



Civilians for Education

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Abstract: *Civil initiatives, free time learning activities with pleasure are significant in general development of society, in the consolidation of knowledge and skills of local communities. However, it also has positive effects on well-being, community building, too. A form of civil initiative is the Swedish study circle which has been operating for decades, recently more and more popular in other countries, too.*

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In recent years, an increasing number of Hungarian and international civil initiatives concerned with education have appeared, which have an important role in diminishing cultural differences and cultural inequalities, and in encouraging adults and elderly people for life-long learning all over the world. These initiatives, which are usually based on trust, liberty, volunteering and self-initiative and are organised from below, mean a lot of benefits for the whole of society and represent a significant value from the point of view of individual and community development. The three most important characteristic features of civil organisations and bottom-up driven initiatives are *liberty, volunteering and independent activity*. Those who want to be members of a civil organisation usually join based on their own, voluntary decisions and want to cater for their personal or professional interests. Joining a civil organisation is always voluntary and is never a result of being forced. Those who join get into contact with people with the same interests and in this way, they can encourage and help each other and in other cases represent their common interests in other forums together if required. Membership in an organisation or society forms human relations, brings new friendships, and gives a possibility of belonging to a group, informal learning, and personal development for those who join. In these bottom-up driven organisations the individual or a group of individuals can learn ways of recognising civil liberties and local needs, and a responsible and creative way of solving problems based on community needs. Joining

organisations and networks based upon independent activity is a source of extending social capital. Together members can achieve objectives that would be unattainable individually. Their activity is based on self-development and self-help, continuing education, and usually cater for bottom-up driven needs and demands.

People often join a civil initiative with a benevolent, altruistic intention, or sometimes they are driven by their consciously recognised needs and interests. Several sources of motivation can be recognised among those who join: some want to extend their informal relationships, some are simply interested, some want to practise their hobbies, meet others and spend their time in a meaningful way. The richer and more complicated the network of civil relationships is among its citizens, the stronger a country is. Moreover, cultural activity has an effect in other walks of life too, therefore it provides a sense of welfare, and it also increases the ability to work. A society that is made up of alienated and atomised people who do not interact with each other will fall apart and will be easy to manipulate, while a society with a rich interpersonal network and a readiness for self-organisation will have a protective, self-helping role. Its net will hold and support those who face difficulties. Their operation is therefore very important both from the point of view of democracy and the operation of a social safety net. The presence of civil relationships and organisations is very important in periods of budgetary restrictions and crises when the self-helping role of civilians grows, thus the civil sector becomes an upholder and promoter of solidarity. In a society, the measuring unit of democracy is the number of civil relationships. Their formation and operation are largely due to the *mutual trust* among individuals. In societies where the degree of trust is high among the members of the population, bottom-up driven initiatives are more frequent. The informal networks that come to exist this way will mean a significant amount of capital both for the economy and the whole of society.

The network of the civil sector is a terrain for *self-help and exercising democratic rights* at local, regional, and national levels. People who join the civil community might get knowledge, skills, and abilities that are very hard to obtain elsewhere. Membership in a civil organisation is a scene of informal learning, which inevitably develops the personality of the individual irrespective of age. The development of the whole personality is positively affected by the competencies obtained here (knowledge, abilities, attitudes). These also influence formal learning. Life-long learning being more and more important, new objectives are also integrated into the school learning process that encourage learning outside the institution. Learning in different locations is also honoured by the school system in an ideal case and is also encouraged directly in many developed countries. For example, voluntary work in civil organisations is rewarded in many European countries with extra points during the application process to get into higher education.

Experience shows that individuals who take part in civil life are more active in other areas of life and have a keener interest for public affairs and solving social problems. They learn how to change things, how to act, they recognise the importance of independent activity, taking responsibility, teamwork, and debate. They also recognise how important it is to exercise

citizen's rights (Arapovics, 2011). Another important factor is that the social relationships that develop this way – human community based on regular dialogue – have a *health protection* function that helps prevent both physical and mental illnesses, so it also has a preventive function in *mental health* as well (Skrabski & Kopp, 2009).

