

SOCIAL ECONOMY: A NEW SCIENCE

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Abstract.

The present article is a first step towards conceptualizing a new science: the social economy. As a part of social sciences, social economy will benefit from the use of methods and techniques specific of sociology and general economics. The social economy fundamental course of action is a comprehensive one of understanding and explaining social phenomena which are known to a restricted degree at the scientific/empirical level, particularly due to the causality they entail and to the consequences of human action. Analysis of the socioeconomic system structural data is the main method of scientific study, in addition to the methods employed by economics and sociology, the constructive criticism applied to research methods, the pro-active approach, and the evaluation of the practical results of human interactions with regard to the socioeconomic system. The major novelty that the social economy science brings to the table is its approach of fields which have not been researched all that extensively and its capacity to conjecture explanations/interpretations and regularities potentially applicable to social sciences. From this point of view, the present paper is a result of the use of participant observation among groups of informal workers on construction sites. The use of this method central to social sciences enables an analysis of the interactions occurring during the workers' general and specific activity related to the construction projects and facilitates the collection of valid information that can be then extended to the entire social system.

Keywords: *social sciences, social economy science, the result evaluation method, participant observation, social sistem*

Research area

Social economy's scope of study is the field of relations and interactions occurring in the absence of a regulatory framework specific of the classical labor market division into public and private sector. This field represents its object of research, and the methodology can be

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applied to any area of activity, which extends the analysis and the interpretation to all forms of human interaction. For our present purposes, the research will focus on the informal working relations in the constructions sector.

Social economy actions are defined as follows:

- They are the result of individual self-organization;
- They produce goods and services paid for with money or in kind;
- They actively engage those human resources who are insufficiently or not at all employed in the community, especially marginalized people at high risk of social exclusion;
- They promote an innovative type of employment, placed outside the public/private sector;
- They don't strictly depend on the existence of legal provisions;
- They focus on reinvesting profit to create jobs for socially excluded people;
- Social solidarity is their underlying principle.

If the distinction between formal and informal is given by the (in)existence of legal provisions and their observance, historically speaking informal working relations take the most widespread place, both in point of timeframe and number of individuals involved. This is explained by the fact that regulated working relations is of the modern times, the first laws in this respect being enforced in the 19th century as a result of industrialization and growing complexity of the employer-employee relations, as well as of the pressure put on by workers to gain and have observed some of the employee rights taken for granted these days: the right to decent working conditions, the right to associate, the right to labor health and security, the right to a daily 8 hour working schedule (as opposed to the Industrial Revolution practice of 14-16 hours daily work schedule), the right to go on strike, etc. As a consequence, before working relations came to be regulated, they were informal, according to the proposed classification. On the other hand, due to the length of time and to the legislation regulation and enforcement deficiencies and differences of culture and civilization between states, informal working relations came to represent a global contemporary pattern.

The accepted meanings of social economy

Classical sociology and economics, defined through concepts and theories related to formal relations between individuals and groups, are accompanied by social economy as the expression of a new type of social relations, a new theoretical field describing social relations in areas lacking clear norms, at least in the current Romanian setting.

As a composite concept, social economy uses the object, methods and laws of classical sociology and economics applied to social relations in legally unregulated sectors. The research area is inexhaustible, starting from informal economic interactions in constructions, farming, illicit goods and services, international drug trafficking to virtual social relations. As a way of adapting to globalization, social economy goes beyond state boundaries and is the expression of social relations lacking the legal regulations typical of public or private sectors. Social economy does not overlap with the ethnomethodological side of the classical sociology, a study of the routine behaviors in everyday activity, it studies the informal socioeconomic relations and behaviors not regulated through legal norms. Social relations may occur in the illegal area (such as the unreported work in constructions) or the legal one, as evidenced by virtual communication.

