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CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS AND CITIZENS-AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: The importance of nonprofit, and inside classic civic sector is usually approached on the basis of figures of the Statistical Office. Based on these, we may assume these to have a slight or intermediate role in the greater economy regarding economic capacity and human resources. Actually, we cannot have a closer look into local conditions and circumstances which would contribute to a better understanding of how civic organizations are connected to citizens. It is difficult to estimate the background, effect, personal movements behind the civic sector; international literature discusses this issue in the framework of civic engagement. In a private examination, I may also contribute to the alternative approach to the importance of the civic organization sector by studying and measuring the complex indicator termed “civic involvement”. Additionally, a small scale pilot examination has revealed a better, more precise description of the connection between citizens and civic organizations, which may also enable the better planning of local municipal interventions.

Keywords: civic organizations, civic engagement, survey, rural society

Introduction

Professional literature (such as Brint-Levy 1999), Cnaan-Milofsky 2007) often discusses and analyzes the connection between nonprofit organizations and citizens, and this special subject is often termed “civic engagement”. Unger (2005: 19) claims that “we hardly find a universal, widely accepted term for civic organizations, since a kind of pluralism may be experienced of that. Still, they definitely are formal interest validating leverages of the civic society”.

This term is related to civic activity connected to civic movements and organizations. Civic engagement means that citizens work together for the common good and social capital is a connection system based on samples of relatively enforced trust, by which citizens and institution may access such special resources as social services, volunteers and donations. Social capital and civic engagement may be differentiated on the level of analysis; still both have mutual central elements, such as trust, human relations, common norms, values and cultural attributes. The term civic relates to the activity of citizens, and by engagement is meant active contributions.

Civic engagement relates to how citizens participate in civic social institutions, such as nonprofit organizations, so that they might contribute to meeting social objectives. This participation is made using a social mechanism, i.e. organizations, which serve the aims of common wealth (Cnaan-Milofsky 2007). Despite the growing numbers of civic organizations which

appeared after the change of regime in Hungary, the real level of civic engagement is still comparatively low in Hungary, compared to EU figures. Cartwright et al. (2008) has revealed that 34% of the citizens of EU 25 countries are interested in active participation or voluntary work. While in neighboring Austria, they have the highest EU level (60%) of such activity, we lag behind most of EU countries with a dismal 17%-according to a survey accessed in 2006¹. Most Europeans do not actively participate or do voluntary work, at least not in or for any of the organizations listed in their questionnaire (64%). The most typical forms of participation are sport or leisure activities. This paper suggests that engagement primarily means employees and volunteers. Other listed indicators are the ratio of making donations, interventions in risky situations for the interest of others and also the frequency of meeting family members, also friends. It also seems that the level of civic engagement decreases with the levels of graduation and status (for example it is the highest for the managers). Bácsné (2012) emphasized based on prime examinations in the field of time management that this layer seems to be more sensitive regarding the importance of social capital in environmental changes. It is more than obvious that numerous indicators

¹There are diverse approaches to accessing the level of civic engagement by different organizations. This data is based on the report of European Social Reality. See further information on http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

are covered by the term of civic engagement (more than the number of members, employees, volunteers and economic capacity, which are the most frequently referred indicators nationally describing the importance of the civic sector), but there are some other, still debated issues on this subject. One of the most comprehensive latest descriptions (Gerő 2012) deals with measuring the importance of the civic sector. It reveals that several surveys (such as European Values Survey, European Social Survey, the International Social Survey programme) aim to access to most accurate data. Still, figures from these do not originate from the same questions, and these statistics may only be understood “carefully, controlled by each other”. Referred indicators are the number of members, active members and leaders of civic organizations, participation in activities and events, frequency of civic engagement, the number of civic organizations, details of volunteerism (which varies considerably by research study), the intensity of participation, action-like participation, donation and donation of 1% of the income tax². The real problem is the “latest” nature of the figures, the difficulty in comparison, the simplification of a complex issue, and these figures may not properly contribute to understanding the real importance of the sector, cannot be transformed into a whole system, and cannot answer local, even country level questions of the territorial development (such as why a municipality should support a civic organization, the importance of which locally cannot be estimated). The real question is whether a connection between civic organization and citizens may be measured at all? As a whole, there is no wide acceptance regarding the depths of these contributions, and diverse approaches mainly focus on specific natures, without describing a whole picture of how this relationship really is.

