

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE CIVIL SECTOR IN ADVANCING SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract: *The function and economic significance of nonprofit organizations in promoting social inclusion are becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary society. This trend is driven not only by the transformation of governmental engagement and the growing activity of civil organizations but also by the rising importance of community relations and the rethinking of the traditional institutional system based on the state and the market. The civil sector – in the form of associations and foundations – responds to social needs that state and market actors often fail to address flexibly. Nonprofit organizations not only complement public services but also offer unique, community-based services. They play a particularly important role in supporting labor market integration, especially for disadvantaged groups such as the Roma, individuals with low educational attainment, or those with reduced work capacity. The training, mentoring, and social support programs provided by civil organizations form a bridge between job seekers and the labor market, facilitating their inclusion in economic activity.*

The rapid transformation of globalization and socio-economic structures further underscores the need to place cooperation between civil society and the public sector on new foundations and strengthen it. The nonprofit sector has by now become not merely a complementary actor but a strategic one in the renewal of society, particularly in areas where reducing inequality and enhancing inclusion are essential.

They also contribute to increasing social cohesion, strengthening active citizenship, and solidifying democratic values, thereby making the social system more sustainable in the long term. By addressing specific local challenges and involving communities in problem-solving processes, nonprofit organizations not only fill institutional gaps but also foster innovation and participation. As such, they play a vital role in shaping inclusive societies that prioritize human dignity, equal opportunities, and solidarity. Nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in addressing labor market inequalities by providing access to skills development, job placement services, and tailored support. Their adaptive, person-centered approaches enable more inclusive employment pathways, particularly for individuals facing structural barriers, thereby contributing to a more equitable and resilient labor market.

Keywords: *nonprofit organizations; community engagement; social integration; employment*

JEL Classification: Z13 (other special topics, Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology; Language; Social and Economic Stratification)

1. Introduction

The civil sector encompasses those organizations and self-organizing initiatives based on social self-activity that aim to meet the specific needs of a given community through their operations. These activities allow for direct responses to social problems and welfare needs, while also encouraging civic participation and cooperation. The prevalence, structure, and thematic focus of civil initiatives reflect the quality of community relations, the depth of social solidarity, and the development of cooperation among individuals.

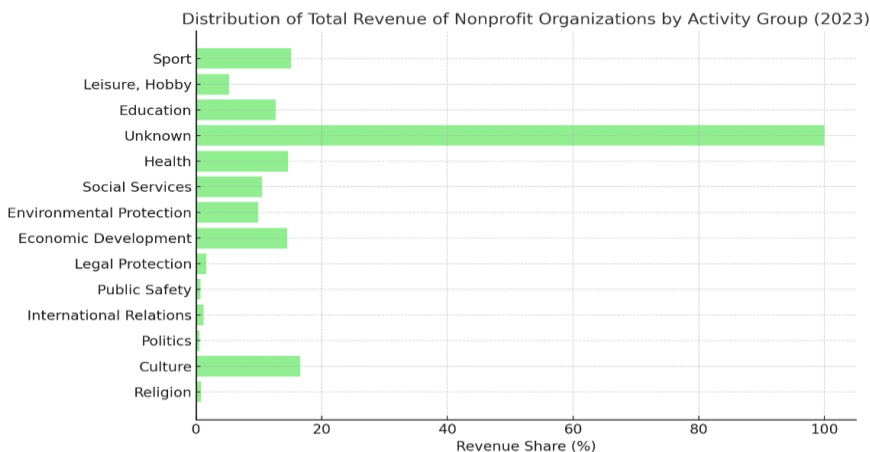
The operation of the civil sector is characterized by significant territorial concentration. The vast majority of organizations choose the form of foundations or associations, which influences not only their goals but also the geographical scope of their activities. Nonprofit organizations often provide alternatives to public services, complementing the efforts of the state. This role is increasingly acknowledged and supported by the government, which gradually expands the scope for civil involvement, thus partially easing the burden on its institutional system (Fricz, 2019). The activity spectrum of the civil sphere is extensive: beyond cultural, sports, leisure, and educational programs, civil organizations are playing an increasingly important role in healthcare services, social care, local community development, and urban development initiatives.