The illicit nature of socioeconomic relations has only a factual significance, as a criterion for membership to social economy, the scientific aim being a comprehensive one of understanding and explaining social phenomena, starting with the causal typology and ending with the anticipated practical consequences. The fundamental difference lies in the structural conditioning which determines the occurrence of informal socioeconomic relations lacking legal formalities. If some people turn to the informal economy (circumventing the law through tax evasion) due to economic motivations, most people fall victims to the economic setting and lack of real labor market opportunities, such that the only way to cover their basic needs remains the illegal sector, the unreported work. The social system structure and the regulating function of the labor market create a socially excluded population segment forced to operate in the underground economy. Legal norms cover only a reduced part of the social phenomena and there always are

ways to avoid legal restrictions. Case in point: while unreported constructions work is prohibited and sanctioned by law, there are significant categories of workers active in this field, some of them benefiting from working conditions far superior to those available to legally employed workers.

The virtual dimension of informal social relations is highly complex and in constant motion. The advancing means of communication tend to replace social relations requiring the physical presence of those in dialogue with virtual interaction. The direct consequences are that time and space become compressed (interlocutors can have social relations regardless of where they are) and the number of virtual social relations is higher than that of physical social relations. This type of people form complex social relations that go beyond the theoretical explanatory boundaries of classical sociology and economics, which leads to the rise of a new science, tailored to the new settings.

The existence of a new theoretical field comes with the need to define its object of study, the theoretical explanatory laws governing it and the methods of scientific study it uses.

IV. The social economy's object of study is the social relations established between the people acting in areas lacking strict legal regulations.

V. Its economical laws are particular to it and stem from classical sociology and economics, making it possible to establish regularities of its own.

VI. Its research methods stem from sociology and economics as a basis for the development of new methods and tools for the study of applied relations/practices.

The need for a social economy science

Social economy practice is not currently accompanied by a sound theoretical corpus that would cover the descriptive principles, the typology of implementation and derived consequences, the laws of operation and required conditions, as well as the mapping of

international best practices serving as model for initiating and developing new projects.

The fundamental functions of social sciences are to explain, comprehend and formulate remedial proposals with regard to the improvement of living standards in various settings of time and space. While the classical sociology appeared as a need to interpret the realities of the 18th and 19th centuries, being followed by the various sociology branches of the 20th century, the new realities of the 21st century call for a conceptualizing and a methodology that are tailored to the most recent trends. They can be explained by the descriptive parameters of classical sociology and economics only to a certain extent, the general trend being one of development of new paths of applied research and constant creation of new concepts and laws that adequately capture the social phenomena.

As a field of research, social economy is specific to social sciences, but it draws on the analytical methods of economics. The concept itself is a result of the theoretical-explanatory hybrid between sociology and informal economy. This is due to the growing complexity of the social arena and is a form of adapting to the multidisciplinary sciences trend. Today's social structure and dynamics do not allow for explanations and interpretations provided by only one science, given that at the basis of any social phenomenon/fact there are complex causal relations requiring multidisciplinary approaches.

Sociology interconnects not only with economics, it opens avenues of investigation that can be conducted in conjunction with all types of sciences, from psychology and anthropology to geography, management, marketing or nanotechnology. We thus have a scope of research, specific to informal sociology, which tends to equal that of the classical sociology except here the progressing relation of the scientific explanatory schemes occurs on a constant basis according to the socioeconomic realities.

Social economy uses the basis of classical sociology, while providing an appropriate solution to the unsolvable epistemological dilemma regarding the difference between the setting in which a social fact occurs and the setting in which it is argued, by quickly adapting concepts to the evolution of social (inter)actions. While classical

sociology interprets and explains primarily social facts of the past, social economy focuses on the present and future social phenomena, thus capitalizing on the modern-predictive, praxeologic line of investigation. Basically, the social economy approach occurs via concepts of other sciences, the absence of a unitary view makes it impossible to have adequate explanation and understanding and excludes the theoretical advance needed to develop new trends of thought required in the design of practical actions addressed to socio-economically marginalized people.

Social economy does not aim to replace the classical science of sociology and its various branches, it uses/adapts the existing theoretical-praxeologic corpus depending on the structure and roles fulfilled by the new types of social relations established at the various levels under study. The reverse is also true and useful: sociology and classical economics cannot adequately explain the new socioeconomic realities, because the analytical schemes focus on past social facts. Hence the need to correlate the comprehensive science with the practices used by the social actors, given that human imagination and creativity determine social progress at a much faster pace than our general mental frameworks can grasp the new settings. This can be easily assumed if one takes, for instance, the innovations in the field of astronautics: a couple of decades have gone by since the first human space flight, but most people don't have a proper knowledge and understanding of this fact.

