SOCIAL INVESTMENT: BEYOND VULNERABILITY THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract
The article seeks answers to some recent challenges that were launched by the European Commission regarding the absolute necessary investments for a Social Europe. The Social European Agenda emphasizes the investments in people or in the human capital regarded as resources for a new economical growth among the state members. Our analysis outlines the opportunities and the critical issues of these challenges, coming as a support for the social inclusion practitioners, by explaining and relating in detail the model of empowerment. We accompany this model also with frameworks for understanding the concept of vulnerability and of social interdependence in order to support the practitioners from the field of social inclusion, including those who work in entities associated to social economy, for responding to the initiative of making social investments.

Key words: vulnerability, interdependence, social investments, empowerment, social inclusion

Introduction

The Social European agenda (2013) emphasizes the fact that, if the State Members wish to have another economic growth, reducing significantly the unemployment rate and the poverty rate, they must focus on investing in people or in the "human capital". It is necessary to move from a welfare state to a state that invests in the social matters. This issue of the Social agenda is focusing on the Social European Investment Package, for economic growth and cohesion, that the European Commission (EC) has presented on the 20th of February 2013. The Agenda targets to consider the people's view on the quality of life,

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on the competencies that shall necessary in the near future and on what European citizenship practically means.

The alarm signal regarding the need to invest in the human capital is almost belated, arrived in the context of the economic crisis. But the arguments are based on the existent good practices and on studies and documents that accompany, in the memo of the Commission, the social investment package (e.g.: IP/5/13: „The employment and social situation in Europe”, 2012).

The above mentioned documents show that within the State Members that have a stronger commitment to make investments in the social field – more precisely: offering benefits and services that consolidate the competencies and the abilities of people -, the population is less exposed to the risk of poverty or to the risk of social exclusion and has a better level of education, the employment rate is higher, the deficits are lower and the GDP is higher.

The worsening of the social situation and of the social protection systems' sustainability in some Member States of the European Union are considered arguments of the analysis and of the measure packages designed for the field of social investment in Europe.

Through the package Investing in Social Europe (PISE) (2013) the Commission offers to the Member States some suggestions regarding the modernization of the social protection systems by inviting them to provide to the vulnerable people the opportunity of facing social risks, in the attempt to reduce the need of ”repairing” the consequences. (24/04/2013) Catalog N.: KE-31-13-870-EN-C). The prevention and prospective measures are emphasized.

If the open coordination Method in the field of social protection (Gîrleanu-Soitu, 2005) was used by the Commission to fashion a guideline for the Member States, keeping the specific and the resources of each, the Social Investment Package makes, in our opinion, the open social coordination Method to become a directive method.

The Commission believes that the capitalization of expertise related to policies, reformation processes, to the involvement of the specialists with expertise, but also of the decision-makers and to the use of the European funds for social investments represent leverages for a good implementation of the proposed measure.
„If we place emphasis on prevention, on developing the abilities and the capacities of the people and on ensuring the adequate subsistence means, it shall result in considerable economies later on and in a better use of the public resources” – states the PISE (2013, p.10)

The package regarding social investments (EC, 2013) is formed of a communication that sets out the strategic framework, the concrete measures that shall be taken by the Member States and by the Commission, and also the guidelines regarding the use of the European Union (EU) funds allocated for supporting reformations. This is accompanied by:

- information regarding the demographic and social evolution and the role of the social policies in formulating a reaction to the social, economic and macro-economic challenges that the EU is facing (work document of the Commission' services);
- the third biannual report regarding the general interest social services, designed to help the public authorities and the interested parties to understand and apply the reviewed norms of EU with regards to social services;
- the recommendation of the Commission named "Investing in children: breaking the vicious circle of disadvantage", that contains an integrated strategic framework concerning the improvement of the opportunities that the children have; (work document of the Commission' services);
- a summary of the 2008 Commissions recommendation regarding the active inclusion of the persons excluded from employment;
- the difficulties and the strategic options regarding the long term care (work document of the Commission' services);
- the situation of the homeless people living in the European Union and presents possible strategies (work document of the Commission' services);
- Investing in health, a document that contains strategies to improve the efficiency and the profitableness of the health systems, in the context of low public health budgets. The document examines the means through which health can contribute to the growth of the human capital and to social inclusion (work document of the Commission' services);
- the way in which the Social European Fund can contribute to the application of the packages regarding social investments (work document of the Commission' services).

