## **PhD theses**

# Operational mechanisms and social embeddedness of the civil society's innovations in Hungary

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#### I. Aim of the thesis, outline of the topic

Innovations are crucial for the competitiveness of the economy. However, the ability to innovate is not only a fundamental requirement for economic organisations but is now also a concern for society. This is partly due to the ineffectiveness of current management of social and societal phenomena and problems, and to the increased efficiency expected from innovations. Research shows a correlation between economic and innovation potential, i.e. areas and regions that are richer in innovation show higher economic prosperity (Pongrácz-Nick 2017). In addition, various studies have shown that social innovation can provide an excellent complementary development opportunity from an economic perspective in more backward, technology-poor regions (Kocziszky et al. 2015a).

In the theoretical chapters of my dissertation, I attempted to clarify the concept of social innovation and to present sociological approaches and theories related to the topic. In the first part, I first presented the classical definition of innovation and then I wrote in detail about the emergence of the concept of social innovation and its possible approaches and characteristics. In my thesis, taking into account the different approaches, I interpret as social innovation those initiatives that contain something new (product, service, market, process) and are created with the aim of improving society by increasing its capacity to act. They have the important characteristic of being effective as they respond more efficiently to societal needs than previous methods. I then reviewed the possibilities for typifying social innovation and the possible areas of its emergence. In the context of practical approaches to the concept, I showed how social innovation is related to social entrepreneurship and the related risks that are known to exist. For the practical application of social innovation, I also wrote about institutional embeddedness and some of the theoretical dimensions of civil society closely related to it. The fact that almost all of my interviewees represented a civil society initiative also justifies the presentation of the topic of civil society. The emergence and functioning of social innovations is significantly influenced by the environment in which they operate and therefore I addressed this topic from different aspects. In the chapter on the theoretical context of social innovations, I wrote about the theory of endogenous growth, the learning region, networkisation, and the relationship between cities and innovation. According to the theory of endogenous growth, development is influenced not only by material goods but also by human capital and socially accepted values and traditions (Kocziszky 2021). According to scientific literature (Stimson et al 2011; Lengyel 2012; Bodnár 2020), in recent years the importance of exogenous factors has been neglected in studies of regional development, while the effects of endogenous factors on development success have come to the fore. They can also be closely related to community learning, as in

both their cases they are community-based, mostly bottom-up activities (Kozma 2018). The formation of networks creates opportunities to use and share experiences and knowledge at the community level. Networks are typically not created by external forces, but are formed along their own internal motivations and interests driven by internal motivations (Hámori - Szabó 2018).

#### I. Outline of the methods used

In the course of my research, I basically sought to answer the question of what kind of operating mechanisms characterise social innovation initiatives in Hungary today, and thereby how they complement the activities of the state for the welfare of society.

The main objective of this research is to explore the relationships that determine the emergence and functioning of social innovations in Hungary. In our research, we wanted to find out what facilitating and hindering factors influence the emergence and spread of social innovations. We were also seeking answers to the question of how the representatives of the social innovations under investigation perceive social environment. In addition, we focused on the mechanisms of the initiatives studied and on the opportunities and difficulties perceived by the innovators/advocates of social innovation. The typology of Benedek et al. (2015) groups innovations according to their purpose, level, status of the innovator, funding of the initiative, time period and type. Along these lines, we were curious to find out what kind of organisational framework the social innovations we studied are implemented in, what kind of funding opportunities they have, and what they see as the key to sustainability. Within this, we also looked at possible motivations, their relationship with volunteers and the community, and the role of learning and development. In the light of all this, we were also interested to see how the social innovations we studied see their own future and that of their environment, and what prospects an initiative that is launching an innovation today can expect.

#### *The sampling methodology, the target group of the research*

The relative unfamiliarity of the topic justified the adoption of an exploratory research method, we used qualitative tools. In the course of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method gave us the opportunity to explore any new emerging themes and to learn details that we had not anticipated. The interviews were recorded on dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

In total, 40 interviews were conducted during the research, 38 with people representing social innovation (some of whom were idea owners or founders, and a smaller number of people

in other positions in the organisation - typically in communication or management), and two with experts representing organisations involved in social innovation or business incubation. The interviews were recorded between January and March 2019 and, due to the distances involved, were mostly conducted online or by telephone, with a duration of between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interviewees were all highly educated (most of them with higher education), so the language of the questions was not a problem as they knew the terms. Among the innovations there were some that received a lot of media attention, mostly linked to a recent award that had been won. In general, they were more optimistic about their situation, which is not surprising as their organisation was typically in an upward phase as a result.

