

RESTART YOUR LIFE

*Solidarity in practice:
economic alternatives
from the Visegrad countries*

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WHY WE NEED A RESTART?

The economic situation in V4 countries stagnates, and the economic model based on direct foreign investment has reached its limits a long time ago. Often even if new jobs are created, there are no workers available and employers are hiring people from other countries. At the same time, some people are long-term unemployed or deemed to be "unemployable". Wages still do not match those in Western Europe. Voices claiming that the process of "catching up with the West" has ended, and those saying that our countries will never reach western social development are on the rise. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that prevalent economic models are not sustainable in the times of the current climate crisis – they are harmful to the environment and contribute to uneven social development by creating areas of deepening economic and social deprivation. Some of the regions are threatened with depopulation. In 2020, developments in all V4 countries were also negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemics. Unemployment rose temporarily and many people found themselves in dire existential problems as a result of poorly organised or deliberately missing support, and the overall anti-social approach of neoliberal governments to the crisis. The consequences of pandemic measures will become apparent later, but it is likely that – as in other crises – people will have to respond with their own bottom-up action. At the same time, to revive the economy, it is necessary to promote those voices that already for some time have been drawing attention to the harmfulness and unsustainability of outdated development models.

It is, hence, urgent to promote new approaches to economic and social development in the V4 countries. Recently, across the V4 region, various actors (individuals, organisations and public administration bodies) have started fostering new local approaches to the social and solidarity economy, such as locally organised production and consumption, municipal enterprises, and the like, some of them taking into account also the environmental dimension of their activities and operation.

The social and solidarity economy¹ provides a viable alternative to the prevalent economic models and practices. A vast number of initiatives are already creating change in our communities, and in the way in which we relate to each other, to our environment, and other forms of life. They represent "real Utopias" – a really existing and operating economy based on democratic and solidarity values. There are many success stories of local actors tackling economic problems in innovative ways via establishing socially conscious and environmentally sustainable enterprises. They often operate in difficult conditions of under-developed regions. Most of them are examples of grass-root initiatives tapping into people's potential to creatively combat poverty and environmental degradation. But there are also examples of support for the social and solidarity economy "from above", mostly on the local level. Municipalities or local governments can be very important and effective actors of needed social and economic changes. They can mobilise local resources and use the structures of public administration to foster solidarity and democracy. Many paths lead to change.

However, these efforts often occur in isolation from each other and there is a growing demand for a more systematic exchange of new ideas, experiences and know-how. The networking of various actors must aim at creating structures representing resistance to destructive public policies. The V4 countries have been facing similar challenges and hence have a lot to offer in dealing with similar issues. We have chosen several cases from each country which we regard as inspirational examples of good practice. They are quite diverse, as they show a wide variety of organisations and initiatives and a broad range of their activities. Each country team took a slightly different approach to present their cases, but they are all unified by a common thread – to highlight various ways in which we can build solidarity between people and in our communities.

Repeating the same procedures over and over again and expecting them to solve the problems they are causing does not make much sense. The crises we are facing clearly show that change is not only necessary but also unavoidable. However, it will not come from institutions and structures whose survival depends on maintaining obsolete and destructive economic activities and empty political ideologies. A society that is democratic and rejects authoritarianism and oppression in all its forms can only grow out of a practice in which the values of solidarity, cooperation, and respect for life are the basis of all relations. And the social and solidarity economy organisations and initiatives are already showing us the way to reach these "new shores".

¹ Resources including definitions and various examples of the social and solidarity economy can be found on the website <http://www.socioeco.org>

CASES FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Social and Solidarity Economy in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, it is not easy to speak about social issues. In the general public, the topics related to the common, societal good, are met with a certain degree of aversion, mostly due to the totalitarian past of “socialist” Czechoslovakia. The meaning of the concept is reduced to helping the poor and vulnerable people. So the social economy and social entrepreneurship in the Czech Republic are primarily perceived as initiatives to employ disadvantaged people (mainly through so-called integration social enterprises), and in this sense, the notions of the “social economy” and “social enterprise” are recognised as relevant. Social entrepreneurship is perceived as an instrument of solving social problems and not as an alternative approach to the economy. The definitions and concepts of the social and solidarity economy are almost unknown. But thanks to some projects, research and educational programmes carried out in the last years by NGOs and some institutions, the awareness is slowly rising.

Another root of the social and solidarity economy is the cooperative movement, which in the Czech Republic has more than 170-years long history. Cooperatives played a very important role in the 19th and 20th century in many economic sectors such as agriculture, retail, electrification, culture, and many others. In the second half of the 20th century, many agricultural cooperatives were established, but they did not adhere to basic principles of cooperativism. Due to forcible so-called collectivisation mandated from the top by the ruling authorities, they were not established as autonomous organisations created as an expression of the free will of their members. Hence, decision-making in such co-operatives was not free and democratic but subdued under political control. These developments severely damaged the image of cooperatives as an organisational form. Even in the new political situation, which grants people the freedom of association, cooperatives are perceived with a certain suspicion. Slowly this situation has been changing, The number of new co-operatives, some of them are “social cooperatives”, is growing – as our two case studies attest.

In the efforts to develop the social and solidarity economy sector in the Czech Republic, to gain knowledge of the overall situation a comprehensive mapping of the situation of the SSE was done in 2015, and on its basis the first Social and Solidarity Economy Forum was organized in 2017 in Prague. It brought together different actors, including local politicians, state administration officials, people from SSE enterprises, universities, NGOs, educators and experts. A more recent project Building Up SSE is intended to promote SSE by providing knowledge, skills and competencies through an innovative training programme¹. But education on the social and solidarity economy is still mainly the domain of non-formal education. It is provided by NGOs that are dependent on project funding, and hence some of the programmes cannot continue after the project ends.

In recent years, many activities related to organic agriculture and Community Supported Agriculture initiatives have been unfolding, supported also through training for coordinators, trainers, communities and farmers. Also, an incubator for new organic farmers was established. Social farming is a new concept that has recently quickly developed . It focuses on interlinking (ideally organic) farming with social integration (about 40 social farms and other organisations promote and implement this concept). The environmental social enterprise that tends to deal with specific environmental issues – usually those relevant in their communities – is also quite a new concept in the Czech Republic (since 2017) and has a potential for development³.

In 2009, the thematic network for the social economy (TESSEA) was established (and formalised its activity in 2015) with the aim to support the development of social entrepreneurship in the Czech Republic, providing information, networking, training and consultations.⁴ The Cooperative Association of the Czech Republic, an association that survived the regime change, provides assistance to its members and promotes the ideas of cooperativism.⁵ The NGO Alternativa Zdola runs different programmes supporting cooperatives by education and promotion of cooperative values and principle.⁶

² Information and educational materials from the Building Up SSE project can be found in English, German, Polish, Czech and Slovak here: <https://www.socioeco.org/busse>

³ The European Commission (2019), Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe. Updated country report: The Czech Republic. Author: Eva Fraňková. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <https://europa.eu/!Qq64ny>

⁴ The website of TESSEA: <https://www.tessea.cz/>

⁵ The website of the Cooperative Association of the Czech Republic: <http://dacr.cz/cooperative-association/>

⁶ Alternativa Zdola developed a cooperative incubator – providing information on the website <http://druzstevni-inkubator.cz/>, and also consultations for those who want to start a co-operative.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs runs a program on social entrepreneurship and offers consultations, workshops and internships in social enterprises.⁷ It works with experts, consultants, lecturers, educational institutions, entrepreneurs and networks, for example the Impact Hub Prague, the National Network of Local Action Groups or the leading NGO in the field of social entrepreneurship P3 – People Planet Profit. By mid-2021, 173 social enterprises were registered with almost 4,000 employees with social and health disadvantage.⁸

During the Covid-19 pandemics in 2020, the TESSEA sent an open letter signed by more than 100 social enterprises to the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs asking for a better and easier compensations for social enterprises in the crisis. A lot of social enterprises provide services, often in the field of gastronomy, and were severely hit by the crisis; some of them even had to close. Unfortunately, the Ministry did not come up with any special aid for social enterprises. They can only apply for compensations provided for “ordinary” entrepreneurs.

A specific laws to support social entrepreneurship are still not in place. Although drafts have been prepared, they have been waiting for adoption for some years already. Politicians could get inspiration in Slovakia, where the Act on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises was passed in 2018.

⁷ The website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs about social entrepreneurship: <https://ceske-socialni-podnikani.cz/>

⁸ Up-to-date numbers can be found in the „Address Book of Social Enterprises“: <https://ceske-socialni-podnikani.cz/adresar-socialnich-podniku>

Where Independence Meets Cooperation

The cooperative publishing house IDEA, Prague

"Reading will not change the world, but it will certainly change your view of it." This statement, which the publishing house IDEA choose to be their motto, accurately reflects the main aim of this independent publisher – to bring alternative visions, theories, and ideas to the public debate. Through their books, the cooperative strives to expand the Czech bibliodiversity, i.e. cultural diversity applied to the writing and publishing world, support non-profit projects, and give voice to individuals and groups who would otherwise go unheard. It is also their ambition to publish interesting translations of foreign and historical texts.

"Knowing that no isolated science can adequately reflect all social challenges and environmental limits, it is our priority to connect various disciplines from economy and sociology to philosophy and political science," stated Vendula Bittner, the current chairperson of the IDEA publishing house.

The cooperative publishing house IDEA is the only one of its kind in the Czech Republic. Why did they choose the cooperative as their legal form from all other possible options? As Vendula Bittner says: "The cooperative movement in the Czech Republic started as a reaction to the growing economic pressure of capitalism, which caused the deepening of social inequalities. Individuals organised themselves in consumer or production cooperatives and created the first organisations based on solidarity and equality. This entrepreneurial model, which puts the interests of people above profit, is still alive throughout the world. We, therefore, wanted to rehabilitate the cooperative as a form of social enterprise and follow the social-democratic tradition. From the second half of the 19th century to the interwar period, cooperatives were, along with labour unions, one of the pillars of the social-democratic movement. We can therefore state that they put social democratic ideals into practice."

Although Vendula Bittner holds the official position of a chairperson, the cooperative functions on non-hierarchical principles. Each of its seven members has one vote, and so far there has not been a need for a majority vote. All decisions have been taken by consensus. "Sometimes achieving consensus takes longer, but in the end, it's worth it. If it is a decision of us all, it's much easier to stick by it. We work better when we know we want to reach the goals we all agreed on," adds Bittner.

How does such decision-making work in practice? "All members who are interested to do so take part in decision-making," Vendula Bittner states. "Individual tasks are assigned and their completion is evaluated at regular meetings, based on people's expertise and capacities. Last year, due to the pandemic crisis, we moved our meetings online and increased their frequencies. We use cloud platforms and team communication applications in our work." Facilitation is an essential tool to reach consensus more efficiently and increase the speed and efficiency of decision-making. One of the cooperative members is a skilled facilitator. Nevertheless, the situation when only one member of the collective holds the facilitator role is not ideal. "That person has to wear two hats, a facilitator's hat and a member's hat, so it's not simple," says the chairperson. "Currently, however, we believe it's not necessary to have another person to take over the facilitator role. Maybe we will reevaluate it if we have problems reaching consensus in the future."

However, a non-hierarchical organisation set-up and operating within a generally hierarchical societal environment could bring about the rise of informal hierarchies, especially when the law requires that the organisation is officially headed by a chairperson. How does the cooperative deal with the fact that one of their members formally fills the chairperson role? Jan Exner, another member of the cooperative explains: "Even in a non-hierarchical organisation, someone is a 'natural' authority; someone who dedicates more time and energy to the common pool of work and activities; someone who is more visible. But the truth is that we discuss all major things together and decide upon them collectively." The chairperson Vendula Bittner adds, "I don't think that there are any differences. I always say that as a chairperson I have exactly the same voice as everyone else." She admits, however, that she does have an advantage compared to the others. She plans the meetings and has more time to think about arguments beforehand. "But still, I often have the who is more visible. But the truth is that we discuss all major things together and decide upon them collectively." The chairperson Vendula Bittner adds, "I don't think that there are any differences. I always say that as a chairperson I have exactly the same voice as everyone else." She admits, however, that she does have an advantage compared to the others. She plans the meetings and has more time to think about arguments beforehand. "But still, I often have the impression that I get the short end of the stick, as it has happened many times that others persuaded me with their arguments. So, I believe that our hierarchy is 'flat'."

The financing of the publishing house is based on two fundamental pillars. The first are loans from the cooperative's members. The second pillar is voluntary work – everyone contributes with their work to

the coop's operation. The members do not receive any salary for their work and are currently not planning to divide any potential profit among themselves. Regardless of the intensity of one's involvement in the cooperative and the amount of their loan, all members are equal owners.

In the era when the economy is mainly dominated by competition and the efforts to maximise profit, voluntary, unpaid work can be a significant emotional burden. This begs the question of burnout prevention. "What is really refreshing is the contrast of our world with the world focused on profit in which publishers often publish, or can publish, only those books that bring in money or those that are published through some subsidies. We publish books that can change this system at least a little bit. I used to work in a publishing house owned by my friend and he had to supplement anything meaningful he published with two cookbooks," says Jan Exner. Vendula Bittner adds: "We all agreed that our publishing house is that kind of therapy through which we prevent burnout in other parts of our lives. The feeling of a job well done, of publishing books that people read and enjoy, has a positive and therapeutic effect on us."

Other potential financial sources for their projects could be grants. "When it comes to grants, we don't avoid them a priori," Vendula Bittner confides. "However, we haven't yet found a grant that would fit our projects, and we don't want to adjust our projects to fit the grants." This stance demonstrates another vital aspect of the cooperative IDEA – their independence. What does this mean for the collective? "It means that no one dictates to us what we can and cannot publish, what it should look like, and how it should feel. We decide about all of this in our best conscience. We are also financially independent and would never enter into a partnership with someone who would want to change our values, shift our goals, or would not be in line with them."