Following the regime change—particularly from the 1990s onward—a significant increase in the number of nonprofit organizations was observed in Hungary. Hungary's accession to the European Union opened access to funding opportunities, giving new momentum to the expansion of the civil sector. In order to sustain their operations and realize their objectives, nonprofit organizations actively participate in both national and EU-funded grant programs. The most successful applicants tend to be those involved in economic development, social services, educational, and cultural activities. The majority of their operational expenses are allocated to maintenance costs and employee wages. It is important to emphasize that civil society organizations are increasingly playing a pivotal role in facilitating labor market integration. Their activities are particularly critical in supporting the social and economic reintegration of disadvantaged groups—such as individuals with low levels of education, Roma communities, people with reduced work capacity, and long-term inactive jobseekers. Nonprofit organizations implement targeted employment programs, training schemes, counseling, and mentoring services designed to support these individuals in entering or re-entering the labor market.

In addition, civil organizations offer flexible employment opportunities tailored to individual needs and life circumstances, thereby accommodating those who may not thrive within traditional employment structures. In doing so, the civil sector assumes an irreplaceable role not only in providing social support but also in addressing structural inequalities within the labor market. Their work significantly contributes to the promotion of equal opportunities in employment and supports the long-term sustainability of the economy by activating otherwise marginalized or excluded groups.

2. Structural characteristics and socio-economic role of the civil sector in Hungary

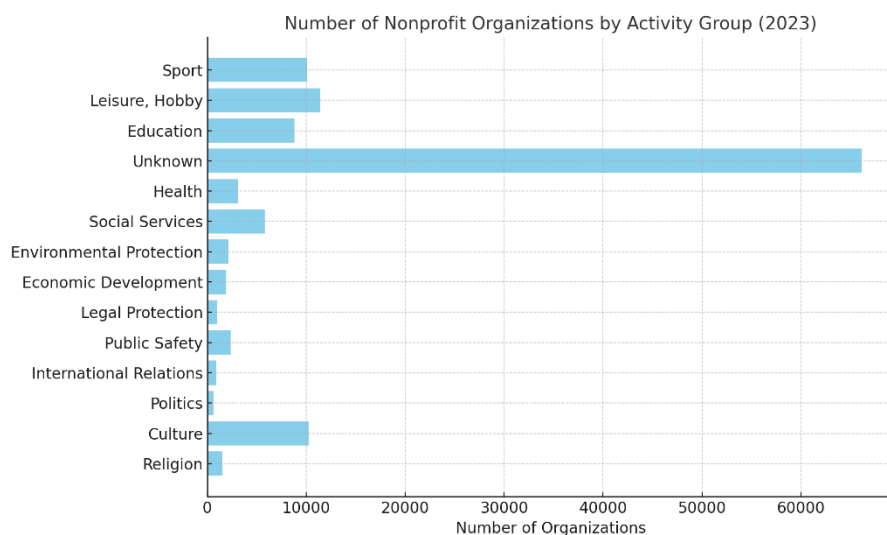
According to the latest data of the Central Statistical Office for 2023, there were approximately 61 thousand non-profit organizations operating in Hungary. The vast majority of these, approximately 88%, belong to the classic civil sector, i.e. they carry out their activities in the form of foundations or associations. The number of associations was 35,405, while that of foundations was 18,242, so the ratio of two-thirds to one-third between the organizational forms remained similar to previous years. The structure and operation of the organizations continue to show that social participation based on citizen initiative plays a significant role in the Hungarian civil sphere. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector was still evident in 2023, especially in the field of volunteering. The estimated number of volunteers decreased from 381 thousand in 2019 to 373 thousand in 2023. Nevertheless, the activities they perform represent significant social and economic value: the estimated value of the hours worked reached HUF 83 billion, which is equivalent to the annual work of about a thousand full-time employees. The presence of volunteers is especially dominant in classic civil society organizations, where a significant part of the human resources is provided by unpaid workers, as opposed to non-profit organizations, where the vast majority of employees work as employees. The economic weight of the civil sector is also significant. Classic non-profit organizations realized a revenue of 1,344.5 billion forints in 2023, which exceeded the value in 2022 by 52 billion forints. Nearly 60% of the revenue came from various forms of support. Within this, the amount of state and local government funds exceeded 534 billion forints, while EU and other private subsidies amounted to another 294 billion forints. Another important source of income for the operation of associations is membership fees, which exceeded 47 billion forints in 2023. These figures also clearly show that the civil sector is not only a community organizer, but also a significant factor in the national economy in economic terms, representing a weight of about 4.5% compared to GDP.