In the course of the research, I approached the key players in the domestic social innovation sphere. The scope of social innovation is very broad and its boundaries are very difficult to define. One reason for this is the lack of a widely accepted, uniform definition. As there are no general, objective characteristics that can be used to clearly distinguish social innovations from simple civic initiatives, the analysis was based on professionally recognised organisations that are active in social innovation according to their main profile and are able to distinguish between them on the basis of their own criteria.

#### I. A summary of the results in thesis form

#### 1. The difficulties in defining social innovation

Many different aspects of the conceptual definitions of social innovation are known. While Nicholls (2010) argues that there is as yet no widely accepted understanding of social innovation that can be applied universally to social innovation, there are many different approaches.

In examining the definition, the first feature we presented was novelty, which is at the heart of the approaches of The Young Foundation (2012), Everett M. Rogers (1995) and Havas (2020). Innovation and novelty were always present in the conceptual approaches revealed in the research, so the results are in line with this emphatic element of the literature. However, the extent and type of innovation can be diverse, as can its interpretation. The novelty of the activity in question is significantly influenced by where and what target group the initiative in question is aimed at helping, and by what means. The degree of innovation can also vary - in our sample, there are organisations that have adapted a model already used elsewhere to the specificities of their target group, and also organisations that have developed a completely new method that has not been used (or is not known) elsewhere.

Related to this emerges a new definitional element, adaptability. Based on the interviews, we also found an approach in which the interviewees put an important emphasis on the adaptability of the innovation created to other contexts.

The social purpose of social innovation is similarly emphasised in the literature, that is, that the initiative in question must be a response to a social need, that it must aim to meet the needs of a target group (The Young Foundation 2012, BEPA 2010, OECD 2004). The social goal as a conceptual element also appeared in all cases among the interviewees in our study. All interviewees stressed the importance of the social aspect of the initiative. All the innovations studied respond to some kind of social problem, but these problems can differ.

The results of the research are in line with the literature (Nicholls - Ziegler 2017, Nussbaum 2016) - they put a strong emphasis on the community aspect of the social innovation initiative and the possibility of involving the target group in its implementation. Social innovation is understood as a kind of community action, in the implementation of which the involvement of volunteers, stakeholders and other interest groups is crucial.

According to Szegedi (n.d.) and Ilyash (2013), social innovation cannot work without an economic approach, without this the initiative cannot be sustainable and capable of development. In the definition interpretation block of our research, this approach is also reflected, it can be important to develop profit generating activities for long-term sustainability, which is why they prioritise this in their own strategy making. In general, an economic approach is understood as the knowledge related to business management that enables an initiative to engage in economic activity for the benefit of society (putting community interests before individual interests).

Among the approaches to social innovation, there are some characteristics mentioned that go beyond the usual approaches to social innovation. One such is creativity, which was linked to the definition of social innovation in some of the interviews. A further, non-traditional approach is that social innovation is seen as complementary to the core activities of an existing and functioning NGO. The definition can also be approached through the activity of the own organisation, so the characteristics of the concept of social innovation are created using the individual characteristics of the own organisation in this case.

Overall, we can conclude that the key elements of the literature (innovativeness, social goals, community responsiveness, entrepreneurial approach) are also reflected in the interviewees' conceptualisation. This interpretation is complemented by some unconventional elements that represent an understanding closely related to the own activity.

#### 2. Characteristics of the social innovations studied

We examined social innovations from different perspectives. In this research, we started from the typology developed by Benedek et al. (2015), which classifies social innovations into groups according to their purpose, level, funding, time period, type and the innovators linked to them.

According to Benedek et al. (2015), innovation can essentially be of four different kinds: increasing quality of life and employment, improving public safety and enhancing self-esteem. The social innovations we have studied fall into the first two groups, but it is also important to stress that the objectives can be multiplied - some of the initiatives, in addition to improving quality of life or employment, can also increase the self-esteem of the target group. We classified the target groups of the initiatives into the following categories:

- homeless people
- Roma
- people with disabilities
- people living in poverty/deep poverty
- children
- children with health problems / disadvantaged children
- adults/children consuming culture

The classification of types of social innovation by Benedek et al. (2015), following the classical Schumpeter (1980) typology, distinguishes between product, technology, service, organisation and institution categories. All the social innovations we studied provide some kind of service, and five of them are also complemented by some kind of physical product.

Basically, social innovation can emerge in all three sectors (Caulier-Grice et al 2012), however, the vast majority of the innovations we surveyed are related to the civil sector, while only three initiatives were found to be related to the economic sector. Some of the civicconnected innovations expanded the profile of an existing NGO with an innovation, while others became an institutional member of the civil society as a completely grassroots initiative.

