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Social innovation initiatives of NGOs in a Hungarian disadvantaged area

The study examines social innovation endeavours initiated by non-profit organisations in the Abaúji region[53]. Addressing the challenges facing the region (emigration, ageing, unemployment and educational inequalities) requires the accurate identification of local needs and the involvement of the population in decision-making. One of the tools for these initiatives is social innovation and support for social innovation endeavours. The key actors in the social innovation process are non-profit organisations (NGOs), which see social innovation primarily as a mission. The aim of our study is to present social innovation solutions initiated by NGOs in the region and to explore the possibility of their adaptation as good practice. The study also identifies the main sets of criteria that, in addition to providing a structured record of each case study, will help to make good practices comparable. Documentation against the identified criteria will support the process of adaptation, which is critical to the successful implementation of social innovation initiatives.
Keywords: social innovation, non-profit, disadvantaged area, good pratices
JEL-code: O35

Introduction

Social innovation endeavours are new tool for disadvantaged areas to help them catch up. Many of the fundamental problems of the economy and society, such as educational inequalities, unemployment, migration or lagging regions, require long-term solutions that makes innovative cooperation between societal actors, the direct voluntary participation of citizens in decision-making processes, and the implementation of social innovation endeavours essential. The concept of social innovation focuses on meeting the needs of the community, and through this process, the quality of life and well-being are also improved. In addition to the income conditions that determine well-being and the needs for subsistence, welfare is also related to the sense of security, self-esteem and the need for relationships (Kocziszky et al., 2017).

The concept of social innovation

The evolution of the concept of social innovation began by its becoming a theory in the middle of the 18th century (Varga, 2021). Various questions of social innovation appeared in papal encyclicals, in the reflections of sociologists and philosophers, and subsequently also in studies and expert materials by scholars, researchers, civil society organisations, governmental and intergovernmental bodies. The first phase in the evolution of the concept (18th-19th centuries) was based on ecclesiastical teachings and sociology, and can be identified as a preliminary phase, or a conceptual demarcation phase. In the next phase (20th century), the theory of

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[53] The name "Abaúji Region" is defined in the FKIP "Creative Region" research project of the University of Miskolc (Hungary) and consists of 25 municipalities. The municipalities in the region often belonged to different administrative or other territorial units, this is not an official name, however, the regional names do not cover the 25 municipalities, so the name Abaúji Region is used. The settlements surveyed are Alsógagy, Baktakék, Beret, Büttös, Csenyéte, Detek, Encs, Fáj, Fancsal, Felsőgagy, Forró, Fulókércs, Gagyapáti, Hernádpetri, Hernádvécse, Kány, Keresztéte, Krasznokvajda, Litka, Pamlény, Perecse, Pusztaradvány, Szalaszend, Szászfa, Szemere.

innovation, the separation of technical, economic and social innovations, became emphatic. In the first decade of the 2000's, solutions that meet the needs of society, innovative ideas, and the phase of innovative collaborations will continue to be brought into focus. Since 2010, the analysis of social tasks based on the involvement of the individual and the study of social processes that improve the standard of living have been emphasised, in an approach focussed on processes.

Based on the literature review (Godin, 2012, 2015; Rüede és Lurtz, 2012; Rana et al., 2014; P. van der Have-Rubalcaba, 2016; Edwards-Schachter és Wallace, 2017; Eichler és Schwarz, 2019, Varga, 2021), it can be established that the theoretical field of social innovation is divided along six basic emphases (the emphases are interrelated), and in most cases process- or result-focus is clearly distinguishable.

The main emphases of the concept of social innovation (Varga, 2021):

- meeting community needs - mostly process-focused solutions
- creative problem solving and novel co-operation - mostly process-focused solutions
- managing societal challenges - mostly result-focused solutions
- improving the quality of life and well-being - solutions that focus on both process and result
- local project (related to the community) - solutions that focus on both process and result
- relationship with further innovations - solutions that focus on both process and result

Social innovation is focussed on process and/or outcome. Process-focus means the participatory process, or involvement, which mobilises participants; while the result-focus defines new collaborations and novel government measures (Edwards and Schachter et al., 2011; Moulaert et al., 2013; Neumeier, 2017).

