

Social innovation, regional development and social sustainability in the Abaúj Region

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Abstract

The article presents the possible interpretations of the concept of innovation and social innovation, looks at social innovation as a process and examines its role in the development of micro-regions. The main purpose of the article is to present a complex social innovation model and its practical use in a project. Therefore, the first part of the article explains the classic concept of social innovation, then the extension of approaches, and finally a complex model. After the theoretical overview, all these concepts and processes are presented as the basic categories of the complex research program Creative Abaúj of the University of Miskolc. The next part of the article outlines the main objectives and project elements of Creative Region project based on Creative Abaúj complex research program, and the last part explains one of the practical products of innovation, the Abaúji Mutató mobile application. The paper reflects to the way up to the theory of social innovation to practice.

Keywords: social innovation; complex model of innovation; regional development; Abaúj Region

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: Social Sciences – Sociology – Social development

DOI: 10.36007/eruedu.2023.4.067-077

Social innovation, regional development, micro-regions

Social innovation may serve as an important tool for improving the situation of areas and small regions experiencing many economic, social and infrastructural challenges, and for increasing the well-being of their inhabitants. Looking at how innovations are generated, the researchers point out that although more centralized, larger settlements provide a more inspiring economic and technical environment for the emergence of innovative ideas, the awareness of territorial disadvantages and difficulties can also be a motivating factor in this respect. Communities that are relatively well-off and satisfied with their situation are less willing to change, there is no need for completely new, innovative solutions, and they can correct minor or major discrepancies using established methods, adapting them to the needs and requirements of the community (G. Fekete 2001). In areas of deprivation and decline, it is the very awareness of the situation that can be the motivating factor for social innovation, provided that the necessary conditions are met. The group

proposing the innovation must be able to identify the problem, have the knowledge to mobilize resources, engage the community or its active part in the implementation, plan, coordinate and acquire the skills necessary for the success of the innovation. This requires an innovator (the mayor or another manager-type person) with the necessary knowledge, the ability to solve problems, to get resources, to influence people. They are usually found among local intellectuals with a sense of local patriotism. In many cases, their role is crucial, but in small settlements where there are no intellectuals, there is no chance of this person coming from within the community. In many cases, the state is trying to fulfil these tasks, to preserve local values and to induce development through central state institutions and central funding. This is not always in line with the interests of the people living there, with their preferred solutions and goals. This is one of the reasons why some of the initiatives are not successful and not sustainable. Other reasons include passivity, a passive attitude, resignation to one's fate, outward migration, ageing of settlements, low levels of education, inadequate training, and poor infrastructure. Even so, rural development policy documents have been looking increasingly for innovative solutions to rural problems based on local resources.

The concept of social innovation

The concept of innovation has been part of our lives for quite a long time, with ever wider meanings. Originally it was applied to technical fields, to various, mainly productive, segments of economic life, in the sense of renewal, as in the original Latin term *in-novare*. Its scientific definition first appeared in a study by Schumpeter (an Austrian-American economist) in the 1930s, essentially referring to professional development (sale of new goods, new markets, new production materials, etc.). The meaning of the term has been constantly changing as different areas of the economy have come to the fore and become more important. It has included newer and newer meanings, to the point where innovation was seen as a key element of economic competitiveness in the 2000s. During its almost 100-year 'career', many attempts have been made to define the concept, but it has also constantly been subject to change as it has been applied in a changing world with ever-expanding meanings. However, the main elements of its meaning can be identified: a new process, a new method in marketing, production, organization, business practice, relationships. Its essential element is renewal, incremental change, development/improvement. It is always based on some creative idea, the implementation of which is carried out through the process of innovation.