Financial sustainability is an essential condition for independence. Therefore, the collective tries to develop profitable projects alongside those generating no, or minimal, profits. "Every sold book helps create a new one," says Vendula Bittner. The first two publications are an example. With the first book, the compendium Budoucnost (The Future), the costs matched the income from sales. "So, given the process of the making of the book and how we focused on interesting content and design, we actually broke even. Although we had one more partner who in part contributed to the making of the book. What we earned from sales covered the real costs, but we did not factor in our own work." This situation was compensated by the second project – the translation of The Doughnut Economics by the British economist Kate Raworth. The cooperative members felt that they could target this book at a wider audience. "It has been selling well so far. At the end of 2020, we published the first edition of 1,000 copies, and we will probably be reprinting it this year. With this book, we factored the value of our work in the price calculation. We expect that we could make some profit from it," says the coop's chairperson.

The launching of the compendium Budoucnost. Photo by Radim Hejduk.



Ideas and values that are at the core of the IDEA Books are reflected not only in the coop's selection of book titles but also in its relations with third parties. "We collaborate with 'kindred' coops, be it cafés or print shops. Also, together with other similarly big, or small, publishers, we try to help each other," explains Vendula Bittner. "We prefer to cooperate with smaller companies, embedded in the local economy, instead of corporate giants. We believe in the power of personal approach and we act as people who are part of a larger whole."

Understandably, the company with which the coop collaborates the most is a print shop. Recently, they have partnered with a family-run company in Žďár nad Sázavou. "What we like about this company is also the fact that it is located in a smaller Czech town. The collaboration with them is really good and although they are a bit more expensive than some larger print shops, we see these extra costs as meaningful and we certainly do not plan to print our books somewhere in China."

The cooperative IDEA started its operation during the period when the work on the compendium *Budoucnost* was being finalized and this fact might have been the root of their success to this date. "Thanks to this project we managed to build a community of supporters," says Vendula Bittner. "We knew that through it, we would build our reputation and our target group will get to know us through this compendium. The publication included about thirty authors, and their friends and acquaintances created a critical mass to learn about us as at the beginning." The cooperative also uses other means to reach potential readers – through newspaper articles, interviews, discussions, or cultural actions in some way related to the contents of their published books. "We only rarely use paid advertisements, for example, when it comes with one package with some news article. So if they publish our article somewhere, we are willing to pay for an advertisement there too. However, it has to be a medium we consider worthwhile."

Feedback from the readers to the co-op members is generally positive. "For instance, we received a constructive piece of advice from one of our readers to consider using the Czech transcription of Chinese given names and names of geographical locations. We considered this suggestion, although the Czech grammar and usage are not really clear about this. Nevertheless, we were grateful for this feedback, which was not only critical but also constructive. On the other hand, an example of something less constructive can be the feedback we got from one devout 'market fundamentalist' about 'The Doughnut Economics'. It was mostly about the content of the book and what he thought was missing or should have been included. But as the publisher and translator, we didn't enter into a discussion with him. If he wanted to hold this debate with someone, it should have been with the book's author."

After two years of its existence, the IDEA has two books under its belt, "As I already mentioned, our first project was the compendium '*Budoucnost*,'" Vendula Bittner states. "It is a book that was, from its start, created through collective collaboration and mutual cooperation. The work on it started a long time before we founded the cooperative. It began several years ago in the collective around the journalist and activist Apolena Rychlíková. We got to know her through one of our members Jan Exner, who also authored one of the texts in the compendium. He informed the collective who was finishing the project about our cooperative, and other authors responded positively. I then took part in one of their meetings, presented the publishing house, including our vision of the book." The reaction was positive, and the collective of the authors entered into cooperation with the IDEA. It is not surprising, as the values represented in the texts of the book overlap with the principles of cooperatives. "The ideas presented in the book are close to ours," the chairperson adds. "We also liked the way these thoughts were expressed because our goal is to connect different genres and fields. This compendium, which is a sort of manifesto of the 'New Left', contains dozens of texts about the vision of the future in various aspects of life. They show how the 'New Left' and its supporters see the future of life on planet Earth, in Europe, and the Czech Republic, how they see the future of religion, family, and other critical societal themes."

The collaboration on the book was intense. Vendula Bittner says that the newly forming cooperative decided to involve all of the co-authors in the decision-making. "The whole process of our work was collaborative – from the timeline plan to the graphic design, to revisions or promotion. Given the involvement of many people, it was not an easy process. As a starting publishing house, we went through a big ordeal, but our first book child was born. And we are very proud parents, all forty-plus of us." The chairperson describes how the enthusiasm after the first book led straight to the work on another project: "We naturally learned a lot of things, we became more realistic and enthusiastically started working on another project, the book '*The Doughnut Economics*'. In it, the author explains how and why economic theories, which were created after World War II and whose roots go even further in time, do not by any means reflect the contemporary world and the crises and challenges we face."

The members of the cooperative are currently finishing the translation and editing of another book by the Swedish journalist Katrine Marçal. "The title of the book is 'Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner' and deals with how economics disregards women. It's a captivating in-depth look into the feminist economics," says the coop's chairperson. Another book that the cooperative plans to publish in the summer of 2021 will be something completely different, as the chairperson states. "It is a children's comic book about sex. It is meant for the age group of 7 -10, but there is no talk about the birds and the bees in it, and it does not contain any scientific explanations about procreation either. It is about interpersonal relations and respect, it focuses on the relationship with one's body, on diversity and setting up personal boundaries when it comes to physical contact. It's a book that parents or caregivers should read together with their children. This type of book is missing on the Czech book market and both parents and organisations who work with this topic need a tool that would help them communicate it. We, both as parents and publishers, decided to reach out to them, and we will see where it takes us."

More information:

<https://ideabooks.cz/>

<https://www.facebook.com/ideabooks.cz/>

Veganism, Cooperativism and Solidarity under one Roof

The social cooperative Bistro Střecha, Prague

The social cooperative Bistro Střecha (The Roof) was established in 2017 with a mission to employ homeless people or people with a personal history of incarceration – such as the youth leaving juvenile detention centres or people released from prisons after having served their sentence – whose chances of decent employment would otherwise be slim. The cooperative runs a vegan restaurant and café in the Žižkov neighbourhood in central Prague. The restaurant also provides catering services. It currently employs eight people and utilises the help of several volunteers.

Bistro Střecha operates on three basic principles⁹: The first is the development of social entrepreneurship in practice. As stated in its by-laws, at least 40% of the staff of the cooperative must be people who have experienced homelessness or who have served a prison sentence. In addition to providing decent work and remuneration, the employees are offered other help and counselling in finding housing, debt elimination and the like. The support that official social work services provide to people released from prisons or detention centres is often rather limited and hence the opportunities created by Bistro Střecha may mean “a new beginning” for some of them. According to its by-laws, the cooperative invests 67% of its profit into fulfilling the public benefit goal.

The second principle is cooperative ownership but ties the membership to active participation in the cooperative’s activities. The membership in the cooperative is open to any person who works for the cooperative as an employee or a volunteer. In practice, it means that every employee has the option to become a member after 6 months of being on the staff of the coop. The membership fee is low (about 40 Euros) to minimise the entry barrier. The by-laws further establish the provision of equal conditions for all co-op employees taking into account their specific needs, support for their professional growth and further education.

The third principle is the promotion of veganism as an environmentally sustainable food alternative without animal suffering. The restaurant puts a significant emphasis on the quality of food it serves. The cooperative wants to show that plant-based food can be tasty and affordable and they do it successfully. The prices of meals are reasonable and the food quality is renowned. The menu consists of several traditional Czech dishes which replace animal products with plant-based alternatives while maintaining their popular taste.

The cooperative was founded by six people who came together through their various activities in the Prague alternative subculture. They got to know each other in the community around the Autonomous social centre Klinika, which was created in 2014 by taking over an unused, publicly owned building of a former respiratory diseases clinic. At that time, Klinika was the only squat in Prague. After some time the squat was eventually legalised, only to be evicted by authorities shortly afterwards – in 2019. Between 2014 and 2019, Klinika was a hub for many civic activities.

The cooperative was inspired by a slightly older project Kuchařky bez domova (The Cooks Without Homes) – a social enterprise of homeless women established by the Jako Doma (Homelike) organisation. Besides some motivation to start the restaurant, the founders of Střecha needed also professional skills and two of its founding members had experience in the restaurant business. When planning the new bistro’s “face”, they wanted to distinguish themselves from the already existing offer of vegan restaurants which primarily target customers from the ideologically close subculture. From its inception, Bistro Střecha wanted to be open and appealing to a broader range of customers. The idea was to attract also people who might have objections to veganism. The primary way to gain a wider spectrum of customers has been providing vegan variations on the traditional Czech cuisine and high-quality beer for affordable prices. The concept also targets tourists looking for vegan options.

Moreover, veganism has an important environmental dimension. It is a well-known fact that meat production has a significantly higher environmental impact than the production of plant-based food of the same nutritional level. Another significant negative aspect of meat production is animal suffering, especially at factory farms, where currently most meat production takes place. The restaurant prefers local suppliers, which decreases the carbon footprint of transportation while helping maintain local sustainability, and it has environmentalism anchored directly in its by-laws. In general, the bottom line is to strive to run the restaurant as ecologically as possible.

⁹ <https://www.bistrostrecha.cz/>

At the very beginning, the cooperative secured its start-up funds through a successful crowdfunding campaign on the HIT-HIT platform (www.hithit.cz). The campaign raised a significant amount for the launching of the coop's operation: 300,000 Czech crowns (about 12,000 Euro) from 600 donors. These donors also created the future customer base of the restaurant, as it was reasonable to expect that the people who supported the project would also visit the restaurant. When they found suitable premises, the cooperative members rebuilt them by themselves. This way they cut down their renovation costs while at the same time informing the public via social media about their work, and hence gaining further supporters. The members also contributed with their own private savings and some funding was provided through donations from their friends and relations. Initially, the founders were hesitant to accept corporate funding and business donors and even considered creating a codex to regulate such contributions, but eventually receded from their position – for instance, they accepted a donation from T-Mobile.

Thus far the cooperative has not applied for any grants, even though they would be eligible to get funding aimed at the social group with whom the cooperative works. The decision not to apply for grants, at least for the time being, is based on the experience with their administrative burden and uncertain outcomes, as well as on concerns that grants are usually connected to long-term obligations like maintaining specific working positions. The cooperative members do not want to lose their decision-making freedom including the freedom to dissolve the cooperative if they decided to do it.

Currently, the cooperative has six members. Its decision-making bodies are the general assembly and board board of directors, and it strictly observes the principle of "one member one vote". However, decision-making is not limited to board meetings and the general assembly. All decisions about the restaurant are made collectively, on the principle of equality. Consensual decision-making is preferred. In case consensus is not reached, a new meeting takes place where a decision can be taken by a two-thirds majority (with at least a half of the members present). The democratic leadership of the coop is also defined in the right of employees to regularly (every 14 days) provide feedback on the operations of the enterprise, and hence participate in its management.

After some time, practical experiences shown that it was difficult to implement a model in which everyone decides about all issues in practice. Hence, working groups were formed – each responsible for a specific area of operation (the bar, kitchen, finances, and staff management). Each working group has one designated person in charge. Staff meetings are, therefore, attended mainly by the people leading their respective groups. However, the general questions related to the future heading of the cooperative are discussed collectively. All key decisions related to the operation and financing – for example whether or not to take a loan, are made only by the cooperative members.

Some members of the cooperative posing with the logo. Photo by Bistro Střecha.



Gradually, it became evident that it was rather challenging to maintain the same initial motivation of the members, and keep the same level of their excitement. Many of them struggled with burnout, and it was necessary to come up with less ambitious plans and expectations. The cooperative members have, therefore, secured external support in the form of supervision provided on a friendly basis, which helps them overcome and prevent internal conflicts. Also, the initial vision to provide their staff not only with gainful employment, but also with in-house counselling and social services has turned out to be too ambitious, especially given the fact that the cooperative currently does not have enough finances to have a full-time social worker on its payroll. Attempts to "partially" carry out social work role alongside other duties proved to be ineffective. Nevertheless, the cooperative was able to resolve this issue externally: they found friendly non-profit social work organisations who give them a helping hand.

The main challenge that the cooperative faces is finances. So far the organisation does not generate sufficient profit to cover all its necessary costs and expenses. The priority is to ensure that all employees have their entire salary paid and receive their paychecks on time. To meet this goal, the cooperative members get only half of their remuneration. A significant burden is the paperwork related to running the restaurant. It also includes dealing with the issues of employees who are in debt and have to pay large amounts of money or have to deal with distraint orders.

At first, the operation of the restaurants yielded promising results, allowing for the repayment of debts before the Covid-19 pandemics hit. The cooperative had plans for its further expansion and development. Unfortunately, the years 2020 and 2021 brought about long-term operation restrictions¹⁰. All restaurants had to be closed for indoor dining for several months and could only serve food via delivery or take-away. In that situation, the cooperative decided that the priority is to maintain jobs for people, which they achieved. The restaurant started to offer food delivery and created new posts for a driver and a person managing online orders. The government crisis aid, through the support scheme Antivir, also constituted a significant help.

The cooperative plans to find a larger space to expand its current operation. Furthermore, the members want to build upon experiences learned during the pandemics and broaden their catering services. They would also like to enrich their production with desserts and other products for sale. They plan to use online ordering to increase their offer and sales. The cooperative managed to secure a grant from the Via Foundation intended for the development of social enterprises. They have received financial aid and expert consultation, which the cooperative will use to expand their operations.

Střecha is a place where the local community and people interested in ethical consumption – who have a positive view on the social economy and who value social solidarity – can meet and network. Hence, the cooperative created a scheme through which people can pay for a meal or drink that goes to an unknown person in need. Without any questions asked, a person in need can "redeem" this food when a sufficient number of meals has been prepaid. So far this system has been working well. The Žižkov neighbourhood is a fitting place for this kind of project. The neighbourhood has a long tradition of solidarity organizing and many civic activities take place there. The cooperative members participate in public debates about social issues such as the lack of social housing, the dire situation and rights of people in debt and the like. The members of the cooperative understand that social entrepreneurship cannot solve social problems alone. It requires a system change.