We divided the motivations for social innovation into three groups. Some of the initiatives were triggered by the emergence of a social problem. Another group of innovations was triggered by personal engagement, where the implementer(s) were personally affected by a social problem and this made the unmet social need visible to them. We named the third group the community of enactors. Here we included innovations that serve the development of an

already active group, where a new way of meeting needs adds a new activity to the existing profile.

All the initiatives we studied have some kind of organisational background, although not all of them had a formal framework at the beginning (when the idea was first conceived). Examining the organisational framework reveals a (presumably) typical problem of social innovation in Hungary: the lack of an appropriate organisational form. Ideally, social innovation has some kind of profit-making activity to support sustainability, but unlike business companies, it reinvests profits back into the operations of the organisation for the benefit of development. Traditional forms of NGO do not provide opportunities to do this, while traditional forms of enterprise hinder the potential of initiative for civic engagement. The majority of the innovations we studied take the form of a conventional NGO (association, foundation), and create a sub-organisation to carry out the profit-making activity, typically a social cooperative or a non-profit limited liability company.

The links between social innovation and the economic sphere are manifold. While the initiative itself can be created in the economic sector too, it is important that the principles of business logic are applied in the operation, especially when it is a for-profit activity (Nicholls - Ziegler 2017). The interviewees in our research also confirmed this assumption, with some of the interviewees highlighting that social innovation can be run effectively with a market approach. The application of this approach is recognisable in some of the organisations we studied, while in others it is not characteristic. In our research, we distinguished between two dominant attitudes that characterise the attitudes of representatives of social innovation initiatives: the civic and the business/economic/market approach. Social innovation initiatives with a civil approach are considered to be those that focus primarily on the social problem and its potential solutions, but think less about the formation of an economic activity that can generate profit. In contrast, initiatives that see the development of economic activity as a necessary means to solve a social problem are market-oriented. They typically have some link to the market sphere, which may be the experience of an innovator or worker in the sector, or the support (tangible) of a company.

According to the typology of Benedek et al. (2015), social innovations can be financed by EU funds, public funds or self-financing. In comparison, and partly overlapping with this, we found three types of resource creation tools in our research. Of these, donations can be considered as the most important for social innovation. The interviews suggest that the donation culture in Hungary is still underdeveloped and evolving, however, in the long term, it can be a stable and reliable source of income for organisations, once the right strategic relationships are established. This type of strategy is more typical of market-oriented innovations, while the NGO approach recognises and values donations as occasional support. Grant opportunities are also a major source of income, from which most innovations seek to be independent. Although most organisations have or have had a running grant scheme in the past, they find the grant system unpredictable and unfavourable, and most would like to find a different source of income in the long term. The third source that was mentioned a lot was the support provided by incubator programmes and social innovation awards. However, in these cases, the interviewees did not focus on financial support, but on professional mentoring with the programme, which gave those running social innovation new skills and competences that they did not have before and would probably find difficult to acquire from other sources.

#### 3. Operating mechanisms of social innovations

An analysis of the work culture of social innovation shows a diverse picture. Some organisations emphasise the importance of democratic functioning, where all members have a transparent view of current processes, while some organisations still operate in a traditional, hierarchical organisation. The latter is, according to our research, less common and typically characterised by innovations using a civic approach. The right working culture can be a challenge for organisations, as in addition to operational, managerial staff, a well-functioning structure needs to be developed with the team of volunteers and target group members, and different groups from different socialisation backgrounds can work effectively in different working cultures. The solution to this is typically to separate different groups and develop a different, personalised working culture with them. An important piece of information on the work culture of social innovations, as observed through research, is the wide range of responsibilities of a very small management team (typically 1-3 people). Initiatives, which are mostly under-resourced, usually cannot recruit the number of people with the different skills needed to function ideally, so the leader(s) have to perform several tasks related to different positions. Volunteers are of great importance for social innovation as a potential human resource base. Most of the initiatives that we have studied deal with the hosting of volunteers.

Experiential learning can be an effective and important tool for regional development (Vercseg id. Nárai - Reisinger 2016). The innovation process can also be understood as a learning process, whereby the local community enriches its knowledge by drawing on the experiences during implementation and the knowledge bank of the community (Havas 2014, Kocziszky 2021). The results of our research show that people creating social innovation typically lack the required and appropriate knowledge at the start of the initiative. Implementers

and idea generators can acquire skills that they did not need to apply before - a professional support incubator programme or a partner organisation with the relevant expertise can be of great help in this process. It is also important to highlight the importance of the learning process that the innovation process provides to the target group. The target group members are usually disadvantaged in some way, which usually affects their labour market status as well. The innovation process can help them to integrate into the labour market, as in addition to professional skills, they can also acquire soft skills related to work culture and work, and build up contacts. This can ultimately result in the success of the innovation and the development of the skills of both the target group and the implementers. Recognising this, the importance of knowledge transfer, both within and between organisations, was highlighted in several interviews.

