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The Significance of Social Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Municipal Development

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The Significance of Social Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Municipal Development

Abstract

Social entrepreneurship offers significant potential for sustainable municipal development by integrating social, economic, and environmental values. This study examines the attitudes of mayors and representatives of municipalities in the administrative district with extended competence Liberec towards social enterprises. Results reveal a narrow perception focused mainly on employing disadvantaged groups, with limited awareness of broader environmental and economic aspects. Although social entrepreneurship is generally viewed favourably, municipalities lack strategic integration and support mechanisms. The study recommends targeted awareness-raising, institutional cooperation, and proactive municipal planning to fully realise the potential of social enterprises as a tool for inclusive, resilient, and sustainable community development.

Key Words: Social Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development, Local Government, Disadvantaged Groups, Community Development

JEL Classification: L31, Q01

Introduction

In the context of current social, economic and environmental challenges, social entrepreneurship is gaining importance as an effective tool for promoting sustainable development at the municipal level. Social entrepreneurship combines economic goals with innovative solutions to social and environmental problems. It offers considerable potential for enhancing the quality of life in municipalities. Despite growing recognition of the benefits of social entrepreneurship at the national level, municipalities often face challenges in incorporating social entrepreneurship principles into their strategic plans. These obstacles are typically associated with a lack of expertise and practical experience. Social enterprises focus primarily on integrating disadvantaged groups into the labour market. That is why they are bringing economic benefits compared to registration at the

employment office and contributing to the reduction of social exclusion. At the same time, they are characterised by a strong relationship with the local environment, which is reflected in their emphasis on environmental protection and community development. In this respect, they represent an alternative to the prevailing trends of economisation, modernisation and materialisation of society (Malík Holasová, 2014). They make it with an emphasis on local community development, responsible human resource development and long-term sustainability.

This article aims to analyse the attitudes of mayors and municipal representatives in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec towards social entrepreneurship in the context of sustainable development. A secondary aim is to assess the level of awareness of social entrepreneurship and its potential for addressing local social and environmental challenges. Social enterprises can play a key role in the development of municipalities. This means not only by supporting employment and social inclusion but also as partners of public administration in achieving sustainable development goals (Lindgreen et al., 2009).

The importance of social entrepreneurship is also reflected in the macroeconomic context, where its development contributes to the stability and resilience of local economies (DTI, 2002). This contribution is supported by legislative measures at the national level, such as the Act on Integrative Social Enterprise, and development tools at the regional level, including business incubators, advisory centres, and thematic catalogues of social enterprises. The article's structure is as follows: the introductory section is followed by a literature review, which provides a theoretical framework for the issue under investigation. Subsequently, the research methodology will be presented, the results obtained will be analysed. And finally, the key conclusions will be discussed, along with proposals for measures to support the development of social entrepreneurship within the local community.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of social entrepreneurship in the professional literature. In general, social entrepreneurship is understood as a market-oriented strategy aimed at achieving a social goal (Kerlin, 2009). In a narrower sense, the emphasis is primarily on employing socially excluded people, which brings both economic and social benefits (Austin et al., 2006). A broader concept of social entrepreneurship includes not only social enterprises but also socio-environmental and integration enterprises. In this concept, the harmonisation of business, moral, and social identity is necessary. It is, therefore, not primarily about the commercialisation of nonprofit organisations but rather about finding a balance between economic sustainability and social benefits.

From a broader perspective, social entrepreneurship is understood as an alternative mechanism arising from the inability of the market and the public sector to respond effectively to social problems. In this context, social enterprises are perceived as entities that seek to combine a social mission with economic self-sufficiency. They are characterised by specific values and goals (Dey, 2014). These enterprises utilise market mechanisms that are based on the principles of sustainability and social responsibility while generating profits (Dey, 2014). Social enterprises can be considered as an indicator

of the level of social responsibility, i.e., the extent to which their activities are consistent with the goals and principles of sustainable development (Hertel et al., 2022). Social entrepreneurship at the community level represents an innovative approach to solving local problems and also a key tool for promoting sustainable development. The importance of supporting social enterprises is also evident in the context of macroeconomic stability (DTI, 2002), where they can contribute to strengthening social cohesion and economic resilience.

The primary goal of social entrepreneurship is to carry out activities that benefit the public, which are explicitly enshrined in the founding documents and are fulfilled through economic activity. Social enterprises often focus on employing people at risk of social exclusion and also integrate an environmental approach. On the other hand their activities are frequently closely linked to environmental protection. A key aspect of developing social enterprises is the implementation of sustainable development principles, which encompass ecological responsibility, responsible human resource management and active support of community development (Lindgreen et al., 2009). Social entrepreneurship is an integral part of the broader social economy framework, guided by principles of social contribution, responsibility, transparency, and democratic decision-making regarding profit.