However, change, development and creative ideas are not only needed in the economy, society is also struggling with challenges that often require new, creative ways to solve them and improve the quality of life. The concept of social innovation dates back to the turn of the last century, but its importance was not emphasized until decades later, in the 1990s. The technocratic orientation of economic innovation played a role in bringing it into focus, as did the growing complexity of social, ecological, demographic and other challenges, the solution of which required

creative ideas, feasible innovative approaches, processes and methods in order to provide effective and relevant responses. With this came the need to define the concept of social innovation. The issue and related research in the economic and social sciences has been addressed by several disciplines, but no universally agreed definition has yet been developed.

The first definition in the literature is given by Drucker (Drucker 1985), who identified social innovation as a key factor in the development of the US entrepreneurial economy. Drucker stressed that innovation occurs not only in the economy, in the technical field, but also in society. Its essence is renewal, as in the case of economic innovation, but it is directed at meeting social needs with the aim of improving the quality of life. It provides solutions that help to solve social problems, increase the activity of society, create new systems of relationships and help the process of social integration.

The identification of the main semantic features also shows that we are talking about a complex phenomenon that can appear in many areas, with different motivations, different funding, heterogeneous targeting, and many possible ways and means of implementation. Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that there have been several attempts to define the subject, with common and different elements, but none of them has (yet) been generally accepted by researchers studying social innovation. A review of some Hungarian definitions shows the same. A definition based on economic research "Social innovation is a new or novel response to a community's problems with the aim of increasing the well-being of the community" (Kocziszky, Veresné Somosi and Balaton 2017). However, the authors also highlight the need for technical, scientific and economic innovation, saying that social innovation can only lead to the well-being of a community if it is combined with these. The authors Nemes and Varga provide a possible interpretation of the term by listing several characteristics in their publication of the results of their research on rural development: "In a broader sense, social innovation can be considered as any new approach, paradigm, product, process, practice, which aim at solving problems and needs in society, while creating new values, attitudes, new social relations, or possibly new structures" (Nemes–Varga 2015). The study also highlights the basic interpretative dimensions of social innovation inherent in the adjectival word structure: i.e., one can proceed from the assumption that social innovation is a social process of generating innovation, but the words also imply that it is an innovative process serving social goals, or that it is an innovative process serving the renewal of the structure of society. In practice, social innovation can take all three possible approaches, depending on the situation, need, problem, solution, opportunities, human resources, funding and other conditions that support and enable its implementation.

In all the definitions, the new idea, the novelty of the solution, the intention to improve the quality of life, the presence of different actors (NGOs, public, church organizations), the variety of funding possibilities, the involvement and activity of the community are common elements. The sociological approach to social innovation emphasizes the importance of innovative thinking and the role of the innovator in the innovation process, who is creative and can engage others, and whose role

is particularly important in smaller settlements. Figure 1 shows the complexity of social innovation (Illésné Kovács 2020, 56).

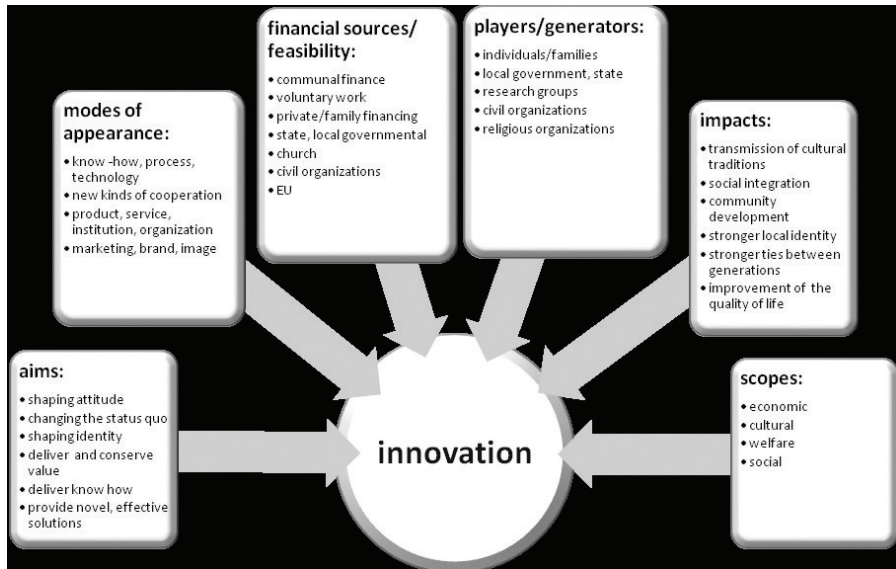


Figure 1: The complex model of innovation by Kinga Szabó-Tóth (2019, 131)

