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What Role Can Community Spaces Play in Supporting the Career Choices and Employment of People with Disabilities?

Abstract

The paper provides insights on community spaces as social enterprises in a general context and through a specific case study. Additionally, it delves into the potential opportunities inherent in utilizing community spaces to support career development among young people with disabilities. The authors also present a promising case study on Labor Café – Donation Café and Open Community Space, Nyíregyháza which illustrates the multifaceted contribution community spaces can make to a social challenge.

Keywords: employment of persons with disabilities, career development, community space, social enterprise.

What Role Can Community Spaces Play in Supporting the Career Choices and Employment of People with Disabilities?

1. Introduction

Hunger in developing countries, housing difficulties, repression, difficulties in accessing health care, or the isolation of minority groups in countries all over the world, the lack of equal access, low employment rates and discrimination processes are social issues that present tangible challenges and are difficult to respond to. Complex challenges require complex solutions, it is a commonplace. Organisations and individuals grapple with a multitude of challenges that defy simple solutions in today's ever-evolving world. These complex challenges arise from the interplay of various factors, including technological advances, social dynamics, economic shifts, and environmental concerns. As we confront these intricate issues, it becomes evident that conventional approaches fall short. Instead, we must embrace comprehensive strategies that match the complexity of the problems. The question is whether and how social enterprises can contribute to responding to these challenges. Lysaght and Krupa stated in their findings that there is a need for a business orientation in the solutions rather than a service orientation, which means social enterprises have something for future answers (Lysaght & Krupa, 2018).

The European Commission's Social Business Initiative, launched in 2011, defined social enterprises that combine societal goals with an entrepreneurial spirit. These organisations focus on achieving broader social, environmental or community objectives. According to the Commission's definition, a social enterprise is an actor in the social economy whose purpose is to achieve social impact rather than to generate profits for its owners or shareholders. It operates by providing goods and services to the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative way and by using its profits primarily to achieve social goals. It is open and accountable in its management and attentive to the involvement of employees, consumers and stakeholders affected by its entrepreneurial activities (European Commission, 2011).

Furthermore, the European Commission's 2021 Action Plan for the Social Economy, "*Building an Economy that Works for People: An Action Plan for the Social Economy*," underscores the pivotal role of the social economy in addressing pressing social challenges and inequalities. Specifically, the plan highlights the potential of the social economy to increase employment rates by integrating members of disadvantaged groups into the labour market (for example persons with disabilities) and to reduce the number of individuals at risk of poverty and social exclusion. By tackling these social challenges head-on, countries can make significant strides toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at both EU and



global levels, particularly in advancing the development of sustainable cities and communities. The Action Plan is geared towards the development of social innovation and supporting the growth of the social economy throughout the period spanning the years between 2021 and 2030, reflecting a concerted effort to promote inclusive and sustainable economic development across Europe and beyond (European Commission, 2021b).

In this publication, the aim is to illustrate, through a Hungarian case study, how a community space managed by a non-profit organization, functioning as a social enterprise, can facilitate the inclusion of persons from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, particularly individuals with disabilities. Additionally, it explores how such a space and its community can support the career orientation of young persons with disabilities.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the context on social enterprises and community spaces, followed by an examination of the open labour market challenges faced by persons with disabilities. It then explores the broader impact of community spaces on young persons with disabilities. Subsequently, it presents the operation of Labor Café, culminating in a case study that demonstrates specific strategies for supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities by a community space.

This paper does not aim to delve into detailed statistics or literature reviews; instead, it seeks to describe the practices offered by Labour Café to persons with disabilities and their families. The focus is on practical applications, highlighting the potential opportunities suggested by the presented examples.

2. Context: social enterprise, community space, employment of persons with disabilities – new responses, new perspectives by social entrepreneurship

Social enterprises, driven by a dual purpose of profit and societal impact strengthen social capital. This intangible resource encompasses relationships, trust, and networks within a community. Social enterprises often rely on strong ties with local stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, and employees. These connections enable them to access resources, share knowledge, and collaborate effectively. By nurturing these relationships, social enterprises amplify their impact and contribute to the well-being of both individuals and communities. Research suggests that social capital enhances resilience, fosters innovation, and facilitates collective action, reinforcing the positive effects of social enterprises (Mair & Marti, 2006). Furthermore, social enterprises not only generate economic value but also cultivate social capital, creating a virtuous cycle of community empowerment and sustainable development (Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

Concepts such as human capital, social capital, and cultural capital, and their interrelations are emphasized in Westlund and Bolton's paper. They define social capital as the set of actual or virtual resources generated for an individual or a group



through a persistent network of relationships based on mutual recognition and acquaintance. Additionally, the paper distinguishes between human capital, which is individual, and social capital, which concerns the connections between individuals (Westlund & Bolton, 2003).