1. Figure: Distribution of Total Revenue of Nonprofit Organizations by Activity Group (2023)

Source: KSH data, 2023, online

The employment role of the civil sector cannot be neglected either. The number of people employed by non-profit organizations was 162,192 in 2023, of which nearly one-third were employed in the classical civil sector. Within this, in addition to full-time employees, there are also a large number of part-time, pension-related, and project-based employees. Flexible working forms are particularly characteristic of organizations that integrate disadvantaged groups – such as the elderly, people with disabilities, or young people – into their programs. This structure not only increases labor market flexibility, but also contributes to the promotion of social inclusion and equal opportunities. The range of activities of non-profit organizations remains diverse. Most organizations serve cultural (16.6%), sports (16.5%), leisure (15.8%) and educational (12.5%) purposes. The operation of foundations is primarily related to the fields of education (33%), social care (16%) and culture (15%), while sports and leisure activities, as well as cultural programs, continue to be decisive among associations (KSH 2023). These activities not only improve the quality of life of the given communities, but also contribute to strengthening social integration, cohesion and participation. In light of the above data, it is clear that the civil sector has now become a key player in Hungary, not only in social, but also in economic and labor market terms. Its significance is unquestionable not only in community services, but also in addressing social problems, ensuring equal opportunities and serving the segmented needs of the labor market.



2. Figure: Number of Nonprofit Organizations by Activity Group (2023)
Source: KSH data, 2023, online

3.The social role of civil society organizations and their role in promoting integration

Equal access to employment is a fundamental prerequisite for promoting social inclusion and the closely related goal of reducing and combating poverty. The importance of improving employment conditions must be understood at the level of society as a whole, but it is particularly important for disadvantaged groups of workers who, for whatever reason, find themselves on the margins of society. The promotion of employment among women, migrants, and Roma workers depends on two inseparable factors. One is whether the members of a given social group have the skills, abilities, competencies, and motivation necessary to participate in the labor market. The other is how inclusive and accepting (tolerant) the social environment is, which can either help or hinder the successful integration of these groups into the labor market. In our analysis, we do not examine the characteristics of the social environment (e.g., prejudice), nor do we discuss all disadvantaged groups of workers; in this case, we focus on the labor market situation of the Roma.