An overview of the possible forms, funding, actors, impacts and areas, together with the potential objectives, illustrates the difficulties of creating an exact definition, as it must include all the necessary and sufficient conditions/factors. In the case of social innovation, which is characterized by many factors and changing parameters, there are therefore various definitions, both generic and listing a number of specific elements

Social innovation as process

Based on the experience of the innovative projects and successful processes implemented so far, the operating mechanism of social innovation as a process, the identification of the successive, equally important stages and the interrelationships between them can be defined, and a flowchart can be generated. A prerequisite for the initiation and successful implementation of innovation is a deep understanding of the circumstances, the mapping and precise definition of problems and challenges. The next step is to mobilize and involve the local community in the implementation process. In this process, various community engagement methods play a role, as do discussions and persuasion (that changes can be achieved, that something can be improved, that the new initiative can be successful). The commu-

nity's commitment to the goal, to the innovation process and its active participation are essential for success and sustainability. This is followed by the implementation of actions, the launching of the social innovation process, accompanied by continuous monitoring and impact assessment. A very important element is the sharing of knowledge and experience, finding collaborative partners in communities facing similar challenges.

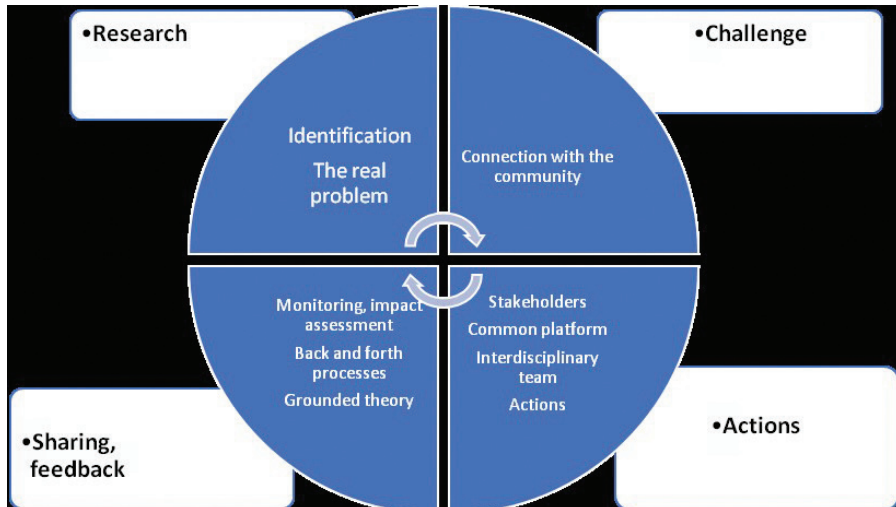


Figure 2: The steps to generate social innovations
by Kinga Szabó-Tóth & Mária Illésné Kovács

Research on social innovation in the framework of the University of Miskolc's Institutional Excellence Programme