A community space as a social enterprise might provide a space where social capital can take place. The intrinsic relationship between communities and physical spaces is undeniable, characterized by an intricate and multifaceted nature serving as a rich foundation for research and discourse. These physical spaces, ranging from parks and streets to plazas and community centres, constitute the backdrop against which community life unfolds. They function as meeting points where individuals from diverse backgrounds, abilities, and social statuses converge, fostering interaction and engagement in various communal activities. For example, a local park may host picnics, children's playdates, and yoga classes, thereby nurturing the bonds within the community. It is essential to underscore at the outset that the publication's concept of community encompasses a diverse and multicultural spectrum of individuals, each contributing their unique perspectives and experiences. Fitzpatrick straightforwardly states that social policy intertwines with spatial policy. Space both influences and is influenced by the delivery and regulation of services, as well as the experiences of service users. Research often highlights this connection in areas such as health, housing, and labour markets, particularly concerning urban and rural boundaries (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

Indeed, transcending their physical attributes, certain places assume special significance due to their distinct goals, identities, and the sense of community they work with. These places are imbued with memories, emotions, and shared experiences, becoming integral to the collective identity of the community they serve. Whether it is a neighbourhood square, a historic building, or a street corner, these locations evoke a profound sense of belonging and pride among community members. They serve as symbolic representations of the community's heritage, values, and aspirations, reinforcing social cohesion and fostering a more profound sense of connection among its inhabitants (Low & Altman, 1992; Lengen & Kistemann, 2012).

The term *interaction* employed in this writing encapsulates the dynamic interplay between communities and physical spaces, highlighting the reciprocal influence each exerts upon the other. Communities actively shape their spaces, manifesting their agency through transformative actions such as repurposing vacant lots into community gardens or organizing street festivals. These initiatives imbue spaces with identity and purpose, enabling the community to recognize and name them accordingly. As spaces evolve, they develop emergent characteristics influenced by the behaviour and activities of those who frequent them. Interactions within a space can give rise to feelings of safety, vibrancy, and social cohesion (Gieryn, 2000). For instance, a bustling café may emerge as a focal point for intellectual discourse, fostering community engagement, whereas an abandoned alleyway may evoke insecurity and disconnection.

Simultaneously, spaces wield a reciprocal influence on community dynamics. Well-designed public squares, for example, can actively encourage social interaction and community engagement, serving as catalysts for collective activity and connection. Conversely, neglected or poorly designed spaces may inadvertently create feelings of isolation and detachment among community members, underscoring the symbiotic

relationship between communities and the spaces they inhabit (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2010).

What exactly do we call *community spaces*? Community spaces are important to people's living spaces in urban environments. In this paper, the authors look at community spaces precisely as locations open to the community, open to the people inhabiting the area, whose services respond to the needs of the people living there, and whose goals include objectives that are important for the local community and local society, and which serve the development of the locality and the improvement of its quality of life. In their publication, Westlund and Bolton highlight that places like community spaces, where social activities happen, increase the social capital on all levels (individual, group, community) and are catalysts for something that will pay off in the short or long term (Westlund & Bolton, 2003).

The authors' explicit intention is to highlight that the purpose of community spaces in reducing social disadvantage and promoting social inclusion is not new. The first settlement houses date back to 19th century England, and were established to alleviate the enormous social inequalities created by industrialisation and the rapid growth of the cities, thanks to the hard work of the Barnett couple.¹ The novelty of the initiative lays in the fact that wealthy students from elite universities relocated to slum areas, now known as ghettos or segregations, to teach the disadvantaged people living there. The idea was based on the two-fold purpose of development and sensitisation. It was intended, on the one hand, to change the mindset and perspectives of young people from affluent families who have just graduated from university, and, on the other hand, to improve the opportunities of those living in slums. The first settlement house, Toynbee Hall,² opened its doors to residents in 1884, where university lecturers and their recent graduates lived and worked with local people in the slums, providing enlightenment, education, and activation. This initiative grew into a movement, and community spaces mushroomed in Europe and the United States. The early 20th century saw a surge in settlement houses, which has continued with the rise of online community platforms (Giczey, 2015).

