approach is required, centred on the PEOPLE who live here, wish to remain here, or intend to settle here.



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