

Research article

The role of social innovation and innovator competencies in the local economic development of disadvantaged settlements

El papel de la innovación social y las competencias de los innovadores en el desarrollo económico local de los asentamientos desfavorecidos

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Abstract

Introduction: The most disadvantaged settlements in Hungary face several economic and social difficulties and challenges, such as a shrinking and ageing population, the emigration of the working age population, high unemployment, low income generating capacity, and lack of creativity. In these areas, the local economy is also highly deficient and underdeveloped due to limited job opportunities. Social innovation is particularly needed in disadvantaged settlements. **Methodology:** Due to the specificity of the topic and the special characteristics of

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the region under study, the participatory action research method was given special attention. **Results:** the study aims to present a successful good practice from the North-Hungary region, which has tried to provide an innovative solution to a complex social problem. **Discussion:** Our research also includes an examination of public involvement efforts as a key driver of social innovation, which requires supporting the innovative role of institutional leaders in generating specific social innovation solutions. **Conclusions:** Mentoring innovators and developing their competencies is essential for the successful implementation of social innovation processes, which can be seen as the cornerstone of local economic development in disadvantaged areas.

Keywords: social innovation; local economic development; disadvantaged settlements; innovator competence; catching up process; good practice; participatory action research; mentoring.

Resumen

Introducción: Los asentamientos más desfavorecidos de Hungría enfrentan numerosos retos económicos y sociales, como el envejecimiento de la población, la emigración de personas en edad laboral, el alto desempleo y la escasa generación de ingresos. La falta de oportunidades y creatividad frena el desarrollo de la economía local. En estas zonas, la innovación social se vuelve especialmente necesaria. **Metodología:** Dada la especificidad del tema y la región estudiada, se utilizó el método de investigación-acción participativa para obtener resultados relevantes. **Resultados:** El estudio presenta una buena práctica de la región Norte de Hungría que ha ofrecido una solución innovadora a un problema social complejo. Iglesias, ONG y municipios juegan un papel crucial en estas innovaciones, ya que, por su carácter no lucrativo y su cercanía a los problemas locales, responden con mayor sensibilidad a las necesidades sociales. **Discusión:** La participación pública es clave en los procesos de innovación social, por lo que es fundamental apoyar el papel de los líderes institucionales como impulsores del cambio. **Conclusiones:** La tutoría y el desarrollo de competencias de los innovadores son esenciales para implementar con éxito iniciativas que fomenten el desarrollo económico en zonas desfavorecidas.

Palabras clave: innovación social; desarrollo económico local; asentamientos desfavorecidos; competencia de los innovadores; proceso de recuperación; buenas prácticas; investigación-acción participativa; tutoría.

1. Introduction

In the Hungarian settlement structure, the number of disadvantaged settlements is particularly high, especially in the North-Hungarian region. In addition to their peripheral location, the low level of education, high unemployment, a high proportion of Roma population, low-income level, lack of businesses, poor infrastructure, and the cumulative disadvantaged situation further complicate the catching-up of these settlements and their integration into the economic blood circulation.

Thus, local economic development and the application of locally born social innovations have a key role to play in improving the situation and quality of life of the people living in these settlements. We describe a successful social innovation good practice using the participatory action research method, which can be identified as a local development in the municipality of Göncruszka.

1.1 The relationship between local economic development and social innovation

The theory of local economic development was developed in the early 1970s as local governments recognized that businesses and capital move between different geographic locations to gain comparative advantage (Nagy 2019). There are many definitions of local economic development, accepting Faragó's (1994) definition that its main purpose is to improve the quality of life of the local population, where cooperation rather than competition and the efficiency of social capital rather than private capital prevail.

We also agree with the ideas of Bajmóczy (2011) that local economic development is a conscious process that intervenes in the local economy to create better living conditions for local people. From the point of view of the conceptual framework, regional development, settlement network development and settlement development can be considered as parts of spatial development (Faragó 1987).

