

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INNOVATION ON EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract

The European Innovation and Solidarity Policy emphasizes the importance of innovation in socio-economic systems to improve social well-being, including in terms of people's participation with the revival of the labor market. The main forms of application of social innovations can be summarized as follows: "social", where communities are organized on a democratic and social basis; "ecological" in which solidarity with the community is seen as a value system oriented towards the individual; and "economic" where the most disadvantaged groups participate fully in the labor market. At a time when social systems are facing various challenges, good practices are needed to integrate people with disabilities into the labor market. By disseminating the results of these innovative practices, there is potential to modernize labor market institutions and effectively address existing barriers to the employment of people with disabilities. After briefly describing the role of economic and social innovation in enabling the most disadvantaged to participate in the labor market, this topic provides a new overview of the application and potential of social innovation in the context of socio-economic systems. Social innovations, depending on their nature, are applied in different sectors and regions to improve social welfare.

Keywords: social economy; social innovations; solidarity; disadvantaged groups; labor market.

JEL Codes: A13, D63, J14, O35, F55

Introduction

The challenges that people with disabilities face in accessing employment opportunities are multifaceted and pervasive. One significant obstacle is the prevailing stereotypes that hinder the improvement of the employment prospects of this demographic group, which necessitates an urgent need to eradicate them (National program for employment and training of people with permanent disabilities, 2024).

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Innovation is no longer only seen as a linear process, but as a collective and cumulative process based on accumulated knowledge (Mulgan et. al, 2007). Social innovation has become a ubiquitous term in various articles, practice-oriented reports as well as academic contributions (European Commission, 2016, Mulgan et. al., 2007). Social innovation is the subject of research by various authors. In Bulgaria researchers publish various studies on the topics of social innovation, social entrepreneurship and the Bulgarian experience.

Welfare economics links competitive equilibrium to resource allocation, showing an interdependence between welfare and economic development (Welfare economics, Deardorff's Glossary of International Economics). Economic solidarity is an integral part of the overall policy of social justice. The European Union defines the risk of poverty as an income below 60% of the average household income. (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017).

The ESF Social Innovation+ initiative promotes innovative solutions to social challenges, including employment, education and social inclusion. The European Competence Center for Social Innovation promotes the transfer and/or scale-up of social innovation, including multiple types of actions. These projects conceptualize and validate tested approaches, help deploy proven models across Europe, or help social innovation support organizations improve their capabilities (ESF Social Innovation+ initiative). This includes social markets, communication platforms between socially responsible employers and social enterprises, and ecosystems (communities) for people with reduced employment opportunities who are actively looking to start a job, change career or self-manage (MLSP, 2021).

The Role of Economic Social Innovation in Providing Opportunities for the Participation of the Most Disadvantaged Groups in the Labor Market.

Innovative approaches are essential to address the barriers disabled people face in the labor market. By implementing social innovations that provide a combination of income support, active employment support and disability support, people with disabilities can be empowered to overcome challenges and secure meaningful employment opportunities.

In recent years, innovation has seen and seen an essential role in the competitiveness and success of businesses. The importance of innovation has led to many scientific researches and has become a broad topic, which is generally perceived in a different way (Yuleva, 2019).

Those decisions not only overcome poverty but maintain the principles of equality, autonomy and dignity of people with disabilities by stimulating their inclusion in the labor power. Creating awareness, advocating for a barrier-free environment and facilitating the

reintegration of disabled workers into the corporate culture are key steps supported by social innovations to improve the labor market participation of people with disabilities (REPORT Towards equal rights for people with disabilities).

As part of implementation of the National Plan for Recovery and Stable Development of Bulgaria, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy plans to provide over 26 mils. BGN by 2027 in support of the social and solidarity economy, with a special emphasis on the social economy and the development of human resources. Those funds will have a direct impact on approximately 4200 persons from disadvantaged groups. Approximately 20 mils. BGN will be invested in social innovations (MLSP,2022).

