

Article

The Situation of Social Cooperatives in Small Villages in Hungary

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Abstract: Social cooperatives, which are an important pillar of the solidarity economy, have become increasingly popular and common in Hungary over the past 10 years, especially in disadvantaged settlements, where the administrative burden of public employment is outsourced to social cooperatives. Analyzing social cooperatives in small villages is a relevant topic for local economic development. Of the 3155 settlements in Hungary, 1162 have a population of less than 500 inhabitants, i.e., small villages. In the spatial structure of Hungary, small villages tend to be located on the periphery, which is both the spatial and socio-economical peripheral position, with mostly disadvantaged inhabitants with low educational attainment and high unemployment. In these settlements, local communities can better understand what hinders and what helps their economies to grow and improve living standards by assessing their economic base. With this new knowledge, local communities can achieve results through strategically designed programs and projects that social cooperatives can join and help achieve. The methodology of the study is field research; we interviewed managers of the social cooperatives to learn about its operations and difficulties. The study described well-run and successful social cooperatives. In small villages, these cooperatives can be an important source of employment, even if the number of people employed is low. The experiences of the field research are presented in the form of recommendations for policymakers, as social cooperatives can be an important instrument of employment policy.

Keywords: social cooperative; Hungary; small villages



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1. Introduction

Public policy is the process of action by the state to solve a specific problem. Public policy aims to improve the quality of life of citizens, promote economic development, and ensure social justice (Carroll & Common, 2013). Moore (1995) offers a new approach to the role and activities of public managers. According to him, public managers are not only tasked with effectively and efficiently implementing the goals set by political leaders but also with proactively contributing to the creation of public value. The theory emphasizes that public managers should focus on the public interest and the creation of public values. This means that their activities should produce outcomes that benefit society as a whole. The author agrees with Moore's theory, as this perspective is entirely suitable for the operation of social cooperatives, which are the focus of the study, and for the viewpoints of cooperative leaders. In Moore's strategic triangle theory, value creation is crucial, meaning that public managers must constantly consider how their activities contribute to the creation of public value. Public managers should continuously seek opportunities for innovation and adaptation in order to respond to changing social and economic conditions. Thus,

leaders must create genuine public value through strategic thinking, innovative approaches, and serving the public interest (Moore, 1995). Crowder et al. (2022) focus on the unique challenges and opportunities perceived by public sector organizations in their book. The authors emphasize the importance of strategic management for public sector organizations, highlighting how it differs from the private sector due to the complexity of public interests and the need for accountability and transparency. They also address the creation of public value and the political and economic context in which public sector organizations operate (Crowder et al., 2022). Kelly and his co-authors further developed Moore's approach based on three main dimensions for interpreting and measuring social value creation, which are as follows: the services, whose quality creates value for citizens; the objective outcomes of public services; and the trust in government (Kelly et al., 2002). The government's management function is carried out through the legal instruments it can deploy. In Hungary, the main actors involved in public policymaking include the government, parliament, local governments, NGOs, professional and interest representation organizations, and citizens (Gellén, 2024).

The capitalist economy creates many problems in society, which the state tries to address, but state action is not always enough (Wischermann et al., 2022). In the former regime-change countries of Central and Eastern Europe (including Hungary), the problem of poverty and unemployment is a major issue among disadvantaged people with low or no educational attainment (Siposné Nándori, 2021). The primary task of the state is to take care of those in need, i.e., to address unemployment through employment policy instruments through appropriate policies. National employment policy is a set of instruments, policies, and activities designed to regulate and shape the labor market in each country. Employment is shaped by the market on the one hand and by government policies on the other. The implementation of employment policy is a joint competence of the whole of the government, the private sector, and the business sector, in which the government relies on the involvement of economic actors to achieve the employment objective. Employment policy is an external system of labor market regulation which seeks to influence the labor market in such a way as to make its operation more flexible and harmonious, to promote a balanced labor market, and to enable social and socio-economic functions to be exercised and implemented. However, welfare and public employment do not solve the problems of the unemployed and the poor, so the strength of the civil sector is also needed, and social enterprises based on civil initiative and that do not operate for profit but provide a real solution to a social problem are needed too (Lang & Fink, 2019).

The economic anthropological approach developed by Károly Polányi distinguishes between the substantive and formal dimensions of the economy (Polányi, 1944; Polányi, 1945). While the formal economy is based on the logic of rational action and the market, the substantive meaning of the term economy derives from the dependence of man's livelihood on nature and his fellow human beings (Polányi et al., 1957; Granovetter, 1985). It refers to the process of exchange with the natural and social environment insofar as this exchange provides man with the means to satisfy his material needs (Polányi, 1976). Social enterprises (non-profit initiatives organized from below) rely on informal economic resources, as well as formal ones, to achieve their goals (Defourny, 2014; Defourny & Nyssens, 2014; Lavelle, 2014; Zimnoch & Mazur, 2020).

The term "solidarity economy" is understood in Europe to refer to a set of organizations broader than the non-profit sector (Salamon et al., 2000; Kelly et al., 2019). It is an economic model that prioritizes a sense of social responsibility and community interests, values the non-material, subordinates economic goals to environmental and social goals, and cuts across all three sectors of the economy (Miller & Kawano, 2008; Kiss & Rácz, 2024). One of the advantages of the solidarity economy is its ability to integrate civic initiatives

into the community spaces of modern democratic societies. The solidarity economy is increasingly expected to address challenges such as the re-emergence of poverty, long-term unemployment, or the decline in locally available services (Borzaga et al., 2008; Coraggio et al., 2015; Miah et al., 2024).

The solidarity economy sector can be divided into different types of organizations, such as cooperatives, associations, self-help societies, foundations, and social cooperatives, which primarily benefit the communities in which they operate (Costa & Carini, 2016).

Social enterprises, which are part of the solidarity economy, have existed in Hungary since the 1990s, and their number and scope of activities are growing. They address a wide range of social and environmental problems, follow different business models, and take many legal forms. Their common characteristic is that their purpose is to serve themselves or members of the community rather than to seek financial profit exclusively. They operate based on democratic decision-making and rules of operation, involving the participation and cooperation of social enterprise managers and workers (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008). They distribute profits by putting people and labor above capital inputs and operate on the principle of empowerment, and individual and community responsibility (Neamtan, 2002). They seek to serve social goals by engaging in economic and commercial activities. They are non-profit organizations in the sense that the profits generated are reinvested in the economic activities of the enterprise or otherwise used to achieve the social objectives of the enterprise (Czene & Ricz, 2012).

A common feature of social enterprises is that their activities are aimed at addressing a social need or problem, and their business objectives are linked to these primary objectives (Nicholls, 2006; Defourny et al., 2019). The social purpose is to help meet the economic and other (e.g., social) needs of its members, to create employment opportunities for its unemployed and socially disadvantaged members, and to improve the social situation of its members from its community base (Kiss & Mihály, 2019; Zimnoch & Mazur, 2020). The business objective supports this, and social enterprises must serve real market needs by offering competitive products and services in addition to serving the social objective of achieving self-sustainability (Trabskaia et al., 2023).