Beyond these, the package regarding social investments is inspired by the European platform for fighting poverty and social exclusion and completes other initiatives recently taken by the Commission in order to respond to the social and economic problems of Europe:
- the employment package;
- the employment of the youth package and
- the white charter of the pensions.

The Social investments package is considered a strategic framework that takes account of the social, economic and budgetary differences between the Member States[1], focusing on:
- adapting the social protection systems to the needs of the people who are going through critical phases in their lives;
- social policies that are simplified and better orientated, having in view to create some adequate and sustainable social protection systems; some countries have better results than others in the social field, despite the fact that they have similar budgets or even smaller ones, fact that shows that it is possible to optimize the social policy related expenses.
- the modernization of the active inclusion strategies applied by the Member States (services for child care and affordable and high quality education, prevention of school dropout phenomenon, the professional training, support for finding a job, help for housing and the availability of medical services are all action fields with a strong social dimension).

The key message of the PISE (CE, PISE, 2013, p. 10) is that the implementation of adequate, just and fair social policies, means investing in the human capital, in the ability of people to develop and to face the risks, within prevention activities.

This idea is also found in the academic papers published in the last two decades, as a reaction to the “transition” and the digressed road of the Romanian social assistance road (Miftode, 1999; Zamfir, Stoica

but the economic crisis of the last years has forced the proposal of taking measures which similar to the ones contained by the Investing in Social Europe document, concluded by the European Commission in June 2013 and published a short while ago.

We appreciate the highlights of the mentioned document with regards to the necessary removal of obstacles that stand in the way of people’s participation into society and on the labor market. The following key actions were considered for this matter:

- investments in social policies;
- investments in social services and benefits that activate and provide to the people with the opportunity to develop their own abilities and to obtain/reach adequate living standards.

The invitation launched by the Commission through the mentioned document bears some much welcomed aspects, but also some critical points.

One of these aspects refers to the political empowerment ideology that is seeking to emphasize the responsibility of the individuals to ensure the meeting of their own needs, with a possible hidden purpose to limit the state services. Payne (1997, pp. 267-8) was expressing, more than one decade ago, the concern related to these risks, by implementing the concept of empowerment into social intervention.

The Social Investment Package (2013) desires to, through the ability of the citizens, reduce the public costs, and to determine the vulnerable or potentially vulnerable persons to prevent and fight the social risks in a greater extent.

What does it mean to be vulnerable in relation with the social protection system?

The phrase vulnerable adult has started to be utilized as an umbrella term for the adults that are eligible to use social services, especially in relation with the matters of abuse and protection (Brown, 2000, pp. 367-369). We include here:

- incapacitated persons;
- persons with mental health problems;
• aged persons;
• persons with disabilities or with reduced capacities – injured, mutilated.

The service users can be considered vulnerable especially when their situation is complicated by additional factors, such as: physical fragility, chronic diseases, the diminish of sensorial sensibility, inadequate behavior, emotional or social problems, poverty, not having a home, age.

In Great Britain, for example, the concept of *vulnerability* was proposed and defined in a consultative document suggested by the Commission of Law Enforcement within the House of Lords, in 1995, starting with the decisions regarding "mentally retarded" adults. From this point of view, the term has slipped in, and started being used in the social assistance field applying generic policies to the groups of adult and aged clients.

This commission has defined the *vulnerable adult* as « a person over 18 years old who has or may have need of community care services due to reasons such as: mental or other kind of inability, age or disease and who is or may be incapable of taking care of himself, of self-protection against a serious damage or against a serious exploitation » (LC 1995, p. 207). As it is results from the definition, the new collective term identifies a very ample group that claims attention in the social protection decisions, being differentiated from those traditionally recognized as vulnerable.