People who take part in civil organisations and other bottom-up driven organisations are more *satisfied* with their lives, and they tend to feel they are in full control of their lives, they can act to achieve changes in their lives. In developed countries, especially in the most developed regions of these countries, we find more civil organisations. It is especially highly educated people who have an increased interest for bottom-up driven movements. The degree of democracy and bottom-up driven initiatives are closely linked. Earlier, in the Socialist era, there were no civil organisations in Hungary because of political reasons: the political system did not allow civil initiatives to unfold independently. Experience shows that if the civil sector is weak in a country, people feel they cannot control and improve their lives and their widespread passivity usually leads to a general sense of dissatisfaction (Arapovics, 2011). Under such circumstances acquired inactivity is common. This means that citizens are used to passivity and they do nothing to improve their lives (e.g. knowledge, education, health, immediate surroundings) even when there are actual opportunities to do so. An active person who wants and is ready to do something for himself and his community leads a happier, more satisfied, fuller life. Since the deep-going political changes of 1989 in Hungary there is a new opportunity to take part in associations and be a member of civil life.

Civil organisations and initiatives usually spring up according to the needs and interests of a social group such as people with disabilities, sick or elderly people, women, migrants, minorities, or the poor, etc. In many cases they achieve significant results and throw light upon problematic social issues that affect many people and that cannot be solved by official governmental organisations. They fill a gap whereby they cater for complex needs (educational, informational, and social) of different groups. Public services often cannot do anything to help people who have needs away from the average. These needs can be catered for by civil organisations that also see and solve problems for which traditional public institutions cannot give appropriate solutions.

Civilians for adult education

Among the different civil organisations (associations, alliances, societies, and foundations) and independent initiatives there are many organisations and groups that have a special interest in catering for the special educational needs of adults. Hungary is no exception. In Hungary, civil organisations that deal with adult education mostly organise programs of professional interest for the labour market. Their aim is to help people back into the labour market and help people keep their jobs, together with developing skills and abilities that help the professional development of the individual. In Scandinavian countries there are amateur education groups – the so-called study circles – that are organised based on common free-time activities and pleasure.

General features of study circles

Study circles are the special, bottom-up driven forms of *Swedish and Finnish* education which have a long tradition and are widely known in Scandinavia (Maróti, 2010). Study circles are groups with only a few members (at least 3, at most 11 people). The members regularly meet each other to learn and educate themselves and to dive deeply into some of their topics. Participation is not bound to qualification or previous studies, anyone can join the group. The first study circle was created by Oscar Olsson at the beginning of the 20th century, who was driven by a democratic idea. He thought primarily of those young people and adults who were less educated and did not make it into higher education. His intention was to give them education free of any constraints, one which was outside the world of the school system and institutions giving certificates and degrees, at the same time giving them a possibility to improve their knowledge and skills. The main aim of study circles is to provide voluntary, *free-time education* for individual pleasure (Oliver, 2002). Based on this initial idea, the approach became very popular and today the network of study circles extends over the whole country. The movement has had many supporters in other countries as well (Harangi, 2010). Study circles now have a rich tradition and are very popular as an educational movement in our days. If Denmark is characterised by community colleges (or folk high schools), Sweden is characterised by study circles, as this bottom-up driven movement has become an organic part of the country catering for needs with a view to life-long learning. The number of participants gradually grew from the 1950's and reached its peak in the 1970's. The number of participants has remained the same ever since. The most important characteristic features of the study circle are flexibility, voluntariness, and a sense of activity during the learning process. The study circle is made up of people who get together again and again to learn freely from each other, to talk about topics in a flexible and free manner, or, in other cases, to create something together. The members usually choose a topic they are all interested in, they get absorbed in it, they read about it, and then they get together to talk, to discuss the topic in the form of a free exchange of ideas (Vercseg, 2004; Bjerkeraker & Summers, 2006). In our days the study circles are not only based on talking and educational presentations, but also the creative forces of their members gain more and more importance. They also build upon handicraft, music, etc. and create something in an increasingly creative process. To achieve this, creativity and taking initiative are very important, together with an ability to create a good atmosphere in the circle. The operation of Swedish study circles is encouraged by the whole of society, as this is a democratic forum which allows people to be themselves, where there is an occasion for honest dialogue and personalised learning. It can produce new human relationships besides relationships with friends, workmates or neighbours, thus increasing the social capital of participants. Study circles enhance the general knowledge of people and contribute to their forming an exact picture of the social processes going on in the world

and recent scientific achievements. The study circle movement encourages the dissemination of both high and everyday culture and strives for free and experience-based learning (Suda, 2001). If certain requirements are fulfilled study circles can get a state funding in Sweden, which can be spent on travel expenses, hiring rooms, books, photocopying and creating textbooks, as well as making purchases. In addition, participants also contribute to the functioning of the study circles on a voluntary basis (Feketéné, 2010).

