

# PROFESSIONALIZATION THROUGH THE SOCIAL ECONOMY MASTER PROGRAM – DIMENSION OF PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITIES, BUSINESS AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Cosmin Goian<sup>[1]</sup>,  
Marius Vasiliuță Ștefănescu <sup>[2]</sup>

## Abstract

The social economy is an alternative business model, not focusing solely on maximizing profits, but also has a social component, the labor market integration of persons belonging to vulnerable groups - women (among whom employment is below that of men), the poor and disabled. In this context, the Master course in Social Economy in Timisoara aims to identify regional partners, with initiative in social entrepreneurship and social economy, to strengthen this partnership through networking, both in education and in business through educating and qualification of the human resource. We refer to researchers/academics, as well as companies, associations, foundations and cooperatives already operating in the area and activities/objectives in social economy without the support of a specific, coherent legislative environment. We identify the need to bring together in the academia, individuals and organizations concerned with finding solutions to social and economic problems in Romania.

**Keywords:** *master's degree in social economy, community - university partnerships, social entrepreneurship, disadvantaged groups, social inclusion*

A lot of features of *social economy* turn it into a challenging area to build a *partnership between the community, business and education environment, especially university education, especially through the*

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<sup>[1]</sup> PhD in Philosophy, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Romania, Address: Bd. Pârvan nr. 4, Timișoara, România, tel.: (+4)0744.810.318, e-mail: cosmin.goian@yahoo.com.

<sup>[2]</sup> PhD in Sociology Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Romania, Address: Bd. Pârvan nr. 4, Timișoara, România, tel.: (+4)0723.005.424, e-mail: mvasiluta@gmail.com.

*research component but also through teaching, through specialization at Masters level.* Research has an important role in the development and diffusion of these principles. Clearly, universities assume an active role by researchers, teachers and employees as stakeholders in community development. The objectives of this involvement also applies to serve and build public support by linking research, teaching and other educational services to assist communities, helping to build the capacity to solve problems in economic and social development (Toof, 2006).

Social economy is extremely diverse, while some parts of the social economy are professionalized and have formal organizational structures that interact well with the university, other important areas of social economy are emerging, informal and highly localized. Partnerships do not have a transformative nature, meaning that they do not pursue the transformation of institutional structures, rules and internal rules of the universities, the practices of society or community systems. Universities lack a more coherent structure, which makes it difficult to choose and identify the university partner by communities and their leaders, resulting in a greater initiative of universities in launching in creating partnerships (Brisbin & Hunter, 2003).

Meanwhile, in the context of the social economy bill, structures and existing social economy organizations and those in the making, aspiring to be social enterprises should deal with questions about building and sustaining partnerships between organizations, community and the university. There is great diversity in regional contexts and therefore, the variation in the approaches taken to build partnerships and networks involving the above mentioned offers a genuine opportunity to shape perspectives on the creation of common space for interaction between practitioners and university.

In this context, the Master of Social Economy in Timisoara is part of the effort to build a national system of social support and stimulate the social economy, along with partners in Oradea, Bucharest and Cluj.

The objective of specialization in social economics at university level in Timisoara is to identify regional partners with social entrepreneurship initiative and strengthen this partnership through networking, both in education and in the business. We mean both the master students and the companies, associations, foundations and cooperatives

already operating in the area and activities, and pursue objectives specific to social economy without the support of a coherent legislative environment. Thus, we propose to bring together individuals and organizations concerned with finding solutions to social and economic problems in Romania.

We also want to prepare future professionals in this field, either in research, which involves increasing the quality of learning and teaching and especially by bringing attention to the social economy in local decision-makers (mayors and councillors) and regional level (county councils, development agencies, etc.) in order to influence economic and social development policies. Finally, practitioners from institutions related to social economy and, especially, people and disadvantaged communities in the Western Region, which will implement their entrepreneurial initiatives that serve as a model, they are our target audience and future partners.