*The vulnerability assumption* is connected to the individual eligibility of receiving services. But the limited resources command the review of the eligible criteria from a perspective of allocating the resources to those who are most disadvantaged, and this fact shall deprive some very vulnerable persons of support, leaving them at the edge of the community, while they would be more legitimate to receive protection and to benefit from the intervention programs.

This term is facing the modern trend that tries to identify less stigmatized names, names that promote equal and more assertive roles for the service users. Thus, it transforms itself in a challenge for the groups of users.
The term supposes some problems in the identification of certain clients' vulnerability, more than its conceptualization as a function of a large system or of some structural disparities.

It is possible to record here an agreement of the theoreticians with regards to the fact that an individual is not intrinsically vulnerable, but it is transformed by:

- poverty;
- inadequate housing;
- receiving low quality services;
- disadvantageous legal regulations;

In the same way, in the wider framework of the community, the women, the persons of a certain ethnicity are made more vulnerable as a result of sexism, racism and of homophobia.

Moreover, the persons that have complex needs, serious imbalances and a challenging behavior are being transformed by the other people’s lack of understanding. To this add up other problems experienced especially by those who resort to social services: the aged persons who live in care centers, the handicapped persons, with difficulties and mental problems are devalued and labeled as marginalized groups.

The predominance of the stereotypes is negative. The poverty chases people away from things that other people own. The increased fragility of the social excluded persons destroys their self-esteem, increases their perspective of no independence in their actions, it marginalizes them.

Therefore the phrase *vulnerable adult* may create inadvertencies at personal level, more than it complicates or it politicizes vulnerability. The concerns regarding the persons with mental health problems seem to be more adequate for care programs than for health services, although the *evaluations often focus rather on danger than on vulnerability*. Some people with incapacities seem to not feel/know that they need additional help for ensuring their protection. The awareness rising with regards to the other vulnerabilities of the people who use social services and of the barriers that exist the moment they seek support for accessing them, can be a step towards the future and towards social investment.
On the way to an anti-discriminatory practice, in last two decades, on Great Britain for example, especially as a consequence of two documents[1] - that have attempted to re-orientate the attention of the social workers from the issues of poverty and disparities – we observe two contrasting approaches of these matters:

\textit{a) a perspective that tends towards a consensus and that considers the following:}

- social assistance provides a saving net for the individual who, by accepting their \textit{vulnerability}, experiment troubling situations during their adaption into the society;
- social assistance must abide the agreement regarding the \textit{status quo};
- in a competitive society, there will be losers and winners; as long as everyone has a fair chance to participate, no rule is broken;
- the state commits to a fair and just social order,, the rights of the citizens are abided, and the most vulnerable persons are taken care of;
- the intervention is directed by the social workers and by the organizations from the field of fair policies and procedures;
- through an adequate intervention, the problems of the citizens can be resolved, and their function in society can be improved.

\textit{b) a radical perspective that asserts the following:}

- the state supports those who have the most resources and power within the society;
- in a competitive society, only those who control the rules of the game shall win;
- social assistance must make people stronger and more capable;
- social assistance perpetuates the status quo instead of discussing the structural disparities of the society (Parrott, 1999, pp.36-8).

Regarding these two approaches, we believe that by explaining the experience of people from just one perspective the diversity of many other categories is being hidden.

Nevertheless we ask how people can be helped, even when they experiment vulnerability situations, how can they become stronger and more capable, how can they be taught and supported to face further vulnerability situations?

**The challenges of the empowerment process**

The students who study the field of social assistance understand since the first courses and seminars that its purpose is to help people help themselves (Miftode, 2009; Irimescu, 2006; Gîrleanu-Șoitu, 2002). As social workers, they can do this by continuously following up the achievement of an empowerment process (Gîrleanu-Șoitu, 2004).

What does empowerment mean?

Empowerment desires to help clients/beneficiaries to have the decision and action power over their own lives.

How can this be achieved?

By reducing the personal or social blockages that hampers him to use his current power, by improving self-esteem and the capacity of using his abilities, but also by transferring the power from the environment to the clients.

Often the clients have abilities they cannot use or they think they do not have them.