Swedish study circles have three basic types. In the first type (1), companies of friends organise study circles in which people who know each other very well form a group based on their common interests and they meet regularly to learn together. The second type (2) exists along with organisations, such as political parties, trade unions, churches, who create study circles for their members to facilitate free education. The third group (3) is made up of the so-called “advertisement” circles which recruit potential members through advertisements. This latter type is run by businessmen and those interested pay a fee for participation. The first two types are free for all participants (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Type 3 study circles work with professional teachers, whereas in self-organised study circles there is no professional teacher, trainer, or adult educator. The leader of the circle, the moderator of the sessions is usually chosen on a voluntary basis. This idea is based on the conviction that at the level of everyday education anyone is capable of teaching others. The leader is responsible for organising and directing the programs and providing the necessary materials and infrastructure. To help organising, there is a huge amount of didactic literature: books, flyers, white papers, and brochures, both in print and in electronic formats. These all provide help organising and arranging the study circle sessions.

At present, most study circles are bottom-up driven organisations, created by people who know each other, but some others are also created by educational associations that form networks. The study circle movement allows people to experience their own skills, helps unfold talent, and gives a sense of being together in a community. It is not based on vertical but horizontal relationships, so it represents a community of equal people (Wennberg & Hane, 2001; Blid, 2000).

The participants are varied, they come from all layers and segments of society. If we have a quick look at statistical data, we can see that women and elderly people are over-represented. Study circles have a special value for retired people and job seekers. The programs are so popular among them because they can avoid sinking into passivity, instead of losing their skills and abilities they can practice them, and during the programs they can forget about their problems and be active members of society. This helps job seekers find a way back to work, as employability does not only require skills and abilities but also a certain mental state as well. Study circles based on the Swedish model are now also available in other countries e.g. in the USA, Estonia, Portugal, and Finland. Study circles educate people to be active citizens, they are based on trust and mutual understanding, and usually not much money is needed to create them.

The Finnish 4H network, for example, consists of 3000 study circles and about 60 000 members, the majority of whom are young people between the ages of 8 and 28. One of the circles has an emphasis on

intercultural learning and young people who join can get to know the culture of different countries. When the topics are chosen collectively, a volunteer finds information about the given country and he is also responsible for organising the session. The members of the circle meet regularly in each other's homes where they speak about the topic, sometimes also incorporating a little cooking together or sometimes they go and visit an exhibition that relates to their chosen topic. (Tanulókör..., 2006)

Independent groups in Hungary

Based on the Scandinavian model, there have been some initiatives to adapt the study circle movement in Hungary, but these initiatives remained unsuccessful. The initiatives present in Hungary were in many ways different from the Swedish model. In Hungary the movement is not so widespread (it is not even known), organised, didactically complete, and has no nationwide movement or tradition like in Scandinavian countries. There are some cultural educators, librarians or other intellectuals who organise cultural groups for people with the same interest, sometimes in their own homes or in their workplaces. In recent years, there have been efforts to revive the movement. In Hungarian folk high schools, several publications have been translated from Swedish into Hungarian (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Wennberg & Hane, 2001). These familiarise Hungarian professionals with the objectives, operation, and achievements of existing study circles, thus encouraging cultural professionals to organise circles and to spread the general idea of study circles.

In Hungary, in the last few decades, there have been several self-organising groups, *clubs*, with an aim of facilitating education and social interaction, but these – although they are like study circles in some respects – are also quite different from them. In the capital and other university cities of the country, but also in smaller settlements, we can find civil initiatives, bottom-up organised *clubs* and associations that hold evenings in many different topics, organise outings or illustrated lectures about foreign countries, travel experiences and adventures. If there is a topic which is likely to attract many people, they also invite professional lecturers, experts thus enabling talks, debates, discussions. Members of these clubs usually share the same interest, they go hiking, practise foreign languages, or simply talk about a given topic. Most of the members are young intellectuals or university students, and the club itself is organised within a university, college or student residence. Their topics are very diverse, the range of topics includes travelogues as well as language practice. There are also study circle program initiatives in folk high schools, with diverse objectives, e.g. learning or practising languages.

The existence of study circles has (or should have) a very important role in times of budgetary restrictions and austerity measures. At a time when very few people can get into higher education, while there are a lot of people who would like to do so and for many people getting a degree remains a distant dream, study circles can perfectly cater for the educational needs of people and provide the necessary personality development. Study circles are open to all people who would like to learn

without any restrictions is previous education or social status. They are occasions created by adults for themselves. Educational activities among equal people, which is done by people according to their own free will and pleasure, can help individuals overcome their problems, at the same time giving new impulses that enable people to re-evaluate their future and objectives in a different light. The realisation of this idea serves not only the individual but also the public good.

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