That is, settlement development refers to the implementation of spatial development at the settlement level. The distinction between settlement development and local economic development is also important, as local economic development does not necessarily apply to a specific settlement, unlike settlement development (Bajmóczy 2011).

The fundamental aim of local economic development is to build the economic capacity of an area to ensure its economic future and a decent standard of living for its population. It is a process in which public, municipal, business and private sector actors work together to create more favourable conditions for economic growth and labour market development (Nagy 2019).

The rise of the local level has been highlighted by Rechnitzer and Smahó (2006) in their characterisation of the principles of subsidiarity and decentralisation about tendering systems. By assessing the fundamentals of their economies, local communities can better understand what hinders and what helps their economies to grow and improve their regional competitiveness.

With this new knowledge, local communities can achieve results through strategically designed programmes and projects. These initiatives aim to reduce barriers and promote development. The competitiveness approach is relevant to local economic development, which aims not only to improve the quality of life of local people but also to enhance the economic performance of the area and thus its competitive position (Lengyel 2010).

Today, the economic success of any municipality depends on its ability to adapt to the dynamically changing local, national and international market economy (Swinburn et al. 2004). Each municipality has specific local conditions that either facilitate or hinder local economic development (Áldorfai, Topa 2015). These local conditions determine the relative advantages of the area in its ability to create, sustain or attract investment. A locality's economic, social and physical characteristics determine the design and implementation of a local economic development strategy.

Experience to date has shown that building a strong local economy requires a common process for all municipalities. As a result, they need better to understand their local economy's characteristics and structure and assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing their economy. In turn, they will become aware of the challenges and opportunities facing the local economy (Swinburn et al. 2004).

If a local employment-centred system is in place, it can create a predictable quality of life. The jobs created by local SMEs have many links to the local economy and provide stability to the local economy, so it is not only public employment that can be achieved, as is the case for people living in disadvantaged settlements (Lipták 2020). Another advantage is that, if the local business environment is right, the profits generated by local resources can be used locally (Tóth 2007).

In Hungary, municipal development tools include infrastructure development, information services and simplified business administration. Local governments' linkages for economic development are mainly directed towards other municipalities and county governments. In Central and Eastern European countries, local governments are key actors in local economic development initiatives (Mezei 2006a).

In addition to local governments, residents, locally generated ideas and the need for the whole development process to be locally controlled play an important role in local economic development (G. Fekete 2001). Social innovations as locally generated new ideas are key to this development process.

The conceptualisation of social innovation is a key issue, which also helps to address societal challenges. The process of social innovation makes societies more sustainable and cohesive through inclusive solutions, collaborations and proactive, bottom-up initiatives (Grimm et al. 2013). However, it is not only a bottom-up process based on citizen involvement, as social innovations, which can be seen in new approaches to social collaboration and structural transformation, often come from above, through macro-level measures (Nemes, Varga 2015).

The focus of the concept of social innovation is on meeting the needs of the community, a process through which quality of life is improved and well-being is enhanced (Hazel, Onaga 2003; Mulgan et al. 2007; Pol, Ville 2009; Szörényiné Kukorelli 2015; Kocziszky et al. 2017). When examining social innovation initiatives, the social benefits of innovative ideas in problem-solving and the role of active community participation in improving quality of life are emphasised. Social innovation refers to new (or new approaches to) solutions that both meet a social need and enhance society's capacity to act (Czakó 2000).

2. Methodology

2.1. Participatory action research as a method for exploring social innovation processes

Due to the specificity of the topic and the special characteristics of the region under study, the participatory action research method was given special attention. In action research, research with the active participation of stakeholders, the researcher serves as a resource for the group he/she is studying - usually disadvantaged - while the members of the group under study actively represent their interests (Babbie 2008). It is a cognitive process based on cooperative learning and work, combining different knowledge and experiences (Pataki, Vári 2011; Málovics et al.