Empowerment is a more positive approach in social intervention than the radical traditional approaches or the anti-discriminatory approaches that used to argue that the oppressed groups are completely lacking power when facing structural oppression.

Raymond Jack (1995) emphasizes the paradox of empowerment because, regardless of the fact that a power is provided by the organization or by a person, those who provide it are, by the nature of their role, in a position of power. The groups that practice self-help must take over the power, must interiorize it, must learn and use their abilities, while, within the Romanian social protection system there is a much smaller law mandate or from the part of service management, for empowerment.
In his turn, Oliver (1996) argues that the social and political rights that come from the citizen role should form the basis of vulnerable groups of people when they are assuming the power. An important aspect of the actions carried out, in this sense, represents the transformation of the services into more participative ones that lead to a common distribution of opportunities and cultural acquisitions that improve the resources of the potentially vulnerable persons and develop them to ensure an adequate social protection.

The distinction between empowerment and consumerism that the author makes is interesting. This difference is essential in order to understand the involvement of the citizens: empowerment refers to the rights and the responsibilities as citizens, while consumerism is closer connected to the position of the individual as receiver of services. The protection strategies of consumerism seem to be less adequate, even inefficient for most of the vulnerable consumers – while the idea of empowerment is, in a particular way, connected to the support of those who are disadvantaged and have no power.

Payne (1997; 2011) emphasized the fact that empowerment is a grandiose concept. It is not surprising that some people do not feel comfortable to speak it. But, if we support the deeper involvement of the public in their own lives, in services and in society, the concept commands to be defined.

Beresford and Croft (1993, p. 50) use the concept “empowerment” in the sense of facilitating the use of power by the people, including the control over their own life. This could mean that the social services users have a strong word to say within the institutions, agencies and situations that affect them. This could also mean, that they are capable to share the power or to use the power over other people, they way they feel it. One of the objections resulted from this idea is that the power cannot be given, it can only be taken. Also, no one shall give away his power. It is easier to help others or to support them with the necessary abilities to take the power than to try to give them the power.

Therefore, a second objection occurs regarding empowerment: we are often alarmed because there are owners of power. No one wants to lose what they have, thinking: "If them (the social services benefi-
ciaries) shall have more power in the decision making process, then I shall have less."

This is the great obstacle for most participants in the process of building policies and services (like the invitation launched in the European document mentioned above) including those from the field of social economy. But the power is not a zero sum, so that if I shall have more, you shall have less. It is also wrong to believe that, by empowering others, we automatically lose our own power. Empowerment is concerned, on the other hand, to modify the nature of the relationships between participants, obtaining a benefit for everyone. At this point, the idea of empowerment differs from the concept of consumerism, where every attempt to alter the balance of power between the service provider and the beneficiary often emphasizes only the inherent antagonism between these two.

*Empowerment is closely connected by the support of the vulnerable persons and of the intervention network through social and community development.* It is, in fact, an active intervention that would provide an example of participation from the part of the beneficiary and of his family, an example of active citizenship and of involvement in the community development.

Empowerment can be used in the field of child protection but also for the protection of aged persons, of the persons with deficiencies, of the poor people or of the people who live at the edge of poverty and of the Roma people, by providing access to information, by involving them in the decision making processes and by taking account of the perspective of clients in the provision of social services.

Expanding what Hegar (1989) claims with regards to the empowerment of children, we can say that this approach and the work methods are benefiting from the opportunity that the vulnerable people identify themselves with strong peoples, by involving them in decisions and by experiencing independence in various activities.

In the case of vulnerable or potentially vulnerable adults, empowerment is very much adequate and this is because mutual support at maturity allows people to share the experience of stigmatization and to reduce isolation (Thursz, Nusberg and Prather 1995). Cox (1989, pp. 111-125) for example, has used group work in order to empower
aged people to respond to the problems related to incomes, abuses and health care.

The philosophy of self-guidance, of personal responsibility and of self-update through empowerment is connected with the humanist and cognitive approaches. These emphasize the process of recognition and of building strengths and competencies at the level of the client.