The place of social economy in the hierarchy of sciences

Social economy has a direct interest in the excluded categories of population and in the creation of innovative social models that enable the resolution of community/regional problems by using the existing labor force, with direct impact on the budgetary structure. Thus, depending on the object of study, social economy decides which methods of investigation and which fundamental laws and theories/concepts are

most appropriate, constantly pursuing to enrich the scientific and methodological/conceptual content.

Sciences are classified based on a variety of criteria, all limited however to the theoretical system in question. As a science, social economy is included among the humanities, next to sociology and economics. Social economy in relation to other sciences does not offer a static tableau, dynamic interactions being at the heart of scientific journey and development. By borrowing inter-scientific approaches, concepts, theories, and methods, it enables the discovery of new analytical views that have a role in the progress of specific epistemology.

The role of social economy in scientific taxonomy is (re)defined based on the integrated applied utility and on the situational setting that calls for its methods/laws. The new science is important because of its capacity to bring social changes to the life of large groups of population, with a decisive impact on the approach to reality, by creating new group action-behavioral models based on solidarity, professionalism and the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Though it interacts with, borrows from and enriches the content of other sciences, social economy is directly influenced by social reality with which it establishes a dynamic, constantly inter-relational rapport, leading to the shaping of scientific principles, to the creation of new causal relations between the phenomena/facts involved and to the enhanced standard of living for the socially excluded.

The relation between social economy and related research fields and its place in the hierarchy of sciences is an epistemological approach that can be rearticulated by every researcher engaged in establishing a taxonomy of sciences, because the classification criteria differ according to the pursued aim. The practical implications of establishing epistemological relations take a secondary place, which is of significance to the field of social economy, as they are the consequences of theoretical models drawn from evaluating the setting and capacity to formulate proposals for increasing the living standards of marginalized people, by participating in socioeconomic programs enabling new dimensions of study.

The epistemological relation of interdependence between the science of social economy and its practical applications represents the element

of reference as it intends to capture the static and dynamic dimensions of the phenomenon under study and to update/reshape the scientific content based on the complex socioeconomic relations between the groups subject to research. For epistemology, the conceptualization of inter-human social relations specific to social economy becomes a legitimate object of study, as daily practices turn abstract, taking the form of explanatory theories necessary for scientific knowledge, especially given their nature of novelty/specificity.

Determining and understanding the facts associated with social economy is a sufficient epistemological argument in substantiating a new science, giving way to the development of new methods for researching and explaining reality, ones which fit the scope of research as well as the needs of society. Due to the innovative nature of social economy and its capacity to be implemented in any social system, regardless of the type of political regime, but with the dormant or visible consent of the bureaucratic apparatus, and due to the network of interactions established with all collateral socioeconomic aspects (which form and extend the research field), the occurrence and development of a new science is of interest with regard to the provision of a valid theory, law and interpretation.

The relation between social economy and sociology and economics

The social economy science is substantiated based on the developments and paths of sociology and economics whose methods and laws are key in shaping the new scope of investigation, but it is focused on advancing innovative principles, strictly linked to the reality defined by major social issues: inequality of access to employment, poverty and social exclusion, growing economic competition which leads to marginalization, poor standards of living and profound implications for social reproduction.

The relations between social economy and economics are complex: on the one hand, they concern the theories and regularities belonging to general fields of research, on the other hand, it establishes mutual

influences with the various branches stemming from the two related sciences. For instance, the totality of the aspects regarding the concept of labor appeals both to sociology, especially the sociology of labor and organizations (major branches concerned directly with the issue in question) and to economics, given the consequences on wages, work productivity, inter-individual and inter-company/state competition, but to social economy it tends to become a legitimate object of study. This occurs because labor bears significant meaning within the social economy model due to an approach and interpretation that are completely innovative compared to what is usually practiced in society. Labor is seen as a quasi therapeutic method for those who don't stand real chances of social inclusion, and the way labor is organized, it targets the self-esteem by uncovering and building on available potential, providing motivation and promoting personal/group goals which give life a new meaning. The profit resulting from the work plays an essential role in this model, in that it is mainly, if not exclusively, directed towards furthering the active involvement of other people who find themselves in similar personal settings at odds with the standard of living promoted by society.