4.1. Introduction to the project

Drawing on previous research results, in 2018 the University of Miskolc started a collaborative project called Creative Region to explore the potential areas and implementation options for new social and cultural innovations in a micro-region. The institution aims to serve the region as an intellectual hub, to contribute to the region's development, to support social inclusion, to help the marginalized through training and research, and to provide targeted assistance for the launch of innovative processes. To implement the project, an interdisciplinary research team was set up, including experts in economics, social sciences, health, law and humanities. The target area of the research was the 25 settlements of the Abaúj micro-region (East-Cserehát sub-region), 23 from the Encs district and 2 from the Szikszó district. The question arises: why did this micro-region come into focus? It is not by chance, since the historical conditions and economic geography of the Abaúj region resulted in a micro-region that, by the end of the 20th century, could be

regarded as disadvantaged. This region is the victim of the events of the previous century. After Trianon, there were serious losses, settlements with significant industry ended up on the other side of the border, and with them most of the marketing opportunities were lost as well. Socialist industrialization did not help the region either. Many people moved to the cities to work, as agriculture was practically the only option for making a living locally. After the change of regime, heavy industry was completely dismantled and the employment opportunities for the local population disappeared, leaving agriculture and forced entrepreneurship as the alternatives to state employment. This led to significant outward migration, the ageing of small settlements and a serious decline in the number of intellectuals. Average incomes, the level of education and the number of businesses in the settlements are also below the national average.

These fundamental characteristics and the location of the micro-region made it the target area of the research. The objectives of the project were defined in a complex way in order to being able to develop a social innovation model based on the research results.

- A complex assessment of the resources in the settlements: recording the economic, social, social, cultural, educational and health status
- Definition of a test structure to support the empirical study (mapping of institutional and non-institutional resources, analysis of current approaches to and impacts of social innovation and their implementation in networks, health status of the population, assessment of the quality of public education, assessment of the potential for changes in pedagogical methodology)
- Summary and further reflection on the research conducted in the micro-region on the “creative micro-region map”
- outlining the development paths of settlements and the micro-region
- Measuring local innovation potential
- Development of a Cultural Heritage concept, definition of content, setting up a scenario, creation of a database
- Creation of a mobile application called “Abaúji Mutató” [Abaúj Navigator] and promotion of the micro-region through it
- Writing research-based Wikipedia articles (in Hungarian, English, and Slovakian in the case of border settlements) that broaden the knowledge of the history of the settlements (Illésné Kovács 2020, 55).

Due to the complexity of the project, in addition to the research objectives, it also includes activities to induce and support social innovation processes. These include the Mayor’s Forum series of events, dissemination of project results, forums in municipalities, support for businesses, workshops, publication of leaflets, and the launch of a health promotion program based on the results of screening tests, the presentation of local historical assets in the form of travelling exhibitions in schools to strengthen local identity (Kecskés 2021), and many other events and activities, including the delivery of donations collected through the “No luxury bags” campaign, which provides targeted support, to women in need.

4.2. Research methods

Complex resource assessment is possible through a combination of theoretical and empirical research. While a large amount of information on settlements is accessible and can be studied using available statistical data, historical and other sources, qualitative research was also needed to understand the innovation potential and, in many cases, to identify previously unknown values, trends and changes. Qualitative methods are more suitable for studying small groups. Personal presence helps to obtain more in-depth and nuanced information, and allows the exploration of subtleties of behavior and thinking. Fieldwork is time-consuming, labor-intensive, even when several researchers are working in the same locality at the same time. The benefit is that we can observe social phenomena directly, in their natural context. Field research is best suited to the study of phenomena and processes that are difficult to quantify and that change over time, such as practices, roles, relationships, organizations, groups, communities and their interrelationships, their operating mechanisms, internal power relations, etc. It is therefore the most suitable method for mapping the capacity for innovation, finding innovative people, novel thoughts and ideas. The combination of the two methods makes it possible to identify the resources (in the broadest possible sense) of the municipalities.