Civil society organizations have become indispensable actors in social, economic, and cultural life. Through their community involvement, they contribute significantly to alleviating and addressing social problems and meeting a number of community needs. Their activities are visible at several levels of society, from local communities to national structures. Their institutions and programs help citizens to assert their interests, strengthen social participation, and develop active citizenship (Nárai, 2004). Active participation in this sector is a particularly educational, socializing, and motivating experience for young people. Community involvement fosters behaviors and social sensitivity that lay the foundation for future civic attitudes. Volunteering among young people promotes community activity in adulthood and strengthens social ties and cooperation skills (Carson, 2002). Such experiences also contribute to young people developing a more empathetic attitude towards different strata of society and its problems. The increase in the number of civil society organizations in recent decades is linked to new challenges emerging in society and the resurgence of previously known social problems. In this context, civil society organizations not only provide services, but also act as a bridge between the state, the market, and society. Their unique characteristics enable them to take on social roles that other sectors are less able to perform effectively (Glózer, 2000). The diversity of civil society promotes the strengthening and deepening of democracy. Civil initiatives are capable of transforming local interests into higher, even public interests, and representing them in decision-making. A healthy civil sphere offers members of society alternatives and choices in their involvement in public life, thereby increasing the level of social capital and willingness to cooperate (Putnam, 2000). The activities of civil society organizations encourage individuals to become involved in shaping public life, thereby contributing to the development of the community as conscious citizens. Social engagement increases solidarity, a sense of responsibility, and initiative. In the long term, these attitudes contribute to the formation and deepening of civic identity and the consolidation of the foundations of democratic functioning (Seligman, 1997). This activity also satisfies a kind of psychosocial need: it creates opportunities for individuals to express themselves, increase their self-confidence, and strengthen their social relationships. Belonging to an organization provides a sense of belonging, while also offering support to those in crisis

situations, such as the unemployed or retirees. For them, civic participation also maintains a sense of social usefulness, which is important for maintaining social integration (Kuti, 1996). The functioning of civil society is also one of the drivers of social policy innovation. In many cases, civil society organizations are able to respond quickly and flexibly to social needs, offering alternative solutions where the state or market cannot intervene effectively. Many social services that are now institutionalized originally started as civil society initiatives. As a result, civil society now performs public tasks and has become an important player in the functioning of the welfare system (Nárai, 2004). It is also becoming an increasingly active participant in the processes of social redistribution. Through fundraising and support programs, the state, the corporate sector, and the general public also become part of this redistributive mechanism, which most often targets disadvantaged groups. The role of civil society organizations in labor market integration has become particularly important in recent years. As employers, they provide flexible work opportunities for people who find it difficult to succeed in the open labor market. A significant proportion of employees in the civil sector work part-time, alongside their pension, with changed working capacity or in temporary employment (KSH, 2024). In addition, training courses, mentoring programs, and community employment models organized by civil society organizations contribute to the development of labor market skills, increased independence, and longer-term employment. As actors in the social economy, for example through social cooperatives, they provide temporary employment for those who have been excluded from the primary labor market (Nárai & Pálné, 2013). Volunteering also functions as an integration mechanism. Through volunteer work, individuals not only create community value, but also develop themselves, acquire skills, and build new networks. This process is particularly useful for those who are unemployed, starting their careers, or have been permanently inactive. In addition to its economic benefits, volunteering therefore also serves to create opportunities (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2018).

4. Labor market vulnerability and characteristics of the precariat

There are many social groups in the labor market that are particularly vulnerable to economic uncertainty, underemployment, and the risk of being excluded from the labor market. According to the World Bank (2017), the unemployed, the inactive, and those in atypical, insecure forms of employment are all considered "vulnerable" labor market participants. This category is particularly heterogeneous, as it includes, for example, middle-aged individuals who have been forced into early retirement, as well as young people who are neither in education nor employment (NEET group). It also includes those who work low hours or for low wages, often in temporary, non-standard employment arrangements, even if they are formally considered full-time employees. The theory of labor market segmentation—based on Huszár and Sik (2017)—argues that the labor market does not function as a unified system, but can be divided into distinct segments. These segments are not interchangeable and structurally fix certain social groups in different labor market positions. Based on the classic theory of Galasi and Sik (1979), the labor market can be divided into two basic parts: the primary and secondary segments. Those working in the primary sector enjoy stable employment conditions, higher wages, and more secure labor law protection, while those working in

the secondary sector often work for low wages, in poorer working conditions, and their position in the labor market is vulnerable, often subject to discrimination (Sík & Szeitl, 2016). The concept of the precariat, introduced into international literature by Standing (2012), is linked to this secondary labor market segment. The precariat refers to a social group living in typically unstable working conditions, whose members are often forced to change jobs, whose income is unpredictable, and who do not have a clear professional identity or long-term career model. This combination of characteristics contributes to the social and economic marginalization of precarious workers, who live in a state of constant uncertainty. The typical precarious worker is employed on a fixed-term contract, often as a subcontractor or temporary worker.