Building from the bottom up is at the heart of using community spaces as community-building tools. In settlement work, founders work from the bottom up in building the community process with the neighbourhood, driven by a passion for social justice and change (Monostori, 2019). Importantly, the process has to influence the whole community through a cross-sectoral, complex endeavour, so to speak, to build bridges among social classes and cultures. In essence, it acts as a social hub where people can meet and exchange ideas freely (Oldenburg, 1989). In such community spaces, by activating and involving the population, local democracy is developed, partnerships are formed, local people's living conditions are improved, information is shared and communication between different groups and communities is facilitated through community development work. The aim is to promote community relations, collective action, and advocacy within the locality (Vercseg, 2020). Like settlement

1 Samuel and Henrietta Barnett were influential social reformers in late 19th-century Britain. Samuel, born in 1844, and Henrietta, born in 1851, shared a passion for addressing social inequality and improving the lives of the impoverished. They were instrumental in founding Toynbee Hall, one of the first settlement houses aimed at providing education and support to the poor in London's East End.

2 Toynbee Hall, founded in 1884 by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, is one of the earliest examples of a settlement house, aimed at addressing social inequality in East London.

houses, the innovative open community spaces created today in varied structures use their complex toolbox to contribute to alleviating exclusion, addressing the lack of small communities, and to promote social interaction in both urban and rural settings.

The use of community spaces with diverse operational structures and content to address various social issues is not a new concept. In this article, the aim is to illustrate, through a concrete example, how an open community space can positively impact inclusion, the development of social relationships, and particularly the integration of persons with disabilities into the open labour market.

One of the critical social challenges that community spaces as social enterprises might address is the *employment of persons with disabilities*. This issue is multifaceted and contingent upon various factors, including access to education, career and lifelong guidance, and social inclusion. Despite advancements in legislation and awareness, individuals with disabilities often encounter barriers when seeking open labour employment opportunities. Community spaces can play a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges by providing inclusive work environments, offering vocational training programmes, and supporting partnerships with local businesses to create employment pathways for persons with disabilities. By prioritizing accessibility, diversity, and inclusion within their operations, community spaces can contribute to breaking down barriers to employment and promoting greater equity and opportunity for individuals with disabilities.

Starting from the premise that social capital emphasizes the importance of social structures and networks in facilitating productive outcomes, Coleman argues that social capital, unlike physical or human capital, is inherent in the relationships among people and the norms, trust, and networks that arise from these relationships. He posits that investing in social activities within community spaces can enhance social capital, leading to increased cooperation and collective action. For these spaces, such investment can translate into a more cohesive workforce, improved community relations, and ultimately, enhanced organizational performance. For individuals, engaging in social activities can expand their networks, provide support and resources, and foster a sense of belonging (Coleman, 1988).

Persons with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged minority groups globally, facing compounded challenges due to overt discrimination, implicit bias, and the lack of simple measures to ensure equal opportunities. In nearly all countries, children with disabilities experience some of the lowest access to education, and adults with disabilities experience low access to quality employment and income (Heymann et al., 2020).

Employment is a key area for the social participation of persons with disabilities. By employment, we mean primarily open labour market employment, but it is also important to define the role of alternative (sheltered, supported) employment providers. For decades, researchers have demonstrated the value of diversity in the workplace, with evidence that diverse groups make better and faster decisions, that diversity positively impacts profits, and that corporate clients increasingly demand diversity indicators from their external consultants. Despite this, there has been an increase in the open employment of persons with disabilities (Havener, 2019).

The EU-LFS survey (2024) on employment found that only 50.8% of persons with disabilities aged 20-64 were employed, compared to 75% of persons without



disabilities. According to the Social Scoreboard, the employment gap for persons with disabilities in the EU in 2022 was 21.4 %, a slight improvement on the figure first measured in 2014 (22,7%) (Eurostat, 2024).

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan articulates the European Union's vision for fostering a robust social Europe, with a primary focus on employment, skills development, and social inclusion. The plan outlines ambitious targets, to ensure that, compared to 2019, at least 78% of individuals aged 20 to 64 be employed in 2030, to facilitate annual training for at least 60% of all adults, and notably, to reduce the number of individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion by a minimum of 15 million, including a specific target of 5 million children. It is worth noting that as of 2020, approximately 21.6% of the EU population fell within the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion category (European Commission, 2021a).

To achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, it is essential to remove social and environmental barriers to ensure full inclusion. Workplaces must provide reasonable accommodation, establishing as the leading legal and practical standard for reducing barriers. Reasonable accommodation involves individual-level measures that make employment opportunities equally accessible for everyone. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), all EU countries are obligated to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to the physical environment, transportation, information, and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems (Heymann et al., 2020).

In the 2022 Census in Hungary, about 9.2 million personal questionnaires were submitted to the Central Statistical Office (KSH), and 75% of respondents completed the optional questions on health. 72% of respondents did not report any health issues, 1,7 million people reported a persistent illness, 639,000 said that their health condition severely challenged them, and 270,000 lived with a disability. According to the database, KSH has identified two main groups of persons: persons with a disability who have difficulties finding a job and others who are severely challenged. In terms of gender, 51% of the respondents to the question '*I have a disability*' were female and 49% were male, while among those who answered '*I am severely limited*', 60% of the respondents were female and only 40% were male, meaning that 50% more women identified themselves as severely limited person. In 2022, according to the Census data, the number of persons aged 15-64 years who reported having a disability or severe challenges was 289,795 out of 753,747. Of the 289,795 respondents aged 15-64, classified as persons with disability and persons with severe challenges, 144,732 were employed, i.e., 49.9% of respondents had a job in 2022 (KSH, 2022). The data indicate that significant progress is needed in this area and that employment rates can be improved through coordinated efforts.

Approaching the target group – youth with disabilities – community spaces play a vital role in encouraging social connections, promoting inclusivity, and enhancing the well-being of individuals within a community. Warner et al. also highlight the importance of community places for different areas of interest, such as political, cultural and social functions. Their example is the role of cafes as 'closed' public spaces, among lots of other impacts, mediating social encounters and creating supportive friendships (Warner et al., 2013).



Employment promotes social inclusion, and employment can be supported by *career counselling and lifelong career guidance*. Career guidance in educational settings has crucial responsibility. According to the SDG 4, which is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 7), there are several opportunities for schools to connect to community spaces, build cooperation and support lifelong guidance. One of the best present-day examples is Hungary, where 'Community Service' is mandatory for secondary school students before graduation.

According to the Hungarian law on education³ all students are required to complete 50 hours of community service as a prerequisite for starting their final exams. The goal is to encourage young people to engage in meaningful activities that benefit others, the community, and the environment. There are several areas of community service, including the educational field, volunteering at schools and kindergartens, in the healthcare system, doing support work in healthcare institutions, supporting charity organizations in the social field, caring for the homeless, the elderly, or persons with disabilities, and engaging in camps or sports events. Other areas are cultural or community volunteering, involvement with museums, theatres, or community-oriented organizations such as community spaces. Involvement in school community service can foster volunteering and social responsibility, promoting acceptance and inclusion both individually and within the community. Community service, as an organized form of activity, provides secondary school students with the opportunity to learn about responsible thinking and explore their potential in an altruistic spirit. Today, young people's experience of community is evolving, with a growing reliance on virtual connections and the Internet for learning, knowledge sharing, and communication. Community service brings a more traditional, face-to-face form of networking to the forefront, enriching young people's experiences and broadening their sense of community (Galambos & Révész, 2015).

Career development for persons with disabilities is indeed characterized by its complexity, nonlinearity, and often chaotic nature, influenced by a diverse array of stakeholders. These stakeholders play pivotal roles in shaping the career trajectories of individuals with disabilities, offering both personal and institutional support along the way. Personal supporters, including friends, family members, and teachers, play a crucial role in providing emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and guidance throughout the career development journey. Their support often extends beyond the professional realm, encompassing personal growth, self-esteem, and advocacy. Institutional supporters, on the other hand, comprise school-based and community-based organizations dedicated to providing specialized services and resources tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities. These organizations offer vocational training programmes, job placement assistance, and advocacy services to promote equal access to employment opportunities and career advancement (Lindstrom et al., 2011).

Well-designed policies, which have considerable room for improvement in most countries, can support career development and can significantly enhance the labour market integration of persons with disabilities. Public employment services play a central role in this integration, but their services are often limited in range and

3 2011. évi CXCV. törvény a nemzeti köznevelésről.

capacity. NGOs can complement these services by providing flexible, personalized, and specialized support, both for daily activities and employment rehabilitation. This cooperation can additionally indirectly affect the inclusion to the open labour market (EASPD, 2022).