All three sciences stem from the same core: the study of socio-economic realities and the proposal of ideas/concepts/practices which are pertinent and in accordance with the setting under study (therefore, in agreement with the Aristotelian principle of relating to reality), some presenting various degrees of originality and utility, enabling evaluation as public goods. This epistemological principle is joined by the determination of the relation between reality and theory and the impact on population, as well as by the interpretation of complex social relations and the generation of a scientific knowledge that matches the needs of society.

Social economy, sociology, economics, as a sum total of sciences, are consequences of the manifestation of certain types of needs, fulfilling at least the following functions:

- **exploratory:** most scientifically studied aspects are either studied for the first time, or there are new interpretations of already studied facts or their evolution in time and space;

- **explanatory:** the sciences' object of study is known by a reduced number of population segments, particularly in the case of analytical approaches with a specific application. This leads to a disproportionate ratio between a population's research potential and the small number of individuals involved in the scientific activity. The positive side is that there is a wide enough population pool capable to absorb the scientifically obtained information and interpret/use it according to its own needs.

- **previsional:** if reality is dynamic, then it is necessary to forecast future trends, in the sense of adapting culture and civilization to the essential parameters of the new setting. Concurrently, science advances and adapts its scope of research to the state of affairs in real life.

- **cognitive:** the research capacity and the investigation fields are theoretically unlimited, feeding into the basic need to know our environment and all its components. Here too, the principle of theory-practice interdependence principle is at work, reality imposes new analytical categories which, in time, alter the view of the studied facts, adjusting the man-environment relation to daily elements specific of the given time and space;

- **utilitarian:** this dimension includes the functions mentioned above, but also responds to the essential need for improving the standard of living, regardless of which society we analyze. Social economy displays a deeply utilitarian nature by focusing its research on social inclusion, therefore on the real aspects related to poverty, marginalization and social inequity.

The development of a new science – social economy – can provide additional knowledge and theoretically substantiated action, both epistemologically, by enriching the other sciences' content of ideas, and pragmatically, by offering the opportunity of an improved living for people excluded from the labor market who participate in innovative programs intended to readjust the individual-group/society motivational relation.

Research methods

The social economy science uses all the methods pertaining to the related fields of sociology and economics, and may resort to the research methods and techniques specific to socioeconomic sciences as a whole (anthropology, psychology, political science, ethnology, marketing, management, and their various branches and sub-branches). The basis for an interdisciplinary research is created and included in the social economy's area of study, as this practical model entails aspects defined as legitimate objects of study for the sciences mentioned above. The multitude of research methods provides an optimal setting for adequately capturing the dimensions of social economy, enabling the submission of hypotheses, concepts and theories which are innovative for all the sciences involved.

From a methodological perspective, social economy proposes **the results evaluation method**. Given that social economy is a practical model implemented in various forms and settings, this type of method becomes necessary and useful not only for this type of socioeconomic pattern, it can also have multiple applications in other sciences dealing more with the theoretical aspects than the accustomed practice.

The results evaluation method combines scientific rigor with practical analysis, representing thus an epistemological model suitable for the field of social economy. This kind of method is an applied enterprise which presents and analyzes the following types of consequences:

- **economical.** The social exclusion of entire population cohorts yields immediate effects on the capacity to attract income and meet existential needs. The implementation of the social economy model generates a source of income, the family budget registers an increase, and the living standard of the people involved undergoes positive changes. Nevertheless, the most important economic consequence and the one which calls for an implementation of the results evaluation method is the change in the pattern of the vulnerable or socially marginalized population with regard to their abilities to attract financial resources by recognizing the usefulness of the social economy model;

- **social.** The individuals' capacity to integrate and create social relations in the form of networks provides significant statistical data

regarding the potential types of capital which can be attracted. Inter-individual relations are the basic element of social economy, the association and production of goods and services which are useful to the community. A relevant aspect, specific of this category of consequences, is the evaluation of the results registered by the social-type services provided through the social economy practices to people in critical situations (old and sick people lacking special care, institutionalized or abandoned children, victims of drug abuse or violence and human trafficking, etc), in the community or even region. Social relations can occur vertically, as part of the forms of association specific of social economy or the hybrid ones, inspired from social economy, but with a different focus and redistribution of the profit made – relations typical of any type of organization, as well as horizontally, given the need to provide social services to the categories of people mentioned before, whether marginalized or with special care needs;