According to Standing (2012) and R. Fedor (2021), a significant proportion of the precariat relies on welfare systems that are subject to increasingly stringent eligibility criteria. As a result, many are completely excluded from the support network, which further deepens their poverty and increases their marginalization in the labor market. This phenomenon is particularly worrying in the case of social groups that are already disadvantaged, such as Roma communities, people with low levels of education, or the long-term unemployed.

The role of civil society organizations is particularly important in this context, as in many cases they are the first to provide support and services to these vulnerable groups. They help with reintegration into the labor market, offer alternative forms of employment, and provide skills development and counseling programs that help increase employment opportunities.

5. The role of the civil sector in employment and creating opportunities in the labor market

Civil society organizations play a decisive role in promoting employment in Hungary, especially among disadvantaged groups who have been excluded from the labor market. In their operations, they often make use of state or municipal subsidies and various grant funds, which are intended not only to finance their operations but also to expand employment. In some cases, these subsidies are linked to the partial assumption of state tasks, thus the civil sector also contributes indirectly to the provision of public services. Thanks to their flexible organizational structure, they offer an ideal environment for implementing various employment experiments and innovative programs. Particular attention should be paid to county-level programs that target rehabilitative employment, productive school programs, or the employment of homeless people. Experience shows that civil society organizations are particularly effective in integrating disadvantaged social groups into the labor market, as their personalized approach, direct support, and local roots enable them to reach people whom the state system is unable to successfully reintegrate into employment (Székely, 2010). The typical activities of these organizations include providing labor market information, career and job search counseling, organizing educational and tutoring programs, and providing health and social support, including welfare assistance. These tasks not only complement the social welfare system, but also promote employment, as they directly contribute to improving the labor market suitability and employability of disadvantaged people.

According to 2023 data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), 90,331 people worked full-time in the non-profit sector, with an additional 18,196 working part-time. The total number of employees thus exceeded 108,000 (KSH, 2024a). In addition, civil society organizations mobilize a significant number of volunteers: in 2023, nearly 306,000 volunteers worked, collectively completing more than 39 million working hours (KSH, 2024b). This activity not only supports the functioning of organizations, but also plays a key role in social integration, especially for people who have been inactive or excluded from the labor market for a long time. Structural changes in the labor market, digitalization, demographic changes, and crisis situations—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—have made it necessary to involve new actors in the labor market.

Civil society organizations are able to establish direct contact with marginalized groups and operate trust-based support systems that can be more effective than formal institutions. At the European Union level, there is also a recognized need to expand employment in cooperation with the civil sector, and this approach is continued in the EU strategy for 2030 (European Commission, 2021). The involvement of local actors and institutionalized partnerships are essential for the implementation of effective and sustainable employment policies. This partnership is based on cooperation between local governments, vocational training institutions, employment agencies, employers, entrepreneurs, professional organizations, and civil society organizations. Such cooperation, based on clear objectives set out in a contract and organized as a system at the regional level, can contribute effectively to addressing employment problems and creating opportunities.