Organizations that serve as community spaces aim to support the development of social skills and foster a sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities. Their primary goal is to enhance the overall well-being and inclusion of these individuals within society. These organizations provide a range of programmes and services designed to help individuals with disabilities develop and strengthen their social skills, interpersonal relationships, and sense of belonging within their communities. Through structured activities, workshops, and peer support groups, individuals can learn effective communication strategies, conflict resolution techniques, and social interaction norms in a supportive and inclusive environment. Moreover, these organizations often serve as community hubs where individuals can connect with others who share similar and totally different experiences, interests, and aspirations. By promoting social inclusion and providing opportunities for meaningful engagement, these organizations empower individuals with disabilities to build confidence, develop lasting friendships, and participate fully in all aspects of community life. Collectively, these efforts can support open labour market employment.

Together, these personal and institutional supporters form a diverse network of stakeholders who cooperate with persons with disabilities in navigating the complexities of career development. Moreover, these organizations serve as workplaces that exemplify inclusive employment practices and characteristics and can support transition from school to work. Lindstrom et al. state that “[s]tudents with disabilities who participate in vocational coursework and community-based work experience are also more likely to obtain and maintain employment after high school” (Lindstrom et al., 2011, p. 424).

Besides career guidance, one cannot avoid mentioning education and *inclusive education*. Inclusive education is a cornerstone of an inclusive society, ensuring that every individual, regardless of characteristics, has access to quality education. Among its many benefits, inclusive education holds the potential to significantly enhance the employment prospects of persons with disabilities. Inclusive education transcends mere equal access or accessibility; it embodies a philosophy that celebrates diversity and promotes equal opportunities for all learners. By integrating learners with special educational needs into mainstream educational settings, inclusive education nurtures a supportive environment conducive to holistic development. Studies underscore the positive impact of inclusive education on academic achievement, social integration, and self-esteem among students with special educational needs. Most importantly, inclusive education is a dynamic process that actively supports social integration (UNESCO, 2020).

The transition from inclusive education to meaningful employment for individuals with disabilities is closely interconnected. Research by Lindstrom et al. reveals that individuals who receive education within inclusive settings are more likely to secure competitive employment later in life. This correlation highlights the pivotal role of inclusive education in equipping individuals with the necessary skills, confidence, and social capital to navigate the labour market successfully (Lindstrom et al., 2011).



Inclusive education challenges societal norms and dismantles attitudinal barriers that perpetuate discrimination against persons with disabilities. By creating a culture of acceptance and understanding, inclusive schools cultivate sympathy and empathy among students, paving the way for a more inclusive workforce. The work of UNESCO emphasizes the transformative potential of inclusive education in building a society where diversity is celebrated, and inclusion is the norm. Inclusive education serves as a catalyst for social change, empowering persons with disabilities to realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. By fostering an inclusive learning environment that nurtures diversity and promotes equity, inclusive education lays the foundation for greater employment opportunities and economic independence (UNESCO, 2020).

The mentioned challenges and subsequent changes increased the need for all stakeholders to take responsibility for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners and for building resilience through more inclusive education systems. The paper *Reimagining our futures together* examines the future role of education (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). It stresses the need for education to be a 'shared social commitment' – one of the key human rights – strengthening everyone's capacity to care and co-operate across all levels of society (UNESCO, 2021).

3. Labor Café – a promising approach to inclusivity and supporting youth with disabilities

This section of the paper will explore how an open, inclusive space can support young persons with disabilities in their career orientation. This will be illustrated through a case study on Labor Café, which has been operating in Nyíregyháza since 2015.

This interpretative internal case study employed a mixed-methods approach. Data on the community space were gathered through spontaneous and participant observations, as well as documentary analysis. The sample comprised regular users of the community space, identified through spontaneous conversations initiated during observations. The inclusion criteria for participants were: (1) regular visitors to the community space, attending at least once a week for a minimum of one year between 2022 and 2023, (2) individuals with disabilities, (3) aged 16 years or older, (4) individuals who had completed secondary education, were pursuing higher education, or were about to start a career at the time of their visits to the community centre. Additionally, the sample included relatives of individuals meeting the above criteria.