Social innovation endeavours play an important role in the lives of decision-makers, politicians, researchers, civil society organisations, NGOs and individuals alike. Despite growing attention, there is currently no uniformly accepted definition of social innovation. The concept of social innovation is highly fragmented in each interpretation (Pol-Ville, 2009; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; P. van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016, Lipták et al., 2019, Varga, 2019). Raasch et al. (2013) point out that the most significant challenge during conceptualisation is the lack of a precise delineation of the individual approaches and research goals.

After a systematic review of the literature and a complex analysis of the various social innovation approaches (Varga, 2021), it can be established that the concept of social innovation is result- and/or process-focused. The two approaches do not contradict each other, however, the relationship between them is needs to be determined for conceptual clarification. The literature distinguishes between result-focussed social initiatives, which focus on the set goal, implement innovative collaborations and measures, and process-focussed initiatives, which encourage community action and adapt to conditions arising from the new structures. The former approach includes measures elaborated to address social challenges, improve the quality of life and boost local development, thus social innovation "provides new or novel responses to a community's problems with the goal of increasing welfare in the community" (Kocziszky et al., 2017, p. 16). The latter wording focuses on the satisfaction of community needs based on creative, innovative co-operations and personal participation in increasing social well-being, and postulates that "social innovation is a process that increases the willingness of the community to act in the form of new or innovative collaborations" (Balaton and Varga, 2017). As a conclusion of our research, we identify social innovation as a process that includes, in addition to measures (results) aimed at raising the standard of living, the emergence of new structures, the encouragement of society's capacity for action and the process of supporting attitudes and participation as emphatic elements.

Social innovation and NGOs

The rapidly changing environment requires uninterrupted development, adaptation and efficient co-operation from the actors of the social innovation process. The actors (implementers) of the social innovation process are profit-oriented and non-profit organisations, as well as "mixed" collaborations resulting from the co-operation of these organisations (Dart, 2004, Lettice and Parekh, 2010). In addition, social innovation endeavours may often be linked to policy makers, government institutions, social organisations, movements and academia. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organisations see social innovation primarily as a mission, and pay particular attention to emphasising the role of social enterprises.

In Hungarian practice, the non-profit sector includes those organisations that are privately initiated, non-profit oriented, and operate in an officially registered, institutionalised form. The term non-profit sector can be understood as a comprehensive concept, which includes classical NGOs, interest representation organisations and economic organisations operating in a non-profit form. In terms of organisational form, the classic NGOs are foundations and associations. NGOs focus primarily on strengthening social participation by creating opportunities for self-organisation. Their main aim is to bring about social change at different levels. According to the State Audit Office, the most important characteristics of non-profit organizations (NGOs) are their institutionalised form and their 'independence from government, neutrality of profit and, in many cases, voluntary nature both in the creation of the organisation and in its activities' (Báger et al., 2003, p. 7).

Murray et al. (2010) argue that the success of social innovation depends on cooperation and effective alliances between organisations. They argue that grassroots NGOs are fundamentally able to work in networks, adapting quickly and flexibly to emerging needs, but that, in line with the top-down pattern of social innovation, they need government institutions with the necessary network capital to facilitate the spread and unfolding of social innovations. This implies a kind of interdependence, whereby endeavours initiated by NGOs are generally supported by governmental bodies. Cooperation and the resulting networking facilitates, and is thus a catalyst for, the realisation of social innovation endeavours. Social innovation is a necessary step towards development and improved competitiveness, where the role of innovators is emphasised. Innovators are first and foremost members of the local community, or society at large, who, with their knowledge of needs, respond to the demands of societal challenges with new or novel solutions. Non-profit organisations play a key role in solving the difficulties encountered and can help other actors to adapt workable solutions by applying and disseminating the solutions developed. This view is based on the social embeddedness of small organisations, i.e. the perception that they have a direct perception of problems and are able to respond to them (Murray et al., 2010). According to Anheier et al. (2019), NGOs are best placed to generate social innovation, as they are primarily able to mobilise members of society. In this interpretation, NGOs' social innovation initiatives are catalysts for community development, and development programmes and initiatives, public involvement and participatory decision-making can facilitate the successful implementation of sustainable social aspirations (Neumeier, 2012).