The cooperative purposefully builds its collaboration with businesses with similar values and aims, especially with other cooperatives – for example, the beer they sell is made by the cooperative brewery Poutník, coffee is from the Fair&Bio cooperative roastery and the like. Many like-minded organisations hold meetings in the restaurant or order their catering from it. Střecha is one of the best known "new cooperatives" which are not linked with the previous totalitarian regime and viewed through the prism of suspicion, or of prejudice against the cooperative movement. This successful organisation inspires and motivates the creation of other social and cooperative enterprises.

More information:

<https://www.bistrostrecha.cz/>

<https://www.facebook.com/BistroStrecha/>

¹⁰ Normally, the restaurant was open six days a week (Monday – Saturday) from 10:00 to 23:00.

CASES FROM HUNGARY

Social and Solidarity Economy in Hungary

The Hungarian social and solidarity economy sector is still rather small with only several dozens of active organisations. They either have an official legal status that falls into the category of the social and solidarity economy, or their operation is based on the social and solidarity economy principles. However, many of the “official social and solidarity economy” organisations do not in practice adhere to these principles; they just use this organisational format without getting to the essence of the concept.

According to Hungarian laws and regulations, the social and solidarity economy organisations are not eligible for any tax reductions or rebates which would acknowledge the positive effect of their work on the fabric of society or on the environment. They fall under the same category as for-profit organisations, the service they do for the well-being of society and the environment is not taken into account. The issues typically addressed by the social and solidarity economy organisations are not priorities in the current legislation and politics. Environmental aspects are subordinated to the interests of industrial agriculture, and social policies and provision of social services are defined through the concept of work-based society.

Moreover, some policies affecting social cooperatives even contradict the cooperative principles. Social cooperatives are obliged to have either a local government, a minority self-government or a big nation-wide charity organisation among their members. These are legal persons, who can not work for the cooperative as natural persons, and if a starting cooperative is unable to include a local government or find a charity organisation to become a member, it can not be legally established. Even if a social cooperative has a legal person as its member, this requirement can later give them too much power in the decision-making process: if they leave the organisation, it can not continue its operation. Thus, the autonomy and independence of cooperatives is not secured and the democratic control by its members can also be jeopardised. A social cooperative has to choose between adhering to real cooperative principles or meeting the obligations required by the law.

A Solidarity Response to the Housing Crisis

The Social Housing Agency project of the Utcáról Lakásba association, Budapest

The Social Housing Agency project has been designed and started by a Hungarian association Utcáról Lakásba (From Street to Homes). It is the first organisation in Hungary that implemented the Housing First approach in an attempt to tackle homelessness. After several years of successful cooperation with local municipalities, Utcáról Lakásba developed pioneering social and solidarity economy models for more efficient provision of social housing.

Hungary has been experiencing a housing crisis and no viable public policy solutions are in place to address it. The profit-oriented logic of the capitalist market is one of the main factors causing and reinforcing the problem. Even though the operation of the system is the root cause of many social problems, it is not supposed to be the task of the “market actors” to tackle and resolve them, or even to take them into consideration. The existing institutions, organisations, services, or projects intended to address these problems are often underfunded or are dependent on external grant schemes or irregular support of corporate donors, and various interests related to them. Hence, the continuity of many social services depends on the will of politicians or sponsors, and in some cases, the nature of provided services is influenced by them. The organisations may not have enough professional autonomy to sustain and develop their operation. It is therefore evident that neither the market nor the state and its institutions can overcome the housing crisis successfully and in a sustainable manner. This creates a space, or more precisely, calls for a new approach, based on the principles of the social and solidarity economy.

The Social Housing Agency provides housing market services for real estate owners while, simultaneously, striving to address the lack of affordable housing opportunities for low-income people or people in a difficult financial situation who might be at risk of homelessness. The main goal is not maximisation of profit at any cost, even by taking advantage of social inequalities or unequal power relations of the housing market. Here social solidarity, sustainability, and the creation of trust are as important outcomes of economic transactions as any resulting financial gain. The scheme by-passes regular patterns and procedures in landlords-tenants relations “prescribed” by the mainstream market approach based on mistrust between property owners and their tenants. It is a common practice that renters are obliged to pay a security deposit at the time of signing a lease on a flat or house. The deposit typically equals a two months rent, which means that people can rent a flat only if they immediately have an adequate amount of money at their disposal. This approach creates a high threshold for low-income tenants, or people in financial difficulties, to access decent housing, and their insolvency is often the cause of mistrust on the part of owners, who are afraid they would incur financial losses if the property is damaged or if the tenant leaves with unpaid bills. These “over-secured” market practices force even those property owners who do not want to take advantage of their position on the market as landlords to apply them and play by these rules.

The Social Housing Agency enters this system as a new actor to establish a different type of relationship between property owners and their tenants. It provides guarantees and establishes a system of securities that builds trust between the parties. Thus the strategies based on mistrust can be replaced by an approach and system that is based on trust and solidarity.

The system is set up to accommodate the needs of all involved parties:

- The Utcáról Lakásba association gets in contact with homeowners who do not foresee using their property for a longer period – optimally at least for 3 years. The association signs a contract with them via which it becomes a managing agency of the property. It finds tenants, while taking into account their social situation, and guarantees that the owner gets a fixed rent even if the place is not rented for some time. The rental price is 20% lower than the average market price.
- Utcáról Lakásba takes over responsibility for keeping the property in a good condition and for renovating it before renting it to a tenant. This is an excellent opportunity for those who want to rent out their flats, but do not have enough finances to renovate them to be able to put them out on the market. With this option, even the decreased rental price is a good deal for them.
- The association chooses tenants and stays in touch with them; the property owners do not have to communicate with their tenants, they do not know each other. Their only relation is with the housing agency. If for any reason a tenant has to leave the flat, Utcáról Lakásba looks for a new one and pays the rent to the owner also during the period when the

- property is empty.
- Utcárol Lakásba takes care of all necessary administrative issues related to the property and its management. All utility contracts are transferred to the name of the new tenant, which provides the owners with more security and places the responsibility of bill payments on the tenants. In turn, the tenant can officially register at the property address, and have it as an address on their ID card. This is an important step because the tenant can apply for social services provided by the local municipality. Also, without an official address, it is difficult to find a regular job or resolve administrative issues with the authorities.
- Social work is provided for tenants to support them in managing their life and housing, fostering good strategies for stabilising their situation and ensuring that they avoid the dangers of slipping back into a more unstable housing situation.

Utcárol Lakásba, in cooperation with the Municipality of Budapest, plays a crucial role in the development of a city-wide social housing model. The model upscales the current Social Housing Agency project. Its design uses evidence-based methodology and research data gathered and practical knowledge acquired from the implementation of Utcárol Lakásba's Social Housing Agency project on a small scale. The project has been granted funds from the European Social Catalyst Fund. Besides Utcárol Lakásba, the project partnership includes a research institute and an organisations from abroad with experience in larger-scale social housing projects. The expertise of Utcárol Lakásba is a key element in the development of the municipal plan in which, besides flats owned by private persons, flats owned by the municipality and also by businesses are included. This social housing agency model is connected to other urban development projects and house renovation funds.

Utcárol Lakásba is a non-governmental organisation. It has a board with two co-chairs and more than 10 employees. There are 2-3 permanent volunteers and several others help with renovation works and other specific tasks, like website management. The decision-making process of the organisation is as horizontal as it can be; it is a democratic organisation seeking modes of operation in which employees can influence their working conditions. Subsidiarity and participation in decisions are the cornerstones. Longer-term strategies of the organisation are designed during intensive 3 day-long strategic retreats at which all members of the community can channel in their values, creativity, ideas, needs and contributions.

The organisational structure consists of teams dealing with specific tasks: a social workers team, technical team, fundraising team, communication team, warehouse management team, social housing agency team, the office. There are weekly meetings of the whole association at which respective teams report on their work and issues, and at which decisions affecting the whole organisation are taken.

The Social Housing Agency team is an integral part of Utcárol Lakásba responsible for all issues related to the currently managed 7 houses, recruiting new flat owners into the programme, and also for upscaling of the project in cooperation with the Municipality of Budapest. The team itself has an inner democratic decision-making process that is integrated in the overall structure of Utcárol Lakásba. According to future plans, the Social Housing Agency will become a separate entity.

The main and most important target group is people living in housing poverty, who are at risk of homelessness. Many of these people face discrimination when they want to rent a flat on the regular market even if they are not in the worst life situation. In this case, even if they would be able to overcome the challenge of renting a flat (and providing the triple of the monthly fee at once) they are excluded. The whole operation of Utcárol Lakásba serves their needs, while prototyping programmes which can be applied by other organisations and institutions – the Social Housing Agency is one of such programmes. In the Social Housing Agency system, the owners cannot impose conditions on the tenants. On the rental market, due to widespread racial prejudice, the owners usually refuse to rent their property to Roma people, making it almost impossible for Romas to rent a flat. They also tend to exclude families with small children. In the Social Housing Agency, families are preferred tenants. The Social Housing Agency strives for a socially just system by eliminating the discriminatory practices common in the private rental sector.

Another important target group are those flat owners who want to rent out their flat and have a wider world-view and set of values than to solely aim for the highest possible gain from this transaction. They see further ahead, are more conscious and socially responsible, and feel solidarity with those who possess less than they do. For them, an alternative to the mainstream rental market is provided through which solidarity can be exercised in a safe environment.

Although the programme does not directly target environmental issues, it has some indirect effects. The plan is to help the renters to start using appropriate heating solutions and fuel. It does not apply to the current flats of the Social Housing Agency as they typically have gas heating but it is a general policy for the future. When renovating the flats, the Social Housing Agency aims at the most energy-efficient and environmentally friendly solutions that the physical conditions of the flat and financial situation allow. In upscaling the idea and preparing a social housing agency model for the municipality of Budapest, environmental aspects are integrated into the concept. As this is a larger scale plan of a city government, and not just of a small NGO, new possibilities can be included. One of these is that it will be connected to municipal renovation funds that already have incentives for environmentally friendly construction solutions.

The Utcáról Lakásba association was established in 2014. The Social Housing Agency concept was designed after years of successful provision of social rental opportunities for rough sleepers based on the principles of the housing first approach in cooperation with local municipalities. This in itself is a pioneering work; Utcáról Lakásba was the first to implement such a project providing real opportunities for ending homelessness.

In association's Huts to Homes programme, several districts of Budapest are involved and cooperate. They find dilapidated houses for Utcáról Lakásba, and the association renovates them with the help of volunteers and future residents. They are selected by the social workers of Utcáról Lakásba from applicants that live in huts on the territory of the district. Their transition from the state of homelessness to inhabitants of a decent home is guided by the social workers who help them with all challenges related to this move – from interpreting official letters to support in finding jobs, dealing with the authorities and neighbours. Also, there are many unforeseen obstacles that could cause that people may slip back to homelessness without such support. This programme targets one of the most vulnerable groups of homeless people - those who live in self-made huts. But there are other types of housing crises and other types of the homeless, for example those who live in homeless shelters could not apply for this programme. The other constraint is the number of houses provided by the districts; 4-5 houses are provided each year. This programme is a constant in the work of the Utcáról Lakásba, but they felt the need to increase their scope of action and capacity by implementing new approaches and designing new projects.

House renovation. Photo by Utcáról Lakásba.



The first model they implemented was the Mobile House programme. It was the first economic initiative of the Utcáról Lakásba association. The scheme was co-designed by students majoring in economics and experts from the McKinsey&Company. It is a social investment scheme where the investor buys a mobile house which is placed on the property of the association (bought mainly from donations). Then from the monthly rental fee of the tenants, the investor regains the investment in a 10-years term, even with interests. After this investment period, the mobile house becomes the property of the association. The investor can support another social cause as the funds were not spent, Utcáról Lakásba gets a house and meanwhile, decent housing opportunity was given to a family who hence avoided homelessness. The Social Housing Agency grew out of the Mobile House project and it has integrated it. At present, the Social Housing Agency consists of flats owned by private persons and the mobile houses of the programme managed by the association.

The fact that in this system the stakeholders can make longer-term plans makes the scheme more predictable, more resilient to changes caused by any unforeseen circumstances. The tenants are not exposed to sudden termination of the contract, having to look for a new place to move. For the homeowner, the rental fee is guaranteed even if there is no tenant in the house temporarily. This provides more predictable grounds even in unpredictable situations of any kind.

Taking into consideration the Covid-19 pandemic, there are also positive aspects. The homeowner and the tenant do not have to meet, the social workers who are in contact with the tenants are vaccinated and wearing face masks. A lot of the contacts were temporarily conducted by telephone. These policies reduce the chances of infection. The pandemic also had a positive impact on the market as Airbnb practically disappeared, along with the upward effect on prices. This makes the Social Housing Agency more attractive to homeowners.

The plans are to strengthen and extend the project by involving more flats in the programme. This is an economic activity – based on the social and solidarity economy concepts – which is intended to be expanded as the circumstances and the market make it possible. However, at the moment it is being implemented by a non-profit organisation whose longer-term goal is slow down its growth after a certain point and not to expand over a certain number of clients. Because of these two opposite tendencies, there will be a point in the future where these two activities may need to form two separate legal entities. The Social Housing Agency department of the Utcáról Lakásba association can later become a separate organisation, a social enterprise, that would be able to grow further.

The main problem of the housing sector in Hungary is that there is basically no social rental housing system, flats owned by municipalities and the state constitute just a small percentage of the total number of flats. No social housing is being built. This is one of the factors exacerbating the housing crisis, and it puts people from vulnerable social groups at real risk of homelessness. On the one hand, this situation justifies the Social Housing Agency concept, on the other hand, it creates a huge demand which a pioneering project definitely can not meet. A small NGO can only prototype solutions for a country-wide problem, and prove their potential. The lessons learned and evidence gathered could be a base for national policies, and incentives to effectively handle the housing crisis.

Another more concrete legislation barrier for the Social Housing Agency is that for homeowners taxes are a deterrent. In the current rental housing market, the black economy has a big share, as some owners prefer to avoid the current 15% tax on income from the rent. If somebody decides to rent out their property through the Social Housing Agency, everything has to be legal. In this way, they have to pay the tax, besides getting a 20% lower rental price compared to the market. Laws that would enable the reduction of taxes for the owners who rent out their houses via the Social Housing Agency would increase people's willingness to participate in such programmes.