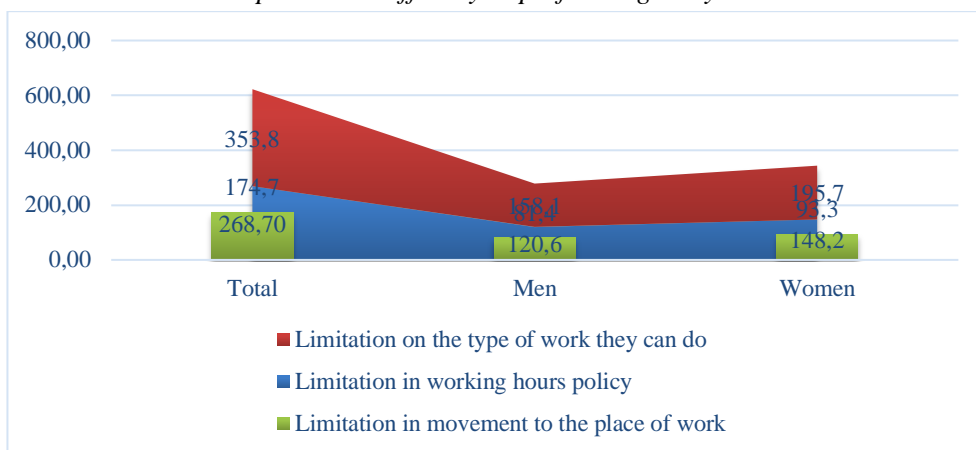
The “Development of Human Resources” program for the period until 2027 will support the national priorities such as education, social integration, and indirect industrial development by contributing to the key priorities: Priority 1 „Education and Skills “– on life-long education, non-formal vocational training, digital and ICT skills and the mismatch between labor market needs and skills supply; Priority 11 "Social inclusion" from the National Plan for Development “Bulgaria 2030” - employment, stimulation of labor market for vulnerable groups, reducing social inequalities, self-employment and social entrepreneurship. In addition, in the period until 2027 the “Development of the Human Resources” program will contribute indirectly for the fulfilment of Priority 3 - “Intelligent Industry” related to Industry 4.0. In such a manner, the good practices, aimed to integrate people with disabilities in the labor market, contribute to the solution of problems related to the social systems.

Improving the skills, socio-economic development and creating stable jobs (including for people with disabilities) are key elements for innovations, which support the labor market. Despite the progress in Bulgaria's socio-economic development, social entrepreneurship still lacks public recognition due to non-financial processes and mechanisms evaluating work activity, which differ from traditional economic activity. (Narlev, 2016). In Bulgaria, the integration of people with disabilities into the labor market through the mechanisms of the social economy is essential. Social enterprises implement good practices, including finding and providing real employment. The ways of identifying vulnerable groups are many and varied, but interdependent and affected by social, economic and physical environmental factors (Lalonde, 1974; Labonté 1993).

The share of persons with up to 50% permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability is the smallest - 53,782, or 8.5%. People with at least one type of permanent health impairment and/or permanently reduced ability to work have different restrictions regarding the type of work, the duration of working hours and commuting to work.

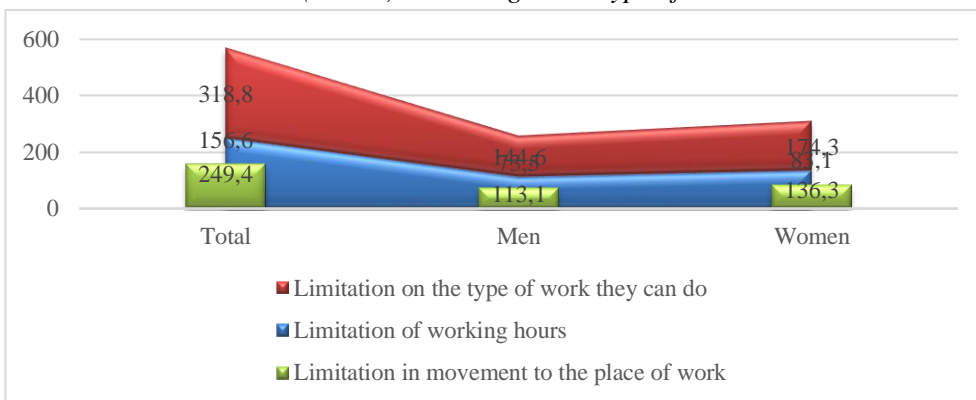
In figures 1, 2 and 3 is presented the data of NSI for persons in the age of 15-64 with at least one type of permanent illness and/or permanent reduced workability with respect to the type of limitation.