Our research shows that there are direct and indirect benefits of involving the public in social innovation endeavours. Indirect benefits include increased institutional legitimacy, commitment and a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving. Indirect benefits can be identified in terms of increasing collective self-confidence and local identity, articulating real needs, increasing mutual acceptance between local stakeholders and understanding local politics.

All these factors identify NGOs as key actors in the social innovation process, as innovators of social innovation endeavours, as having a key role in stimulating social empowerment, and thus the analysis of their activities and the structured analysis of the good practices they implement can provide practical and pragmatic advice to decision-makers and other actors in the social innovation process.

Non-profit organisations in the Abaúji region

In this analysis, the non-profit organisations of the Abaúji region are examined in terms of their capacity to stimulate and support social innovation, based on the questionnaire of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO), OSAP No. 1156, *Statistical Report on the Activities of Civil and Other Non-profit Organisations*. The questionnaire distinguishes 18 groups of activities[54]. As we believe that social innovation activities are not expected from all organisations, we had to filter the organisations for those with the potential to carry out such activities. The organisations that remained in the screening were Culture; Sport; Leisure, hobbies; Education; Health; Social care; Urban development, housing; Economic development, employment; Legal protection; Protection of public safety; International relations; Professional, economic representation (classified organizations).

Table 1 Number of non-profit organisations in the municipalities of Abaúji region, 2010-2019

Non-profit organisations	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	110	104	101	103	103	95	77	76	78	71
Classified	50	47	49	51	51	48	45	43	42	39
Percentage of classified, %	45,5	45,2	48,5	49,5	49,5	50,5	58,4	56,6	53,8	54,9

Source: own calculation based on HCSO data

In 2019, there were 71 non-profit organisations operating in 25 municipalities in the Abaúji region, 19 of which are expected to carry out social innovation activities (Table 1). Despite the fact that the number of both the total number of NGOs and the number of NGOs surveyed has decreased in the municipalities surveyed since 2010, the decrease in the latter has been only minor, so that their share has increased.

Table 2 shows the evolution of some indicators for the NGOs included in the study between 2010 and 2019. In addition to the decline in the number of employees, a major problem is the sharp drop in the number of volunteers. The number of regular volunteers has been steadily decreasing since 2012, reaching its lowest point in 2017. The number of volunteers has been increasing since 2018 due to the impact of certain social innovation initiatives.

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[54] 1. Culture, 2. Religious activities, 3. Sport, 4. Leisure, hobbies, 5. Education, 6. Research, 7. Health, 8. Social care, 9. Civil protection, fire fighting, 10. Environmental protection, 11. Urban development, housing, 12. Economic development, employment, 13. Legal protection, 14. Protection of public safety, 15. Multi-purpose donations, non-profit associations, 16. International relations, 17. Professional, economic representation, 18. Politics

Table 2 Related key indicators for the NGOs included in the study, 2012-2019

Non-profit organisations	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
total number of employees (/person)	55	52	50	39	51	72	35	36	32	37
number of regular volunteers (/person)	98	86	49	40	27	58	21	16	19	58
number of casual volunteers (/person)	103	93	198	114	76	66	51	36	37	36
total income (HUF)	465 077	315 938	268 985	268 650	298 990	272 419	140 036	219 305	332 383	313 805
total costs (HUF)	397 588	273 107	270 707	297 058	278 158	273 040	187 997	213 646	334 885	362 707

Source: own calculation based on HCSO data

The number of ad-hoc volunteers is also steadily decreasing, with the number of volunteers registered in 2019 being around one fifth of the 2012 figure. This is consistent with what the literature identifies as barriers to social innovation. Barriers that hinder the generation and implementation of social innovation processes can be identified as a limitation in the social innovation process. The main impediments are passivity, the lack of resources and the risk of legitimacy. Main factors are also the lack of confidence, the lack of experience and the lack of volunteering
Total NGO income fell by around a third between 2011 and 2016, reaching its 2011 level in 2019. Meanwhile, their costs have also decreased at a smaller rate, but have exceeded their revenues since 2018.