When we discuss the subject of civic organizations, the term does not mean the same for all of us. Regarding the term of nonprofit, it is obviously meaningful, still there is difference between nonprofit and civic organizations. According to Geszti (n.d) *“The label of civic organization is not obvious, since it is in relationship with diverse contents by countries. We often regard as the third sector, by differentiating it from the governmental and business sector. The most experienceable term is the nonprofit category”*.

There was a bit of confusion up to 2011 regarding the sphere of civic organizations in Hungary, as it was defined it an earlier manuscript³. *“Today we may identify the association (and its some specific forms, such as the alliance), the private foundations and the civic society as civic organizations. The understanding of the new legislation⁴ explains that association cumulates the social capital of the members, the foundation integrates the financial possibilities of the members and the*

founder, the civic society is a less legal form of an association with fewer obligations and cannot accept state support, which is a major characteristics opposite with the others”.

Table 1: Basic types of civic organizations

Nonprofit organizations			
Civic organizations by the new Act			Other nonprofits
Classic civil organizations		Civil society	
Associations	Foundations		

Source: Private examinations, 2013.

There were 65.5 thousand nonprofit organizations in Hungary in 2011⁵, one third (23.2 thousands) in the form of foundations, and another 42.3 thousand as associations. These two forms are also referred to as classic civic organizations.

Of the 65.5 thousand nonprofit organizations, almost 90% may be considered to be classic civic organizations, meaning that the sphere – regarding number of organizations – is determined by the classics. When this figure is compared to the data of previous years⁶, we notice that there is one civic organization for every ten for-profit organizations. Official statistics describe a more positive picture of the nonprofit sphere, while this picture does not seem to be favorable for the classics. The distribution of revenues is not equal, the sphere is considerably polarized⁶. Regarding all nonprofits, 57% of incomes come from support, of which 42% is state support. Vántus-Oláh (2012: 184) confirmed that supports played a vital role in the life of for profit organizations, so a similar tendency seems to be valid for nonprofit organizations, as well. Although we may note a considerable large number of employees for nonprofits, of which classics possess only a small fragment. Totally, we see a human capacity of 52 thousand full time employees (calculated by including the working hours of employees and volunteers), which means only one full time workforce per organization. This simplification may be exaggerated, but large inequalities are behind this figure).

When we try to describe the importance of these almost 60 thousand classics, official statistics may only reveal economic and financial possibilities by averages: the number of members, employers, volunteers, working hours, and balance sheet like revenues and expenditures, on the one hand.

On the other hand, civic organizations quite frequently do not purely serve the interests of members, volunteers and employees, but the quite frequently referred common wealth and are means of the also quite frequently referred social (and corporate) responsibility. Their activity may (and definitely

²This latest may be a speciality of the national system, partially directly and partially indirectly providing financial resources for civic organizations.

³Civic organizations-an approach of diverse understandings (by Troy B. Wiczarowski - György Norbert Szabados – Anita Pierog (2013). Published in the scientific conference „Taylor után 101 évvel”, Szeged, Hungary.

⁴In the end of 2011, a new Act on Civic Organizations and related legislation were introduced. It has defined the term of civic organizations, introduced a new form, changed the financial promotive and control system.

⁵The Hungarian Statistical Office yearly publishes most important figures of the nonprofit sphere. For the latest statistics see: http://www.ksh.hu/apps/shop.kiadvany?p_kiadvany_id=13287&p_temakor_kod=KSH&p_session_id=471427495347132&p_lang=HU

⁶The ratio of those with revenues less than 5 million Ft is about 80,9%, 4,3% with more than 50 millió Ft revenues possess 83,8% of revenues of the sphere. For further information see http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_qpg006.html

) contribute to the clearer environment, a better education system, a healthy life, better international connection, or even the maintenance of culture, which are really hard to be estimated by the statistics. This means that civic organizations serve the interest of the larger social base (also democracy) and may mostly work on improving life conditions. Actually, we rarely find an estimation on these kinds of effects and the relationship between civic organizations and citizens.