More information:

<https://utcarollakasba.hu/about-us/>

A Hub Where People Meet and Cultures Mix The Filantrópia charity shop, Budapest

As stated by the report Social Circular Economy, Social Circular Economy – opportunities for people, planet and profit¹¹, the social circular economy unites the circular economy and social enterprise concepts to enhancing well-being of people and the planet. It is an economy that is regenerative and restorative by its own definition, keeping resources in use at their highest value for as long as possible. It replaces the linear economy based on “take, make and throw away”. Instead, the circular economy uses only renewable and sustainable resources and minimises waste and negative externalities.

Social enterprises conduct business to achieve societal good and seek to make a positive change in the world. The social enterprise typically has these characteristics: have a clear social mission, generate majority of income through trading goods or services, reinvest majority of their profits into their mission or organisation, are independent and autonomous from the state, are transparent and accountable. The principles of the circular economy are implemented in the Profilantrop association and in the activities of the Filantrópia charity shop in a particular way, such as in the daily effort to use resources as long as possible: the received goods (donations) have already been used, and through the exchange that takes place in the shop the same goods find new life and new owners. It means reducing almost to zero the production of waste. Another characteristic of a social enterprise is that it has its “beneficiaries”, such as the homeless, the poor, the elderly, children and youngsters. All of these beneficiaries are part of the community which blossoms in the charity shop and in the other projects of the association. It is a win-win-win for all partners of the equation: for the planet, for the economy, for society.

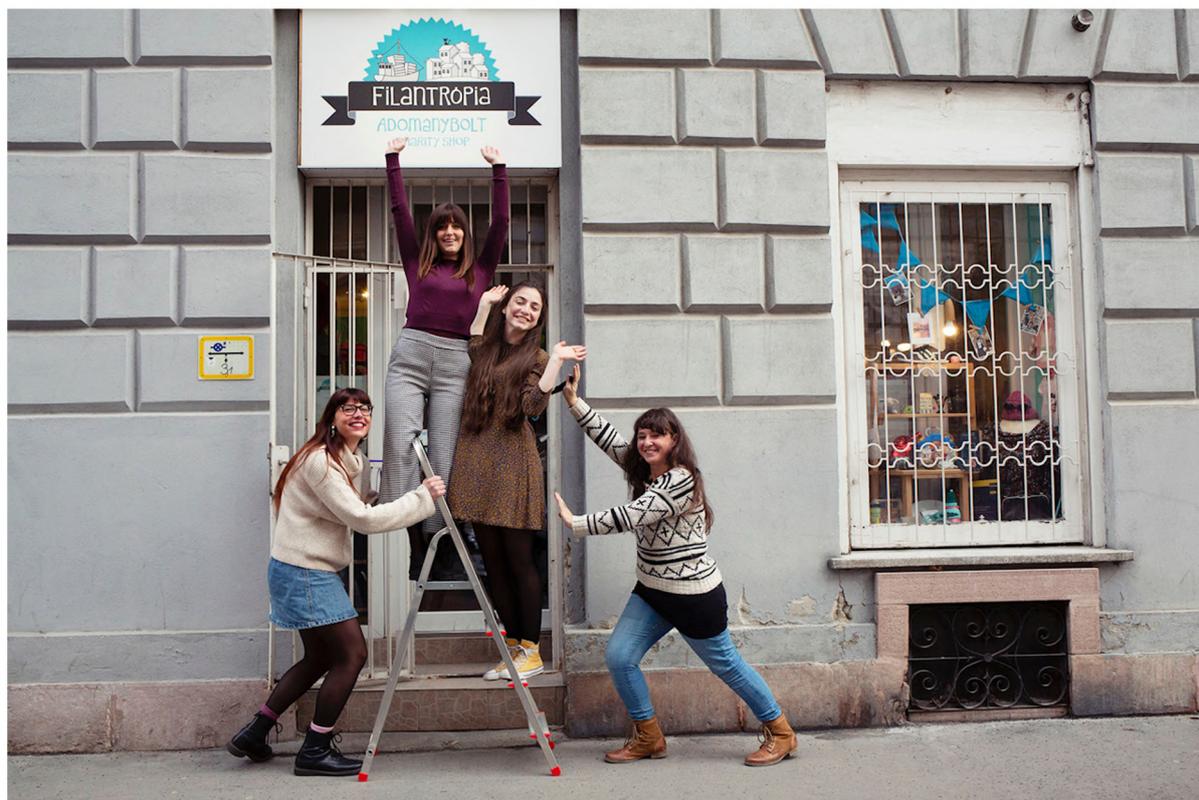
The Profilantrop association applies innovative methods to fight for social and environmental sustainability using an integrative, interdisciplinary, systemic approach combined with participatory methods. The main goal of Profilantrop is to raise environmental awareness, strengthen independence and self-esteem of local communities to find a way to a responsible, sustainable and peaceful lifestyle. Empowerment is a cornerstone of this work, incorporating creativity and skills of people in finding solutions to their problems – instead of waiting for the outside help. The main activities of the association are:

- building professional networks and co-operation in Hungary and abroad;
- organising events to mediate between different groups to find common values and interest;
- promoting a sustainable lifestyle through trainings, discussions, knowledge-transfer; fighting against energy poverty by developing simple appropriate technology solutions which can help improve the quality of life, especially for low income families;
- guidance and trainings for youngsters to give them support to find their ways on the labour market or volunteering opportunities;
- international youth exchange and voluntary projects in order to make the youngsters experience international co-operation.

All the aims of the association are also applied through the Filantrópia charity shop, where the founding principles are put into practice. Inside the shop, you can buy at low prices all kinds of clothing, household items, bathroom accessories and kitchen utensils, jewellery, shoes, toys, sporting equipment. All items come from donations that the shop receive from people, nothing is bought and resold. What cannot be sold because of its condition, is given to other associations that deal with helping the homeless and orphans, to name a few. Volunteers are in charge of arranging donations and managing them with the ultimate purpose not to produce garbage. Beside the Erasmus+ volunteers, there are also other people that spend some of their time helping the association: people who offer their car for transportation, creative artists who offer their services during workshops, photographers who offer to take pictures for free during an event, others who serve as mentors or guides for the volunteers, youngsters that take part in external events and festivals and promote the work of Filantrópia, people who contribute their time, money, materials, physical strength to the cause.

¹¹ Social Circular Economy, Social Circular Economy – opportunities for people, planet and profit. (2017, <http://www.socialcirculareconomy.com/news>).

In front of the charity shop at Aradi utca, Budapest. Photo by Profilantrop.



In the Covid-19 pandemic situation, face-to-face workshops could not take place, but they were conducted online. For instance, during winter 2020, the team organised an online workshop on using recycled products in order to create gifts such as Christmas decorations and garlands made from old ties. During the 2021 lockdown, the team made a video to share with people the dream of reopening. These events were well received by the community of people who regularly attend the charity shop, and have had a good resonance on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram.

The pandemic has changed peoples' daily habits, even the field of charity has been affected by the lockdowns. As a result, the income of the charity shop was lower than in the past. However, this has not changed the will of people to continue to donate but the storage spaces are not big enough, so the shop could not take all of them. Also, the shop implemented the practice of putting the donations in a so-called quarantine for two weeks to ensure that the goods are free of the virus. Under these conditions, the association decided not to accept donations of clothes. However, this rule was unclear to people and often they werenot aware of it , so they kept bringing in the clothes they no longer wear, assuming that the charity shop always accepts everything. This is a misunderstanding because it is not a service to help them get rid of the unnecessary belongings, and often it is difficult to make them understand this. Under the Covid-19 situation, the association asked for support from partners with whom they had collaborated in the past. Additionally, it launched a campaign for getting support and financial donations. There is also a plan to make an online auction involving famous people who can put on a real show to support a good cause.

The Profilantrop association was established in October 2006. Its members have a background in social sciences and research, especially cultural anthropology, which provides a good basis for working with communities. The Profilantrop team uses different techniques and approaches: social projects, community work, green energy and appropriate technology development, youth work, social entrepreneurship, research, IT projects, volunteer and youth exchange programmes, organising of events and festivals, training, workshops. The daily and constant effort of reducing waste, especially clothes and other items, is one of the cornerstones of the association. In addition, over the years, a large number of activities have been implemented in rural areas of Hungary in the field of agriculture. An example is growing hemp for flour and oil and other personal and home care products. All these activities have been carried out with a respect for the environment and work of the people involved.

The association started to work on the establishment of the charity shop in 2015. It won the support from a non-profit organisation which had a programme to help find vacant properties for rent to NGOs, especially small premises, in order to have fewer abandoned places in the city. Thanks to the 500 000 forints received, the association renovated a place in Aradi street, where now the charity shop is located. For the first six months, the people from the association involved in the creation of the charity shop did not receive any salary from the income of the charity shop; it was a volunteer work. In order to pay the first monthly rent, a member of the association decided to pay for it from her own resources.

The team of the Filantrópia charity shop is led by Zsuzsa Mester, but the decision-making process is horizontal: although she is in charge, the decisions regarding the store or future activities are discussed during meetings. They are also very useful for team-building, since they create a space for an open and respectful discussion in which everyone has the opportunity to express their ideas. Another important person in the life of the shop is Sara Del Sal, who accompanies volunteers during their European Solidarity Corps project at the facility, and at the flat offered by the association, as volunteers and Sara live together for the whole duration of their European Solidarity Corps year. Volunteers are free to express their ideas and opinions, propose projects, and deal mainly with donations to the store: they sort them out and decide if the material is useful to be taken to other associations that deal with helping the homeless or orphans.

The participatory self-sustainable projects have multiple benefits: using environmentally friendly techniques and helping poor people to reach less vulnerable states in their life empower them with the experience of holding their life in their hands. The association helps members of its target groups to develop interests, openness, willingness to learn by experience, to think “outside of the box”, to make links between different social or ethnic groups, countries, cultures. It is not only customers coming from different backgrounds who contribute to the creation of a vibrantly diverse environment inside and around the shop, but also volunteers and temporary workers who want to support the community that has been created around it. Every year, the association hosts two volunteers thanks to the Erasmus+ programme and teaches them this new lifestyle based on solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity, mutual aid, altruism, caring and sharing. Thanks to the agreement with their sending organisations, the volunteers are coming from Italy and from the region of Transylvania, Romania, respectively. This is one of many ways in which Filantrópia strives to break down boundaries to be the real meeting point of different cultures. The charity shop is a hub where people meet and cultures mix, people are not treated just as consumers but as human beings. Often, conversations start – people exchange opinions and share their life stories. The Filantrópia charity shop supports local community building projects of an association working in poor communities. Thus, those projects can be regarded as part of the wider reach of Filantrópia, their target groups benefit from the support of the charity shop.

The objectives of the association are evolving and seek to go beyond the current circumstances. For example, the plan is to open a second charity shop, presumably outside Budapest, in a larger space that can accommodate a larger community of people and that is suitable to hold a greater number of practical learning events and knowledge-sharing activities, in order to make such practice constant over time. The goal is to create a workshop where people will learn to repair things, such as textiles but also others. This would also allow the development of artistic partnerships, as the association is in contact with many local artists. The association would also like to carry out an awareness-raising project about the knowledge of charity shops across the country to make other associations running charity shops aware of the existence of the Erasmus+ programme, and to ensure that they can also receive European volunteers. The culture of recycling and reusing has been expanding, but charity shops should not be confused with second-hand shops. The goods that a second-hand shop offers are bought on the market and then resold, and the social purpose, typical for a social enterprise, is missing. The association would like to become a leader in the sector, and with the joint effort of other social enterprises, it would like to create common standards regarding charity shops – a selection of good practices to follow and standards to be observed.

More information:

The Profilantróp association

<http://www.profilantrop.org/en/home/>

The Filantrópia charity shop

Street address:

Aradi utca 4

H-1062 Budapest, Hungary

<https://www.facebook.com/filantropiabolt/>

<http://filantropiabolt.blogspot.hu/>

CASES FROM POLAND

Social and Solidarity Economy in Poland

Although the social economy in Poland has its roots in the cooperative movement of the 19th century, its present understanding has been significantly marked by the period of the totalitarian political regime in the years 1945 – 1989. In people's minds this era is especially associated with forcible establishment of collective farms, and this perception has significantly tainted the general understanding of the social dimension of economy. However, recently a new generation of active people, with different life experiences, have more intensely started to promote the concept and principles of the social and solidarity economy. They establish organisations and movements, some of them enter politics and work in local governments. Also, the academic sphere has started to pay more attention to topics like alternative economic models and related social movements.

Still, in general, the social and solidarity economy is associated mostly with the so-called third sector and non-governmental organisations and its understanding remains rather vague, despite the recent increase in activities and emergence of new initiatives and enterprises. Especially, the movement for alternative agriculture and new forms of food production and distribution, e.g. through food cooperatives or the community supported agriculture system, has becoming increasingly popular, as more people have been focusing on access to good-quality and organic food. Hence, the social and solidarity economy is often being mentioned in the context of environmental costs of conventional agriculture and food production or a lifestyle focused on fast, mindless consumption. In this respect, one of the main promoters of the social and solidarity economy is the Polish branch of the Nyeleni movement for food sovereignty¹². For instance, the Nyeleni Polska Food Sovereignty Forum in 2020¹³ provided a strong impetus for creation of an umbrella organisation of Polish food cooperatives. Another initiative promoting the social and solidarity economy in Poland is the Open Eyes Economy Summit – an annual congress of various social and solidarity economy actors.¹⁴ This event significantly contributes to a better recognition of many forms of the social and solidarity economy, it is also a space and an opportunity for networking. The congress is organised by the think tank Foundation for Economics and Public Administration, an intellectual movement established at the Cracow University of Economics.