One of the key aspects of social entrepreneurship is its ability to respond flexibly to the specific needs of local communities. On one hand, nonprofit organisations and associations are involved in these activities. On the other hand, it is the municipalities themselves that often initiate projects aimed at employing disadvantaged groups or addressing environmental issues. A participatory approach to local community development makes a significant contribution to strengthening social capital, fostering trust, and cultivating positive relationships between social enterprises and public institutions. This type of cooperation promotes long-term sustainability and increases the effectiveness of local development strategies. The community can play an active and crucial role in the development of a given municipal area. A well-chosen approach to this potential can lead to the creation of business opportunities within the local community. It is characteristic of social entrepreneurship that it predominantly operates in local and regional markets, fulfilling its mission at the local level by addressing social problems and promoting environmental sustainability (Barraket et al., 2010).

Community entrepreneurship can be developed through social enterprises, also including those owned by municipalities (Sriyono et al., 2021). A specific example is the so-called village enterprises in Indonesia (Kania et al., 2021) or NGOs involved in microenterprise development to alleviate poverty in a local community (Luke and Chu, 2013). Village-owned enterprises can contribute the prosperity of local communities and can be managed in collaboration with residents (Kushartono et al., 2023). For the effective development of these enterprises, it is essential to properly select the target community and identify its specific characteristics that can facilitate the socialisation of disadvantaged groups (Battilana and Dorado, 2010). One of the indicator of territorial development and a fundamental feature of sustainability, is the positive relationship of the inhabitants with the area. The link between the public sector and the local community can be realised through voluntary and community sector organisations. These

organisations play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. In some cases social enterprises can represent the interests of the community in opposition to public institutions. Social entrepreneurs who are primarily motivated by social purpose can be perceived by the local community as trustworthy providers of public services at the local level (Muftugil-Yalcin and Mooijman, 2024).

Social enterprises, by their very nature, are based on principles of social responsibility. So it is natural to expect close and positive cooperation with local governments. Municipalities can contribute significantly to the development of social enterprises through the provision of land, professional facilities, the use of municipal facilities or in the form of financial support. The attitude of mayors and other municipal leaders towards social entrepreneurship and sustainable development plays a crucial role in shaping a modern business and social environment. In this time there are growing efforts to integrate sustainability principles into local development policies, which are essential not only for economic growth but also for ensuring social and environmental well-being. Mayors, as key actors in local governments, can significantly influence the promotion and support of social entrepreneurship aimed at addressing social challenges and improving the quality of life of residents (Svatošová and Novotná, 2012). The importance of mayors' involvement lies in their ability to strategically manage the development of municipalities and effectively utilise available instruments (such as for example European Structural Funds). These funds represent a crucial source of funding for projects aimed at enhancing economic and social cohesion, which are contributing the reduction of regional disparities (Svatošová and Novotná, 2012) and improving the living conditions of residents. Mayors thus become not only advocates of local interests, but also facilitators of social innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives that can enrich the life of the local community (Knapová, 2011).

Foreign experience, for example, from the Netherlands (Backer, 2019), shows that although cooperation between social enterprises and municipalities is considered important, entrepreneurs often lean more towards a model of autonomous diversity. This approach suggests a desire for independence. On the other hand, they would welcome a more supportive institutional environment. Barriers to cooperation may be due to a lack of political will (Backer, 2019) or a vague idea of the possibilities of interconnection. Institutional barriers stemming from different goals and values can hinder the effective engagement of social enterprises in municipal structures, which often favour commercial interests and do not adequately reflect social impact in the subsidies (Muftugil-Yalcin and Mooijman, 2024). At the same time, social enterprises often actively contribute to solving public problems, such as poverty or limited access to resources crucial for human well-being, for example drinking water (Westley et al., 2011). It is, therefore, essential that municipal representatives recognise the importance of these enterprises, identify their potential and seek systematic collaboration.

Empirical evidence from the US (Korosec and Berman, 2006) shows, that in 2003 more than half of city leaders reported that their cities had high levels of social entrepreneurship, with collaboration taking place directly or through grant programmes. An inspiring example from the European context is the Amsterdam Impact initiative, which aims to make Amsterdam an internationally recognised centre for social

entrepreneurship (Amsterdam Municipality, 2019). This paper will focus on assessing the attitudes of mayors and representatives of municipalities in the administrative district with extended competence Liberec, which has extended competence towards social entrepreneurship in the context of sustainable development. As well as their awareness of the social entrepreneurship issue and its potential for sustainable municipal development. **The research is based on answering the following research questions:**

1. What attitudes do mayors and representatives of municipalities in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence, Liberec, have towards social entrepreneurship?
2. What is their awareness of the concept of social entrepreneurship and its dimensions (social, environmental, economic)?
3. How do they perceive the potential of social entrepreneurship to support the sustainable development of their municipalities?
4. What are their views on the possibilities of municipal support for social entrepreneurship?