Based on the literature (Nemes, Varga 2015; Katonáné Kovács et al. 2016; Bund et al. 2015; Kleverbeck et al. 2019), we assume that by examining the cases from the North-Hungarian region on a case study basis and documenting them as good practices, key elements and success criteria of social innovation efforts can be identified. The solutions examined have been captured in the form of a case study, following a structured analysis of each initiative. A set of criteria has been used to record the cases studied, which will also help to facilitate comparability and to identify the elements of the process.

As a first step in the research, we worked with local communities to formulate the research problem and identify local resources and problems. After examining the region, it can be said that regional differences in development are closely related to the size of the social innovation potential. In identifying good practices, the main challenges of each municipality - out-migration, unemployment and educational inequalities - provided a way of categorising the cases.

During the research, a research diary was kept (752 handwritten pages), interviews were recorded (188 interviews, nearly 260 hours of audio) and more than 2000 photos were taken, starting in 2016. We documented the changes that occurred during each action (planned and actual processes). During this documentation, video recordings, audio recordings, and materials documenting the various group activities (invitations, summary reports, workshop reminders) were produced and analysed.

To answer the research questions, we analysed our notes from the events, interview summaries, written summaries of the forums and workshops, and personal notes, as well as audio and video materials from each forum and workshop. Particular attention was paid to repetitive elements, individual opinions and possible contradictions.

We have identified the factors that can be identified as key challenges for the region (educational inequalities, unemployment, health and housing problems) and have identified areas where ambition can be identified for the region, based on the contribution of social innovation to well-being. The focus of social innovation efforts is on the following areas:

- strengthening the attachment to the place of residence,
- supporting disadvantaged groups,
- supporting local economic development,
- local specialities,
- public employment practices.

The research focused on public involvement as a key driver of social innovation. Our research has shown the direct and indirect benefits of public involvement in social innovation processes. Direct benefits include increased engagement 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. Passivity, lack of resources and legitimacy risk were identified as the main barriers.

These factors can be further broken down in line with the findings of the flagship project KÖFOP-2.3.4-VEKOP-15-2016-00002 “Attentive Monitoring of Local Government Development II”, led by the Ministry of Interior's Coordination Office for Local Government 2015-2019. Reasons for passivity include low levels of social trust and community cohesion and lack of political socialisation. This issue is particularly pronounced in settlements with lower-status populations, where the lack of political culture and local patriotic core further compounds the problem. In terms of resources, the problem is not only financial but also time and expertise.

The legitimacy risk arises from the conflicts that are a necessary corollary of transparent governance. The main objective of inclusion is to retain and employ young, skilled workers. This is a particularly relevant challenge for the disadvantaged area under study, while at the same time, the opportunities for low-educated residents of some municipalities in the labour market are limited. To overcome this gap, it is necessary to introduce, among other things, complex programmes (education, employment, health and housing), the preparation and implementation of which started in 2004 in Göncruszka, a disadvantaged settlement in the North-Hungarian region.

3. Results

3.1. *Competency-based management of social innovation*

In our research, we focus on the role of social innovation processes in the catching-up processes of peripheral regions. By treating the creation and management of social innovation as a change management process, we found that all its characteristics could be identified. In our approach, change leadership is understood as an activity aimed at identifying, recognising, planning, implementing and sustaining the changes needed for environmental adaptation and municipal/organisational renewal. For this capability-based approach to change, we have identified three main areas: sensing opportunities, seizing opportunities and implementing change.

In the case of social innovation initiatives at the municipal level, it is essential to examine the organisations implementing social innovation efforts and their network of relationships. The number of measurements at the local level is scarce (Szendi 2018; Varga 2021), although empirical studies of these initiatives are essential to increase the social innovativeness of local decision-makers and to generate local-level initiatives.

The process of social innovation requires competency-based management of social innovation at the organisational and network level. In the competence-based management of social innovation, the definition of organisational and network competence is emphasised. Organizational competence is the sum of individual and collective skills, expertise and capacities (Awuah 2001). Network competence is the set of resources and activities through which the organization creates, develops and manages the network (Gemünden, Ritter 1997).