Out of the 25 municipalities, 13 have an organisation with the potential to be a social innovator. Their spatial distribution is illustrated in Figure 1.
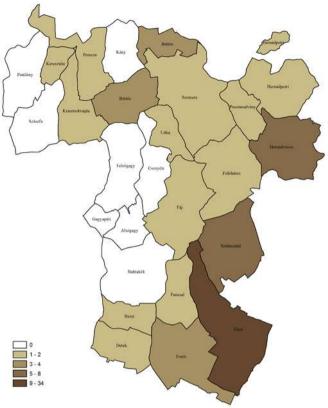
Figure 1 Spatial distribution of the surveyed non-profit organisations, 2019 (number)
Source: own edition based on HCSO data

Most of the organisations surveyed are active in the fields of Legal protection, Leisure, hobbies and Culture. There is also a relatively high proportion of organisations working in Social care and in Urban development, housing (Figure 2).
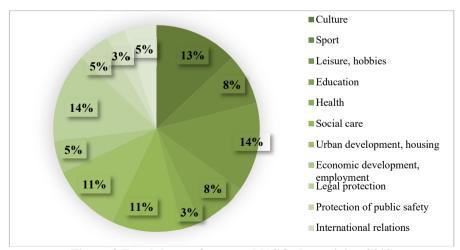

Figure 2 Breakdown of surveyed NGOs by activity, 2019
Source: own edition based on HCSO data

Structured analysis of social innovations endeavours by non-profit organisations in the Abaúji region

In the case of non-profit organisations in the Abaúji region, the assessment of their capacity to generate social innovation was based on the analysis of available statistical data (HCSO) and expert interviews. Based on qualitative interviews with civil society professionals and municipal leaders, it can be concluded that the Abaúji region includes disadvantaged municipalities facing significant challenges. Social innovation endeavours play a key role in addressing these challenges, and two selected good practices are presented to illustrate how they can be successfully implemented (municipalities are Pusztaradvány and Encs).

The main categories of questions in the semi-structured interviews with NGOs are: general organisational information, ideas based on social innovation, social innovations implemented, social innovation endeavours planned, regional cooperation (and opportunities).

In the case of the disadvantaged municipalities of the Abaúji region, social innovation appears as a model and determines the success of the catching-up process. The basic criterion for the social innovation process is that the endeavour should be a novel initiative. This does not necessarily imply a completely new solution, but a novel combination of previously well-established schemes that meet emerging societal needs. Social innovation is not a linear process, but a spiral process with feedback loops. Once the endeavour is successfully implemented, new needs emerge and are met by the socially innovative community along the above process. Social innovation is therefore a dynamic process that leads to social learning through feedback loops and constant risk assessment (Varga, 2021).

The study and measurement of the impact of social innovation initiatives is greatly aided by the identification and recording of good practices as case studies. In the study of the Abaúji region, particular emphasis will be placed on good practices related to NGOs and their role in generating further innovation. The endeavours initiated by the NGOs under study are essentially responding to local needs, addressing challenges faced by the population in the form of creative problem solving and innovative collaborations, and leading to higher living standards and well-being. Showcasing them as good practice both creates opportunities for adaptation by other municipalities and supports the comparability of individual solutions. The use of documentation principles defined according to different sets of criteria supports the process of adaptation, which is critical for the successful implementation of social innovation endeavours.

Through the interviews, and in collaboration with the local community, we identified complex endeavours related to critical areas (education, employment, health, housing, and community development and complex programmes) and elaborated individual case studies. Each good practice was assessed according to the structure of Nagy-Szabó (2014).

   I.   General information (name/address, purpose, target group, target region, financing, required infrastructure),
   II. A complex description of the practice (brief description, implementation process, results outcomes, ideas, problems encountered, lessons learned),
   III. Why good practice? (territorial approach, partnership approach, innovation, networking, sustainability, adaptability).