- **political.** The social economy model gives a new dimension to political approach, particularly where public policies are concerned, developed as intervention programs and measures in response to community/regional issues. Firstly and especially for states lacking legal systems that include provisions for social economy, the social economy model forces the political leadership to consider the implications of this model and to act towards regulating the legal relations. Secondly, creating a trend in approaching and implementing the social economy model among representatives of the political power can be key in the development and evolution of this pattern, in exchange for (in)direct benefits, the most important one being that of gaining social capital and votes;

- **administrative.** The main administrative implications of implementing the social economy model are felt at budgetary level. Although social economy is addressed primarily to socially excluded people who lack adequate means of survival, thus creating the impression that this model is useful only for under-developed or developing states, the facts show that social economy emerged and developed as a model in the developed European states. The main explanations include **a.** the administrative system's failure to provide sufficient and quality public

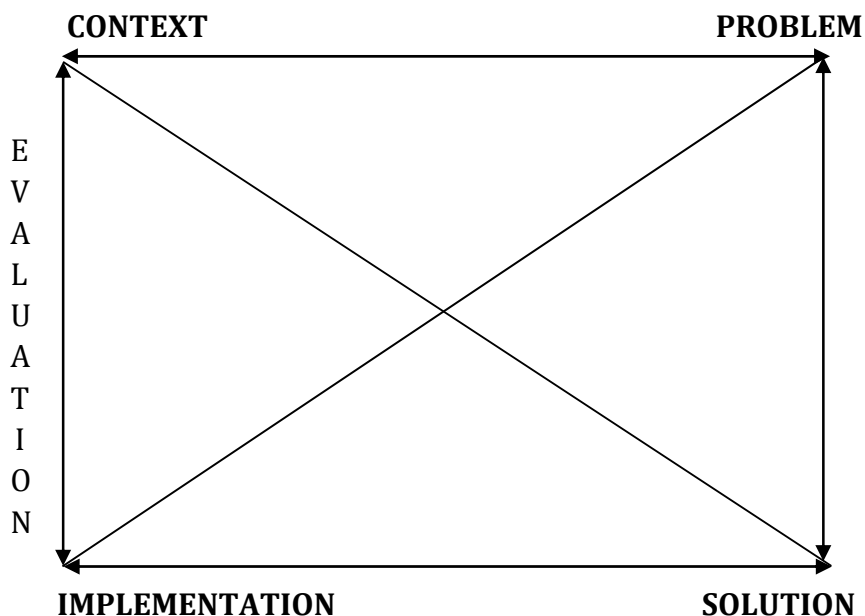
services to its target population; **b.** the development of the civic entrepreneurial spirit and **c.** the need for community services insufficiently met by the public/private environment. From the budgetary perspective, drawing out the cohorts from the social protection system and inserting them on the labor market as employees/shareholders or even owners of a business reduces the financial pressure associated with passive labor measures (those of redistributing the income as population financial aid measures) and re-balances the income-expenditure scale, as the activity of production and provision of social economy goods and services adds to the contributing economic agents. Another consequence is the change in the local administration organizational structure as a result of new departments associated with social economy.

- **cultural-civilizational.** The social economy model is the expression of an anthropological mutation generated by the progress of culture and civilization. This becomes obvious when analyzing the comparative history of scientific ideas as they occurred in the various countries of the world: the individual approaches were developed together with the community ones in which the foundation was the solidarity principle. Thus, the social imaginarium takes shape reuniting the ideas, practices and human behaviors of a defined space and time and changing as new types of theoretical-practical approaches emerge. An interdependent system is designed according to which the cultural/civilizational bases (the sum total of theoretical knowledge and practical skills) serve as grounds for initiating new practical models which will play the role of support for new socioeconomic innovations. Such a socio-cultural endeavor generates the necessary climate for civilizational evolution, in the form of a dynamic system in which the inputs determine the change of parameters and even of the system itself. The most important cultural consequences consist both in initiating and developing a labor culture that is completely different, in its values and principles, from the public/private organizational system, and in discovering the utility of associating for the purpose of addressing community issues, all having implications on the typology of cultural symbols defined and embraced by the respective groups. Concretely, the social economy model determines a change in the