Typically, they operate at the local and settlement level, and their basic aim is not to permanently solve employment within the social framework but to initiate community-based income-generating activities that can become self-financing over time, making the jobs created stable and the higher levels of employment sustainable (Varga, 2023). The post-socialist transition has also reorganized the structure of the economy and, in most cases, further weakened the role of remote rural areas in the formal economy. According to Váradi (2005) and Varga and Jeney (2020), the exclusion of disadvantaged populations, entire settlements, or regions from the global economy will continue. For them, more and more functioning social enterprises can help.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Importance of Social Cooperatives for Local Economic Development

Local economic development is a conscious local community intervention in economic processes for sustainable local development, which may include the creation or support of social enterprises based on local needs and resources. Local development is achieved when all four of the following elements are met: the involvement of local actors, the use of local resources, development based on local initiatives, and the exercise of local control (Fekete, 2011). Rural and local communities have a sufficient level of social capital and collective problem-solving capacity, making them ideal for social entrepreneurship (Farmer & Kilpatrick, 2008; Muñoz et al., 2015). The autonomy of development and the conditions for bottom-up development require, on the economic side, the existence of a local market

and local resources that can be mobilized, flexible territorial policies that are sensitive to details, and prepared local actors, as well as democratic leadership, and local community and prepared local management.

According to Németh (2012), social cooperatives are defined as autonomous communities that aim to meet the needs arising from the social and economic division of labor. They are organized around three principles: caring for others and the community, responsibility, and solidarity. Social cooperatives can play an important role in unemployment and in reducing poverty and, in a broader sense, against exclusion in struggle (Póla & Finta, 2020; Kiss & Rácz, 2024). In several European countries, social cooperatives operate with a similar scope of activities. According to Borzaga, the most common goal of social cooperatives is the following: create work opportunities and facilitate the improvement of other social needs of its disadvantaged members (Borzaga et al., 2014).

Social cooperatives are an initiative for local economic development toward a solidarity economy. In Hungary, social cooperatives are based on the former public employment system and its further developed versions. Since 1 July 2006, it has been possible to establish social cooperatives in Hungary (Act X of 2006 established social cooperatives as a specific form of cooperatives). Social cooperatives are a special form of social enterprise (Ianes, 2020).

The special feature of a social cooperative is that it operates on a profit-oriented basis, and the main decision-making body, the general assembly, decides that the profit can be distributed among the members (Mitov et al., 2024). From an economic point of view, they are considered to be an economic entity that combines the advantages and characteristics of a company and a social organization but is not a company. It operates democratically, so that each member has one vote, regardless of its assets. Another important advantage is that there is no minimum capital requirement at the time of incorporation. The organization combines both entrepreneurial and community development functions, two objectives that make the social cooperative institution special. To cover the benefits provided to the members of the cooperative and their dependents, a community fund is distributed from the social cooperative's after-tax profits, and the community fund can be used to provide benefits such as welfare payments, social benefits, food allowances, scholarships, pension supplements, and support for cultural and sports activities. In addition, the main task remains to create opportunities for self-employment, as only social cooperatives can employ members. A member who is employed within a social cooperative may receive for his/her work, from the goods jointly produced by the members, a tax-free payment in kind up to the amount of the current minimum wage, in proportion to the work performed by the member (Pansera & Rizzi, 2020; Póla & Finta, 2020).

The basic characteristics of social cooperatives are members—who can only be natural persons—determine the value of the shares they will use to establish the open-member cooperative, so if someone accepts the statutes, anyone can join the cooperative without discrimination. A social cooperative operates on the principle of variable capital, which means that the amount of capital changes as members enter and leave. A share entitles the holder to a share in the cooperative's profits after tax, except for social cooperatives with charitable status, which may use their profits only to achieve their public benefit objectives. The purpose of a social cooperative is to meet its members' economic, cultural, educational, social, and health needs and to create employment opportunities for unemployed or socially disadvantaged members. The personal participation of members is compulsory in social cooperatives. They can be members, employees, or contractors and provide support for members and their families from a community fund (Borzaga et al., 2014).

However, the sustainability of social cooperatives is not ensured (Váradi, 2016; Csoba & Sipos, 2020). Social cooperatives have the advantage of being able to engage in other

income-generating activities. Still, the income from them is dependent on the market, while public employment does not have other income-generating activities, but it is a secure, low-level source of income.

Several researchers see the solution to unemployment not in public employment but in the solidarity economy and social cooperatives (Fekete, 2011; Csoba & Sipos, 2020). In their opinion, the preservation of solutions that compensate for the employment potential of businesses, while at the same time looking for ways to move out of public employment, should be kept in mind. Value-added public employment offers more favorable conditions for retaining the skills needed to re-enter the labor market than unemployment benefits, but it is as economically unsustainable as unemployment benefits. The way forward from public employment is either business or social economy, but in underdeveloped areas with a lack of entrepreneurship, the former is rarely successful (Csehné Papp et al., 2018). One of the government's preferred options for the latter is to transform the public employment program into a social cooperative. In recent years, the government has seen the exit from public employment as a transit solution through the creation of social cooperatives.

2.2. Research Question

It would be appropriate to develop a regional employment policy in Hungary, considering regional aspects, as the rural settlements in the outlying areas have different labor market problems than the metropolitan areas (Tóth & Nagy, 2024). Does a successful social cooperative revolve around one key person? The main research question is the following: What are the characteristics of the social cooperatives in small villages, and how can they contribute to job creation?

3. Methods

The measurement of regional differences, the analysis of causes and effects, is one of the most important issues in regional science (Enyedi, 1996; Lengyel & Rechnitzer, 2004; Fenyővári & Lukovics, 2008). There are significant regional differences in Hungary (Molnár et al., 2024; Tóth et al., 2023). To prove my hypothesis, I have used the model of region types developed by Martin (2003). They first identified three types of regions by placing the development of regions in a coordinate system of two relatively simple indicators (GDP per capita and population density): regions as production sites, regions as sources of increasing returns, and regions as hubs of knowledge. Subsequently, further subtypes were developed as a function of changes in population density and income levels. Figure 1 shows a model of region types that has since been much referred to.

Based on the theoretical region types of the model, the data collection and calculations for 2012 and 2022 for the NUTS 2 level regions of the Central and Eastern European countries were carried out, and the following results were obtained (Figures 2 and 3). According to this, out of the seven regions in Hungary, five regions in 2012 and six regions in 2022 were classified as rural, rural regions requiring targeted development and support. The exception is the capital region (Central Hungary), which was classified as cosmopolitan in both years under study. The indicators of territorial and economic condition (e.g., GDP per capita, regional income, permanent population trends, migration balance, unemployment rate, and education level) also show this region type as the most typical.

Within the rural region type, social cooperatives are increasingly present in small villages with a population of less than 500 inhabitants and can thus provide employment opportunities for residents alongside settlements (often the only employers other than settlements).