Another area where the need for the social and solidarity economy has been emerging is housing. Poland has a difficult housing situation – on average there are about 388 flats available per 1,000 inhabitants.¹⁵ So there is a very high demand for housing, especially affordable housing. Prices on the real estate market are among the highest in Europe, so the possibility to build a house together on a cooperative basis seems to be an attractive solution. In practice, however, building plots in good locations with access to infrastructure are not easily available, as most land in cities has been seized by private developers, which is a big obstacle for potential housing cooperatives. Another difficulty is financing, because commercial banks are not willing to finance these kinds of investments. Despite these adversities, there are a few initiatives directed towards a cooperative approach in accessing and sharing living spaces. An interesting example is the initiative of the City of Wrocław that set aside an area in one of the model housing estates Nowe Żerniki for cooperatives to build housing for their members. It is a large housing estate and 5 plots were marked out to build houses for 5 families. Each plot was available for purchase by a housing co-operative. Today, 3 houses have already been completed and other 2 are under construction. Although this number may seem very low, given the scale of the housing market, but in the Polish context this initiative is exceptional, and it will be interesting to see how the cooperatives will function in practice.

The practice of running a social enterprise (e.g. a cooperative): setting it up, managing its finances or applying for support (both financial and material) is very demanding. Therefore, many initiatives are run informally – mainly food coops. On the other hand, more and more social businesses, established with the main objective to satisfy the needs of their members, are being created and run by foundations, associations or various other types of companies. The most common are cooperative cafés and restaurants or cooperatives providing services (such as bicycle workshops, gardening services) or artistic collectives. But the legal environment is not favourable to the operation of social

¹² See e.g. <https://nyeleni-eca.net/>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loPKakArXAU&t=205s>

¹⁴ <https://oees.pl/en/>

¹⁵ From the Visegrad countries only Slovakia has fewer, in Hungary and the Czech Republic it is about 455 flats per 1,000 inhabitants, e.g. in Germany the number is 509.

and solidarity economy subjects, and the access to subsidies and support for social enterprises is formally very complicated. Hence, the already functioning initiatives pave the way for further undertakings.

It is impossible to mention all organisations that support, develop or promote the idea of the social and solidarity economy. The list would be long and incomplete. Certainly, the concept has been more in the public eye lately thanks to the work of various actors who highlight the negative environmental and social impacts of the currently prevailing economic system and emphasise the need to introduce new economic models. Polish NGOs work together with other European subjects to promote and strengthen the social and solidarity economy movement. The Covid-19 crisis has compelled many people to revise their attitudes towards the value of money and work, and to start thinking about the importance of crisis-resistant society. This crisis may be an opportunity for a broader expansion of social and solidarity economy initiatives and the development without endless growth.

Shortening the Distance, Building the Food Community

The organic market Bazar Ekologiczny Krótka Droga, Wrocław

The story of the Bazar Ekologiczny Krótka Droga started to unfold in 2009 when a group of local activists in Wrocław set up the Falanster – a book store and a café. At that time, a delegation of consumers and farmers from France promoting short supply chains came to visit the city. They were part of the URGENCI¹⁶ network and wanted to popularise the idea of AMAP (French for Association pour le maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne), a French version of the Community Supported Agriculture.¹⁷ They asked the local NGO Fundacja EkoRozwoju, known for its involvement in promotion of alternative food supply chains and support for local and organic food producers, for logistical help and gave a few lectures for organic farmers from Lower Silesia. At that time, there was only about a dozen of such farms in the area, and the farmers already knew each other from local seasonal events, including the "Eco-market" that Fundacja EkoRozwoju had been organising for several years already. All of them were very keen to get access to customers in a big city.

The Community Supported Agriculture is a system of cooperation between customers and farmers. Both the activists from Wrocław and the farmers found the idea of starting a CSA appealing – altogether three people: one from Fundacja EkoRozwoju (Monika Onyszkiewicz), one from the Falanster (Mariusz Sibila) and one person not associated with any organisation (Katarzyna Gawlicz). The farmers were generally quite well organised, many of them had modern farms, but they had their doubts which hindered them from starting a trade system based on trust. From the discussions between the representatives of the French CSAs and the farmers it became evident that this kind of cooperation was not established in Poland and therefore the questions arose whether it could be successfully established with their countryside neighbours. The customers were probably more enthusiastic and trusting, but even for them it was not easy to fully grasp the CSA concept, especially its the solidarity and community feature. It shifts their position from unattached persons for whom the market just meets their demands to partners sharing risks and accepting natural limits of local farming.

In Poland, various arrangements between farmers and customers have always functioned in one way or another, and – as in any long-term relationship – there is some room for closer relations and trust. Numerous neighbourhood markets (some of them still in operation), cars driving around neighbourhoods selling farm produce, side-road sales of produce from family allotment gardens, people travelling to the countryside to buy produce from farmers at bulk (potatoes, eggs, meat) – these are some of the examples. What seemed new about the CSA was the emphasis on sustainability and shared responsibility.

Many things seemed to converge. For several years the activists around the Falanster had held discussions about establishing a parcel system and there were various activities organised by Fundacja EkoRozwoju, such as organic markets held twice a year in the centre of Wrocław. The visit of the URGENCI representatives provided an impetus to start a food initiative in the form of the "short distance market" – Bazar Ekologiczny Krótka Droga based on the principles of short supply chains.

Initially, the market took place twice a month, but quite soon, when it turned out to be a success, it was organised every Saturday, and this is how it has been to this day. It was the first organic and local market of this kind in Poland, and it seems that it is still quite unique because of the way in which it is run, and because of a specific culture that has formed around it.

As a rule, decisions are made jointly with the farmers – each new farmer or seller joining the core of the team had to be approved by others. Long discussions were held on many occasions to what extent a new person's produce would enrich the offer and to what extent would it constitute a competition to the others. In the end, practice has shown that that each farmer had his or her own group of clients. Diversity has turned out to be an enrichment, not a competition. Farmers pay small fees for being part of the Bazar to cover the rent of the place at which takes place. The amount of the fee is related to the amount of space that the farmer needs. These simple, but in practice very demanding, rules related to running the Bazar (joint decision making, sharing the costs of the organisation and development of the

¹⁶ <https://urgenci.net>

¹⁷ See e.g. <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/what-is-csa/>

market) create a sense of shared responsibility and “ownership” of the whole undertaking. Conversations and meetings are a constant element of every Bazar. There are people who come in the morning to buy some of the products, and then, drinking coffee or snacking, spend several hours at the Bazar talking with other buyers and farmers. It is a tradition to have a common meal at the time of closing of the market if there are any leftovers – tasting of various breads, pates, juices or even a soup sometimes. Each year, a special Christmas Eve market takes place – not as a religious event but as a friendly meeting of a group of people with a common vision.

Since the beginning, the number of farmers has been more or less constant – about 12 people, but their composition for various reasons changes. Some of them went professional. e.g. dairy and cheese producers, some of them withdrew from jointly creating the Bazar because they were not able to relate to market’s organisational form. Currently, the number of regular customers is about 200 people and the Facebook group has over 3,000 users. The market offers dairy products such as milk and cheese, eggs, bread, cereals, oils, delicatessen, cakes, juices, fruit preserves, pickles, vinegars and most of seasonal vegetables and fruits.

Local sellers and their customers at Bazar. Photo by Bazar Ekologiczny Krótka Droga.



“In 2013 year, after almost 4 years of functioning of the Bazar, it was clear that our group consists of people looking for alternatives to the current food system. Our target group is mainly people looking for good quality food, often having health problems or very aware of the weaknesses of conventional food production. From the perspective of wealth, it is different. Some come out with full shopping bags every Saturday, others regularly buy selected products, preferring to eat less and of good quality than more, but highly processed, conventional food. At that time, two farmers took the risk of founding a ‘real’ CSA group. They were extremely different people, with different motivations. Unfortunately, these attempts were unsuccessful – for one farmer the problem was too much willingness to please the consumers and the difficulty in assessing her own abilities. The second farmer proposed a model in which there was no room for shared responsibility, transparency and trust,” says Mariusz Sibila, one of Bazar’s founders and organisers. He continues: “The experiment with setting up a CSA group has not worked out so far, but this experience has taught us a lot. First of all, that it is worth sharing what we mean by cooperation, mutual support and shared responsibility. We have learned what our possibilities in terms of delivery, production and finances are, and what our expectations are. The idea of establishing a CSA group has been put on hold for some time, but the need for something more than the ‘Bazar’, something that would complement it and involve the farmers more closely, has not disappeared. The CSA idea is still alive in our minds.”

Over the course of years, the Bazar has changed its premises several times. Its last moving was forced by the withdrawal of the city from the lease agreement on its premises in 2016. Hence, the Bazar had to relocate to the current headquarters of Fundacja EkoRozwoju. "Our cozy, cramped place had been put up for sale by the city of Wrocław. Although the city, has declared its willingness to provide us with new premises for the market and for our educational and artistic activities, the realisation process turned out to be lengthy and very bumpy. The city policy in Wrocław is not very favourable to the activities of non-governmental organisations or grass-root artistic and educational initiatives. The city does offer premises to this sector at preferential rates, but these are usually very badly maintained buildings that require huge renovation investments," explains Sibila.

The activists organising the market share a common dream. They plan to establish a cooperative in which also farmers and other producers will be involved. Their aim is not only to simply set up a food cooperative, but also to find a way to integrate some of the production, and create a complex and integrated circle of growing, processing and sales to get even closer to fulfilling the principles of the food sovereignty movement. For instance, some Bazar sellers offer cakes, soups or dumplings or other ready-made food. Since they do not produce all necessary ingredients, they must order them from elsewhere (e.g. certain types of flour, cane sugar, lentils, chickpeas, hemp seeds, etc.). They have to do it on their own and it is not always easy for them to find all they need in an organic quality. Sometimes they are able to order from the same producer or wholesaler, but each of them has to negotiate the price individually, and their cooperation is limited to sharing information about their suppliers and exchange of contacts with others. Through the cooperative, they might be able to get their supplies in an adequate quality and amount. The cooperative might also be able to purchase processing devices such as an oil pressing machine or coffee roaster to be used by all members of the coop. Step by step, the coop could search for new solutions. "Perhaps one or more employees could be hired, depending on the scale of the project. A small margin on the goods could be introduced and used to cover the costs of transport, rental and maintenance of the premises as well as wages. The coop would skip any middlemen such as wholesalers." describes Sibila their vision for the future.

During the Covid-19 crisis, the Bazar and the community around it have proven their resilience. "On the demand side, as farmers themselves claim, they have never had such good sales of their goods. The sudden fear of being infected with Covid-19, the widespread panic when people were afraid to get too close to each other, forced us to leave the building and operate on the courtyard. After a few weeks, when more farmers wanted to join the market, we decided to look for a different, more independent and larger place. We had to choose from what was available on the market and we picked premises at Tęczowa street, 150 square meters, owned by a private developer. We had to pay a market rate for this facility but we had hopes that we could extend our activity there. We wanted to operate a second market in the middle of the week, find more sellers and organise a café. However, those plans have not materialised for many reasons, but they still are on our 'to-do list'," says Monika Onyszkiewicz, one of the initiators of the Bazar.

During the crisis the idea of the cooperative came to the fore again. It seems that this time more people were willing to join in. Each has different experiences and each has a deep desire to work on alternative economic system. Some of the farmers selling at the market have declared their willingness to join the cooperative as well. "We started to organise meetings at which we discussed how such cooperative would work, we invited more people. We officially established the cooperative on the 21st of March 2021, on the first day of Spring, after several months of discussing the principles of its operation," adds Onyszkiewicz.

As of today, the cooperative runs a simple online store selling goods from several regular suppliers that cannot be purchased at the Bazar, like oyster mushrooms, locally made plant-based yogurt, organic coffee, locally made tempeh, organic olive oil and olives from Andalusia. Also, some farmers who sell at the market are gradually adding their products to the shop offer.

In twelve years of its existence, the the informal community that has solidified around the Bazar has clearly shown its strength and resistance to crises. Bazar's places of operation may change, new farmers may join in or some of them may leave. But the number of customers who come to the Bazar every Saturday is still about 200.

At present, the biggest challenges are financial self-sufficiency of the Bazar and securing its stable premises. The community of farmers together with Bazar's main organiser Mariusz Sibila currently faces the problem of its further development. "This is not an easy task, as the concept of the social and solidarity economy, of which the Bazar is undoubtedly part, is not very popular in Poland. We straddle two spheres – the sphere of volunteering and that of a business. Trying to take into account social,

ethical and environmental aspects while having to deal with competitors who do not care requires a lot of effort. The story of our community is still unfolding. We plan to develop the cooperative to complement the weekly Bazar and involve more local farmers. We also want to build something more than just a store to include a coffee roastery, bakery and regular cafe. As a matter of fact," Sibila continues,"it all started from thinking about Utopia. In a sense, Utopia has never died. This piece of a poem by Mario Benedetti has been our inspiration:

How can I believe, said the man,
that the world has run out of Utopias?
How am I to believe, said the man,
that the Universe is a wreck?
Even if it is,
or even if death is just silence,
how am I to believe, said the man,
that Utopia exists no more?"¹⁸

More information:

Bazar Ekologiczny Krótka Droga
<https://www.facebook.com/krotkadrogabazar/>
Kooperatywa Tęczowa
<https://www.facebook.com/skleeeep/>

¹⁸ <https://www.poeticous.com/mario-benedetti/utopias>

Grown in the City

The community garden Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty, Wrocław

Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty (The Ołbiński Open Garden) is a community garden in Ołbin – a housing estate in Wrocław. The neighbourhood is divided into four parts by so-called family allotment gardens¹⁹ that take up about one fourth of its territory. These family allotment gardens are clusters of small plots of land where in the past people could grow their own vegetables and fruits, while having a place for recreation. As a rule, they were used only by allotment holders and were inaccessible to outsiders, despite their high environmental, historic and landscape value, and their potential to become spaces for various social activities. They are usually located close to residential areas.

In 2017, a strategic document laying out plans for the development of the city of Wrocław was issued by the city authorities. It presumed that the allotment gardens would be designated for the construction of new buildings. This proposal, however, was met with opposition on the part of a group of young people who actively expressed their disagreement with the plans and decided to establish a community garden there. They organised a series of meetings, put together petitions and contacted the media. As a result, the city authorities backed off, and reclassified the area as a green zone, although this change is still formally pending approval by the City Council. The second important motive for establishing the community garden was the desire to share knowledge about ecology, gardening and garden architecture, and to organise historical walks for both residents of the estate and allotment gardens owners. The activists wanted these two groups, who so far had not have the opportunity to meet, to get to know each other. This would allow the garden owners to share their knowledge and experience, which so far has not been widely available.