Civic engagement – civic involvement

This subject leads us to a specific area, the observation of which directed me to the adaptation of involvement. Kovách (2005), studying the importance of agriculture after the change of regime, declared that the level of employees has fallen to a relatively low level, still, a large number of the national population still remained, although in a different level, agriculturally involved, which means they still have relationship with the agriculture. His examinations has revealed that agricultural involvement may be accessed differently (some for example are employed in the agricultural sphere, others have infield, some have agricultural degree or just produce agricultural products for sale or self-consumption). By defining diverse categories, he published that the role of agriculture is still not insignificant: *“In 2005, 51.6% of the adult population has been directly agriculturally engaged”*

Regarding civic organizations, it seems obvious that some local organizations do not purely mean some 10 members,⁷ volunteers or employees, their importance may not be simplified this way, and it does explain their real local importance. They may operate local “telehouses⁸”, provide free services, organize village fairs/days, cut ragweed, clean sidewalks, which are not externalities since their founding objectives are in connection with these activities and these do not purely serve the interests of members, volunteers, employees. A special phenomenon of the past 10 years is the cooperation between governmental institutions and civic organizations, aiming to support the poor and the unemployed in the labor market. Such assistance is typical of western European countries, and appeared in Hungary from the beginning of 2000 through various applications (Móré 2012). Civic involvement, inside civic engagement, may illustrate a diverse and a more practical picture of the effect of the classics and their relationship and connection with local citizens and may also reform our thinking on the operation and activity of them.

It is also interesting that a vital variable (supporting the labor-related conditions and supporting the human livelihood and financial prosperity) is not emphasized in the statistical classification. Ibrahim-Hulme (2010) regarded that there is a growing emphasis and attention on decreasing poverty and privation, and the question arises why civic organizations are primarily involved in gender or environmental issues

instead of aiming to decrease poverty directly? These kinds of organizations should play a vital role in promoting these kinds of issues and contribute to sustainable decrease of poverty.

Involvement may be approached from two aspects. First, citizens have their points of view on these issues, so their opinions and relationships may be accessed. On the other hand, civic organizations may also have a kind of estimates on these issues, since they can also experience the effect of their operation: the relationship with people and its depths. It also has practical issues, since it may reveal a more precise picture and may also justify locally the financial promotion of classics (such as, for example, that it is true that we only have 10 members (employees and volunteers), but almost 80% of local population are affected by our activity, since we organize free blood pressure checks, cut ragweed)

Research of the civic organization sphere still cannot be closed. There are some specific areas which still require much to be revealed, since some organizations strongly represent their (or their further background's) interest by preventing the force-feeding of geese, protesting against military radio towers or taking actions against establishing a factory or some nuclear waste facility. The background and underlying human or other capacities are quite often hard to estimate, and the question arises whose interests are represented really: only some members, others or a complex human network. It is also debated how efficiently they can take institutional tasks and realize objectives, for example in the field of public employment or such further challenges, such as the compulsory nonprofit practice of high school graduates. There are also some approaches, mainly by business organizations, that civic organizations may exceed their limits and may also cause serious damage as compared to the benefits, their real human background is slighter than it appears and require a more thorough and strict governmental regulation.

Method and material

In the framework of a research program, I tried to validate my assumptions on a pilot examination. The subject of the pilot was a small settlement of the Sárrét Micro region of Hajdú-Bihar County. This village is situated relatively far from even the minor cities, approximately 50 kms away from Debrecen, which means a peripheral location. It had largest population in the XIX. Century, and has been continuously decreasing since then. The latest statistics illustrated approximately 200 inhabitants locally (informally this number is lower). Visiting the village, typical rural conditions and symptoms are revealed: in such a place almost everyone knows each other, human relations are assumed to be more intimate and direct.

Regarding data collection, I have applied a systematic random sampling method⁹. *I could use the list of local inhabitants, of which half of the population, hundred people was included in the survey. This survey was carried out by*

⁷Founding an association in Hungary requires at least ten people, the same for a foundation may be fewer.

⁸These are local community points for citizens.