The master has a practical orientation, the education plans following this direction that is reflected in the master projects and our concerns for field placement (such as, for example, the work of master students and coordinators in the Veneto region in Italy) and identification of good practices in social economy. We emphasize the importance of practice, by observing patterns of social cooperatives, functional legislation of the economic framework in which they operate and a whole range of different products and services that we were able to analyze. We note, in particular, the role and importance of partnership and integration of individual actors in the network of social cooperatives operating as a major premise of social economy enterprise, regardless of the field, in other words, overcoming the competition by identifying strategic partnerships.

Currently, The West University of Timisoara, through the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Department of Sociology, holds the Masters Degree in Social Economy, the program director is Prof. Mrs. Anca Munteanu. The program is conducted over a period of two academic years, claiming a total of 50 available openings. Master students are selected from among university graduates who wish to specialize in social economy and/or intend to develop social cooperatives, associations, organizations, foundations, social economy activities in order to

create jobs for groups with risk of exclusion from the labor market. The participation of civil servants and other categories of employees in public institutions and candidates who practice in the private sector or NGOs is encouraged.

Master students are supported in practice activities and research at an advanced level by forming multidisciplinary teams involved in the development and analysis of programs/projects in social economy, including field placement in the country and abroad, at partner universities. Also, partnerships can provide opportunities for students to familiarize with social inclusion issues related to poverty, employment and entrepreneurship in the social economy, both in urban and in rural areas. At the same time, leadership, communication skills, problem solving and field research are growing. (Reinke & Walker, 2005, p. 7)

The objective of the master's program is to train qualified specialists in social entrepreneurship and creating jobs, especially for economically and socially marginalized people, to encourage graduates to action on the development of new forms of social economy enterprises as solutions to integrate vulnerable people on the labor market.

The idea of this master appeared as a result of the partnership between West University of Timisoara and Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, the Christian University Dimitrie Cantemir in Bucharest and the State University of Oradea, under the project "Social economy - innovative model for promoting active inclusion of disadvantage people", co-funded by the European Social Fund (Operational Programme of Human Resources Development) and implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, the Department for Social Inclusion, in partnership with the European Network for Social Integration Enterprises, Bernard Brunhes International, National employment, Integra Romania - Oradea, the General Directorate for Social Work and Child Protection - Sector 1 Bucharest, Department of Community Social Work Timisoara and Hall Piatra Neamt, in November 2008 - October 2011. Note that in the first year, West University of Timisoara had a master number of 72 students enrolled.

Social economy in general and the social enterprises in particular have grown significantly in the last 20 years in Europe. The social economy has claimed the ability to help solve economic and social

problems. Economic and social development gave way to another form of economy, situated between private and public sector. Forms of social economy play an important role by providing an offer of activities and services whose demand is not adequately covered by private or public entities. It became a major provider of jobs in Europe, job creation is a consequence of the specific objectives of social enterprises, namely by promoting integration through work and providing personal service, with strong human resource allocation.

“Social economy organizations are economic and social actors in all areas which are characterized mainly by their specific goals and form of entrepreneurship. Social economy includes organizations such as cooperatives, self-help organizations, associations and foundations. These enterprises are particularly active in certain areas such as social protection, social services, health, banking, insurance, agricultural production, local services, education and training, culture, sport and recreation”. (CEP Definition of CMAF the Permanent European Conference of Cooperatives, Mutuality, Associations and Foundations)

Shares of social economy are characterized by social objective and less the profit motive. Social economy projects meet community needs (school, training). All actions are made on a voluntary basis and involve management and democratic control.

The Master in Timisoara aims coherent skills and professional skills needed by specialists in the social economy, which can contribute actively to the development of specialization and increased employment for disadvantaged people as a tool for social inclusion and combating poverty. We are concerned with the constant development of this program, so that we always stand in first place among higher education institutions offering similar programs in Romania. This training program aims to position itself among the top rated programs by social entrepreneurs and among the most requested by the candidates, along with existing programs (Sociology and Human Resources) supporting a training framework for the scientific and professional level, facing the new trends in the organization and regulation of the activities of the social economy in Romania.

The need for a master in social economy in the field of "Sociology" at the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology from West University of

Timisoara has evolved from the need to respond to trends in national and international academic space to offer programs of study in social economics at masters level to meet labour market demand.