The idea and goals behind Labor Café: as mentioned above, community spaces are pivotal in fostering connections and personal growth, particularly among young individuals. At Labor Café, the mission is clear: to create a community space that embraces diversity and extends a helping hand to those in need. The primary aim of the Café is to serve as a connection point for the local community in an increasingly isolated and individualized world. It fosters a sense of belonging and community



among visitors and participants. Additionally, the space is designed to support community initiatives and provide a platform for individuals who are marginalized elsewhere.

According to the website of the organisation that runs the community space: *“Labor Café Donation Café, Open Community Space relies on people, the local community. It will survive as long as there is social support behind it, as long as there are people who believe in independent, free initiatives, in the power and importance of working together. By bringing the community closer together in the space, they will also be brought closer to a social cause, a community initiative, of which they will be part, both as users and as facilitators. Our aim is to give as many young people as possible a sense of community thinking, the experience of shared success, the experience and knowledge of volunteering. We know that a community’s strength and resilience depends on its members’ ability to work together, so maintaining and running the space is a practical way for volunteers and donors to open up to each other and forge new relationships.”* (Tabulaplaza, 2024) Regarding operation and finances, the motto of Labor Café is: *“Contribute Your Share, Add Your Part!”* The community space promotes social responsibility through its community-funded model and volunteer-based operation. Initiated and coordinated by the Tabulaplaza Foundation in 2015, the project aims to embed a culture of giving into daily life in Nyíregyháza and across Hungary. Visitors support the maintenance and development of the space by contributing to donation urns, which serve as symbols of honour. With an annual budget of approximately €16,000, the funding of the space is derived from donations related to its services—such as community office operations, space rentals, and programmes—as well as contributions from corporate and private donors. This shared approach to social enterprise embodies the principle of collective responsibility and the practical implementation of communal ownership.

As far as programmes are concerned, Labor Café’s programmes (*Switching off and on in an informal space*), which are described in the paper, truly make a difference in enhancing the quality of life for young people with disabilities and, consequently, their families, by improving their opportunities in life. An open and inclusive environment beyond the institution facilitates indirect inclusion. Participants can draw inspiration from the community and its initiatives organized within the space, potentially becoming organizers themselves. Notable examples of this dynamic can be observed in several of the Labor Café programmes, which have indirectly fostered the development of inclusive initiatives both within and beyond the space. In the present section, we will present illustrative examples demonstrating how a social enterprise-led open community space and its engaged community can support young persons with disabilities and their families. This will be completed with quotes and reflections from participants, visitors, and organizers.

Community Events and Clubs: (1) *Kocka Klub* (The Dice Club) is a weekly board game and e-sports club where young persons with or without a disability can come together to play in a casual setting. Gergő, a person with autism spectrum disorder, joined the club at the invitation of Labor Café when he was 15 years old. The club’s impact as described by Gergő’s mother: *“My son made friends there for the first time! For someone with autism, this is a very significant achievement! They stayed friends for a long time. What he found there was 100% acceptance and support! It’s a fantastic place with wonderful people! During the sessions, I chose not to stay*

because I wanted to encourage his independence ... and this, incidentally, became my 'me-time'." Gergő also wrote feedback to the Café when he was 21: "I made friends; we didn't just hang out at the community café. I met a retired teacher who helped me get my high school graduation."

Community Events and Clubs: (2) *LinkedIn Local* is a bi-weekly professional knowledge-sharing club for professionals, designed for the local entrepreneurial ecosystem to cultivate relationships and for facilitating both informal and formal knowledge sharing. Emese (23), a person with visual disability, decided to join this initiative and told us about the event: *"As a visually impaired person, stepping out of my familiar environment was an immensely significant experience. It allowed me to engage openly with strangers, discuss the challenges I face and seek their assistance. I expressed my desire for greater independence. Moreover, my participation in LinkedIn Local not only enriched my knowledge but also introduced me to new acquaintances."*

Community Events and Clubs: (3) *Sign language club*. A number of programmes have also been accommodated in community spaces that have been squeezed out elsewhere due to the high cost of renting for-profit or municipal spaces. One of these is the Sign Language Club, which was initiated by one of the Foundation's regular supporters and is held twice a week. The interesting thing about the programme is that the initiator himself is a person who is hearing impaired, and his volunteer programme was designed to increase the visibility of the community space and to stimulate contact between deaf and hearing-impaired people and the able-bodied majority. This is how its organiser, Dóri (24), described the initiative: *"The community space is about supporting each other. The space supports us by allowing us to use it and meet each other for a minimal donation, while we help the space by promoting it to a community who find it difficult to move out of their own familiar environment. We have got to know the place together, experienced the openness of the community and visitors, and are now happy to visit it for other programmes or private meetings. In whatever way we can, we help include people with disabilities ourselves. During the volunteering activity, time spent with members of the community previously unknown to us gives many of us a confidence that we can use elsewhere. In addition, it is particularly important that we are active and involved in helping those who find it difficult to open up to persons with disabilities for whatever reason. Both we and they learn and grow in this way."*