After examining the individual examples, it can be concluded that, in addition to external assistance (funding, professional councils), it is necessary to mobilise local residents, to think together in new ways, to think in new structures. Creative problem-solving, innovative ways of tackling challenges, accurate mapping of community needs and responding to them are essential. It is necessary to identify breakthrough points that can be identified, taking into account the strengths and potential of a given municipality, and to successfully implement good practices in social innovation by involving the local community as partners and emphasising the role of civil society organisations as innovators.

The aim of the statistical and interview-based analysis of social innovation processes in the Abaúji region is to identify outliers that can be identified as breakthroughs in the region's catching-up efforts. The focus is shifting towards the examination of local, mostly grassroots initiatives, where the effort to respond to a social challenge is partly (or entirely) achieved through innovative collaborations between non-profit organisations and local government and residents. The use of new structures helps social renewal and improves the quality of life in society. Non-profit organisations are one of the key players in good practice in the Abaúji region. The interviews have made it possible to identify the links and interconnections within the region, as well as the (mainly political) factors that make cooperation difficult or impossible. We identified the factors that can be identified as key challenges for the Abaúji region (educational inequalities, unemployment, health and housing problems) and identified areas where ambitions can be identified for the region, based on the contribution of social innovation to well-being. The primary purpose of the structured documentation format (Table 2) is to present good practices with different content, structure and functions, but also to provide an opportunity to compare individual solutions.

Table 2 Social innovations initiated by non-profit organisations in the Abaúji region

	Name/Address	Pusztaradvány - "A nice place"[55]	Generating social innovation by ÖMÉFA[56]
I. General information	**Purpose**	The overall aim of the effort in the municipality of Pusztaradvány is to reduce poverty and social exclusion of children, to compensate for the disadvantages of the municipality, to improve life chances by providing preventive services that lay the foundation for successful pre-school and school education and labour market and social integration for both the children concerned and their families.	The overall aim of the effort is to develop measures and interventions that contribute to the reduction of social and societal problems in the municipality and its region. The focus of the programme is on the complex development of 10 families, which can serve as a model for their own environment, and the change of attitude and social inclusion of additional families.
	Target group	The population of Pusztaradvány (especially disadvantaged children).	The population of Encs-Fügöd (especially disadvantaged families)
	Target region	Pusztaradvány (Abaúji region, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county)	Encs-Fügöd (Abaúji region, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county)
	Financing	tender applications and funds from NGO	
	Required infrastructure	real estate, internet, professions	
II. Description of the practice	**Brief description (identification of the need)**	The social viability of children living in the municipality is being developed so that they can grow up to be able to create the conditions for their own subsistence, contributing to the relief and development of society. The NGO aims to achieve this by developing a positive motivational base for learning, preparing for the world of work and maintaining health and a healthy lifestyle.	In contrast to the previous practice (which tackles the problems of the region as a whole at the district level), the present effort starts primarily from the level of the families that form the foundation of society (local level), and development activities are adapted to their needs and requirements. Its main activities are the transfer of new knowledge, the development of skills and abilities, the improvement of financial awareness and the improvement of housing conditions.
	Presentation of implementation	With the help of the NGO, it will be possible to improve the development, school progress and educational opportunities of children living in the municipality by developing a complex system of services that can, in the long term, alleviate the disadvantages (geographical, economic and social) of the municipality, reduce segregation, promote school success and reach children who are marginalised in the municipality.	The NGO-initiated effort is primarily aimed at families with specific problems. In the Encs-Fügöd area, 10 families have been complexly developed by 2022, and are a model for their wider environment. There is no predetermined recipe for implementation, as different developments are needed for dispersed and segregated families, so a model programme has been developed to offer them alternative solutions.
	Results, outcomes and ideas about the future	The specific activity of the programme is to develop and provide flexible, niche, low-threshold services based on local needs for all children and young people (0-25 years) and their parents, based on their age group needs, providing a variety of preventive activities and programmes with the involvement of parents, the development of the local community and the presence of professionals. A modern and well-equipped service site has been created for children and young people in the municipality, where trained professionals provide support for inclusive education, learning and integrated leisure activities in the pre-school and out-of-school periods. All	Support for 50 families in four locations (including 10 families in Encs-Fügöd). The complex development of families has been achieved, so that they can serve as a model for other families in their own environment, i.e. a change in the attitudes of other families and a social inclusion. The most notable achievement is the role of family mentor, as an independent social professional. The family mentor is a quasi-interface between the client and the family support worker but does not have the authority to do so, which is why a more honest and confidential relationship between him/her and the