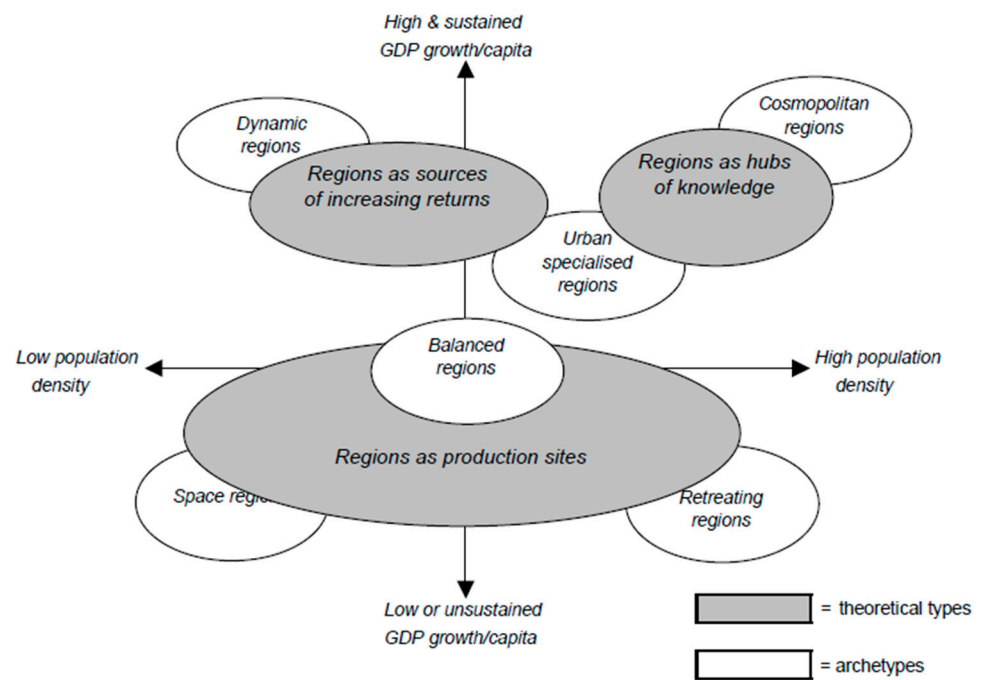


Figure 1. Martin’s model of region types. Source: Martin (2003).

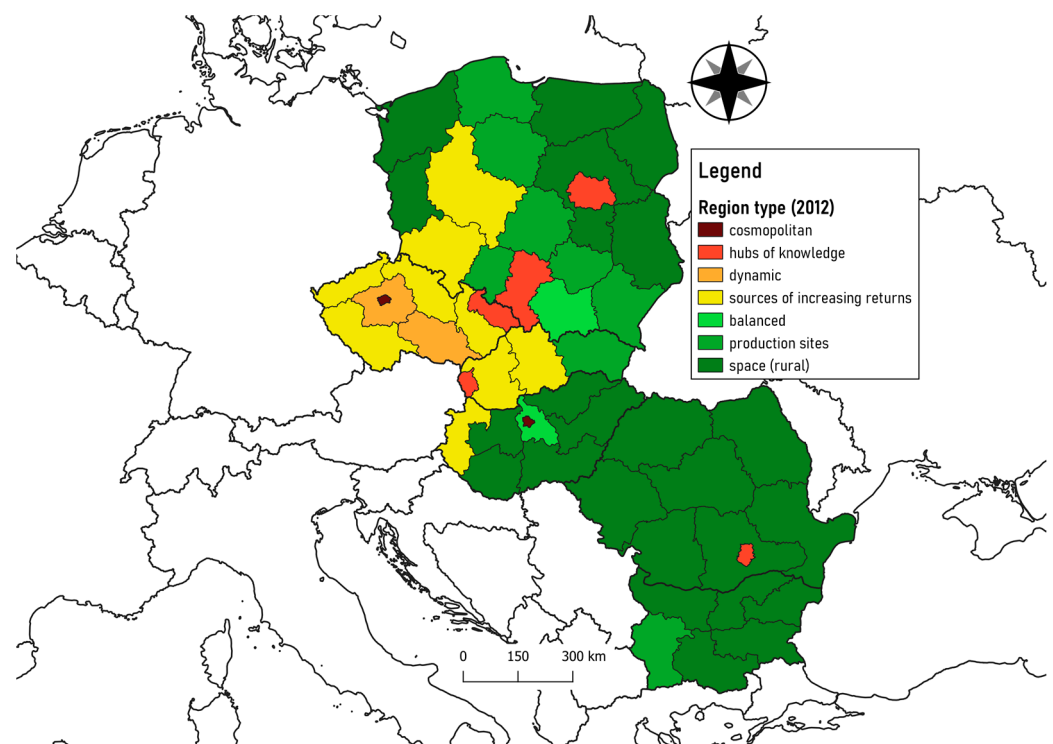


Figure 2. Region types in Central and Eastern Europe in 2012. Source: own editing based on Eurostat data.

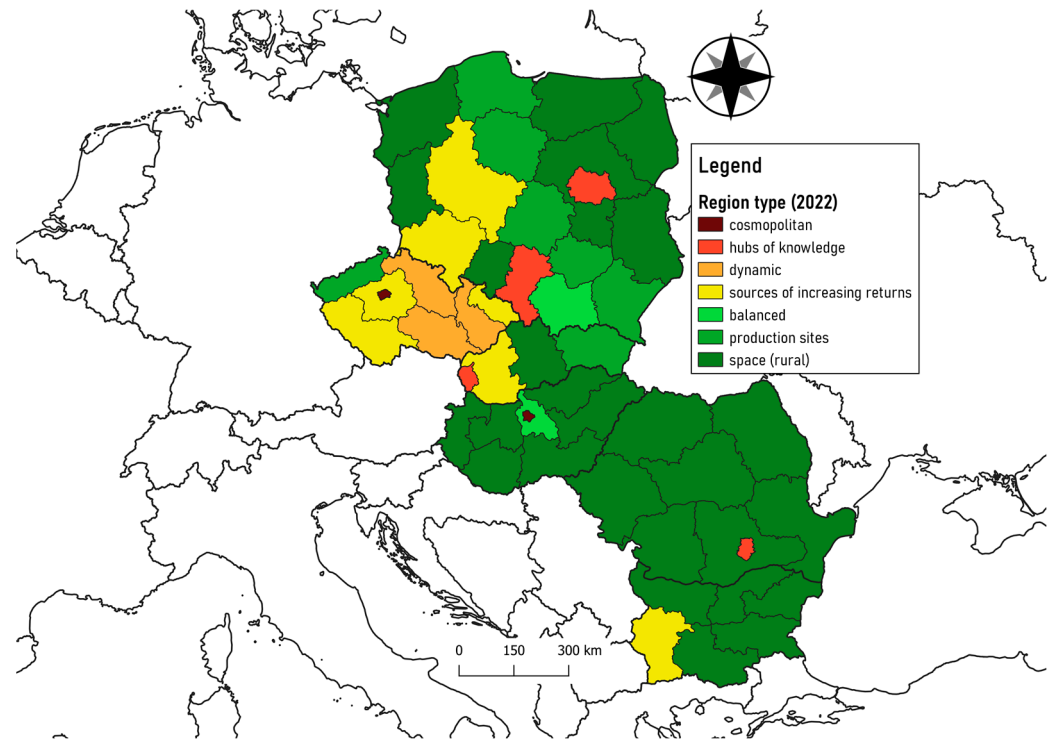


Figure 3. Region types in Central and Eastern Europe in 2022. Source: own editing based on Eurostat data.

