SOCIAL ECONOMY AND THE ROMA COMMUNITIES¹
- CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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This material is based on the experience of implementing and running social economy projects among Roma communities at national and European level, through the project co-financed by the European Social Fund, „Social Economy – a solution for the development of Roma communities in Romania”.

As stated in the Social economy and the roma communities - challenges and opportunities – report the main objective „is to carry out a critical evaluation of the current status of social economy among Roma communities" (Toth , Dan, Briciu, 2012, p.7). Referring to: the legal and institutional framework, social experiences in Romania with reference to the social economy.

The report was prepared by a team of three independent experts: Alexandru Ioan Toth, Adrian Dan and Cosmin Briciu, in collaboration with a number of representatives of public institutions and NGOs, among which: Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection; Roma Women

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Association in Romania; Policy Center for Roma and Minorities; Romanian Social Development Fund (RSDF); General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Sector 1 Bucharest; World Vision Romania; Resource Center for Roma Communities; National Agency for Roma; Department for Interethnic Relations General Secretariat of the Government; Department of Equal Opportunities between Women and Men; Civil Society Development Foundation; Research Institute for Quality of Life; SOROS Foundation Romania.

The concept of social economy is seen as an innovative instrument of integrated development through:

- analysing the applicability potential of practices of social economy among Roma communities in terms of social, economic and institutional;
- specialists training, support, initiation and development of social enterprises;
- social economy promotion among Roma communities and the general public. (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 7)

For a greater data accuracy the authors used three research methods:

1. social economy analysis among Roma communities by studying relevant documents like: European and national strategies, legislation, specialized articles;
2. statistical data analysis, from various surveys carried out in Roma communities or in a series of social economy entities;
3. qualitative research based on individual and group interviews with relevant actors in the field of study: representatives of organizations that have implemented or are implementing social economy projects in the communities of Roma." (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 8)

Chapter 1 The diagnosis of Roma communities in Romania describes, in detail, the profile of Roma communities in our country. Socio-demographic data analysis (Roma population number, territorial distribution, age structure and gender and mortality), highlights the differences between individual and general poverty. At the same time are highlighted a number of issues, including: the impact of
discrimination on social inclusion, low participation in the labour market, low level of skills and education of Roma community members. The chapter summarizes and a brief description of the social policies for the Roma population at an European and national level.

In the Second Chapter *The social economy context in Romania: actors, legislation and evolution authors*, the authors tried to write a quick review of the social economy concept in Romania. The focus is on the history, definition, legislation relating to the development of the social economy, as well as the main areas of intervention. The conclusion reached is that: "through the development of skills for the labour market, increasing the level of employment, entrepreneurial skills development, social economy can have an great impact in terms of reducing discrimination, if the strategies of social inclusion and integration in the labour market are correlated with those of preventing discrimination." (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 33)

Chapter 3 *Social economy analysis in the context of social inclusion of Roma* examines the concept from the perspective of the current economic context and vulnerabilities faced by the Roma community members. It’s discussed the impact of public policies for social inclusion of Roma and the authors present a "series of national and international experiences of income-generating activities, funding models of social economy and the need for bridging social economy with the market." (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 7)

Most Roma communities face: low cohesion, subsistence work, not assumed ethnic identity, concluding that the social economy can develop only through cooperation and active participation of the national and local authorities, civil society, financial institutions and the private sector." (Toth, Dan, Briciu 2012, p. 39)

Chapter 4 focuses on the *Experiences of social economy in Roma communities from Romania* and a series of case studies, positive examples applied within Roma communities are presented.

The ROMA-RE Project co-financed from the European Social Fund, Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-
2013, aimed to establish five resource centres to promote social entrepreneurship among the Roma. A recycling paper activity was implemented, to promote sustainable development, so that beneficiaries were both the employed people in the project, but also the whole community. (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 45)

The Romano Cher – The House of Roma People Project funded by the European Social Fund, Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, proposed the revalorification of traditional Roma crafts and their adaptation to current labor market. (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 46)

The Fem.Rom Project funded by the European Social Fund, Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, the main objective was to improve the access of Roma women to the labour market through the development of integrated services - information, guidance and counselling, for them, and the establishment of five pilot production cooperatives - florists, laundry cleaning, manufacture of dolls and textiles, jewellery. (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 47)

The "Support for Roma communities development in Romania Nord-Vest and centre regions" implemented over a period of three years (2008 - 2011) by the Resource Centre for Roma Communities, co-financed from the European Social Fund, Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013, included training courses, establishment of 36 community associations and as many business plans for social enterprises. The economic activities were: manufacture of decorative handicrafts, vine cultivation or tobacco and tourism. (Toth, Dan, Briciu, 2012, p. 47)

The conclusions and recommendations of the authors mentioned at the end of the report target the conditions of long-term development of social economy structures in Roma communities through: legal recognition of social enterprises, social franchising, tax incentives, direct financial support mechanisms (subsidies, grants and reimbursement of certain types of expenses).

At an European level, the Roma minority is one of the most vulnerable groups, facing social and economic exclusion risk, which is determined by the low level of education, lack of professional qualifications, prejudice and ethnic discrimination.
According to this report, at this time, social economy projects "completed in and for the Roma communities in Romania seem to have a greater impact on a small number of people and less on the whole community." (Toth, Dan, Briciu 2012, p. 51)

To have the desired impact, revenue generating projects, must be accompanied by: market needs evaluation in order to adapt the services and the products offered, plans and strategies for local development, infrastructure development projects, access to education and social services.