According to Vilmányi's (2004) approach, network competence can be defined as a prerequisite for effective relationship management, but it should be seen in a broader context. A high level of network competence enables the organisation to identify opportunities for cooperation with different actors and to select the best alternative (Vilmányi 2004).

Network structures can be critical to the ability of communities to collectively innovate the responses needed to initiate and support change and to create social innovations that can respond to complex challenges (Newman-Dale, 2005). The creation of social networks is a form of social organisation, defined by patterns of vertical and horizontal relationships. Social networks are composed of strong and weak ties, the former referred to in the literature as 'binding' and the latter as 'bridging' ties (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000; Newman, Dale 2005).

Moore and Westley (2011) attempted to explore the operational characteristics of social innovation networks. In their study, they concluded that weak ties are more likely to lead to innovation than strong ties, as different levels of knowledge and skills are more likely to lead to novel recombination.

However, their study also found (referring to studies by Uzzi 1997, 2008) that network actors are more willing to share the risk of innovation when ties are trustworthy and driven by cooperation rather than competitive self-interest, which is generally more characteristic of strong ties than weak ties. All these approaches suggest that the emergence of innovation is more likely to be supported by weak ties, while the adoption of innovation requires strong ties and trust so that the network structure must evolve during the social innovation process. The relationship between the stages of the social innovation process and network structures needs further study (Newman, Dale 2005; Moore, Westley 2011).

The analysis of social innovation processes (Veresné Somosi, Varga 2021) has clearly shown that the successful implementation of individual efforts - in addition to networking - is inconceivable without the active participation of the local population. The basic aim of the initiatives is to raise the quality of life, to meet community needs through innovative cooperation, which requires an analysis of the attitudes of the local population and their conscious participation in local decisions. Within the framework of social innovation, the role of individual institutions is emphasised, which, in cooperation with local businesses and NGOs and the Church, help to implement training and labour market programmes and improve access to social services and public information through innovative initiatives and programmes.

Among the measures, we have looked at several novel activities that are new to the life of the municipality and different from the traditional governance model. Based on the analysis of each of these efforts, we conclude that the role of institutional leaders as innovators in generating social innovation solutions is pronounced. A particular focus is the examination of the leadership competencies of institutional and church leaders. Goleman (2019) distinguishes five personal and social competencies in his model. Personal competencies determine an individual's behaviour about him/herself, while social competencies are responsible for managing peer relationships. Examining these competencies and identifying the related developmental steps helps to outline the competency framework for managers and to define the process of competency management.

Personal competencies:

- **Consciousness:** when making decisions, consciousness, i.e. the ability to recognise emotions, is a key factor. Components: emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment, self-confidence.
- **Self-regulation:** managing emotions appropriately. Self-regulation means that the individual is not hindered in the performance of his or her tasks, but rather supported by his or her emotions. If emotional imbalance occurs, the individual will soon be able to rebalance his/her emotional world. Components: self-control, reliability, conscientiousness, adaptability, innovation. The latter is particularly important in terms of resourcefulness and openness to new ideas, approaches and information.
- **Motivation:** it refers to emotional aspirations that stimulate and guide the achievement of goals. Components: achievement motivation, commitment, initiative, optimism.

Social competences:

- **Empathy:** empathy is the knowledge of the feelings, needs and beliefs of others. Components: understanding and development of others, partner-centredness, valuing diversity, political awareness.

- Social skills: skills that enable individuals to elicit from others the responses they want. Components: influencing, communication, conflict management, leadership, catalysing change, relationship building, collaboration, team spirit.

Based on our studies (Veresné Somosi, Varga 2021), it can be stated that in the case of leaders/social innovators, it is necessary to measure and develop competencies in the following areas:

- cognitive analytical skills: creativity, problem sensitivity, logical reasoning, curiosity, flexibility, resilience,
- content skills: digital competencies, oral expression, language skills,
- social skills: networking, openness, negotiation skills,
- process skills: critical thinking,
- leadership skills: human resource management, time management,
- complex problem-solving skills.