[55] Implementer: Regional Civic Centre Foundation (Regionális Civil Központ Alapítvány – RECIK)
[56] Implementer: Independent Quality of Life Development Foundation of Otherness (Önálló Másság Életminőség Fejlesztő Alapítvány – ÖMÉFA)

		of these activities contribute to the development of skills, successful progress at school and good health, according to individual needs and wants. The programme also provides a model for daily living, leisure, behaviour and social interaction. It brings together and embraces initiatives and programmes aimed at children, thus helping the local community to renew and develop. The "Leaning on the Little Ones" sub-programme aims to help access missing services and specialised services, support family travel and bring in a specialist. The sub-programme "What's a career?" prepares people for the labour market, mainly through skills development and career guidance.	client. The family mentor before the problem arises, as a preventive in their lives, preventing crisis situations. They are not dependent on him/her, which is why they are more often to ask for help, either during a formal procedure or to resolve a family problem or conflict. The programme provides services for complete families sessions, as it is important that not only parents, but also children attending different educational institutions to reduce the backlog of children. Elements of the complex program: - available accommodation program Family Porta programme - healthy lifestyle programme - club activities for children - prevention sessions
	Problems encountered and lessons learned	Lack of resources and volunteerism, individual case management for families in need, the channelling of various problems into the local care system.	Providing resources, running the system and network that has been set up, individual case management for those concerned, and strengthening an inclusive attitude.
III. Why can it become good practice?	**Territorial approach**	For disadvantaged children and young people in the region, neither the family nor the school alone can create the appropriate conditions for success in school and further education, and this is where the programme can help.	
	Grassroots approach	The practice clearly focuses on local needs, and involves the local population in implementation.	
	Partnership approach	The exercise has a clear focus on local social challenges, but it is primarily implemented through the efforts of local civil society organisations, educators and support professionals.	
	Innovation	The partnership goes beyond the usual forms and a truly active co-thinking is created.	
	Integrated approach	As a result of the programme, the incidence of juvenile deviance resulting from social tensions and a lack of purpose has decreased significantly.	
	Publicity/networking	publication in the electronic press, and a project report	
	Sustainability	The projects and training courses respond to genuine challenges, are adapted to local peculiarities, and are based on the co-operation of the NGOs and the population.	
	Adaptability	The local peculiarities can be identified as an important factor, and the combined framework conditions for improving the living conditions at the local level will result in closing the gap. The identification of the stakeholders involved in the process, the role of communication (information), the planning of financial resources, attempts to change attitudes and the institutional background are particularly important. The implementing civil society organisation has a key role in these practices.	

Source: own edition

Conclusion

Social innovation focuses on solving social problems improving well-being (and prosperity) and living standards. Social innovation efforts to improve living conditions in the disadvantaged Abaúji region focus mainly on education, employment, health and housing. The identification of the stakeholders in the social innovation process, the role of communication (information), the planning of financial resources, attempts to change attitudes and the institutional context are of particular importance. In addition to these factors, the local social care system has an important role to play in helping the catching-up process to take place. Collaboration, taking on the role of innovator and adapting good practice are prerequisites for generating innovation. Adapting good practice supports the generation of further innovation. However, the question is whether practices in other municipalities can be copied and embedded in the life of the community. Copying in itself is only the transport of good practice, but transferring the process, encouraging cooperation, supporting cooperation between municipalities, and defining the framework conditions for networking will lead to effective and sustainable solutions to key problems in disadvantaged areas.

The NGOs have responded to local needs and, unlike previous practice, have cooperated and consulted continuously with the inhabitants of the municipality to implement the programme. In an innovative way, it has initiated a real dialogue and has sought innovative solutions, while encouraging citizens to take action. This in itself is a social innovation.

Acknowledgment

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