Many of the skills used in the current practice of social economy requires skills already formed in the main program of undergraduate training in Sociology: policy formulation for labour employment and unemployment, knowledge of organization theory, formulating evaluation questionnaires, working with databases, developing interview guides and interviewing non-verbal behaviour analysis, communication in organizations, working with indicators, etc..

The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, through the Master's program partner teachers, complements the skills necessary in the field with the scope of financial accounting, management and marketing. Since the 2012-2013 academic year, the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, the Department of Sociology, created and accredited the bachelor degree direction- human resources, seeking skills training in the field of organizational management and human resources, thereby providing additional skills specific to the social economy master.

Among the skills formed within HR master are the following:

- ✓ Contractor in social economy.
- ✓ Specialist in human resources management in enterprises and social cooperatives.
- ✓ Specialist in mediation and negotiation of labor relations in enterprises and social cooperatives.
- ✓ Expert consultant in organizational development in enterprises and social cooperatives.
- ✓ Specialist in group processes and social inclusion.
- ✓ Expert in knowledge, work measurement and activation groups including disadvantaged people.
- ✓ Consultant in motivation, satisfaction and performance in enterprises and social cooperatives.
- ✓ Specialist in methods and techniques of social inclusion.

The Master of Social Economy is offered in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timisoara. Due to the necessity of acquiring fundamental knowledge in

the field of social sciences and humanities, the first two semesters include courses in the thematic area of sociology, economics, social work and psychology. By area of interest, the Sociology offers a holistic, systemic, integrated on the organizational realities at all levels: at the macro level of disadvantaged populations and social inclusions, the process of adaptation to the external environment, the organizational culture and the mezo and micro level and dynamics of work groups and teams, and the economic behavior of individuals within social enterprises and cooperatives.

In the second year (i.e. semesters 3-4), the courses are different from the common trunk of the social sciences, with the presence of courses that allow the acquisition of essential knowledge for managing social entrepreneurship: Social Entrepreneurship, Strategic Management, Labor Law, the legal organizations and social economy enterprises, change and risk management, Introduction of labor law in the EU employment policy, social policy and program evaluation. Besides compulsory courses students can opt for a number of courses that will complete the specific curricular profile with complementary skills the component being enhanced through practical internships in the country and abroad, developed in partnership with NGOs, private companies, public institutions, social enterprises and cooperatives.

Due to the necessity of acquiring fundamental knowledge in the field of social sciences and humanities, the first two semesters include thematic areas of sociology, social work, psychology and economics, in terms of courses taught. In semesters 3-4 courses differ from the common core social science course which allows the acquisition of essential knowledge specific to the business management, entrepreneurship and social cooperatives. Each semester is totalling 30 ECTS credits. Total specialization thus contains 120 ECTS credits.

In Romania, the social economy began to be represented since the eighteenth century, bringing a developed cooperative sector, numerous non-profit organizations, CAR's and UPA whose work contributes to social cohesion, providing examples of social innovation. The social economy includes various forms of organizational structure, level of development or field, from the major sectors of activity (manufacturing, distribution or services) to the most frequently organized microstruc-

tures for-profit businesses, but geared towards social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals or groups. Social economy is currently booming in Romania, the number of cooperatives and social enterprises ever increasing since the early 1990s.

In the context of the current economic crisis, understanding and harnessing the potential of the social economy (SE) is essential. An opportunity for graduates of this specialization is the preparation for entrepreneurship in the social economy. Graduates can start small business in the social economy or take positions as human resources specialist, guidance counsellor and career guidance, career guidance counsellor, trainer, specialists with intellectual and scientific occupations, statistician counsellor in the social economy structures; these graduates are through their simultaneously theoretical and practical vision, a worthwhile investment for doctoral academic programs and academic research.

Occupations and professional outlets: 112 032 social entrepreneurs in social economy; ruler associations, and community organizations 114 201, head of community, humanitarian organizations 123,901, leader of a small enterprise, owner (trustee) education, health, sports, science 131901

Social Economy gains wide acceptance due to economic and social potential in terms of both national economies and directions for inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Social economy development includes: policies to support innovative local initiatives in promoting social inclusion, promote social enterprise, developing favourable context, especially financial institutions and supporting business start initiatives, supporting the production of goods and services by forms of social economy and providing training entrepreneurs.

