

Integrating ESG Principles through Collaboration with the Business Sector in Youth Support



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In this edition of ESG Chat, we highlight the challenges and successes of integrating ESG principles into social initiatives, emphasizing the importance of long-term collaboration with the business sector to support youth in need.

How does the Zvezda Center integrate ESG principles into its activities and projects, particularly in relation to cooperation with the business sector?

We integrate ESG principles into our activities in various ways—through working with youth in social need, fostering their inclusion and integration into society, and using eco-friendly materials for the products we distribute through our social enterprise.

Companies in the business sector are interested in integrating some of the ESG principles into their operations, so we strive to connect them with our work, as we need their support in all aspects of implementing our activities.

Could you explain how the Zvezda Center supports businesses in their ESG efforts through your programs and initiatives?

As an association dedicated to providing concrete support to young people without adequate parental care, Zvezda Center implements various projects. Among them are initiatives that respond to companies aiming to integrate ESG principles. For example, we have included eco-friendly products in our range of handcrafted items because environmentally conscious companies requested this.

We've collaborated on recycling certain products and materials, and this wouldn't have been possible without cooperation with both individuals and legal entities who provided expertise essential for these activities. When it comes to the employment or education of youth, we actively participate, offer our opinion, and share relevant information on opportunities for integrating the youth we support into companies willing to assist in this sphere.



“Smaller organizations, like ours, that focus on long-term impact, need cooperation “for the long haul” to produce more significant results.”

What are the biggest challenges you face in implementing ESG strategies in cooperation with businesses?

The biggest challenge is the lack of people specifically focused on ESG topics, both in the business sector and especially among social service providers. Large companies have teams dedicated to ESG issues, but as humanitarian workers, we often don't have professionally trained personnel who can liaise with businesses and engage in joint activities to integrate ESG principles.

On the other hand, the business world often lacks the time for research and long-term efforts in implementing ESG principles. They are usually more interested in short-term actions with immediate results. For smaller organizations like ours that work with a long-term vision, collaboration needs to be sustained over a longer period, which can yield better and more lasting results—provided there is a good strategy and patience to work in the agreed directions. In working with people, as with nature, it's impossible to do something quickly and well. Every successful project requires time and dedication, which are not hallmarks of modern society.

How would you rate the awareness and readiness of companies in Serbia to invest in ESG projects, especially in the area of socially responsible business?

I believe that most companies are ready to invest in ESG projects, but it is not always entirely clear what criteria are used to select partners. Additionally, in today's fast-paced world, our perception is that instant solutions are sought, which do not yield long-term results. The projects we run operate on a long-term basis, making it more difficult to secure funding for their implementation.

Have you noticed an increase in interest and investment from companies in ESG?

Socially responsible business practices have changed some of their principles and incorporated new ones, but social concerns have always existed. Company management is responsible for choosing the direction of action, while those delegated to implement it are significantly responsible for execution. The "human factor" greatly determines how cooperation will proceed. We strive to offer multiple avenues for collaboration to make it easier for businesses to choose and to support as many young people as possible who need help.

What is the role of organizations like the Zvezda Center in promoting and advancing ESG standards in Serbia?

Our role, as we understand it, is to assist in implementing the goals, intentions, and principles of ESG actions of companies. We are the "on-the-ground" operatives who reach the end users and directly act in achieving the set goals. Whether it's social inclusion of vulnerable groups, raising environmental awareness, or managing certain resources—our teams implement it on the ground. That's why cohesion between corporate teams and the NGO sector and other stakeholders who execute agreed activities is so significant.

What are your future plans, and how do you see the growing scope of ESG standards impacting your development in the coming years?

As an association, we have a wide range of activities: inclusion of youth without parental care, involvement in policies and guidelines concerning youth work, applying ecological principles within the social enterprise we are establishing specifically for these young people, and developing the idea of opening a "House of Opportunities" in rural areas for young people who grew up in foster families. This project aims to teach them how to manage a household independently and stay in that environment. We also plan to begin food production for these young people as part of the "House of Opportunities" program to ensure partial self-sustainability of the program.

“ We are the "on-the-ground" operatives who reach the end users and directly act in achieving the set goals. ”

What do you consider the key indicators of your success?

The key indicators of success are the young people who have been part of the program, successfully become independent, and are now ready to help others transition smoothly after leaving the alternative care system.

Our association has managed to achieve this without financial support from the state - we are not part of a larger foundation, nor do we have guaranteed monthly income. We have survived thanks to the enthusiasm and dedication of the team, the promotion, and sales of the products we make, as well as the support of individuals and companies who uphold their ESG principles.

“ The essence of success is not in the amount of money one earns but in the purpose for which that money is used. ”

Can you provide examples of successful projects where collaboration with the business sector contributed to significant ESG results?

Thanks to our collaboration with JTI, we were able to purchase machines and prepare a workshop space that now allows us to train young people without adequate parental support to work with laser engravers, CNC machines, UV printers, cup printing, textiles, etc. We have employed some of them, and this has also provided the conditions for the self-sustainability of our accommodation facilities, which serve to offer young people a safe space for living, support, and education for independent living in society.

Through promoting and selling products, we have sensitized a portion of the corporate sector to get involved in providing support to youth without family support through education, employing young people in these companies, and offering support on various levels. In this way, we have made this neglected social group more visible, and we hope that support in this direction will continue.

How do you see the balance between business and financial goals achieving socially responsible business priorities? What would you say to a small business owner who asked you this question?

The essence of success is not in the amount of money one earns but in the purpose for which that money is used. Building relationships and working long-term with the people around us will contribute to a better society for all, including ourselves. Business and financial goals are one side of the equation, but if part of that income is not reinvested in the community from which we come, there will be no improvement for us, our company, or our families. Inner motivation, the sense of satisfaction after having done something positive, and long-term impact on our natural or social surroundings are feelings that cannot be bought with money or replaced by any business success. It just takes time and opportunity for each of us, including people in the business world, to reach that feeling. After that moment, everything becomes easier, clearer, and more meaningful.

Life certainly has a deeper meaning than just business—if we explore it and share it with others.

About Tatjana Dražilović

Tatjana Dražilović was born in 1976, in Petrovac na Mlavi. After completing elementary and high school, she enrolled in the Faculty of Teacher Education in Belgrade, where she graduated in 1998 as the top student in her class. She went on to earn a master's degree in didactic-methodological sciences from the same faculty. Over her 20-year career, she has worked as an elementary school teacher and as a counselor at the National Employment Service.

Eleven years ago, together with her husband and a few close friends, she founded the Association for Supporting Children and Youth Without Adequate Parental Care, called the Zvezda Center. For the past nine years, she has served as the director of the association and as the coordinator of the international project "House of Opportunity" for Serbia, aimed at providing housing and support to young people transitioning out of the social protection system. Currently, Houses of Opportunity exist in Belgrade, Niš, and Kragujevac, with over 90 residents who have been part of this unique program for empowering and supporting youth lacking adequate parental care. A rural property is currently being prepared for a House of Opportunity in the countryside, and there are plans to expand the project to other cities. Tatjana believes that the work she is currently involved in is her calling and life's purpose, and she dedicates her energy, enthusiasm, and time to these and other projects and activities related to this vulnerable social group. In addition to her four children, she also refers to all the children and youth without adequate parental support as "her own" and strives to help them in every aspect of their lives.

She is a collaborator on educational activities for national minorities, a volunteer with an international organization that distributes Christmas gifts to children in socially disadvantaged families, and recently, a partner in a global network promoting foster care. Tatjana has participated in numerous conferences and seminars in Serbia and abroad on topics dedicated to children and youth.



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