Figure 4 shows the population in Hungary in 2024. The categories of settlement types accepted in regional economics were applied (number of small villages: 1162; number of villages: 1723; number of small towns: 210; number of medium-sized towns: 52; and number of big cities: 8). Based on the data for 2024, the 1162 small villages in Hungary represent 36.8% of the national population, with only 299,000 inhabitants, 3.1% of the country's population. The proportion of people living in small villages exceeds 5% in 7 counties. However, these averages mask the disparities at the district level within the county. The spatial distribution of small villages (less than 500 inhabitants) is confined to the periphery, with the largest number of settlements in the regions of Northern Hungary and Southern Transdanubia.

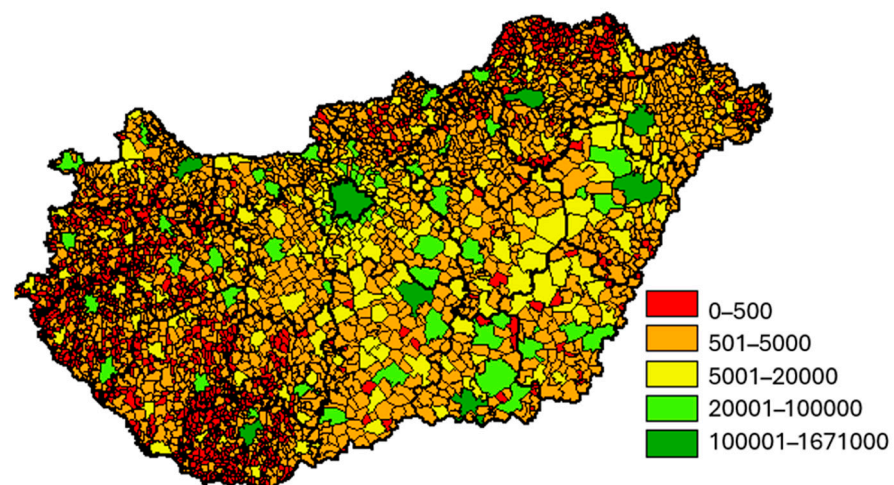


Figure 4. Population in Hungary in 2024 by settlements. Source: own editing based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office data.

Figure 5 shows the number of social cooperatives in Hungary by county in 2024. The map of cooperatives is fully consistent with the location of the small villages and the spatial differences. The counties with more than 100 social cooperatives tend to have a strong small village structure, high unemployment, limited employment opportunities, and low per capita income; thus, they meet the requirements of rural areas in all respects.

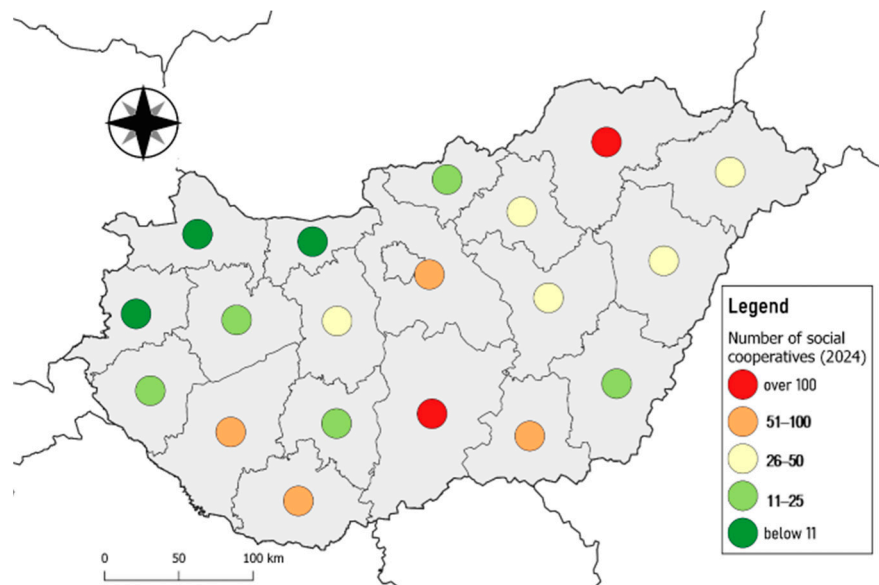


Figure 5. Number of social cooperatives by county in Hungary in 2024. Source: own editing based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office data. (Note: grey—counties in Hungary).

The number of social cooperatives in small villages was also mapped, showing that, on average, there are 1–3 social cooperatives in these small villages (Figure 6).

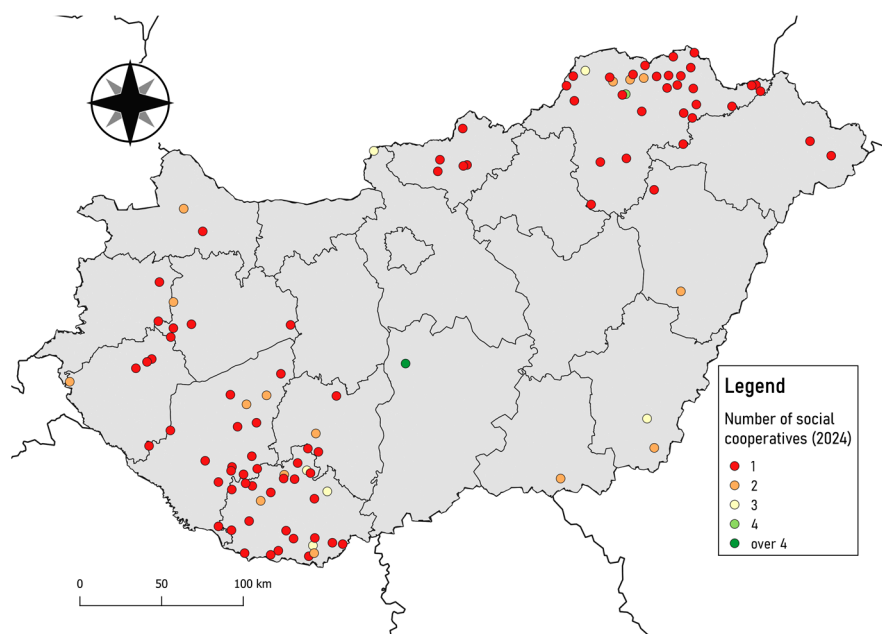


Figure 6. Number of social cooperatives in small villages in 2024. Source: own editing based on OPTEN database. (Note: grey—counties in Hungary).

Figures 4 and 5 show—in line with the literature—that social cooperatives are more needed and more active in areas with a high number of small villages. In small villages, the number of jobs available is limited, and social cooperatives often appear as the only

employer besides the settlement. The members of the social cooperative try to respond to the social problems of the settlement through their activities.

The methodology of the research is based on data collection, field research, and interviews. Data on all registered social cooperatives were extracted from the OPTEN database and then narrowed down to only those cooperatives that are operational, excluding those that are in bankruptcy or liquidation. Subsequently, the database was narrowed down to only small villages and the cooperatives operating there. From 9 counties, a total of 20 successful social cooperatives were selected. Figure 7 and Table 1 contains detailed data on the social cooperatives.