6.The impact of civil society organizations on regional development and community cohesion

Civil society has a significant and growing influence on economic and social development at the local and regional levels. László Osváth's (2005) study highlights that the activities of civil society organizations are typically focused on a single municipality or a specific part of it, but their impact extends to the wider environment and the development of the entire region. The development of a given area is inconceivable without the participation of the people living there and active social actors, including civil society organizations. Although regional development decisions often come from above, at the government level, the opinions of the local population and organizations are of fundamental importance in terms of the actual professional content and local realities. One of the keys to effective regional development is that local actors, including civil society organizations, feel ownership of the development directions and participate actively in shaping them. Civil society organizations play an irreplaceable role in setting community goals and identifying local needs. They only support development directions with which they can identify and which reflect genuine social needs. Through this role, they exercise a kind of civil control over development processes, in which they not only form opinions but also make corrective proposals where appropriate. The regional impact of the civil sector can be measured not only in social but also in economic terms. Organizations not only provide community services, but also contribute to increasing local employment and creating jobs. At the same time, their impact may vary from region to region, especially between more developed and

less developed regions. Although domestic indicators currently lag behind those of the more developed Member States of the European Union, civil society organizations have significant potential in this area as well. The willingness of organizations to cooperate and network promotes the efficient use of resources, improves the quality of services, and creates new employment opportunities. Cooperation can expand financing opportunities, which opens up further development.

7. Results

Civil society organizations are now indispensable actors in the functioning of society, especially in sensitive areas where the state and market sectors have limited capacity to respond effectively. These organizations are unique in that they are in direct contact with communities, enabling them to respond credibly and quickly to emerging issues. Their tasks include strengthening social cohesion, supporting disadvantaged groups, promoting equal opportunities, and combating prejudice and social exclusion. These objectives contribute, directly or indirectly, to building social trust, which is one of the cornerstones of sustainable and inclusive development.

Social relations and community ties are of paramount importance for the development of a region. Civil society organizations actively contribute to the creation, maintenance, and strengthening of these relationships. Their work can foster a sense of local identity, belonging, and loyalty to the region, which encourages individuals and communities to participate actively. Civil activity helps local communities recognize their own interests and represent them through joint action. In contrast, disadvantaged, marginalized regions often experience a narrowing of social networks, a weakening of community activity, and the migration of the mobile, active population. This process further deepens regional deprivation in a self-reinforcing manner, making the strengthening of civil society and activism a strategic tool for catching up. Civil society can therefore be not only a partner, but also an initiator and shaper of a region's economic and social development. It plays a particularly important role in enabling stakeholders to shape the future of their region themselves – and this participation is not only a democratic value but also a prerequisite for effective development.

One of the most important features of its operation is that it does not pursue profit-oriented goals but focuses on strengthening social participation and responsibility. Its founders and active members are usually deeply committed to achieving community goals, which ensures the credibility and sustainability of the sector. Civil society organizations are able to accept and support grassroots initiatives and offer alternative solutions that go beyond the framework of formal systems. Their flexible operation, direct social embeddedness, and dialogue-based approach enable them to act as credible partners to communities, thereby strengthening social cooperation.

The work of non-profit organizations is particularly valuable in promoting labor market integration. In many cases, they provide assistance to individuals and groups—such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, Roma, young people starting their careers, or those with low levels of education—who are not or only with difficulty accessible through traditional public and market-based labor market services. Voluntary programs, training, mentoring opportunities, vocational training, and alternative forms of employment provided by civil society organizations not only prepare participants for

employment, but also develop their social skills, self-confidence, and community ties. They play a key role in improving the labor market opportunities of disadvantaged people, especially where the capacity or flexibility of the public welfare system is limited. Civil society organizations often act as intermediaries between labor market actors and target groups, thereby facilitating job placement and labor market retention. They also provide support in the areas of social work, information provision, counseling, health care, and childcare—all of which are complementary services that contribute to improving employability. Their role in labor market integration also creates value for the economy. Volunteering is a particularly important integration tool, as it not only provides work experience, but also builds new networks, reduces isolation, and facilitates subsequent placement in the open labor market.

Overall, the involvement of civil society organizations in society and the labor market not only improves the quality of life in communities, but also contributes to a more balanced and fairer economy. The active presence, professional knowledge, and people-centered approach of the civil sphere are indispensable in addressing the complex and ever-changing challenges of social integration. Our responses to the challenges of the future must therefore take into account the strengthening of civil society organizations and the conscious development of their integrated role.

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