There are also connections with the theory of the ecological systems, since there is demand to work with the client on the skills needed for a positive interaction with the environment. It is equally channeled also towards cognitive theory, because it involves the search for new ways that people can use and interpret environmental information. A strong perspective is humanist or constructivist, due to the fact that it focuses on the people’s abilities of defining their interaction with the environment. (Payne, 1997).

We observe some critical perspectives regarding the empowerment of mentally sick people, thinking of their entrance in the subjective reality in order to build a constructive one. As a result, they will be able to see sufficient situations where their subjective reality limits the control over the environment. By empowerment, the clients are involved in a process that transforms dependence into interdependence, with the support of a social network (Payne, 1997: 274). (Autonomy is not desirable in all situations, and in some cases it is impossible to obtain. In fact, we appreciate that we are all interdependent).

In the case of social intervention, the power can be legitimately used in order to support other people in their anti-oppressing practices or illegitimately, in order to oppress other, but through misunderstood practices. The power is also an element in the competition for resources, jobs and education (Milner and O'Byrne 1998).

The social interveners can also experiment a lack of power - by this having a better understanding of the services addressed to the users -, but the danger is expressed when the power is used to exclude and marginalize, to create dependence or to lay stress on vulnerability.
Models of empowerment for social inclusion

A. The personal-cultural-structural model

When working with vulnerable people, by looking to counter-balance the negative self-image, the negative life experiences, the blocked opportunities and the physical and emotional troubles, Thompson (1993) suggests, through a tridimensional approach, the *PCS model*, where:

- P – represents the personal/psychological elements;
- C – the cultural, common aspects (consensus and conformity);
- S – the structural dimensions, the social forces or the political dimensions.

It is important to mention that these dimensions interact with each other, P being included in C, C being included in S.

It is difficult to operationalize the strategies of empowerment. The strong people, and through them the intervention methods based on power, and theories of power find means to resist. The social interveners are not in the position to provide power to the people, and their purpose is to help reduce the lack of power that the individuals and the groups are experimenting.

From a psychological point of view, there is an important inheritance left behind by the lack of power, that includes lethargy, despair and helplessness – a habit of helplessness or a “culture of silence” – where there is an apparent acceptance of servitude and dependence. By this, the vulnerable persons subscribe to the myth of receiving what they deserve, they internalize it, and moreover they own the feeling of alienation and evilness (Beresford, Croft 1993). The modern development of power is operating through the subtle term of self-adjusting.

How can the students and the practitioners from the field of social inclusion perform a process of empowerment?

a) First, by understanding that the power expressed through the abilities of a beneficiary do not reduce his power. He is not being threatened!

b) Then, by being well informed about the entire social assistance system, he shall be able to present to the beneficiary not only social benefits data, but also arguments for using the social services.
c) The third step of empowerment represents the support of the beneficiary in (re) gaining his own power.

Another way to reduce vulnerability is to counsel for development, by facilitating the individual change. Any step made by the beneficiary towards personal development shall represent a gain. (Soitu, 2012).

The practitioner from the social services field – provided either separate or integrated with the medical, educational, economical services, etc. – may go through a process of empowerment starting from:

a) developing own points of view;

b) forming own judgments;

c) negotiating with the others (Beresford and Croft, 1993, pp. 154-155).

In order to achieve this, the social services specialist, or the social economy specialist, needs to:

a) learn to work within a team;

b) openly receive the new comers, making their involvement possible, beyond any kind of barriers;

c) start introducing the perspective of empowerment in their own organization, before creating similar programs intended for other people;

d) ensure that the organization they are part of is not based on and does not reflect discriminations and exclusions;

e) speak in their own name, and not in the name of others;

f) resist the external pressure that could result in a minimization of power or of responsibilities.

Beresford and Croft (1993, pp. 141-143) speak about three different aspects of empowerment:

1. development of knowledge, by collecting information from experts, by coming back afterwards to the own knowledge, going on and creating new one.

2. sharing practical competencies – people seek to know things through reading, learning from books or from the experience of others. But there are also other opportunities to learn. A trainer was underlining the strategy of working with small groups – each member goes further and spreads out what he has learned. People involved in common
actions learn one from the other. It is very important that they do not come alone, but in groups of two-three, working on a project.