Community Events and Clubs: (4) *Social Skills Development*: This is how we "see"! The programme was primarily designed to foster open and inclusive communication between young people in public schools and their visually impaired or blind peers. Coordinated by regional professional organizations, this series of initiatives enabled young people to learn alongside their peers with disabilities, discovering ways to support each other. Participants had the opportunity to use devices that simulate various visual impairments, gaining firsthand insight into the challenges faced by their peers with visual impairments. Additionally, they engaged in activities such as making sandwiches and tea together, further understanding the difficulties their peers encounter in daily life. This collaborative approach not only educated participants about visual impairments but also built empathy and stronger community bonds. This is how Valera (16) described her experience of the programme: *"I didn't think I was helping in a bad way by holding the hand of my blind partner and trying to guide him."*

It never occurred to me that it was possible to do harm by helping, i.e., by holding someone back. Józsi showed me that the first step is always to ask. Do you even need my help, if so, how can I help? This is a very important lesson for me.” Józsi, the 24 years old university student coordinator of the programme, added: “I am very happy when I meet people who are open to persons with disabilities, and I consider it an important volunteer mission to reduce the gap between the mainstream society and persons with disabilities outside the institutional framework. Labor Café is a great place to do this because people come here not only to do this, but also to meet, so it’s a more relaxed, less formal situation. I’m just one volunteer among many, who can also show, for example, how a visually impaired person lives. And then we can play music or have a coffee together.”

Community Events and Clubs: (5) 24 hours of poetry. Krisztián, who is a person with intellectual disability, is one of the regular participants in the 24-hour programme, which is held once a year on the Day of Hungarian Poetry. Every year, he and his mother prepare a poem, which Krisztián performs for the Labor Café audience. Krisztián’s mother told us about his experience: “Krisztián loves to recite poetry, but I’m the only one who is his audience on weekdays. I see this as a good opportunity to prepare a poem once a year, knowing that he is not the only one who will perform, but everyone else will recite before and after him. He is proud to perform with others, people he doesn’t know. He is looking forward to this programme and loves it when someone he has met there asks him how he is doing on the street. I’m very happy that even if everyday life doesn’t allow us to come here regularly and often, we can still have acquaintances from outside the usual environment.”

Labor Café is a unique social enterprise that blends the concept of a café with a philanthropic mission. Located in the heart of Nyíregyháza, Hungary, this café serves as a community hub, offering delicious food and beverages alongside opportunities for social impact. The café is committed to supporting disadvantaged individuals, including those facing unemployment or other social challenges. It channels a portion of its profits into charitable initiatives, such as supporting local shelters, providing meals for the homeless, and funding educational programmes for at-risk youth. By patronizing Labor Café, visitors not only enjoy a cozy atmosphere and tasty treats but also contribute to positive change within their community. By making the space non-institutional, not-for-profit, and shared by all members of the community, it simultaneously puts freedom, responsibility, and inclusion into practice. Labor Café recognizes community spaces as multifaceted hubs that serve various purposes. It is a *Networking Hub*, that facilitates meaningful connections among diverse individuals, bridging gaps and promoting collaboration. It is a *Knowledge-Sharing Centre*, because the Café is a repository of information, encouraging the exchange of ideas, skills, and expertise. It is a *Collective Reflection Area* where young people engage in thoughtful discussions reflecting on their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Finally, it is a *Volunteering Platform* which encourages active participation, allowing young individuals to contribute to their community while developing essential life skills. Altogether, by embracing inclusivity and providing barrier-free access, the Café as a multipurpose community space empowers young persons with disabilities to thrive, learn, and connect within a supportive and enriching environment.

Community spaces like Labor Café serve as dynamic platforms that provide a framework for inclusive programmes catering to a diverse audience. Whether designed to meet specific needs or be open to all, these spaces play a crucial role in fostering involvement, developing social skills, and supporting career choices. Based on observation and research, this paper introduces the most effective programmes that Labor Café, as an informal space, can offer to communities, including vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities.