Currently, after several years of active and intensive work that attracted many supporters, the activities of the community garden have been broadened to make use of the food potential offered by the allotments. Hence, an informal marketplace has been established to provide an opportunity for cashless exchange of food produced on the plots, preserves and tools. The inspiration for this formula came from community gardens in Germany and England.

Community gathering at the garden. Photo by Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty.



¹⁹ Rodzinne Ogrody Działkowe in Polish, commonly abbreviated as ROD

The organisation of the community is based on different circles of involvement: at the centre is the core of the founding group of 5 people altogether. Another circle encompasses about 6-7 people working closely together, carrying out various activities, some of them paid. The third circle is made up of people who are regularly involved in the running of the garden, have their own keys to the garden house, and take care of the place. This group is the largest, it consists of about 20 people. Additionally, there is a whole group of supporters, people who visit the garden when open events are organised, such as workshops about making preserves, joint construction of small architecture elements, sometimes film screenings or even dancing.

Formally, the tenant of the plot is an NGO – Fundacja Plastformers (The Plastformers Foundation) which has the status of a social enterprise. In practice, all decisions related to activities taking place in the garden or involvement in various initiatives are made jointly by the community. Decision-making matters are first discussed among the so-called core of the garden, i.e. people who have been active “from the beginning” and feel that they represent the group formally – the already mentioned group of 5 people. Then the matters are discussed with other people involved in the activities of the garden.

It is the garden’s community that constitutes its most valuable resource and determines how resilient the initiative is in the face of a crisis. Thus far it seems that the community has been building its resilience efficiently, and its strength lies in its openness to new members, including other NGOs that in the garden organise their own activities compatible with the character of the place: for example, an open meeting on how to start a community garden or an outdoor film screening.

This open formula of organisation is demanding – it requires mutual trust and a lot of time to maintain good communication among members. However, so far the method has been successful and it seems that the activities carried out, and the form in which they are implemented are winning allies. In general, the boards of allotment holders are perceived as a rather conservative and hermetic environment – usually the allotment gardens are closed to outsiders, there is distrust towards new people, especially the youth, who are stereotypically associated with loud parties. So far, the Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty’s activities have led to the opening of the allotment to a broader community. It literally opened its gates to nearby residents to freely walk about. Such small changes are in fact a big success, unique within the city-wide context.

Since the beginning of the Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty, the coherence of its programme and consistency in its implementation, including with spontaneous additions, has been evident. Each season is dedicated to a specific leading theme. At the beginning, in order to attract residents to the allotments, activities were directed from the outside to the inside, for example – joint building of a garden shed, painting pictures of the allotments landscape, organising walks through the allotments or creating allotment poetry. Then a direction changed from the inside to the outside, it was up to the allotment holders to show their knowledge and experience through activities such as the market, the exchange of crops, tools and recipes, and the like. Today the group is expanding further, and is open to more and more people, as well as animals and plants. The activities focus on involving as many institutions as possible, people who could benefit from the garden’s potential and develop it: thus, the garden received help from architects, and is now used by senior citizens, kindergarten children from a nearby school or people with disabilities from a nearby centre.

Different media are also used to communicate in order to reach different age and social groups (besides social media also leaflets and posters). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some activities had to be moved to the Internet. These took the form of video tutorials or online lectures accessible to anybody. When the restrictions were less severe, events were held as planned in the garden area, with the recommended number of participants. There was a registration requirement for the events. Despite these restriction, the feedback from participants was positive and accessibility of the events was rated highly.

The future plans are to focus on the promotion of the environmental and social value of the allotment gardens. A very important point is the use of local food produced on these plots of land, especially surplus produce that could be sold or given to local people. Other plans are to create a network of partner gardens in the country, which through regular cooperation and joint initiatives could have a real impact on people’s change in attitudes about food. This would require systematic work and the involvement of different municipal units and NGOs. It seems that the Covid-19 crisis has increased the interest of urbanites in gardening or growing their own food, even if it is just on a few square meters of their balcony. Poland has been experiencing a heightened demand for the ownership of plots of land in family allotment gardens, and prices have gone up considerably. These circumstances are very favourable for strengthening of the community around the Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty, and there is a hope that new people will join the community and the plans to enlarge the area of garden and extend its

activities will come to fruition.

Contact:

Ołbiński Ogród Otwarty
<https://www.facebook.com/OlbinskiOgradOtwarty/>

Fundacja Plastformers
<https://plastformers.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/plastformers/>

CASES FROM SLOVAKIA

Social and Solidarity Economy in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the support for subjects whose primary economic aim is social officially falls under the umbrella term the “social economy”. Policies belonging to this category have been for many years focused on creating employment for people who are disadvantaged in finding work on the “regular” labour market, due health disabilities or due to their social characteristics (e.g. the Roma, women 45+, the long-term unemployed).

The new Act on Social Economy and Social Enterprises passed in 2018 was presumed to bring about new development opportunities. A social enterprise could be any entity that meets the conditions stipulated by the law and obtains a respective registration from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family. Social enterprises should strive to serve common public or community interests and provide some public goods. They should use at least 50 percent of their profits to reach this goal.

By the beginning of May 2021, the registry of the Ministry recorded 336 social enterprises. In September 2019, relatively shortly after passing of the new bill of law, the number of such enterprises was just 33. This increase may in part be caused by the fact that the new law promises to introduce several support schemes for social enterprises. This may attract also those who, in fact, are more interested in potentially accessing the financial aid rather than genuinely developing their social entrepreneurship (as it happened in other countries such as Poland and Hungary with some enterprises established through the EU support schemes for social cooperatives.)²⁰ Thus, only time will show how many of these subjects will be in operation for a longer period, although – undoubtedly – the number of non-registered social enterprises may, in reality, be even higher. At present, registered social enterprises employ about 1,000 people.

According to the new legislation, registered social enterprises should be able to obtain governmental support from several schemes. The most common and widely utilised are state contributions to salaries of employees, which may, in some cases, be as high as 100 percent of their income. Another direct support should be access to loans or non-refundable grants but, in fact, it is difficult to meet the conditions. Indirect forms of governmental aid are lower tax rates and tax allowances, preferential treatment in case of public procurements²¹ of goods and services and vouchers to stimulate demand for goods and services provided by social enterprises. To support further development of social entrepreneurship, Regional Centres for the Social Economy have recently been established in each region of Slovakia as advisory institutions. In 2020, the Association of Subjects of the Social Economy was established and obtained a status of an umbrella organisation from the Ministry. Thus far it has 70 members.

During the Covid-19 pandemics, the Ministry has not put forth any special scheme to aid the social economy and none such scheme is under preparation. Worse still, at the beginning of 2021 the Ministry basically stopped regular payments of governmental subsidies. Hence many social enterprises were left for two months without financial means, which jeopardized their very existence – especially those that had to close down their production or services provision.

In the post-pandemics plan for economic reconstruction, the social economy is mentioned only marginally. Its governmental support should be provided mostly through so-called “social public procurement”. The plan states that “where possible and adequate, the realisation of an investment via some subject of the social economy may be viewed as a criterion of preference. Instead of supporting one-time or short-term public works, this approach may possibly support sustainable employment linked to systematic economic and social integration of disadvantaged people.”²²

Despite new opportunities that the new legislation has potentially created and despite relatively improved institutional background, it is obvious that the Slovak government has adopted a rather narrow definition of what the economy based on social concerns and values of social solidarity could

²⁰ See Riečanská, Eva et al. A Volatile Present and an Uncertain Future. Mapping cooperative and social economies in the Visegrad Countries. Authors, 2015, Available at:

https://nova.utopia.sk/documents/20123/0/Volatile_present_eng_online.pdf/f9a8ec08-39dc-d2c2-dbfd-654978ff57c7?t=1619698997835

²¹ 6 percent of all public procurements realized by public institutions must be carried out through a registered social enterprise.

²² These few mentions were only added to the document after the round of public commenting on the strategy on the part of other institutions and the public. Available at: https://www.planobnovy.sk/files/dokumenty/cely_plan_obnovy.pdf

mean and how it could be developed in practice. Overall, social enterprises are mostly viewed as subjects providing employment to the disadvantaged – usually people with disabilities. The social enterprise is hence regarded as a tool of “economic and social integration”. Moreover, these subjects are on the margins of political and institutional interest of the current Slovak establishment.

Officially, state institutions in Slovakia do not utilize the concept of social solidarity or the social solidarity economy as it is understood, for instance, by RIPESS²³: as an ethical and values-based approach to economic development that prioritizes the welfare of people and planet, over profits and blind growth. In this understanding, the social and solidarity economy seeks systemic transformation that goes beyond superficial change in which the root oppressive structures and fundamental issues remain intact. Thus far, this subject-matter has attracted very little academic interest and no systematic research has been carried out. Hence, at the time of writing of this publication, no research data were available that would sketch out the basic contours of the social and solidarity economy in Slovakia.

While organisations and initiatives working along the lines of the social and solidarity economy or deliberately striving to put its values into practice exist, they mostly operate outside of the officially recognised frameworks of the “social economy” or “social entrepreneurship”. Some of them are various civil society organisations, some of them work as informal initiatives. Nevertheless, these initiatives are rather scarce. In contrast to neighbouring countries, in Slovakia there is almost no visible social and solidarity economy movement – for instance, there are no networks or umbrella organization that would unite social and solidarity subjects, and initiatives like community supported agriculture have not yet really taken roots. Social cooperatives – as globally the most widespread organisational model of the social and solidarity economy – do not exist in Slovakia and cooperativism as such has officially no special support.²⁴

²³ RIPESS is a global network of continental networks committed to the promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy. For the definition of SSE see: <http://www.riposs.org/what-is-sse/what-is-social-solidarity-economy/?lang=en>

²⁴ The new Act on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises lists cooperatives as one of possible organisational forms, but it does not provide grounds for any special treatment or support for cooperativism. The law only mentions as advantage that subjects should have a democratic decision-making structure, but the rule of “one person-one vote” is not mandated. Many cooperatives are in reality cooperatives only formally.

The More Bikes, the Better

The informal initiative Cyklokuchyňa, Bratislava

Cyklokuchyňa (the Bike Kitchen) was established in 2011 with a vision to promote the use of the bicycle as the best means of transport in the city, and also to help people to easily acquire bicycles and learn to repair them. It was started by a group of bicycle enthusiasts who began collecting old, non-functional bicycles. From their parts, they reassembled functional bicycles and started giving them to people. Therefore they decided to organise the first bicycle exchange in Bratislava and named it Cyklokuchyňa. "From the very beginning, we tried to complement our activities with cultural events. They were supposed to contribute to the popularisation of cycling. The bicycle as such has been technically the same for almost 100 years, and nothing much has changed about it. So Cyklokuchyňa has set itself the goal of promoting the culture of cycling," says Tomáš Peciar, one of the founders of the initiative.

Very quickly, many cyclists started to seek Cyklokuchyňa's help and advice. The founders realised that the best solution would be to set up an open cycling workshop. Anyone could come to the workshop and repair his or her bicycle for a voluntary contribution. They gained their first premises thanks to the participatory budget in Bratislava. The workshop was initially in the YMCA building on the second floor, which was far from ideal, as people had to carry their bikes upstairs. At the same time, Cyklokuchyňa shared these premises with other communities of activists who were involved in the participatory budget. "However, Cyklokuchyňa benefited from having this space. Our community was formed and activities started to be regular and systematic," says Peciar. From the beginning, consultations about bike repairs were done on a solidarity basis – if people did not have enough money, a small contribution was enough, and if someone could contribute a larger amount, he or she contributed. Other resources came from the sales of repaired old bicycles. The biggest wave of interest in them was about 8-10 years ago, when historic bicycles became a fashion among hipsters, especially for driving about the city.

Later, Cyklokuchyňa moved to the center of Bratislava. At that time, the Old Town self-government approved a project that combined non-commercial and commercial activities, and modified shipping containers served as the premises for the projects of several organisations. Cyklokuchyňa was located in one of the containers. However, after the change in the local self-government, the project had to end and the initiative had to move again.

The activists found a suitable space near one of Europe's main Eurovelo network²⁵ bicycle paths at a neglected parking lot close to the Danube river embankment. The whole part of the river bank was rather dilapidated and the placement of Cyklokuchyňa there in fact brought some new "life" to the location. However, the whole process took some time. As the activists put it, they "kept bugging the mayor and other people in charge", who eventually gave them permission to place two connected containers to the spot. The activists bought and repaired the containers thanks to a grant from the Actors of Urban Change programme.

On the waterfront, they started organizing regular workshops, where people could learn how to repair their bikes – adjusting the brakes and derailleurs, repairing flat tires, and the like. The workshops usually take place once a week in the evening. Some workshops last up to three hours and people leave them with at least some basic skills. They are funded by voluntary contributions from participants. The goal is to teach people to be able to do minor repairs on their bikes by themselves, while simultaneously promoting the culture of urban cycling

The Cyklokuchyňa collective has always organised bicycle rides The Critical Mass²⁶ in Bratislava. They regularly take place on the last Friday of every month. Each ride has a specific theme – for example, climate change or the history of anti-fascist resistance in Bratislava. The activists also assembled their own sound system powered by a car battery. They place it on a DIY "tricycle" and use it to play music, mainly songs with a bicycling theme, during the rides. "I dare to say that we probably have the largest playlist of bicycle songs in the world," boasts Peciar. The sound system is used on various other occasions too: they lend it free of charge to various groups of activists or organisers of demonstrations and protests – a teacher's strike, climate marches, anti-fascist events, the rainbow pride. The sound system also has its own FB page.²⁷

²⁵ <https://en.eurovelo.com/>

²⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass_\(cycling\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass_(cycling))

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/hurasoundsystem/>

Recently, Cyklokuchyňa enlarged its premises with another container and built a small community garden right next to the containers. The expansion of the space allows the collective to organise more cultural events, such as regular concerts of various bands. In recent years, they have organised one concert every week. But it is not only concerts, the space has also hosted alternative dance, the Slovak championships in beat-boxing or film screenings – often in cooperation with other initiatives. All events are open to the public and organised by the Cyklokuchyňa community. Every September, on the occasion of the annual Car Free Day, the team organises a festival.