Right from the start of the research, two types of database were identified:

- a statistical database at the municipal level (data that can be obtained through secondary research: demographic, economic, infrastructural)
- a database of local assets

Buildings, objects, traditions, customs and practices that are considered valuable by local people are also included in the database of local assets. The database was designed taking into account the categorization of the county's inventory of local assets and the items it contains. Local values and knowledge were collected through interviews and questionnaires. The criteria used are as follows:

1. Agriculture and food economy, specialty foods, beverages, traditional products
2. Wellness, spas
3. Built environment: castle, church, chapel, statues, monuments, bridges, mill, inn, cellar, park,
4. Industrial and technical processes: lime burning, coal burning,
5. cultural heritage: customs, folk architecture (houses, fences, gables, gates), folk art (weaving, embroidery, ceramics), preservation of traditions, cemeteries
6. Sport: clubs, achievements
7. Natural environment: cave, lake, stream, spring
8. tourism and entertainment: museums, country houses, local history collections, festivals, folklore groups, traditions, traditional food, architectural monuments.

For the interviews, the interviewees were local leaders: mayors, notaries, pastors, local key informants. Also, interviews were conducted with local NGO leaders to explore bottom-up, civic initiatives, grant activity, collaborations, local innovations.

Among the interviewees were also the heads of kindergartens and schools. The interviews with them also provided a picture of the settlement, the methods used in the institution, innovative initiatives, extra-curricular activities, opportunities and methods for inclusion and integration. More than 500 questionnaires from the municipalities were processed in an SPSS database, which allowed us to draw a number of conclusions. The results of the interviews and questionnaire are available to the researchers in a shared Google Drive in folders by municipality, and were used as a basis for the analyses and the for the creation of the app. These folders contain descriptions of the region's gastronomic heritage and linguistic features, as well as historical and political analyses.

5. Abaúji Mutató – mobile Application

Whether it is a study of any kind, but especially in social scientific analysis, research should be as transparent as possible. However, published data, studies and essays can rarely be presented in a way that is accessible to all, or rather 'tangible'. This is what one of the CR project's components has attempted to do: the Abaúji Mutató application. An interactive interface is thus an integral part of the scientific work, through which the most interesting findings of the research can be presented to the public. The Abaúji Mutató app is a virtual interface that is easily accessible to all, and can be downloaded by anyone on the main platforms (iOS AppStore, Google Play). The importance of the app lies in the fact that it provides the municipalities information that in cannot be found elsewhere. In line with F. Schulz von Thun's theory of public communications, we can observe at least four modes of interaction through the app (Schulz von Thun 2012). It is worthwhile to extend Schulz von Thun's theory now, as others have done before (Fragó, 2021). The theory suggests that at least six factors influence communication. The factual message, the stimulus, the communicator's self-mediated value system, the relationship between the communicator and the receiver, the actuality "surrounding" the moment, and the social relations and stratification. How does it work in relation to the application and the Abaúj region? The editors have identified at least four interrelated communication elements as the communication-marketing objectives of the application. One of these is national information that has a major impact on the lives of locals and local residents. The next is the expansion of the network of contacts that the app helps to create, and the other is that the information provided encourages people in the region to connect with each other. The app strengthens the identity of the Abaúj region and the sense of belonging. The content includes dozens of local treasures. Even if someone has lived in the area for decades he/she might have walked past a landmark, a piece of art or a local story without noticing it. The main purpose of the CR project, to promote and publish research material, should be included among the local assets. A particular value of the app is that it includes data of public interest that is not yet available elsewhere. It often provides a substitute for the municipal website, a virtual community space.

The Abaúji Mutató app guides you through the region, works as a map and also focuses on the historical, geographical, ethnographic and built assets of the region. The CR project was accompanied by several conferences where the results of the research were presented to mayors and local residents. In late August 2020, we held the demonstration in Hernádvécse, where one of the participants, looking at one of the app screenshots, commented aloud, “There’s the dentist’s phone number, we don’t need to look for it!”. After that, there is no need to prove that the app has a database that can be of help to everyone living in the area. Moreover, a third of the municipalities in the Abaúj region do not have their own websites. Of course, there are virtual communities, FB and Insta pages linked to the settlements, but usually only to those that also have a website. It is thus definitely a valuable tool for summarizing local and regional data of public interest.