⁹Two research studiess have been made parallely, since my colleague, Anita Pierog, has collected data on economic engagement.

prepared survey attendants. The confidence interval on 95% reliability level is about 10%, which suggests a more careful approach to the consequences. Parallel to provide triangulation, I have tried to reveal the opinion of managers of the two local operating civic organizations, by making targeted interviews (still focusing the original variables). By contrasting the two approaches, we may gain a better picture of civic organizational involvement of the inhabitants. Of the total results, I will only cover the most significant details.

It seems interesting to examine how local inhabitants are connected to the activity of civic organizations and some kind of benefits, such as improving the life and society through civic organizations. Survey results illustrate quite an uncertain picture (Figure 1).

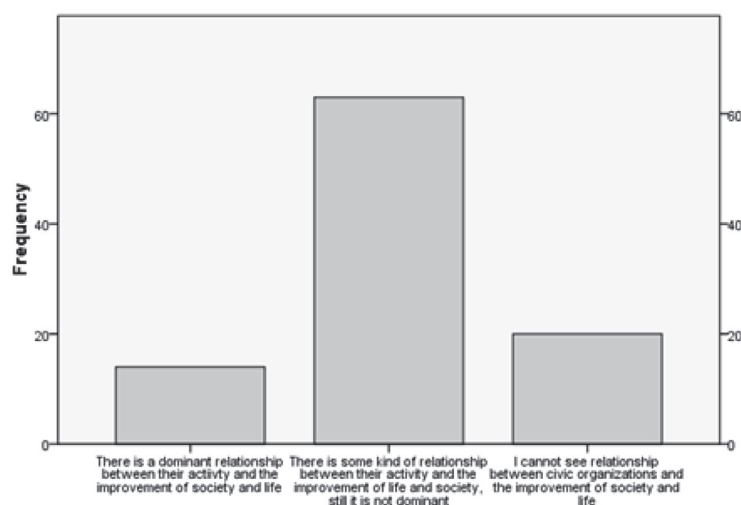


Figure 1: The opinion on the positive influence of civic organizations
Source: Private examination, 2013.

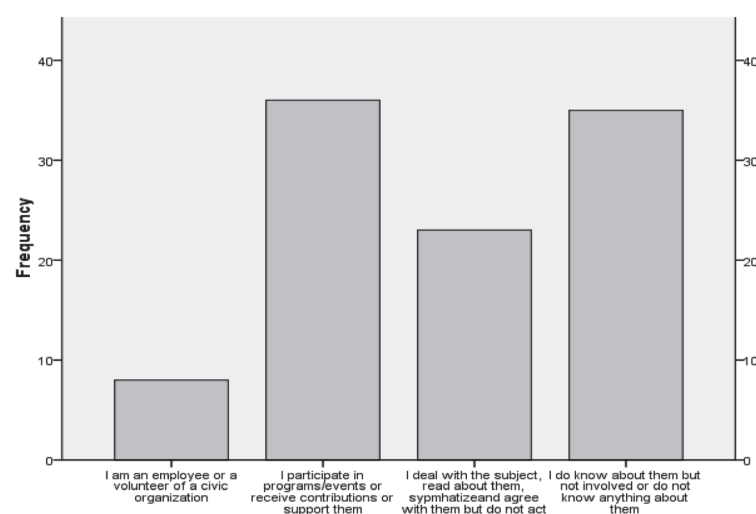


Figure 2: The distribution of involvement depths
Source: Private examinations, 2013.

Opinions of majority of local populations refer to a mostly uncertain condition (63) and an additional (20) part cannot see any relationship between civic organizations and the improvement of life and society by local experiences.

Unfortunately, it illustrates quite an unfavorable picture of the activities of local civic organizations, and it seems that their activity do not have a kind of social impact. Regarding age distribution, mainly the younger ones evaluated more positively, denial seems to be growing by age, the oldest ones seem to be quite uncertain. Acceptance also seems to be increasing by graduation of the respondents. The inactive, unemployed ones seem to be more denial or uncertain.

Interviewed representatives of the civic organizations stated and emphasized a divided picture, which they have mentioned to be related to the financial resources, where some citizens gain benefits, but the others are omitted. They frequently have programs for the youngsters, which explain some of the results and relevant relationship. They are working on applications to involve more unemployed, but they could not refer to successes lately.