In the third container, a small community “bar” was set up providing refreshments during events. Also, together with the Vagus association that works with the homeless, Cyklokuchyňa activists collect free food from supermarkets and give it away to people. All drinks and food offered at the bar are for voluntary contributions. These are then used to finance various activities and further development of the initiative. All members of the team are volunteers and work for free. “Even though we are usually able to secure what we need either for free or for a significant discount, there is always something that needs to be paid for. I think that if the bar were open non-stop, it would be possible to make a living from the income. But we don't want to formalise ourselves, which would require complying with all kinds of regulations and rules to follow if you have a regular business,” says Peciar.

A flat tire workshop. Photo by Cyklokuchyňa.



In 2020, an art installation entitled the Cyclosphere was added to the community garden. It is a hemisphere made of old bike wheels connected by tapes. The activists plan to light the artifact up with led lights to make the place more interesting and to further promote the cycling culture in the evenings. It is possible to go inside the structure and observe the sky from the inside through the wheel frames. Especially families with children like to use it in this way when passing by.

An important part of Cyklokuchyňa is – as its name suggests – cooking. The community recently acquired a large pot in which it can make 100-150 servings of goulash or other food. The cooking takes place before and during events or at the events to which Cyklokuchyňa is invited by other initiatives. Food always brings people together and helps to create a friendly atmosphere in the community. The team has several people who actually did not join the initiative because of bikes, but because they like to cook and want to show their culinary talent. As one of the first initiatives in Bratislava, Cyklokuchyňa started cooking vegan or at least vegetarian dishes. Although not all members of the community are vegans or vegetarians, they try to cook food that is inclusive and respect the environment and climate. They often distribute food to homeless people for free. Otherwise, it can be purchased for a voluntary contribution, which is another way to raise funds for activities. Other initiatives or people from vegan restaurants in the city often help with food preparation.

The pot, as well as the bar, are also used by others during their events organised in Cyklokuchyňa. In Bratislava, there are relatively many students on the Erasmus+ exchange programme. Many come to borrow bicycles from the initiative, but since they usually do not have much money, instead of paying they can cook a culinary specialty from their country of origin. These cooking events are always a great success and people always try hard to cook something special. The Cyklokuchyňa collective regularly cooks meals, for example, at the Critical Mass in Vienna, where it also each year organises one of the after-parties.

The initiative is based on the activity of volunteers – each year about 10 people offer their regular help. One part of it is a "stable core", some people change. They either leave to pursue other interests, have children, move out from the city, etc. However, new people have always come so far and have given this space a bit of themselves – something new and different. "We are a 'do-it-yourself' community. It also means that people who are skilled or experienced in certain areas, and come up with some ideas for activities then also take it upon themselves to 'lead' others or organise whatever is needed to make things happen. Decisions are taken by consensus. We have no fixed organisational structure or formal procedures. Our membership is hence 'fluid.' People come and go, all who want to help on regular basis are welcome, if they agree with our mission and our values, and we talk about them a lot. Our community is open to all people, the only thing it does not tolerate at all is any form of hatred and xenophobia," explains Peciar.

From the very beginning, Cyklokuchyňa has been connected with the NGO Cyklokoalícia which unites various groups and individuals supporting the development of bicycle transport. The association takes an active part in the planning of public spaces and the preparation of networks of bicycle paths in various Slovak cities but also outside their territories. In cooperation with the organisation Cyklokoalícia (The Bike Coalition) and some volunteers, Cyklokuchyňa operates a DIY White Bikes²⁸ bike-sharing in Bratislava. The initiative was launched in 2012 as a response to the inability, or unwillingness, of city officials to establish a similar system of public bike-sharing. The bike-sharing system uses an open-source software²⁹, so it can be downloaded and used by anyone in the world. At present, it is used also by activists in other places in Slovakia and abroad.

Besides Cyklokuchyňa, there are also a few other bike repair shops in Bratislava. They are not perceived as competition; on the contrary, they are seen as natural partners for cooperation. The motto of Cyklokuchyňa is "The more bikes, the better". The other workshops are located in residential areas and thus have a slightly different character, and are more focused on cooperation with local communities. While Cyklokuchyňa was still located in the city centre, people from the neighbourhood used to stop by, and a local community around the workshop was formed, but no people live on the waterfront and in the surrounding areas. However, this allows the initiative to organise concerts and other cultural events that they could not organise in the centre, but the target group is different – the attendants are like-minded people from all over the city and its environs, and tourists taking bike trips along the European bicycle path. Hence, also the nature of people's interaction and relationships are different.

The collective also cooperates with the city of Bratislava and is involved in the preparation of plans for revitalisation of the waterfront. They try to ensure that their place will remain on the waterfront even after it is rebuilt, as it provides an interesting and needed diversity. Otherwise, only expensive and commercial spaces would take up the waterfront and the whole area would be completely gentrified. Cyklokuchyňa provides space for everyone and access to its services is governed by the principles of solidarity – financially contribute mainly those who can afford it. The city magistrate plans to rebuild the parking lot and relocate another initiative there, for instance the T3 Tram – a community that bought an old tram car from the city's transportation authority and turned it into a cultural space where exhibitions, discussions and concerts take place. Cyklokuchyňa has the ambition, in cooperation with the magistrate, to transform the entire adjacent part of the waterfront into a community area. The activists would like to attract other initiatives and activities to the place and create a unique space in which solidarity values will prevail, which will be inclusive, and which would make this key and unique part of Bratislava's public space accessible to everyone without discrimination.

More information:
<https://cyklokuchyna.criticalmass.sk/>

²⁸ <https://whitebikes.info>

²⁹ More information about the software can be found at: <https://opensourcebikeshare.com>

Sport is a Community, Not a Commodity

The Kozmos football community

The scope of the social and solidarity economy is broad, and it does not encompass only the manufacturing of goods or provision of services. It also involves initiatives that, at first sight, do not carry out any economic activity but adhere to the principles of democracy and solidarity, respond to the current economic situation, and directly intervene in the economic sphere.

The Kozmos football community is a democratic self-governing football club founded in Bratislava in 2019. The idea to establish a football community had come about one year earlier and is based on the concept of "calcio popolare" or people's football. It is a reaction to the commercialisation of sport, and an effort to bring football back to the people, to the community. "Recently, football has been primarily a business. It is associated with corruption, violence, racism and hooliganism, which crush the principles of this beautiful game. However, we believe that football has a huge emancipatory potential, it can connect people, create communities, be a goal in itself and a means of social change," states the manifesto of the football community.³⁰

The community drew inspiration from the success of alternative football clubs such as AKS ZŁY from Warsaw or NK Zagreb 041, but also from the experience of the anti-racist DIY football tournaments The United Colours of Football Bratislava and the UAFA Cup Trenčín, which some of the community founders have been organising for many years. "We started reaching out to people in the circles of our friends and later also to people we didn't know so well. We prepared an open meeting where we presented our vision. We wanted to establish a club that would not only aim at the best possible results but also promote democracy and solidarity in practice. About 20 people came to the first meeting, and we engaged them. Most of them are still with us. It was interesting that some people who wanted to participate were not interested in football at all. They were attracted by the values on which the club is built. From the very beginning, there were also a lot of women involved who are still active, but they didn't want to play football," says Michal Riečanský, one of the founders of Kozmos.

According to Kozmos, official, state-sponsored football is full of bureaucratic procedures and fees, the meaning of which is often unclear. The organisational structures of the Slovak Football Association are strictly hierarchical and authoritarian, and have only a small number of democratic elements. However, the official league competition is the largest organised football competition in Bratislava, and that means participation in regular matches. It was the main reason why the community decided to join the league. In fact, it was the only reason why members of the community founded a civic association and registered it with the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. Without this incorporation, the club could not be registered in the Slovak Football Association. The club was originally intended to have the legal form of a cooperative. This was not possible, however, because according to Slovak authorities, the organisation does not carry out any economic activity, and hence its registration as a cooperative was rejected.

The community has three guiding principles: self-government, solidarity and cooperation. These are reflected in the structure and activities of the club. Self-government is implemented through democratic decision-making. Key decisions are taken by all members at the general assembly, which is held at least twice a year. It discusses a variety of topics, from financial reports to strategic visions. All members have the right to vote on the plans of the organisation and approve reports of action groups. The members elect a statutory representative of the club and a coordination group, which is in charge of the club in the period between general assemblies. The coordination group has a mandate of one year. Their members further have the right to call an extraordinary general assembly and become members of action groups. The action groups are open also to non-members.

In Kozmos, cooperation means that the responsibility for running the club and for individual tasks is shared by the whole community. People are divided according to their own interests into action groups, whose activities are coordinated by the Coordination Group. The club has 8 action groups and they are in charge of, for example, communication with the public, i. administration of social networks or preparation of media presentations, international cooperation, communication with the football association, pre-match preparation, organisation of trainings or preparation of merchandise booths and communication with fans in the stands.

³⁰ <https://fkkozmos.sk/mnfst.pdf>

The community fan zone during one of matches. Photo by FK Kozmos.



The community wanted to have a collective statutory body comprising the entire Coordination Group, but the Ministry of Interior rejected this proposal as well, with an argument that it would constitute an undemocratic [sic!] element in the by-laws. The mentioned club from Zagreb encountered a similar problem, but in the end, they managed to push their proposal through. Therefore, Kozmos believes that this will also be possible in Slovakia, as other legal entities may have a collective statutory representative.

Members pay solidarity membership fees the amount of which varies. It is determined according to the financial possibilities of individual members. It is lower for students or retired people. Membership fees can be waived if necessary. The principle of solidarity is further manifested in the goal of the club – to create relations of solidarity not only between and among its members, but also with people outside of the organisation. It is funded exclusively through membership fees and refuses corporate sponsorship to remain independent. In 2020, 96 people were members of the community. As a result, it was not very affected by the pandemic crisis. On the contrary, the club had a lot of free resources and waived membership fees. Kozmos also plans to set up a social fund, funded from membership fees. Members could apply for contributions from the fund if they find themselves in a difficult life situation. If the fund accumulates some extra resources, the community is considering supporting various external solidarity projects.

Solidarity values are inscribed in all activities organised by the club. From its beginning, the club has been looking for ways to work with non-members. They wanted to support people from Kopčany, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Bratislava, especially young people from poor families mostly of the Roma ethnicity. The community started cooperating with them through personal contacts with the community and social workers in the area. After several months, Kozmos together with a local street work organisation hosted a football tournament for the youth from the neighbourhood.

Kozmos also opened trainings for the general public. Anyone can come to take part in the training at any level of skills. Thanks to open trainings, Kozmos has also managed to create a women's team. They had a plan to form a women's team right at the beginning, but they did not find enough women interested in playing football. The team has been training together since 2020, but due to the pandemic, it has not yet been officially registered and entered in official competitions. A specific problem is that the women's leagues are only higher competitions. Lower local leagues do not yet exist in women's football in Slovakia. The higher league entails a lot of travelling, which could be a strain on club's budget. But in Kozmos, they also plan to take on this challenge. Women have so far participated only in various football tournaments.

Kozmos considers itself to be "part of a pan-European movement that sees football not as a commercial show, a business plan, a place for nationalist propaganda, a farm for super-talents, or source of income for sports TV channels, but as a sport for the people. This movement perceives football as an activity that belongs to the people who do it – that means the players, fans and activists, simply all those who see football as a space for democracy, freedom, creativity and self-realisation."³¹

More information:
<https://fkkozmos.sk>

³¹ Ibid.

The Public Enterprise that Feels Like a Family

The social enterprise Agro – drevinový ekosystém BBSK, Rovňany

The regional government taking an active part in supporting the local social and solidarity economy is a fairly new phenomenon in Slovakia. The main change in this respect was induced by the regional election in 2017 and also by the new Act on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises introduced in 2018, which establishes the grounds for the development of the local social economy. The Act has recently been put into practice by the Self-Governing Region of Banská Bystrica (BBSK). It is an illustrative example of how regional governments can mobilise public resources and provide both direct and indirect support to achieve a tangible economic change in a relatively short time.

In Slovakia, self-governing regions are responsible, among others, for social services, they establish and maintain secondary schools and take care of the regional road infrastructure. In order for the BBSK³² to be able to further expand its activities, the BBSK Development Agency was created. One of its first activities was the establishment of an agricultural social enterprise in the village of Rovňany, in the Poltár district, located in the southern part of central Slovakia. The district belongs to the so called least developed districts characterised by a significantly higher long-term unemployment relative to other parts of the country, and this factor played a role in the selection of the location for the enterprise.

According to Milan Vaňo, an expert on the social economy development at the BBSK Development Agency, behind the establishment of the enterprise was the idea to create an agroforestry ecosystem in the region. The criterion was that it should be set up in one of the least developed districts of the region. Subsequently, the company obtained the status of a registered social enterprise from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family, which makes it eligible to apply for the support provided to these enterprises by the state on the basis of the new social economy law.

Since its inception, the main goal of the company has been reduction of unemployment through creation of jobs. However, this is not its only goal. In the past, the Poltár district was mostly agricultural but after the regime change in 1989, the scope of agricultural production has been gradually declining. The unemployment in the district has significantly risen and people are leaving. The situation is similar across the whole region: ten years ago, the regional government maintained ten secondary agricultural schools, at present only four are still open. One of them is located in the Poltár district. In fact, this was another factor why the social enterprise was set up there – the objective is the further development of the school. Simultaneously, revival of agriculture will foster biodiversity and contribute to sustainable landscape management. The company's agricultural production takes into account the dynamics of the local ecosystems and strives to improve local and sub-regional environmental and climate conditions.