3.2. Social innovation based on good practice

Based on our research, we prepared a case study of good practice in a disadvantaged settlement (Göncruszka) in the North-Hungarian region. The case study method is an appropriate way of documenting good practices with different content, structure and functions. Based on the analysis, it can be stated that the social innovation efforts included in the study can be adapted to other municipalities.

The analysis of each case allowed for a complex presentation of the practice, creating opportunities for adaptation, sustainability and effective implementation. The basic aim of good practices is to identify tools and methods that are more effective in achieving the objectives set than the methods already known. They are innovative and constructive approaches and techniques that have been proven or are already proven to contribute to raising the quality standards of a municipality and serve as a replicable example for other municipalities.

The presented good practice was examined according to the following structure (Szabó, Nagy 2014):

- General information (name/address, contact person, target, target group, target region, human resources needed, funding, infrastructure needed),
- Complex description of the exercise (detailed description, implementation process, results so far, expected results, obstacles encountered, problems, lessons learned),
- Why good practice (bottom-up approach, cooperation, networking, visibility, sustainability, transferability)?

We participated in several workshops with Levente Sohajda, the innovative and young pastor of the Göncruszka Reformed Congregation, during the fieldwork. He established the congregation to find and use local resources (restarting the school, creating quality time) to sustain the settlement. The target audience is the population of Göncruszka and the Abaúji region, especially young people. Currently, 10 people are working on the administrative tasks of the church. The necessary resources for the operation and maintenance are provided by grants and voluntary donations.

Göncruszka is located in the Abaúj part of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, in the Gönci district, which is ranked 3rd in the “ranking” of the most disadvantaged districts to be developed with complex programmes. Since the 1980s, the population of the region, including Göncruszka, has been steadily decreasing. This has been accompanied by low educational levels, an ageing population and high unemployment. The population of Göncruszka had fallen by roughly 50% by the early 2000s. The problem was exacerbated by the closure of the primary school in 2006 and the absence of a functioning community life.

Pastor Levente Sohajda moved to Göncruszka with his wife in 2004. Their first goal was to create a community in Göncruszka. To do this, they assessed the local resources and found that the retired and unemployed people living there had a significant amount of free time. So programmes were organised for them, but also taking into account their motivations and needs, and adapting the theme and timing of the events accordingly. They thought that a good way of working together would be to set up a community bee, where all the members of the community (from the youngest to the oldest) could make honey together and spend quality time together.

As most of the elderly people no longer have family in the village, it is also important to strengthen the community so that they feel that their lives have meaning. Meanwhile, the state school closed in 2006 and they had the opportunity to restart primary education in Göncruszka in 2011. The aim was to run a school that reflected local society. The Talentum Reformed Talent School is not run by the state but by a non-profit organisation set up in the municipality. The children who grow up can integrate properly into the society that surrounds them today.

At the start, there were 16 children and 2 teachers in the school. Today, children from 22 municipalities attend the school, and 220 children are studying in Göncruszka, all with very positive results that strengthen the community. Unfortunately, problems do arise from time to time, the most significant of which is the high level of poverty in the area, compounded by alcoholism and drug abuse.

The good practice described here clearly focuses on local challenges, involving local people in its implementation. At the outset, an attempt was made to identify existing good practices (e.g. how street children and immigrants are integrated in Palermo, what school models and pedagogical systems are in place to do this; how children from different social backgrounds are successfully integrated there, and how much has been learned and used).

A very important approach at the beginning of the programme was the grassroots approach, based on the cooperation of the church and the population in a spirit of partnership. A very small parish dared to restart primary education in the municipality, without any teachers or people with experience. In this way, they have made it possible for the children to learn locally, and many children from neighbouring villages also come here. According to the integrated approach, the emphasis of the practice is on running a school that reflects the local society and local conditions, thus helping children to integrate and stay in the area.

In addition to harnessing local resources, new ways of working have been introduced. A prime example is the adoption of local catering in an innovative way, catering for local children and workers, and providing meals on a menu for out-of-home catering, as well as for tourists. The restaurant and social kitchen functions have been perfectly combined.