Regarding the measurability of involvement depths, many categories (attributes) may be identified. Breaking down these involvement depths is still not ready and complex, since experts and experiences may refine the attributes. There must be rates and order, which are illustrated as follows:

- Employment and volunteerism being (please note that these ones are usually/most frequently members) mean strong involvement.
- Participating in programs/events or receiving other contributions (such as volunteers cutting the grass in front of a private house) or citizens support them means a medium involvement.
- Poor involvement means the relationship of those, who mainly theoretically deals with the subject or read about them or show sympathy but do not really act.
- The last category (passive or not involved) include the relationships of those who are not involved but do know about the phenomenon or those who do not have information on the activity of civic organizations at all.

Details of involvement depths regarding the settlement are illustrated as follows on Figure 2.

Results show a new, alternative approach of the impact of local civic organizations, where almost half of the population is involved, an additional 23 people are poorly involved and one third of the population is not involved at all. Compared to the previous results, the impact of civic organizations may not be considered as insignificant. We may describe an involvement curve, where the curve is asymmetric, and it is shifted to the right. Representatives of the civic organization explained these results by the inactivity of local inhabitants and also members of the civic organizations. For example, the only association has 22 members, of which 16–17 are completely inactive, and one of the managers does not understand the motives behind it. The only foundation has 3 members, and has only been working here for 1 year, which may also explain the slight involvement. Both of them referred and blamed the financial

issues and deficiencies behind the low involvement rates, and they also mentioned that totally they can reach approximately half of the local population by their activity.

A last question of the examination tried to reveal the strength of the impact of civic organizations. Results show that the impact of local civic organizations is intermediate or poorer (*Figure 3*).

Results revealed that the impact of the classics is primarily intermediate, and the impact curve in this case is shifted to the right. Mainly youngsters, intermediate qualification level respondents felt a stronger impact. Impact is slighter on the unemployed and rather intermediate for the inactive ones. Interviewed representatives explained these results by their uncertainty. They accept a fair intermediate level, although the leader of foundation could not talk about long experiences. They might accept the poor impact also, since, owing to the applications, civic movements have only started to strengthen lately. In some years, probably best results may be achieved.

Consequences

It is obvious that estimating the role, importance, effect of civic organizations is a complex activity, where the issue of civic involvement may also contribute to accessing a better picture.

Regarding the results, locally the impact and involvement of civic organizations may not be considered as strong. There is a kind of picture about a positive effect of organizations, which is not clear and dominant, at least not dominant for the living and society. Local citizens are rather intermediate or poorly involved, one third is not involved at all, and it is hard to be estimated whether they will be accessed at all in the future. The impact of organizations is rather intermediate or poorer, which results, added to the previous ones emphasizes that local civic organizations currently on the settlement are not strong enough to serve local tasks and to affect and influence local society deeply.

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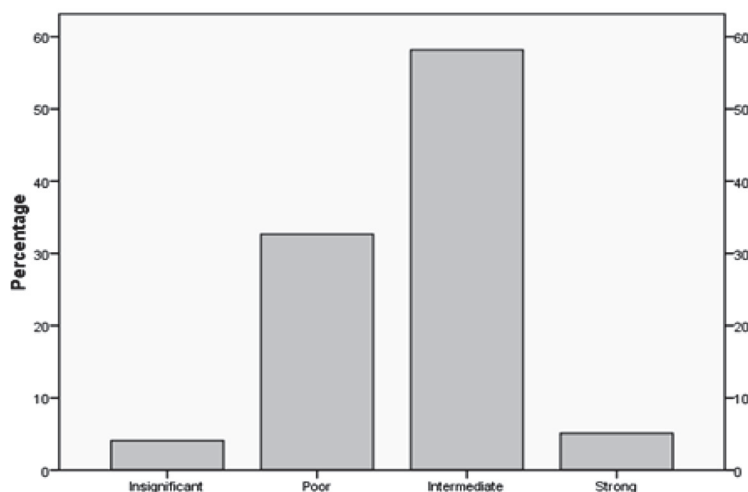


Figure 3: The opinion of inhabitants on the strength of the impact of civic organizations
Source: Private examinations, 2013.

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