The main idea of the whole project is to connect the school, the social enterprise, the BBSK and other relevant actors in the Poltár district. "The school graduates who studied agriculture or agrotechnology should be more motivated to stay in the district. We do not want them to leave the region, and go to work somewhere else for the car industry and the like. We want them to be able to make a living here, where they graduated. When they finish school, we will offer them the opportunity to work in the social enterprise. Currently, when students from the least developed districts finish school, they usually end up at the employment office or leave the region all together. This is caused by a low number of available jobs, but also by the fact that many job positions offer very low salaries." says Vaňo. During their studies, students work alongside employees of the social enterprise and they have a chance to learn in practice the entire production process – from planting to plant care and harvesting.

The company has adopted a "step-by-step" approach and has been unfolding its activities gradually. Planting was first tested on the areas belonging to the school that had been neglected for some time. The first two revitalised areas are orchards – a former breeding nursery of apple and pear trees. In the past, the orchard had 1,300 fruit trees – all of them old varieties. Due to their long-time neglect, only 600 of them are still in good health, hence 500 trees of the same old varieties were newly planted. In 2020, the company started to grow garlic, and in 2021 they planted 600 seedlings of raspberry bushes. Raspberries were common in the past, and they are very suitable for the local environment.

³² Self-government in Slovakia is organised at two main levels – the regional level represented by eight self-governing regions, i.e. eight autonomous territorial units, and the local level represented by 2,890 municipalities (the cities of Bratislava and Košice are further divided into several self-governing city parts). The eight autonomous regions are referred to in the Slovak Constitution as "Higher Territorial Units".

Simultaneously, they provide food for bees. Beekeeping used to be an important part of agricultural production in the region, and the social enterprise strives to revive it. The initial goal is not to produce honey or other bee products, but to create suitable conditions for the life and reproduction of bee colonies.

In the first year, the company produced 2.36 tons of garlic. However, the entire harvest was planted back in the fields, mostly because schools that were supposed to use the garlic in their cafeterias were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Linking local food production to local demand will ensure the sustainability of production and have a positive environmental impact. Foods that can be grown locally do not have to travel long distances. This reduces the carbon footprint of agricultural production. Localisation of production and distribution will help to keep resources within the region, and the social dimension of economic activities ensures decent work conditions for the local people.

In 2021, the company had 10 employees – one half women, another half men. It employs people from marginalised social groups at risk of poverty – especially Roma women, and people with disabilities. The company offers them adequate work and a low stress work environment, barrier-free access and the opportunity to fully integrate into the workplace. At the beginning of 2021, it employed 2 people with disabilities. One has been with the enterprise almost from the beginning. During that time, he gained a tractor driving license, so he is a qualified tractor driver without whom other employees cannot even imagine the operation of the company. Everyone hopes that he will stay with them, as he now has offers from other companies as well. Other employees had been long-term unemployed before they starting working for the enterprise. The only employee who is not from a disadvantaged group is the mentor. According to the social economy law, a registered social enterprise can employ one mentor per two employed disadvantaged people. For the mentor, the enterprise can receive a salary refund from the state. This mentor is a beekeeper and deals only with bees. Currently, he has been training two other employees in beekeeping.

Although the enterprise is technically a BBSK institution, people perceive it as a family business. “We try to create a pleasant and family atmosphere. As a manager, I stop at the company once every two or three weeks, otherwise things are working on their own. I don’t have to assign any tasks to anyone, everything is running smoothly without me. For me, the biggest reward is mutual trust,” says Vaňo. One of the company’s employees, Anna Čonková, confirms his words, saying that this is the workplace with by far the best atmosphere and conditions she has ever experienced. The employees work 37.5 hours per week and their salary is quite high relative to the earnings in other companies in the district where people often receive only the minimum wage. In this enterprise, the salaries are calculated according to the standard remuneration “tables” of the regional government employees.

Anna Čonková and other employees with the governor Ján Lunter. Photo by BBSK.



The enterprise has an advisory committee composed solely of employees. It is intended to ensure the democratic governance of the company. The committee meets once a month. It has three members chosen by the employees, all of them are women. The members of the committee defend the interests of the employees. This is another factor that creates a good atmosphere in the company: people are not only employees, but they are also involved in the discussion about the working conditions and relations in the workplace, but also on company's future, and have a chance to provide their inputs about innovations and strategic solutions.

The regional government wanted to create an agricultural enterprise that would be managed in harmony with nature and have a positive environmental impact. Therefore, the choice fell on establishing an agroforestry company. It plans to plant strips of trees and vegetation in the agricultural landscape under its management. In 2021, they began planting black walnuts, and in the following years they want to plant honey trees. The speed of the process will depend on the availability of resources. All trees and shrubs are suitable for the local soil type. In the future, crop production will be complemented with animal husbandry. Ecological procedures and compliance with legislation should also be ensured by the involvement of experts in planning of the planting. There are protected water sources in the areas managed by the company, therefore it does not use any chemical fertilizers or sprays. Later, the farm will use two or three sheep in the orchard as natural lawn mowers.

Planting is planned for several years. The company will gradually increase its production based on demand, but the primary goal is supplying schools and senior homes. Gradually, other activities are planned to be added. The company wants to set up a carpentry workshop for the production of hives and "insect houses". They will offer the opportunity to educate students about agroforestry ecosystems and beekeeping also to other schools in the region. In the future, the company plans to offer bee colonies to local people interested in beekeeping. The company also plans to supply institutions under the administration of the BBSK, such as secondary schools and senior homes, with fresh produce grown on its farm. The whole company, and its relations with other institutions, will serve as an example of good practice, which the BBSK wants to transfer to other districts. Environmentally sensitive work with the managed landscape should also serve as an example of good practice. Another plan for the future is to promote sustainable tourism in the region. The overall long-term vision is sustainable development of the entire district.

The company campus is open to public visits and local people have already been given the opportunity to plant lavender on the premises: they can plant it, take care of it and eventually harvest it. This and other activities are meant to strengthen the relationship of local people to the land. The company also cooperated with local activists in identifying its future employees. Local people are well aware of the situation in the district and can provide important information – in this case it was knowledge about which disadvantaged people should be included in the integration process in agroforestry.

Building of the social economy from above requires the support of the regional leadership and the regional council. The establishment of the enterprise would have not been possible without their backing. Thus far, other self-governing regions have not supported the development of the social economy, despite the fact that the BBSK offered them help and presented their own plans. In the BBSK, its advancement is supported by the regional governor and the council that unanimously approved all development plans.

The region also plans to set up a social enterprise for cleaning sheep wool. There are several protected areas in its territory the natural landscape of which would change without sheep breeding. The local people do not know how to utilise sheep wool. No one in the region processes it, so they either burn it or bury it. A wool processing company will put an end to this nonsensical practice, help create more jobs and help preserve pastures with protected meadow plants.

In 2021, another registered regional social enterprise, the BBSK Development Services, was in

³³ Agroforestry is a land use management system in which trees or shrubs are grown around or among crops or pastureland. This diversification of the farming system initiates an agroecological succession, like that in natural ecosystems, and so starts a chain of events that enhance the functionality and sustainability of the farming system. Trees also produce a wide range of useful and marketable products from fruits/nuts, medicines, wood products, etc. This intentional combination of agriculture and forestry has multiple benefits, such as greatly enhanced yields from staple food crops, enhanced farmer livelihoods from income generation, increased biodiversity, improved soil structure and health, reduced erosion, and carbon sequestration. (See <https://www.fs.usda.gov/nac/practices/index.shtml>)

operation. It started from a relatively simple idea that the region should use its own capacities to maintain its buildings and property itself rather than hiring external maintenance and construction companies. The enterprise employs people disadvantaged on the regular labour market. The third company that meets the characteristics of a social enterprise, but is not registered, is the Labour Agency, where disadvantaged people are treated as clients with specific needs. The agency tries to work with them very closely: it offers them help in developing work skills and provides them with assistance with their integration into the workplace. The agency operates a training center and communicates with employers. Together, these companies employ about 50 people, of which 30 are from disadvantaged groups.

The BBSK also supports social entrepreneurship indirectly. The Development Agency has compiled and published a list of all goods and services that the local government procures and encourages all registered social enterprises to respond with their bids. At the same time, the BBSK has laid down a requirement that these companies must reinvest all profits in their operations. All mentioned initiatives have been supported for a relatively short time. The first successes have appeared quickly, but their continuation will depend on the political will of the elected representatives of the region. However, if a viable movement gradually emerged, the social and solidarity economy and its initiatives would become more resilient, but it is too early to make any predictions about the future paths.

More information:

<https://rabbsk.dobrykraj.sk/socialna-ekonomika/>

ABOUT THE PROJECT AND PARTNERS

This publication was created as a part of the project Restart You Life and Thrive – Innovative Models for Sustainable Local Living funded by the International Visegrad Fund. The aim of the project was to strengthen ties between and among actors who devote their work to fostering the social and solidarity economy. Some of them have been already cooperating, some have just started or are planning to. It does not matter whether someone is a practitioner, member of an NGO or some informal initiative, researcher or activist, the specific perspective of each of them can enrich others, inspire them and help them to find an answer to their problem. The building of stronger ties between these actors also reinforces their position in the economic and political sphere, which is crucial if the new approach to the development policies is to be applied.

Unfortunately, the pandemic situation changed our plans and the envisioned regional conference and several working visits could not take place. Some of the planned networking and experience transfer was not possible to organise, but each of the project partners selected several interesting and illustrative cases of the social and solidarity organisations and initiatives, and elaborated them into the form of good practice examples. They are recorded in this publication. There is never enough inspiration which can lead us to reshaping our communities, economy and politics to make them more socially and environmentally just.

More information:
<https://restart.utopia.sk>

Ekumenická akademie, www.ekumakad.cz

Ekumenická akademie (EA) is an NGO established in 1996 in the Czech Republic. Its vision is a socially just, sustainable and tolerant society. EA's scope of interest are human rights and finding solutions to economic, social, gender and ethnic inequalities. The organisation supports alternative forms of economic democracy, such as the social solidarity economy, fair trade, cooperatives. EA organises campaigns, conferences, seminars, round tables, discussions, publications, happenings and the like to raise awareness about these issues. EA is active in networking with partner institutions in the Czech Republic and Europe. EA is a founding member of the Czech Development Cooperation Forum, Czechia Against Poverty (GCAP campaign), Fairtrade Czechia and Slovakia, Czech Climate Coalition, Czech Social Watch Coalition, Czech Clean Clothes Campaign, Czech Fairtrade Towns Campaign and Czech Women Lobby. EA is also a member of international networks – Eurodad (European Network on Debt and Development), OIKOSNET Europe (Ecumenical Association of Academies and Laity Centres) and RIPPES Europe (Social Solidarity Economy network). The organisation has a long-term experience with EU international projects focused on awareness rising and advocacy. In the last years, it has focused on projects about ethical consumption, food sovereignty, climate change, the social solidarity economy, debt and financing for development.

Profilantrop Egyesület, www.profilantrop.org

The Profilantrop Association applies innovative techniques and technologies to fight for social and environmental sustainability using an integrative, interdisciplinary, systemic approach combined with participatory methods. The team of Profilantrop Association has a strong background in social sciences and research, especially cultural anthropology, which creates a good basis for working with communities. Anthropological knowledge of its members is an important resource that the organisation offers in service to society. Profilantrop works with a variety of techniques and approaches: social projects, community work, green energy and appropriate technology development, youth work, social entrepreneurship, research, IT projects, volunteer and youth exchange programs, organising events and festivals, training, workshops. The participatory self-sustainable projects have multiple benefits: using environment-friendly techniques and helping poor people to reach less vulnerable states in their life empowers them with the experience of holding their life in their hands. In 2015, the Profilantrop Association founded a Filantrópia charity shop. This social enterprise serves sustainability in many ways: reduction of waste, provision of affordable goods for low income people, transfer of knowledge about reusing and upcycling, hence aiming at positive changes in attitudes regarding sustainability. Filantrópia is also a community place, where donors and customers alike can

engage and meet each other. From the revenue generated by the charity shop, the association can finance its rural local community projects.

Fundacja EkoRozwoju, www.fer.org.pl

FER has been systemically implementing activities aiming at building a responsible and resilient society for almost 30 years. It is one of the largest organisations in Poland professionally dealing with responsible consumption and building a responsible society while carrying out the pioneering activities such as environmental education to increase knowledge and social skills for sustainable development. Programmes for school children and students, but also adults and professionals strive to connect education with environmental activities and local communities development. The programmes show interdependencies between humans and nature and the effects of human behaviour on the environment. FER opened an ecological environmental education centre - EcoCentrum. FER cooperates with local communities and the media as well as local self-governments and public institutions. FER was the first in Poland to organise ecological fairs in Wrocław, and its activities support cooperation between farmers and consumers. Thanks to collaboration with other organisations, a weekly "Short Road" farmers market was established as a grass-root initiative, which operates to this day and is one of the oldest of this type in Poland. The market takes place every week and brings together local organic farmers and Wrocław consumers. Since 2014, FER has been cooperating with a wider group of European organisations in the field of development of CSA groups.

Utopia, www.utopia.sk

Utopia is a civic association founded in 2010 to support deepening of democratic processes in society, building active citizenship and participation, and promoting socially inclusive and environmentally friendly policies. The organisation designs and implements social and institutional innovations to foster people's participation in their civic and economic life. Members of Utopia have facilitated a large number of public meetings and deliberative forums, and designed and facilitated various processes of participatory planning. Utopia is the first NGO in Slovakia to introduce the concept and method of participatory budgeting in several major Slovak cities such as Bratislava, Trnava or Banská Bystrica. Utopia designed a participatory budgeting process for the regional government in Trnava, and has led the participatory planning of the development of the campus of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. One of Utopia's goals is to achieve public administration transparency. Hence, Utopia is also part of the global open data movement and in cooperation with other organisations actively promotes open data use at all levels of public administration. A significant area of Utopia's work is centred on the social and solidarity economy as a democratic way of the local and regional development, and a tool of people's empowerment, aiming at reduction of poverty and social exclusion of the economically disenfranchised. Since 2015, Utopia has been involved in a number of international projects focusing on mapping the social and solidarity economy in CEE countries, development of educational materials, building of the public knowledge base, and promotion of the concept in the public at large.

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