## Conclusion

As indicated above, commitment to principles, common goals and partnership are not the same and rhetoric alone can not ensure a genuine partnership between the academic and social economy actors

(Stoecker, 2009). Confusion like this can generate different expectations horizons and frustration.

Partnerships can provide useful results and effective partnership but the process itself becoming valuable in our society. Partnerships are designed to solve problems of communities, increase their capacity in this regard, to produce innovative ideas, management skills, new technologies, discovering new areas of research. Pursuit of common goals by providing collective resources and expertise means, involving those with specific skills and expertise in research that can make a significant contribution (Buzărnescu, 2007).

Partnership for education, research and training of the human resources between academic and social economy actors highlights the need for a common objective regarding methods, resources, and dissemination of project results. For partnerships to be functional, it takes a greater awareness of the university of community needs to develop a common language and mutual respect of partners' needs (Temple, Story & Delaforce, 2005, p 4). Exchange of experience between researchers and practitioners can reflect cross dissemination of results, published in specialized journals, the latter making known and given in their research results in the field, including at events such as conferences and workshops. Especially this last stage, the dissemination of results, is of particular importance in advertising the results of research and best practice models (to the extent that this title was not overloaded), positive experiences and especially promote the Social Economy as a sector and concept.

Finally, below are a few opinions on the Timisoara Social economy master, from the perspective of our graduates:

"In my opinion, a master's degree in social economy in Timisoara was noted both by the good organization of teaching and the students' active involvement in this process. The proposed academic curriculum meets the training needs of students, the cooperation of academics from various university centres adding additional value by facilitating the exchange of best practices in training in terms of expertise gained in the social economy.

Selecting the master students from a wide range of socio-professional fields that interferes with the objectives of the social economy has contributed to the generation of novel social projects, working in multidisciplinary groups representing the optimal manifestation of social entrepreneurship (Tomita, 2013, pp.190-191).

Interuniversity training facilitated the creation of virtual communities between master students, active in various universities. The success of communication platforms and partnerships established in social economy manifested on the occasion of the first National Social Economy Fair held in Timisoara, which contributed to the development of a unified, efficient and modern system on social economy.

Regarding the practice under the direction of designated master teachers, master students were involved in identifying organizational structures operating with elements of social economy, and through their practical training, a mutual exchange of information, ideas and experience was done. Through the cooperation protocols with organizations sustainable cooperation on training future specialists in the social economy were set up. Most master students who chose to participate in a training course abroad have benefited from an internship conducted in social cooperatives in Italy, familiar with the models of good practice in social economy replicable in the Romanian context.

Based on the experience gained during the first year of master, I think it is the most current training of specialists in the social economy. Employability needs and opportunities of the existing multiple projects in social economy structures require a significant increase in the number of trained specialists. This requires continuity, development and diversification through the specialization of education on social economy.

I am fully satisfied that I chose this master and I recommend it to those oriented in the hope that we become colleagues in social economy.”

Iosif CSATLOS - DIMA (master student, Master of Social Economics, Sociology and Psychology, Sociology Department, West University of Timisoara).

“The Master of Social Economy is the future way to rebuild destroyed businesses after 1990 and agricultural cooperatives in rural areas, representing the opportunity to create jobs in urban and rural areas.

The training through this master course, both in terms of theory, being an interdisciplinary master and from the point of view of practical applications, the exchange of experience in field placement, carried on social cooperatives in Italy, concerning the transfer of expertise and good practice models, operating under a very good legislative framework.



The opportunity of master students to become good entrepreneurs, trainers, managers, leads to the creation of jobs in all industries and for all socio-professional categories, but especially for those who don't have a job, for those with disabilities, for people with neuro-psychological conditions. Their introduction into the work field may have as a finality increased self confidence, which is a particularly important aspect, given the current context of global economic crisis and the specific unstable Romanian economy, especially reflected on precarious current job situation and difficulties in filling them.

In conclusion, I consider that the master has a great professional value, a strategic investment for the training of specialists in the social economy, which supports a viable and sustainable economy, given in particular the hiring of disadvantaged persons and their integration into the work field."

Ionel Cascaval (master student, Master of Social Economics, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Sociology Department, West University of Timisoara).

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