1. Methods of Research

The research was conducted between April and June 2024 through a questionnaire survey to assess the attitudes of mayors and representatives of municipalities within the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence, Liberec, towards social entrepreneurship in the context of sustainable development. The choice of this administrative unit was based on the principle of subsidiarity, as the authorities of individual municipalities serve an important link between regional and local levels of public administration. The research focused on individual municipalities within the administrative district with extended competence Liberec.

The survey aimed to obtain the views of municipal representatives on social entrepreneurship, their awareness of its principles and their perception of its potential for municipal development. Based on the information received, recommendations were formulated to raise awareness of social entrepreneurship. The questionnaire was designed by the research team from the Faculty of Economics at the Technical University of Liberec based on previous experience with family entrepreneurship research and an extensive literature search. It contained both closed- and open-ended questions, focusing on the definition of social enterprise, its importance for community development, forms of support, and identification of development needs. For example: Which activities in your municipality are supported by social enterprises? (Select any number of answers, or add others)

The distribution of the questionnaires was carried out through personal visits to the mayors of the municipalities by the team from the Municipality of Liberec's Department of Territorial Analytical Documentation and Geographical Information System. All 28 municipalities in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec, were contacted. The return rate was 15 completed questionnaires. A combination of quantitative methods (mainly percentage of responses) and qualitative

approaches (analysis of open-ended responses) was used for data analysis. The low return rate may have been influenced by respondents' concerns about their lack of knowledge of the topic or misinterpretation of the topic. The timing of the survey, which took place before the regional elections, may also have played a role.

2. Results of the Research

The analysis of the questionnaire survey results shows, that the prevailing perception of social entrepreneurship among representatives of municipalities in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec, is closely related to the employment of people disadvantaged in the labour market. Up to 93% of respondents associate the term "social enterprise" with this characteristic. In comparison, almost 80% perceive it primarily as a workplace for people with disabilities, whose main objective is to support these individuals regardless of economic performance or production quality. This approach is consistent with a narrower definition of social enterprise that emphasises the integration function of people at risk of social exclusion (Austin et al., 2006).

Conversely, perceptions of the broader concept of social entrepreneurship, which involves linking social purpose with economic self-sufficiency and environmental responsibility (Dey, 2014), are only marginally represented among respondents. Only a third of respondents believe that social enterprises play a significant role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The environmental dimension, economic sustainability, and broader impact on the local community are not perceived by respondents as important aspects of social enterprise. This gap between the theoretical framework and practical perceptions may be probably due to a lack of awareness and focus on the social aspects of entrepreneurship by municipal representatives. A limited understanding of the complex nature of social entrepreneurship may be one reason why municipalities fail to fully leverage their potential in their development strategies. The lack of knowledge and experience in this area is a significant barrier to the effective implementation of the social entrepreneurship concept in practice.

The research results also point to specific benefits that social enterprises can offer to municipalities. The most frequently mentioned benefit is their role in social development - 57% of respondents perceive their potential in reducing unemployment and straightening labour market conditions. Half of the respondents also state, that social enterprises, through the employment of disadvantaged individuals, contribute to improving their living conditions, strengthening their sense of security and enhancing the overall quality of life in the municipality. The economic self-sufficiency of social enterprises is also perceived positively - half of the respondents believe, that social enterprises can generate profit and are not entirely dependent on public support, which supports their long-term sustainability. Environmental benefits are perceived less strongly - only a fifth of respondents perceive social enterprises as actors with a positive relationship to ecological protection. However, 29% of respondents consider it important, that these enterprises can contribute to environmental objectives, for example, by reducing CO₂ emissions or energy intensity.

An interesting finding is, that although only a fifth of respondents know the specific social enterprises operating in their community (for example Texman was mentioned in Liberec), 43% of respondents assume they are linked to the local community, and 36% perceive their contribution to regional development. These results may indicate a general, superficial awareness of the community character of social enterprises. The key areas of community development are considered by 60% of respondents to be addressing the situation of disadvantaged residents, improving the quality of public space and expanding the range of community activities. It means, these are areas that social enterprises can effectively fulfil not only through supporting the employment of people with specific needs but also through environmental projects or initiatives aimed at developing local communities. Although respondents are often unaware of this potential, the results suggest, that social enterprise can be an important tool for addressing specific regional challenges.