Figure no. 1 Persons in the age of 15-64 with at least one type of permanent illness and /or persistent difficulty in performing daily activities



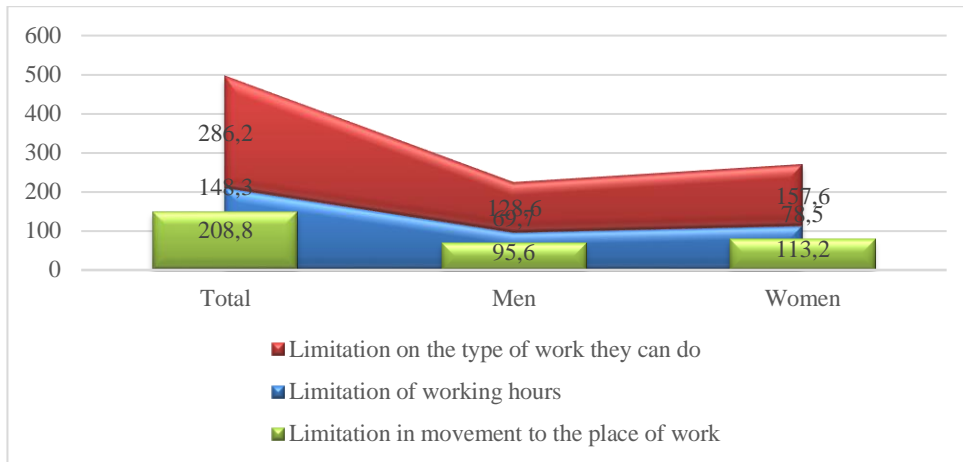
Source: NSI

Figure no. 2 Persons in the age of 15 - 64 with at least one persistent condition(illness) according to the type of limitation



Source: NSI

Figure no. 3 Persons in the age of 15 – 64 with at least one persistent difficulty in fulfilling daily activities depending on the type of limitation



Source: NSI

According to the findings the barriers in front of the integration of the persons with disabilities in the labor market delay the process of engaging people from that vulnerable group into the labor market. Of great significance is the limitation in the type of work they can do, followed by commuting and length of working hours. People with disabilities are more often economically inactive in comparison to people who do not possess any health impairments. Low levels of education among the majority of unemployed people with disabilities is also one of the causes of income inequality, poverty, social exclusion and isolation of that vulnerable group. The combination of factors such as low or average education and qualification, health conditions and lack of skills make that vulnerable subgroup extremely uncompetitive in the labor market.

Ultimately, integrating people with disabilities into the workforce not only improves their social inclusion and financial independence but also contributes to positive results in the overall economy, highlighting the importance of social innovations to promote equality and diversity in all sectors of society. (Ilcheva, 2020). In an effort to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, various successful social innovations have emerged. One such innovation is the introduction of measures aimed at increasing the employment of people with disabilities. By focusing on improving access to social inclusion services for disadvantaged people, these measures have facilitated the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce. Initiatives that seek to improve access to social and health services for people with disabilities have played a crucial role in creating a supportive environment for people seeking employment opportunities. In addition,

measures aimed at re-entering the labor market for family members who take care of people with disabilities have not only eased caregiving responsibilities, but also indirectly contributed to the increased participation of people with disabilities in the labor force. By implementing these innovative approaches, societies can work to create a more inclusive and supporting environment that enables people with disabilities to secure meaningful employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The barriers faced by people with disabilities in accessing employment opportunities are complex and multifaceted, encompassing both physical barriers and social and economic constraints. The measures aim to address these challenges by improving access to social inclusion services, providing support for the integration of disadvantaged people into the labour market and society at large.

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