To summarize the main features of the app:

- creates publicity
- is available for free
- is available on both iOS and Google
- is a gap-filler for presenting local assets and data of public interest
- includes tourist attractions
- also provides the economic data needed by investors
- is connected to the University of Miskolc - not secretly aimed at prospective students
- for researchers: short versions of the most interesting research essays are also available on the app

As for the structure of the app, there are five interfaces within the app. The opening page (and Hírek button) contains the most noteworthy news: studies, interviews, news from Abaúji, university information. It also presents some of the projects carried out by students during their studies, most recently in the Digital Sustainable Media Communication course. It is important to note that the articles are also linked to a comments area, a discussion board, where users can add their comments and opinions on what they have read, moderated by the moderator. This also gives users the opportunity to bring previously unknown information to the attention of researchers and editors.

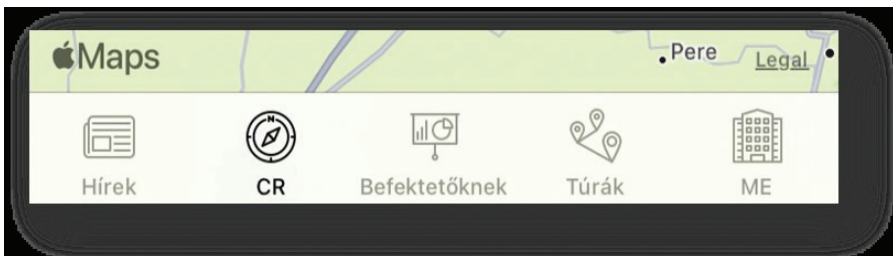


Figure 3.: The Abaúji Mutató app

The settlements are presented on two separate, yet organically linked pages. The region is shown on a map, so the user can tap on a settlement or type in the search box to find the details of any Abaúj municipality. Through the CR button, users can learn more about the history and information of the settlements, and there is also a brief audio summary. Interestingly, most of the municipalities also have a demographic chart showing the number of inhabitants from the 19th to the 20th century. On the page dedicated to investors (Befektetőknek button), the economic environment of the municipalities is outlined. It shows the businesses located, the infrastructure available and the economic activities particularly favored by the municipalities.

Visitors and tourists alike will be interested in the Tourist section of the app (Túrák button), which contains thematic itineraries: gastronomy, accommodation, natural values, hikes, castles... In addition, there is a research-based interface. The title Gastronomy craft tours presents a research project (Kra'gas) linked to the University of Miskolc. Some of the stops on the tourist route created in collaboration with Romanian and Ukrainian universities can be visited here. You can also discover the gastronomic and artisanal craftsmen who live in the area and create real value.

The fifth tab of the app introduces the University of Miskolc, showing the University of Miskolc's educational portfolio. The aim of the app is to encourage young people to study at university. These pages provide small details about the ever-changing range of programs, but also show why the University of Miskolc's student life is so special, and why it is so important to keep tradition alive. The app also offers a game, so anyone can test their knowledge on the traditions of the University of Miskolc (ME button).

6. Results

As a result of the complex assessment of the resources of the Abaúj region, the combined application of quantitative and qualitative research, in addition to economic activity, a number of other areas, activities and local initiatives have become visible through the mobile app. They are also considered resources, as they contribute to the well-being and identity of the people living there, and to the future of the settlement (K. Nagy and Illésné Kovács 2022). These factors, especially bottom-up initiatives, are local manifestations of social innovation and are therefore important measures of the value of settlements and a key element in the lives of their inhabitants. Our research focuses on them and offers targeted development alternatives and innovation elements (e.g. Abaúji Mutató app.) for the municipalities under study.

The study was carried out within the Thematic Excellence Programme 2021 – National Research Subprogramme, as part of the Creative Region III project TKP2021-NKTA-22, with the support of the NRDIF.

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