- *Mentoring Programmes*: Connecting young persons with disabilities and accomplished professionals with similar experiences within a specific field. These mentors offer guidance, inspiration, and practical insights.
- *Workshops and Lectures*: These sessions provide fresh perspectives and essential skills related to career opportunities, self-advocacy, and equal access. By fostering knowledge exchange, community spaces empower young individuals to make informed decisions.
- *Work Experience Opportunities*: Beyond traditional classroom settings, community spaces themselves become valuable arenas for gaining practical work experience. Through volunteering, internships, or short-term roles, young people explore areas of interest while building mutually beneficial relationships.
- *Simulation Programmes*: These innovative programmes enable young individuals to explore various job roles and activities using simulation methods. By immersing themselves in realistic scenarios, participants gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities available in the labour market. Collaborating with local businesses as partners enhances the authenticity of these simulations, allowing young people to envision the labour market as a tangible pathway. As they engage in simulated work experiences, they can proactively prepare for their future needs.
- *Community Events and Clubs*: Building a robust social network is essential for successful entry into the workforce. For young persons with disabilities, confidence in navigating mainstream society is crucial. Community events and clubs within the community space serve as valuable platforms for achieving this. Young individuals can connect, initiate conversations, and engage in networking around shared interests here. Such clubs empower young people to move confidently toward their professional aspirations by fostering these connections.
- *Online Support*: When extended to an online platform, the community space becomes a valuable resource for individuals facing mobility challenges. These individuals can explore job opportunities in specific occupational areas based on their unique skills. By blending online and offline elements, a hybrid environment is created allowing young people to access information, share experiences, and seek answers to their questions.
- *Inclusive Workplace Programmes*: Community spaces play a pivotal role in corporate social responsibility initiatives. By engaging young persons with disabilities, these programmes empower companies to create inclusive and supportive workplaces. They promote an environment where everyone can thrive professionally through collaboration, education, and awareness.



- *Social Skills Development*: Beyond informal networking events, community spaces serve as ideal venues for formal programmes focused on social skills and capacity building. These events equip young individuals with essential skills such as cooperation, effective communication, and teamwork—skills vital in the dynamic world of work. By nurturing these abilities, the youth prepare for successful careers and meaningful contributions.

4. Summary

According to the European Council's *Strategic Agenda 2024–2029*, investing in people's skills, training and education throughout their lives and encouraging talent mobility within the European Union and beyond is a target. The EU and Member States will aim to strengthen social dialogue, uphold equal opportunities and reduce inequalities. Increasing participation in the open labour market and promoting youth employment will be of key importance in the coming years (European Council, 2024), to which social enterprises, community spaces can also contribute.

Measuring the impact of social enterprises is notoriously challenging due to their unique dual focus on financial sustainability and social or environmental missions. Unlike traditional businesses that primarily track financial metrics, social enterprises must assess qualitative outcomes such as community well-being, environmental sustainability, and social equity. These impacts are often intangible, long-term, and influenced by a myriad of external factors, making standardized measurement complex. Furthermore, the subjective nature of social value and the diverse range of stakeholders involved add additional layers of difficulty in quantifying and demonstrating tangible results. In their paper, Arena et al. present possible and already applied forms of impact measurement, and then, through a social enterprise case study, demonstrate the usefulness of their proposal, leaving open the need for further development in the field (Arena et al., 2015). Their findings and suggestions merit thorough consideration and study.

Labor Café – an ongoing field of action research – offers a unique environment that provides an informal space where inclusion can be achieved indirectly through its organized programmes and events. The spontaneous relationships formed within these thematic programmes allow young persons with disabilities to focus on their abilities, personalities, and talents rather than their disabilities. For these individuals, identifying and promoting effective practices to enhance their employment prospects is crucial as they transition into adulthood.

Community spaces operated as inclusive, open, and responsible social enterprises play a meaningful role in this process by ensuring accessibility for all and fostering equal commitment and responsible thinking. By highlighting successful initiatives and innovative approaches, the aim is to inspire and empower communities, businesses, and policymakers to adopt inclusive practices and create supportive environments for persons with disabilities. In addition to developing impact measurement for social enterprises, it is crucial to share success stories and promising practices to break down barriers to open labour market employment and enhance the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities.



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