The research findings are not consistent with the high level of awareness and engagement with social enterprises reported for example in the US context in Korosec and Berman's (2006) study. A narrow and simplistic perception of social entrepreneurship persists in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec, which is reduced to the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the labour market. The majority of respondents (71%) are unaware of the specific involvement of social enterprises in the municipality's life. Only a minority understand their broader role in sustainable development. The results show that:

- a) perceptions of social enterprise among municipal representatives are narrow, focused mainly on the employment of disadvantaged people;
- b) environmental and economic aspects are perceived less strongly;
- c) low knowledge of specific social enterprises in municipalities limits their use;
- d) there is potential for development, but a lack of systematic support and awareness-raising exists.

The results of the study indicate the need for systematic awareness-raising and support for social entrepreneurship at the municipal level. The study provides empirical insight into the perception of social entrepreneurship in a specific regional context and contributes to expanding knowledge about its potential for sustainable development. It also highlights the need to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical understanding of the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship at the local government level.

3. Discussion

The research aimed to analyse the attitudes of mayors and representatives of municipalities in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec, with extended competence in social entrepreneurship within the context of sustainable development and to assess their awareness of this concept. The results show, that although respondents intuitively realise the potential of social

entrepreneurship for the development of local communities, their understanding is mainly reduced to the employment of people disadvantaged in the labour market. Such narrowly defined perceptions represent a significant barrier to the full use of social entrepreneurship as a tool for sustainable community development.

The research was burdened by several limitations that may affect its generalizability. One of the main limitations was the low return rate of the questionnaires - only 15 of the 28 municipalities participated in the survey. This fact reduces the representativeness of the results. The low participation may have been due to respondents' concerns about their limited knowledge of the topics of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. The timing of the survey in the run-up to the regional elections may also have negatively affected respondents' willingness to participate. Another limitation is the regional focus of the survey, which does not allow direct application of the findings to other regions with different socio-economic conditions. The prevailing narrow perception of social entrepreneurship among respondents may also have influenced their answers to questions about the broader benefits of the concept. The fact that 71% of respondents were unaware of any specific social enterprise operating in their community, may have further limited the depth of their responses.

However, from a theoretical perspective, it is clear that social enterprise has a much broader scope, including environmental responsibility, economic self-sufficiency and active engagement in community life. To effectively integrate this concept into municipal strategic planning, it is essential to overcome the current knowledge and awareness deficit, not only among municipal representatives but also within the broader community. Public administrations should take a proactive approach to promoting social entrepreneurship in the future. It includes systematic awareness-raising, education and facilitating dialogue between municipalities and social enterprises. Such an approach can lead to the creation of workable partnerships and contribute to building more sustainable and prosperous communities. Such as for example in America (Korosec and Berman's, 2006).

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations for public administration can be formulated. This can contribute to the effective increase of social entrepreneurship as a tool for sustainable development:

1. Promoting employment and levelling labour market conditions.

- a) Introduction of interest-free or low-interest loans for social enterprises aimed at employing disadvantaged groups as an instrument of active employment policy.
- b) Prioritising local suppliers and social enterprises in public procurement as a form of support for the local economy and an inclusive labour market.
- c) Establishment of municipal social enterprises as a direct tool to tackle unemployment of disadvantaged groups and promote social integration at the local level.

2. Strengthening social cohesion and quality of life in the municipality.

- a) Provision of municipal premises under favourable conditions for social enterprise activities that contribute to the integration of disadvantaged people into community life and the strengthening of social cohesion.
- b) Implementation of awareness-raising campaigns to disseminate information on the benefits of social entrepreneurship and its impact on local communities.

3. Promoting the economic sustainability of social enterprises.

- a) Providing expert advice on the development of socially-oriented business plans.
- b) Developing business incubators to support start-up social enterprises and to ensure their economic viability and long-term sustainability.

4. Promoting the environmental dimension of social entrepreneurship.

- a) Prioritising social enterprises in public procurement with an environmental focus.
- b) Including environmentally oriented activities in the evaluation criteria of competitions (such as the Village of the Year) and awarding environmentally oriented social enterprises to increase their visibility and prestige.

Future research should focus on a deeper analysis of the barriers to implementing social entrepreneurship at the municipal level and on a comparative study of the relationship between municipalities and social enterprises in different regions or countries, including examples of best practices.

Conclusion

Social entrepreneurship is a crucial tool for promoting sustainable municipal development, particularly in areas such as employment for disadvantaged groups, fostering community cohesion and promoting environmental responsibility. However, research conducted in the administrative district of the municipality with extended competence Liberec, has shown, that awareness of the concept among municipal representatives is limited and often reduced to its social dimension. To effectively integrate social entrepreneurship into municipal development strategies, it is necessary to strengthen awareness, promote cooperation between public administration and social enterprises and create a favourable institutional environment. Only under these conditions can the full potential of social entrepreneurship as a tool for building inclusive, economically stable and environmentally responsible communities be realised.

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