Kozma (2018) argues that communication and marketing play a crucial role in the success of social innovations. Effective communication can facilitate collaboration, while its absence can hinder it and ultimately lead to project failure. This is also confirmed by the results of our research. According to the innovators/key actors in innovation interviewed, it is now essential to develop appropriate external and internal communication strategies. This is not only to help them engage with their target group and volunteers, but transparent communication can also help them to find the right supporters and donors.

In our research, we also wanted to find out what individual characteristics are associated with the role of innovator, according to the subjective perception of the interviewees. Three important groups of attributes were identified. According to these, a key innovator is typically a problem-sensitive, empathic individual who is able to see the social needs and problems that arise around him or her. A risk-taker actor, being able to take on the uncertainties of social innovation and play a role in its implementation. They are also pro-active, with leadership and entrepreneurial skills, able to take responsibility as well as coordinate. In examining their motivations, we also identified three motivational elements: the ability and the willingness to reflect on problems, civic engagement called civic courage, and personal connection and involvement with the problem.

#### 4. Environmental barriers to the creation and diffusion of social innovations

The surrounding environment can be crucial for the emergence and development of social innovation initiatives (Csikszentmihályi 1997, Szilágyi 2006). An inclusive, supportive, open environment is favourable to the development of creativity and innovation, while a closed,

rejectionist environment hinders their development.

We found two types of views based on our research. The group of people who have a positive view of the social environment is smaller than the group of people who have a negative view. The social innovation initiative of the former showed an upward trend during the interview period, so the focus was mainly on their own internal functioning, which resulted in a positive attitude. The proportion of those who had a negative view of the socio-political environment was much higher, which they explained by their perceived social isolation, anti-civicism, aloofness and funding difficulties. The closed-mindedness of the society towards novelties was felt by our interviewees, which confirms the results of Ságvári and Dessewffy's (2006) international comparative analysis that Hungarian society is highly intolerant towards novelties. Part of the interviewees perceived political rejection and a lack of support, which made it very difficult to sustain the activity - in several cases it was already likely to fail at the time of the interview. These were actors who, for some reason, said they did not enjoy the acceptance of the political sphere.

In the case of innovations, it would be important to develop collaborations, and this need was also expressed by the interviewees. The majority of innovators/representatives interviewed would be open to starting a joint thinking process and sharing experiences, but no organised effort to do so was seen until the time of this research. The development of individual, informal relationships does occur in the social innovation ecosystem, but there are no organisations or groups that can help to develop collaborations between actors, which are common to many and serve common goals.

#### 5. The future of social innovations

The duality of perceptions of the environment surrounding social innovation is also reflected in the examination of visions for the future. Respondents who were positive about their own sociopolitical environment - typically market-oriented - were optimistic about the future. Representatives of both market and civil society initiatives, who were more negative about the current situation, also saw their vision of the future as negative. However, we also encountered forward-looking approaches which, despite the perception of current negative environmental factors, were optimistic about the future. This is based on the idea that a difficult situation can create a sense of urgency and an opportunity to develop new solution strategies and build collaborations, so that the adverse situation can ultimately create an innovation-friendly ecosystem.

#### **Summary**

In my thesis, I attempted to provide an overview of the theoretical background of social innovation, to present the main approaches related to it and to present our own research results.

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the Hungarian social innovation ecosystem has begun to develop and expand as more and more innovative initiatives are emerging. The social innovation ecosystem is expanding in proportion to this, but the development of links and cooperation between actors is still to be seen.

The initiatives studied tend to be related to the civil society sector - most of them are either developed within an existing NGO or have become formal NGOs as grassroots informal civil society initiatives. Although independent of this, the public and market sectors may also have such initiatives, it can be concluded that the civil sector plays a dominant role in social innovation, and the future development of the sector may determine the future of social innovation, too. The majority of interviewees in the survey expressed negative opinions about the current state of the socio-political environment. They perceived the regulatory environment at the time of the research (2019) as inadequate, the attitude of the state and local governments towards social innovations as explicitly unfavourable, and the social environment as closed and distrustful of novelty in many cases. However, based on the conclusions of the literature, the role of an innovation-friendly environment is of paramount importance for the emergence of innovative activities, thus, it is believed that a change in this area, a higher degree of support (both mental and financial) could exert a positive impact and could facilitate the emergence of initiatives.

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

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7. Czibere, I., Paczári, V.: Perception of social problems among young people: Characteristics of social innovation knowledge potential. *Thinking Skills and Creativity.* 41, 1-26, 2021. ISSN: 1871-1871. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100882 IF: 3.106 (2020)

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