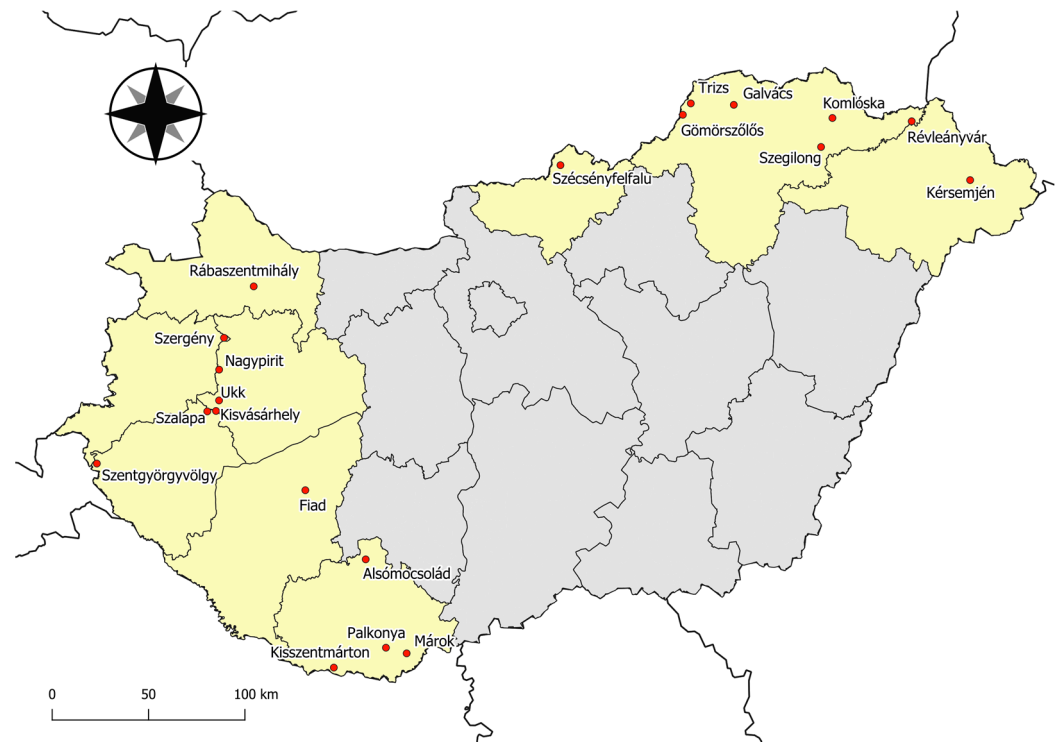


Figure 7. The small villages involved in the field research in 2024. Source: own editing. (Note: grey—counties in Hungary, yellow—counties covered by the field survey).

Interviews were chosen as the primary research method, whereby those involved in the operation of the cooperative were contacted and asked to respond. In the spring and summer of 2024, the author visited these selected settlements in the framework of field research and conducted interviews with the cooperative leaders and members. For the present study, the following settlements and social cooperatives we chosen: Alsómocsolád, Palkonya, and Szegrény. These three settlements have the same demographic background and labor market situation, and yet they have established social cooperatives with different activities, all successful in their respective municipalities.

Table 1. Characteristics of social cooperatives.

Name of Social Cooperative (S.C.)	Small Village	County	Main Activity	Year of Foundation	Number of Employees	Successes	Difficulties
Alsómocsolád Villager S.C.	Alsómocsolád	Baranya	Community, social activity	2008	8	Complex settlement developments, “village company”	The cooperative is organized around one person
Olajütő S.C.	Kisszentmárton	Baranya	Oil production	2008	5	Production of healthy pumpkin seed oil	Lack of expertise
Mároki Vegetable and Fruit Start S.C.	Márok	Baranya	Fruit and vegetable processing	2013	7	Production of healthy vegetables and fruits	Difficulties in sales
Palkonya Producers Market S.C.	Palkonya	Baranya	Food market	2016	6	Production of healthy vegetables and fruits	Lack of adequate workforce
Galvács Consulting, Sales and Service S.C.	Galvács	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Retailing	2015	8	Community building	The cooperative is organized around one person
Gömör Value Saving S.C.	Gömörszőlős	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Cultural training	2013	3	Community building	The cooperative is organized around one person
Komlóska Start S.C.	Komlóska	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Community, social activity	2016	8	Complex settlement developments, “village company”	The cooperative is organized around one person
Révleányvár S.C.	Révleányvár	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Fruit and vegetable processing	2017	1	School catering has been solved	The cooperative is organized around one person
Szeglilong Food Product Manufacturing, Trading and Service S.C.	Szegilong	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Pasta production	2018	10	Production of competitive products	Difficulties in sales
Trizsi Ízek Start S.C.	Trizs	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Fruit processing	2015	8	Operation of a local product shop, production of quality jams and syrups	Limited funding
Rábaszentmihály Ízei Manufacturing and Sales Start S.C.	Rábaszentmihály	Győr-Moson-Sopron	Fruit processing	2015	10	Production of marketable jams and syrups	The cooperative is organized around one person
SZÉF Common Will S.C.	Szécsényfelfalu	Nógrád	Fruit processing	2013	2	Fruit processing in contract work	Difficulties in operations
Fiadi 3D Manufacturing and Service Provider Start S.C.	Fiad	Somogy	Medical device production	2017	8	Sustainable operation	The cooperative is organized around one person
Kérsemjén Vegetable and Fruit Wholesale S.C.	Kérsemjén	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Wholesale vegetables and fruits	2013	14	Processing of vegetables and fruits	Difficulties in sales
Szergény Greening S.C.	Szergény	Vas	manufacture of personal care products	2013	1	Production of handicraft products	The cooperative is organized around one person
Marcalmenti Purchaser Service Provider Start S.C.	Nagypirít	Veszprém	Vegetable cultivation and general store operation	2016	9	Operation of a general store	Everyday struggle for survival, employee dissatisfaction
Bébic Food Processing, Trade Start S.C.	Ukk	Veszprém	Fruit processing and vegetable processing	2013	10	Production of quality fruit juices and jams	The cooperative is organized around one person
Albikóka Fruit Processing S.C.	Kisvásárhely	Zala	Fruit processing	2017	8	Production of quality fruit juices and jams	Lack of suitable workforce
Szalapa S.C.	Szalapa	Zala	Store-based general retailing	2013	9	Production of soaps and unique handicraft products	The cooperative is organized around one person
Elevenszeg Service Provider and Trade Start S.C.	Szentgyörgyvölgy	Zala	Restaurant catering and vegetable cultivation	2017	10	Operation of a local product shop, community development	Lack of suitable workforce

4. Results

4.1. Introduction of the Social and Economic Situation of the Selected Small Villages

For the present study, the author has chosen small villages which perfectly symbolizes the situation of a small, disadvantaged rural village (less than 500 inhabitants) in Hungary: low population, limited jobs, high poverty rate, low education level, and strong civil sector with citizens who are proactive and willing to act. The reader will learn about the conditions under which a social cooperative was set up, the range of products, and the everyday difficulties. Before presenting the social cooperative, it describes the economic and social situation of the small village using statistical data. For the settlements, the analysis of demographic trends is very important because it helps us understand and anticipate changes in the structure and size of the population. By taking demographic data into account, the settlements can plan infrastructure improvements, social services, economic strategies, etc. Figure 8 illustrates the total population. The change in the population of the settlements shows a steady decrease and a strongly declining, ageing demographic pattern. The decline in the population has an impact on the labor market, as it reduces labor market participation, and the birth and death rates affect the demographic structure of the settlement.