4. Discussion

We believe that this good practice can be adapted to other regions and target groups, taking into account local conditions. In addition to taking into account local specificities, framework conditions to improve living conditions at the local level will together lead to catching up. In this practice, the innovative role of the implementing church leader is emphasised. Based on our research, and as a result of the study with the good practice innovator presented, the process of becoming a social innovator, the key factors of the social innovator role can be identified as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1.

The process of becoming a social innovator, key factors for becoming a social innovator



Source: own editing (based on Veresné Somosi, Varga 2021).

The process of becoming a social innovator is a step-by-step process that requires the implementation of grassroots initiatives. The innovator must have courage, inner commitment, charisma, and be "realistically optimistic". Mentoring social innovators and developing their competencies is essential for the successful implementation of social innovation processes.

5. Conclusions

Social innovation efforts to improve living conditions in the North Hungary 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.

Collaboration, taking on the role of innovator and adapting good practices are prerequisites for generating innovation. Adapting good practices supports the generation of further innovations. 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.

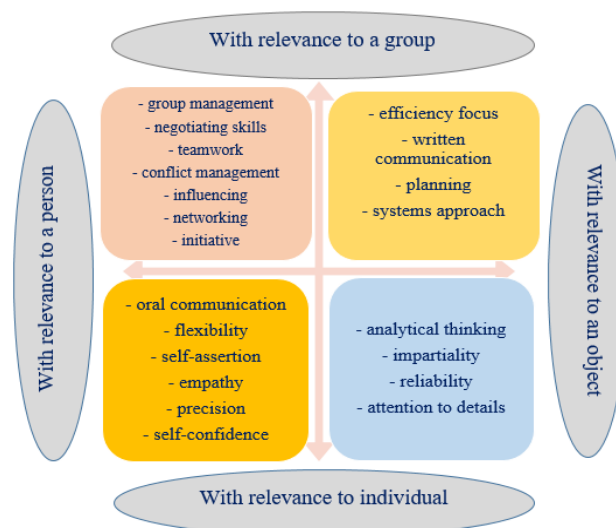
The innovators and practitioners of the good practice studied have responded to local needs, cooperated and consulted continuously with the local authorities, entrepreneurs, NGOs, institutions and citizens to implement the programme. Innovatively, they have initiated a real dialogue and have come up with innovative solutions, while encouraging the population to take action. This in itself is a social innovation.

The research suggests that the value-driven social innovation observed in the region, integrating young people of different ages and disadvantaged groups, is a useful methodological solution to community problems. Social efforts are emphasised in reducing the out-migration of skilled youth, supporting disadvantaged groups and meeting a higher demand for public education.

Today, competence has become a key concept in human resource management. It helps to answer the question of what factors are needed to ensure that institutions have competent employees and volunteers who perform at a high level and above average. Based on our research and the analysis of the good practice presented, a competency map based on the performance expectations of social innovators active in generating social innovation can be defined (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Competence map of social innovators based on performance expectations



Source: own editing (based on Veresné Somosi - Varga, 2021)

The competencies expected of social innovators include individual and group, personal and subject-specific skills and competencies, with a focus on collaboration, task performance and leadership.

The competencies of innovators are the set of skills and abilities that enable innovators to solve a given problem and to do so with sufficient motivation, decisiveness and agency. We believe that the following areas are key to measuring personal and social competencies in order to identify the role of social innovators:

- cooperation: reacting to frustration and criticism, communication skills, building relationships, relating to others, teamwork,
- task performance: work style, task preference, reaction to failure, willingness to work under pressure,
- leadership style: leadership ambition, leadership dynamics, leadership focus, leadership fundamentals.

The measurement of the competencies of social innovators, and the development of individual personal, social and professional competencies support the generation of social innovation processes, which can effectively address social and economic problems in disadvantaged areas within the framework of local economic development and provide adequate responses to complex challenges.

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