STRONGER ROOTS

## ORGANISATION: ÉLMÉNYLELŐ YOUTH ASSOCIATION

# How did ad hoc corporate supporters become committed partners?

Rethinking corporate relations through the example of the Élménylelő Youth Association

Case study of a Hungarian organization supported under the Stronger Roots 2023-2025 Program.

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## Organisation description:

The **Élménylelő** (*'Experience-Seeking'*) **Youth Association** primarily operates a community space called Élménytár ('Experience Repository') for primary school children. Its main goals are to support school progress, build community and develop social values such as critical thinking and emotional intelligence. Their „You Are Not Alone" programme helps disadvantaged teenage girls. They also offer accredited training for social workers. The organisation is run by a three-person management team, mentors, interns and volunteers.

## Case study introduction

**The case study shows how the Élménylelő Youth Association developed conscious, long-term partnerships from occasional corporate support and how they involved new corporate partners. Building on personal relationships and experience-based programmes, they developed a new approach to corporate cooperation. Their experiences offer useful lessons for civil society organisations on strategic relationship building, value proposition development and corporate engagement.**

## Starting point and first attempts

The Élménylelő Youth Association had previously been able to count on corporate support, but this was typically ad hoc and organised through personal connections. Support took the form of volunteers sent to individual events and one-off financial donations, but these did not develop into long-term strategic partnerships. Networking was not a consciously managed organisational activity.

At the end of 2021, the organisation gained new momentum: it attempted to expand its corporate relationships beyond its own network. They specifically targeted companies that did not have a well-developed corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, or newly established, often foreign-owned small and medium-sized enterprises. The approach was well-intentioned, but the results were disappointing: most of the companies approached either did not respond or did not see how they could get involved in the organisation‘s work.

The initiative consumed a lot of time and energy, but did not yield any meaningful results. The failure clearly indicated that in the corporate world, a „cold“ approach does not work on its own. A deeper understanding, personal connection and value-based cooperation are needed.

## From a change of mindset to programme development: how did the relationship become a partnership?

The first step **was to conduct personal interviews** with companies that had previously supported the organisation in some form.

The interviews had two objectives: to find out what had motivated the companies to support the organisation in the past and to build on these existing connections to develop **deeper, longer-term partnerships.** During the discussions, new companies often came to the fore, as partners made recommendations from their own networks, thus expanding the network organically.

The discussions gave rise to the idea of not just providing corporate partners with information, but also **involving** them in the organisation‘s activities in **an experiential way.** This resulted in the **„Company Game“ programme,** a dramatic, shared experience involving children and company employees.

During the programme, company representatives present their professions and skills in the form of role-playing based on a fictional story, while the children become active participants in the joint search for solutions. This format **provides both learning and networking opportunities:** career guidance for children and emotional engagement and a positive impression of the organisation‘s work for company participants.

The „Company Game“ debuted at an interactive presentation event where corporate partners could directly

experience the impact of the programme. The active participation of the children and the power of the experience proved convincing: two of the participating companies **entered into specific partnerships** with the association and purchased the programme as a project that fits into their corporate social responsibility activities.

## Resources, challenges and the real key to success

Strengthening the corporate partnerships of the Élménylelő Youth Association required not only a change in mindset, but also the mobilisation of significant internal and external resources. The implementation was based on three main pillars:

- **Personal relationships:** These formed the basis for interviews and initial support events, where existing corporate partners could be directly involved in the organisation‘s activities.
- **Internal organisational capacity:** The active participation, commitment and shared thinking of team members enabled them to respond quickly to changing circumstances and shape the new strategy together.
- **Financial and professional support:** The resources available through the Stronger Roots Program contributed to the development of the website, the printing of publications and the organisation of events.

However, one of the most important factors was the **involvement of an external expert.** He helped the organisation to clearly define its value proposition and objectives in a language and structure that is understandable and attractive to the for-profit sector. This made it possible for companies to see the civil society organisation as a genuine partner.

However, several serious difficulties emerged during the process. Although the strategy of building personal relationships worked well, there were significant shortcomings in the digital background and online communication. Technical problems with Meta‘s advertising system and Google‘s services, as well as website integration errors, hampered the organisation‘s visibility. In addition, there was no conscious social media strategy, which prevented a unified communication presence. Another weakness was the lack of impact measurement. Although the organisation recognised its importance, it lacked both the methodological knowledge and established practices to measure the long-term social impact of its partnerships – this remained a key area for development in the future.

Despite all this, the programme was successful. The real breakthrough came with a change in mindset: the association saw companies not just as donors, but as partners. They realised that companies are not just a source of funding, but also share common goals, values and opportunities. When they were able to demonstrate this in a credible, personal and experiential way, it had a much greater impact than any formal request.

## LESSONS LEARNED, GOOD PRACTICES AND USEFUL ADVICE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

1. **It is worth involving external experts in the planning process**
   An outside perspective helps you articulate your value proposition clearly and in a way that companies can understand.
2. **Don‘t skimp on personal networking**
   Personal meetings are time-consuming, but they build lasting trust and strong cooperation – they are much more effective than mass inquiries.
3. **Strive for long-term thinking**
   Partnership is not a one-off action, but a process. Gradual development creates strong, lasting relationships.
4. **Build on your organisation‘s social embeddedness**
   Local knowledge and credibility also inspire trust in companies. Long-term, transparent operations are a strong foundation for partnerships.
5. **Don‘t just ask for money – offer shared value**
   Offer a programme that also benefits companies. Shared experiences create stronger bonds than one-off donations.
6. **Shared responsibility = more stable operations**
   When more people understand the processes, there are fewer mistakes, greater commitment and, if necessary, it is easier to replace each other.
7. **Be present online – but be mindful**
   A fresh, professional online presence builds trust. It is important to be findable and consistent.
8. **Start measuring your impact today – even small steps are worth it**
   Even a few pieces of feedback or numbers can go a long way in helping you see and show others your impact.

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This case study was prepared within the framework of the Stronger Roots Program. The Stronger Roots Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate.

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