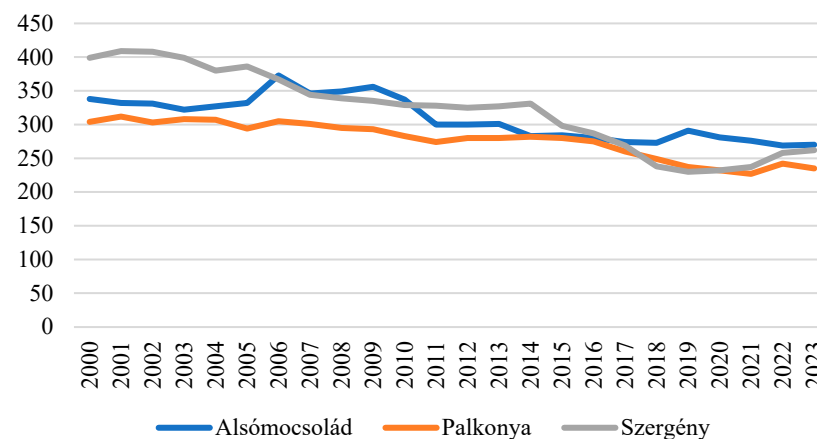


Figure 8. Population changes in Alsómocsolád, Gömörszőlős, and Szergény for 2000–2022 (number of inhabitants, persons). Source: own editing based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office data.

The domestic migration balance (Figure 9) varied greatly among the examined settlements. Typically, emigration was significant, but in the settlement of Alsómocsolád, there was considerable immigration before the economic crisis, which involved the return of those who had previously left.

The labor-market situation is a very important factor and influences its economic stability and social development and the quality of life of its inhabitants through several effects. The evolution of the number of registered jobseekers is shown in Figure 10. The number of unemployed people supported by active employment policies has been high since 2014. Active employment policy instruments are measures and programs used by governments and other organizations to help workers in regard to employment, job retention, and career development. These instruments can be used at all stages of the job search process and aim to reduce unemployment, increase labor market flexibility, and improve people's labor market situation.

Public employment reduces unemployment in the settlements, promotes community development, provides social services, strengthens community cohesion, supports the local economy, and plays a preventive role. Participants are involved in local projects, such as maintenance or environmental clean-up. This improves the environment and livability of the community. Community work can help strengthen local community

ties. The local economy also benefits from the use of local labor. Public employment can help reduce crime and neglect by keeping participants busy. It contributes to the social and economic development of the settlement. The Hungarian government and its employment policy are deliberately reducing the amount of money that can be spent on public employment, as they want to ensure that the unemployed look for work in the primary labor market and do not get stuck in public employment. The relationship between public employment and jobseeker rates is complex, but effective local public employment programs can reduce the proportion of job seekers in the municipality. Programs often aim to reduce unemployment and develop skills that can increase the chances of finding a job in the traditional labor market. Public employment can also help social reintegration, contributing to the reintegration of job seekers into society.

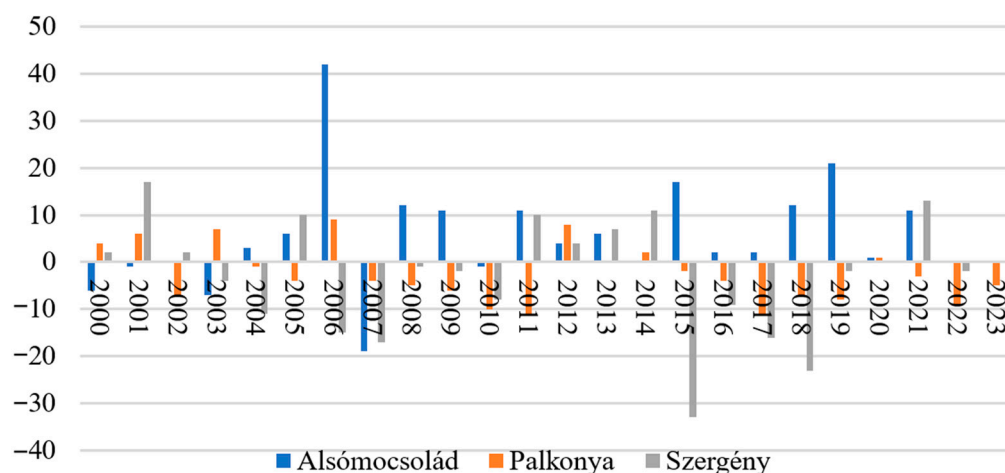


Figure 9. Domestic migration balance between 2000 and 2023 (persons). Source: own editing based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office data.

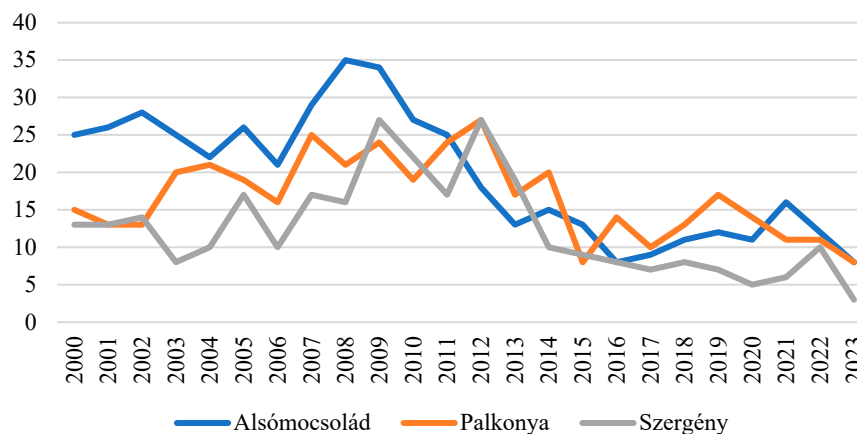


Figure 10. Number of registered jobseekers in 2000–2023 (persons). Source: own editing based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office data.

4.2. Introduction of the Social Cooperatives of Alsómocsolád

The Alsómocsolád Villager Social Cooperative was founded in 2009 with seven members, three of whom were long-term unemployed. Based on the cooperative model, the generated profit and assets are shared. Members proportionally benefit from the cooperative’s ownership. Like nonprofit organizations, it reinvests the generated goods, forming the basis of reproduction. According to the mayor, who is also the president of the social cooperative, “The social cooperative is exciting because of its mindset. Social cooperative can

teach people to be the shapers of their own destiny". Its main activities include vegetable growing, animal husbandry, and the maintenance of public areas.

The Social Cooperative places special emphasis on environmental protection, organizing electronic waste collection days multiple times a year. During these events, residents are encouraged to bring in their old and worn-out electronic devices, ensuring their proper disposal and reducing environmental impact. The cooperative's main products are agricultural items such as potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, beans, and peas. Additionally, they offer laundry and cleaning services in the village. The cooperative can employ people cyclically, depending on the availability of external funding. There is also a need for seasonal workers since the main activity of washing does not require consistent employment. The cooperative values environmental protection, making their own laundry soap, and striving to reduce their ecological footprint. They can employ 6–10 people annually.