3. common work together with the professionals – we all need sometimes experts and professionals, not just for support, but also for presenting their competencies. Despite the fact that some relationships can become difficult, we can discover the possibility of making things better. Instead, the involvement in the decision making process is important.

B. The model of social involvement
A model of social involvement (O’Hagan, 1987, pp. 2-5) makes the distinction between services orientated towards:

a) efficiency – the purpose is to improve the service, by providing information and consultations;

b) new acquisitions – when there is concern that the people obtain something through these services: new skills, competencies and confidence;

c) empowerment or providing opportunities – when this is the objective, the participating persons decide the agenda on their own.

Considering that this model is closer to a democratic approach than the simple provision of information and consultations can be seen as being closer to the consumerist approach.

Empowerment needs:
1. provision of information;
2. provision of advice;
3. the direct involvement in the decision making process (Medeleanu 2013).

In this case the people are not called only for their view points or for their advice, but also for getting involved in the decisions. They may or may not be the only voice, but they shall not be subordinated to other people. They have the power to decide what shall happen to them, with their neighbors and with the services they use. This is an approach that is closer to the democratic approach. If the consumerist approach is often associated with the search for information and consultations, the democratic approach is closer to speaking the own view points of the
vulnerable or potentially vulnerable people, letting them speak for themselves and in their own name.

It is wrong to expect too much from these citizen involvement approaches, but it is also wrong to dismiss them. Participation is complex and subtle. The informal and consultative agreements would provide the vulnerable people with the effective opportunity to participate, in comparison with the current methods. We can identify here the weaknesses but also the strengths of such an approach, because the provision of information and consultation may support the clarification of problems, it may support the public debates, the information campaigns and the campaigns that bring together people for deciding a future in agreement with their needs and expectations.

We can observe two key components of efficient involvement (Beresford and Croft, 1993, p. 51): providing access to services and equally offering material and personal.

The resources and the personal change stand as the base for the four elements that make involvement possible through:

a) personal development;

b) practical abilities;

c) practical support;

d) support for people to get together and work in a group.

On one hand, the empowerment strategy does not only underline the personal dimension, because the starting point is not just the lack of abilities, confidence or resources. On the other hand, if the people are not supported to participate, then they will not be able to use at maximum the opportunities they might have.

This is one reason for making a difference between what people are formally saying and what they are actually saying. This also explains who is part of this and how efficient is the involvement of each.

If the people are not ready to get involved, to participate, the initiatives shall be just like a mirror, perpetuating the predominance of some determinants for discrimination and other disparities, instead of diminishing them. Regardless of the involvement type – from gathering of information to directly expressing the points of view, the preparation for achieving actions becomes more and more important. Supporting and favoring the access of people’s participation are an essential part of
the same empowerment process. They reflect the political and personal aspects of each citizen’s involvement.

Conclusions

The sustainability of the social protection systems is negatively affected not only by the challenges of the economical crisis and by the demographic one, but also by the insufficient investment into the human capital. To these we add the interpretation manners of the vulnerability situations, fact that also means personal development and social involvement.

The analysis made in the documents attached to the social investment package lays down the problem of costs and results, in other words the efficiency of the social protection systems.

We see more sustainability in the social protection systems from the EU member states where the unemployment rate is lower, the school dropout rate is lower, the access to health services is higher and the quality of life is appreciated by most citizens. On the other hand, the administrative issues from some national social protections systems – as it is ours - affect, states the PISE -, the costs and efficiency; there is reference made to the situations where there are multiple benefits, numerous agencies and relaxed eligibility conditions for certain benefits. Among these there are the serious financial difficulties, the growth of poverty and social exclusion, and also the record holder levels of unemployment, especially among young people. To these we add the aging of populations and the decrease of the active population, which trials the sustainability and the adequate character of the national social systems.

Social investments are necessary both at the level of policies and also at the level of those who are making and applying them. Investing in the development of the states also means investing in the prevention and the limitation of the vulnerability situations. Among these we also have the potential of social economy.
References