The operation of the cooperative consists of several parts: (1) animal placement, which is managed by the municipality purchasing the animals and handing them over to the social cooperative, which then places them with residents along with feed; and (2) housing support to retain the population. This support is available to residents with permanent addresses in Alsómocsolád and those who have previously requested housing support, provided they have repaid the amount awarded by the municipality. As a result, the drastic population decline has halted. The local community is ethnically diverse, with Roma residents making up 35%. There have always been Roma people, but they have integrated into the community, they work, and there are no problems with them. The number of active workplaces in the village exceeds the total population, yet the current unemployment rate is 3% (thanks to the public employment program, without which the unemployment rate would be 19%). The main problems are real deep poverty, lack of human capacity, lack of strategies, and regional cooperation.

Since 2006, the village has also had a retirement home to address population migration. The Autumn Light Retirement Home provides professional care for both demented and non-demented elderly who need more than 4 h of care per day or are over 80 years old, as well as for those over 70 if their property lacks utilities. The residential institution operates at full capacity (42 places). The residential care can be used for an acceptable monthly fee, which includes five meals a day and full supervision. The kitchen of the institution has a capacity of 100 people. The vegetables produced by the social cooperative are purchased by the kitchen at a favorable price.

Among the local services available in the village are a shop, pub, post office, retirement home, home assistance, elderly club, village caretaker service, village host, and forest school. Compared to typical small Hungarian villages, Alsómocsolád is much better equipped with institutions. The mayor's office has been functioning as a management organization for 20 years; a normal office cannot operate with such a mindset, as its main profile is public administration. Naturally, Alsómocsolád also has a full staff to handle all administrative tasks, but they do not focus solely on this. The relationship with nearby tourism service providers is good, and they build on each other's service offerings, meaning they do not implement programs or developments already present in the region.

The example of Alsómocsolád is not just a well-functioning social cooperative but one element of a complex local development strategy. The secret of Alsómocsolád lies in the organizing force of the mayor, who, with his ideas and enthusiasm, can mobilize the residents of the village to work together for the community.

4.3. Introduction of the Social Cooperatives of Palkonya

The labor market situation in Palkonya has always been influenced by agriculture, particularly viticulture and related activities. Back in 2019, the then-mayor played a

significant role in making Palkonya an increasingly attractive tourist destination and in establishing the Gastro Village, thereby ensuring job opportunities for the village's residents. Taking into account the tourism opportunities and advantages of the Villány wine region, Palkonya chose a unique path, successfully involving the village's entrepreneurs to the fullest extent. It is not only a part of the wine region but also its most romantic village, attracting visitors not only for wine tasting but also for relaxation. Rather than competing with other tourism-focused settlements, they planned to provide complementary services. Since the village is smaller than the surrounding settlements, they focused on smaller groups and a more family-friendly atmosphere, preserving their traditions. They started organizing smaller, thematic events where bakers baked bread using traditional sourdough methods in different courtyards and cellars, accompanied by wines offered by the winemakers. To achieve success, the residents and local entrepreneurs joined forces.

The Palkonya Producers' Market Social Cooperative has been operating since 2016. It began with founding members, including two public workers, one municipality, and five private individuals. Since then, the number of members has decreased to seven due to one member leaving. There is no other cooperative with a similar profile in the area. The aim of its establishment was not only to create a producers' market but also to provide a platform for local small-scale and primary producers to present their products to the public. As part of the investment, an open-air market space with paving and a roof was opened on the Palkonya cellar row, along with a supporting building that also functions as a catering unit. Here, in addition to the cooperative's own wines, wines from small producers and family wineries are sold. The cooperative was primarily founded to empower local and nearby primary and small-scale producers by leveraging Palkonya's tourism appeal. Their secondary activity involves utilizing the skills of hired workers to perform smaller construction tasks, mainly building renovations. The third pillar of the cooperative is the production of compost using by-products from winemaking in Villány and sewage sludge from the biogas plant in Pécs.

The social cooperative is engaged in the cultivation of sage, peppers, potatoes, and onions. The sage and peppers are sold, while the potatoes and onions are distributed to the village residents. As a service, the cooperative uses a tractor purchased through the program to plow the small gardens and land of local residents free of charge. The sale of local products is characterized by restraint. The active presence of producers is almost exclusively limited to larger events. Unfortunately, their plan for attracting buyers through the presence of producers has not been realized. Instead, it is the guests attending large-scale events who motivate the producers to become active. On weekdays, there are no visitors in the village, and even on weekends, the number of visitors is not sufficient to encourage producers to set up booths with fresh products. The producers sell the products themselves. Visitors have a special experience when they can talk to the farmer or artisan who produced the product. These conversations provide not only information about product production but also an opportunity to share challenges and market conditions. Visitors can learn different techniques and receive advice on making their own products. It is primarily the village's tourism events that generate interest and attract buyers during these events.

In their operations, cooperatives face the same challenges as any micro-enterprise. They have no external assistance in their operations or in securing resources, relying solely on their own families. Their future plans mainly focus on keeping the cooperative alive, which is also their primary goal. The greatest added value of the social cooperative for the local community is that it provides a presence and a platform for local producers and primary producers to showcase their goods. Through events, they are able to offer some recognition and a small source of income to participants.

Palkonya is a typical example of small villages in Hungary, with a steadily declining population, yet it strives to remain alive and sustainable. The vision of the Palkonya Gastro Village—established a few years ago—that Palkonya could become a charming rural hospitality center built on local values and ingredients within the Villány wine region, has, in my opinion, been successfully fulfilled. However, when developing a comprehensive rural development program, I believe it is definitely worth adding Palkonya to the list of villages, as its listed buildings, courtyards, restored church, and the chapel crowning the vineyard all deserve attention. During the field research, the village's atmosphere, clean air, and the meeting of culture and wine captivated the author.

4.4. Introduction of the Social Cooperatives of Szergény

The manager of the Szergény Greening Social Cooperative was interviewed during the fieldwork. The cooperative produces artisanal soaps. The most outstanding feature of their soaps is that they are excellent cleansers, removing all dirt and dead skin cells from the skin surface. This way, the impurities do not poison the living tissues and do not clog the pores, and our skin is free to breathe and live, allowing its self-healing mechanisms to kick in. Plus, its active ingredients help nourish, hydrate, and protect our skin.

The Greening Social Cooperative in Szergény has been operating since May 2013, with seven founding members and one other member. The cooperative aimed to create job opportunities for unemployed, job-seeking, and socially disadvantaged people. The main objective of the social cooperative is to create jobs and solve local employment problems. The cooperative aims to provide suitable working conditions and to support the livelihood of socially disadvantaged residents. Meeting the economic and social needs of its members and pooling the skills and labor of its members to generate income is key. The human resource sensitivity of the social cooperative is a serious risk, and its reduction is a governmental task. The social cooperative's manager says her employees have the right skills, but, unfortunately, she cannot offer them competitive wages.

The number of employees is low, as is common in social cooperatives in small villages, but every employee counts. At the Greening Cooperative, four people over 50 years old and one worker returning from maternity leave have employment contracts. Unfortunately, workers from the previous public employment scheme were not suitable to continue their work in the social cooperative, so new workers had to be recruited.

The main activity of the cooperative is the production of soap, which is carried out on the premises rented from the municipality (formerly used as a kindergarten). The necessary health permits for production and the necessary permits for sales were obtained at the outset. Promotion of local products on the market takes place at various local events, fairs, and local markets. They are also exhibitors at many fairs.

According to the cooperative's manager, financial resources are scarce and do not make it easy to operate. The social cooperative is trying to obtain funding from grants, so they have been able to apply for an EU grant for 8 months, which helped them buy equipment, equip the production plant, and obtain licenses. They also received wage subsidies for 4 months. In addition to this, further targeted support would be needed. The cooperative's founder is a "local hero" in the day-to-day running of the cooperative, as she is the driving force behind the cooperative. This is partly a risk because, if he or she were to retire or imagine a life outside the civil sector in the primary labor market, the cooperative's functioning could be called into question. The members would not yet be able to run the cooperative independently, as there is a strong dependence on the manager. In this disadvantaged small village, the establishment and operation of a social cooperative has been a great success and a motivating force for residents. Many people want to become employees of the cooperative.

The Greening Social Cooperative in Szergény is not just a business, but a community-building initiative where everyone plays an important role. Soap-making is a way of bringing the community together while promoting their commitment to sustainable living and environmental protection. Furthermore, Greening Social Cooperative not only sells its products but is also active in awareness and education. Through training, workshops, and community events, they seek to spread awareness and inspiration for sustainable living in the Szergény community and beyond.

5. Discussion

Based on the results of the field research and the interviews described above, as well as the literature reviewed, the author highlights the following areas in this section. As a result of the 1989 regime change and Hungary's EU accession in 2004, social enterprises, cooperatives, and social cooperatives began to emerge rapidly in Hungary (Hamza et al., 2018). However, their activities remained sporadic, with mostly weak results achieved at the municipal (rather than regional) level. Their employment capacity is also low, typically operating with 5–10 employees.

The autonomy of social cooperatives in Hungary was reduced when the legislator, in 2016, mandated that local governments and minority self-governments must be involved in their operations. Civil society organizations representing interest groups also protested this, but the legislator did not amend the law (Kiss & Mihály, 2019). All the social cooperatives described above comply with Hungarian legal requirements, and their leaders have stated that municipal members are part of the cooperatives. They did not emphasize the drawbacks of this, but rather pointed out that it strengthens the cooperation between the municipality and the social cooperative.

Social cooperatives aim to solve social problems using market and business tools. However, in non-post-socialist countries, the vision and mission of social cooperatives go far beyond this, and abroad they are often seen as an alternative to the capitalist system. In Hungary, the social cooperative is just one type of nonprofit organization (Davies, 2014).

The available funding opportunities for social cooperatives are limited, which makes operational difficulties a significant issue (Póla & Finta, 2020). Cooperative leaders also mentioned this during the interviews above.

Finding suitable human resources is often a problem, as social cooperatives operating in small villages only have access to the local labor market of the given municipality. In disadvantaged rural areas of Hungary, the unemployed population typically has very low educational qualifications or lacks both education and work experience (Kiss & Rácz, 2022).

Social cooperatives are often organized around a key figure, usually the mayor or a person referred to as a "local hero" in the rural development literature. If this person leaves the cooperative for any reason, its viability is questioned, and it is unlikely to continue operating (Kiss & Rácz, 2024). Interviewees mentioned that the lack of proper managerial succession is a challenge everywhere.

6. Conclusions and Proposal for Policymakers

In answer to the research question, the results of the field research show that the social cooperatives in a disadvantaged small village can create some new jobs, which, in the long run, will contribute to the improvement of the socio-economic situation of the villages. The capacity of a social cooperatives to create jobs is limited, but in a small village, all new local jobs are significant. For the inhabitants of the villages, commuting several hours a day to jobs in the county's capital is not feasible because they do not have cars due to their low income, and public transport to small villages is not well regulated. The spatial distribution

of social cooperatives in Hungary is more pronounced in rural areas. In disadvantaged peripheral areas, social cooperatives play a key role due to limited job opportunities.

These social cooperatives are an example that show how the local community and sustainable businesses can go hand in hand, strengthening each other in all aspects of life. The principles of sustainability and community togetherness can continue to guide future initiatives and businesses, helping the community move toward new opportunities.

Social cooperatives contribute to community well-being, development, and value creation in numerous areas. From an economic perspective, the most important aspects are job creation and the stimulation of the local economy. Social cooperatives often create jobs for people who have difficulty finding employment in the traditional labor market. Their activities rely on local materials and resources, which strengthens the local economy and reduces the community's dependence on external sources. From a social perspective, the main achievements are strengthening community cohesion, fostering volunteerism among local community members, and applying innovative approaches. Social cooperatives enhance community life by providing services and programs that connect people and promote social integration. By encouraging volunteerism and community participation, cooperatives increase people's commitment and sense of responsibility toward their community. In Hungary, social cooperatives are also pioneers in developing and applying innovative solutions, often being the initiators of social innovations.

Policy recommendations are based on the previous research experience of the author, field research, and dozens of in-depth interviews. The reason is that it is not possible to formulate an improvement in the employment situation at the national or regional level by exploring the situation in one settlement.

Employment policies differentiated by regions are not yet practiced in Hungary. There are no good examples in Europe either, although the existence of a regional employment policy would be justified. In the case of the European Union, the regional approach is present in many areas, and this approach is becoming increasingly justified in the case of employment and the labor market. Regional employment policy would require a separate set of instruments and a separate set of institutions, which would not always be the same as those that apply in other regions of the country. In the long term, a multi-channel employment policy combining traditional forms of employment and alternative solutions would be justified. To achieve this, it is not sufficient to decide at the regional level, but rather to ensure macro-level socio-economic conditions. Instead of automatically dismantling the EU's employment policy, a strategy should be developed which is based on internal conditions but also takes account of external developments.

The author agrees with [Common and Gheorghe \(2019\)](#) that a country adopts the public policies or practices of another country in order to improve its own public management. In their study, they analyzed the situation in Romania, which is particularly interesting, as the country underwent significant political and economic changes following EU accession. EU membership required numerous reforms in public management. The authors emphasized the importance of a strategic approach in policy transfer. This includes a clear definition of the goals, methods, and expected outcomes of the transfer. The authors pointed out the challenges of policy transfer, such as the need to adapt to local conditions and the resistance of local actors. Additionally, they stressed the importance of local capacity building and continuous monitoring. The process of policy transfer could also be applied in Hungary, as it is similarly a post-transition state with all the legacies of its post-socialist past.

The paradox of social enterprises and, hence, social cooperatives refers to the apparent incompatibility and coexistence of business, market, and social logic ([Weller & Ran, 2020](#)). Among the difficulties and obstacles, the lack of financing and the low profile of social enterprises among the public and customers, as well as banks, investors, and support orga-

nizations, are notable. This is followed by a lack of public support programs and limited opportunities to apply for grants. Social enterprises and the social cooperatives in Hungary enjoy very low levels of political support. Social cooperatives serve a public purpose that the public sector cannot serve effectively. It is recommended that the government should give social cooperatives tax incentives and appropriate credit conditions. They should also be provided with the liquidity they need for tenders. Support for self-sustainability could also bring significant results for cooperatives.

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