community and even societal perception of the capacity to solve community problems and this is the expression of a socio-cultural fact. From a civilizational standpoint, the results evaluation method targets the social economy's effects on improving the standard of living both of the people involved in it and of the community. An even more significant aspect is the capacity for technological innovation of new products and services through the efforts of the workers who are marginalized/excluded but also involved in the social economy projects. As a result, the social economy model and science have implications of more than just an inclusive nature, displaying also heuristic functions, since the model applies to any field of activity, hence also to high-performance scientific research.

The results evaluation method is a practical tool for analyzing the inclusion measures specific of social economy and it can be extrapolated and used by other sciences. We can imagine it illustrated through the following diagram:

Fig. 1. *Diagram of the results evaluation method*



In addition to the methodological-educational grounds for using it on a wide scale, including by graduates of socio-economic-political studies, the results evaluation method can be used in a job interview/hiring process (the exclusively theoretical approach to the higher education plans and the lack of practical skills, of the ability to evaluate and interpret/act upon reality is what mainly drives employers to reject candidates, particularly students and graduates lacking relevant practical experience). Moreover, the method can be a post-employment working tool for various categories of staff, which makes it all the more useful for public/private organizations, as well as for social economy entities.

Strictly applied to the above design, an interpretation of the results evaluation method considers the structural interdependencies between the elements of the diagram. When using the results evaluation method, the following interpretative models may apply:

- *holistic*. The general view targets the contextualist nature (any social phenomenon occurs in a given time and space and involves the sum total of correlated aspects)
- *individualistic*. An analysis of each phase included in the diagram brings additional knowledge, since the evaluation method can be applied to each and every segment, as part of the investigation process. If any given socioeconomic problem is placed in a setting and a variety of solutions can be chosen to solve the identified problem, the implementation process leads to the occurrence of a new setting. The results evaluation method is applied to the implementation stage in order to analyze the consequences of the solutions chosen to address community problems, both in point of the proposed objectives and of the unintended consequences (the perverse effects).

The above diagram has a methodological role, it describes the interaction-based system specific of the results evaluation method. The application of the method is limited only by the researchers' and practitioners' willingness to use a practical tool for evaluating the results of human action, regardless of the field of activity.

Applications of the results evaluation method

The results evaluation method is of significance not only for researchers or for students and graduates of educational institutions. With regard to organizational management, it can be applied to gain two-dimensional knowledge:

1. analysis of the employee's performance with regard to their job description;

2. appropriate knowledge of the results of the organization's actions on the environment as carried out by the employees (e.g. in sales, it is necessary to have a detailed analysis of the effects of marketing on the market, noticeable in the balance of additional receipts).

The results evaluation method also applies to the local/central public government when analyzing the impact of public policies on the social environment. While results evaluation has been, until recently, only one of the phases of the socioeconomic intervention programs, the need to have an appropriate approach to reality calls for establishing the method as independent, driving public measures towards efficiency. Basically, any administrative field can use this type of method if the goal is to make resources more efficient, particularly given the current challenge posed by budgetary distortions caused by the decreasing number of jobs.

In the trading field, the results evaluation method can accompany the cost-benefit analysis by allowing for the development of an interpretative pattern which includes not only the economical-mathematical relation, but also the analysis of the setting, of the problem and its implications, of identified solutions seen from the perspective of their consequences, and of the process of implementation and response to social/community concerns. This becomes necessary in order to understand complex relations, along multiple levels of analysis, and the structural interdependence between socioeconomic facts and phenomena.

The results evaluation method can be implemented both at individual and group level, which extends its applications to an infinite number of fields. The relevance of the method is given by the factual data obtained from the socioeconomic arena, which can be processed and presented as research reports with proposals and recom-

mentations for the improvement of the activity in a particular sector. The relation between the results evaluation method and factual reality is mediated by the researcher's/practitioner's intervention and his/her own value system, which entails an updating of the method according to the complexity of the field of investigation. By using the method in as many research areas as possible, one contributes to conceptual progress, but the implications are noticeable at the practical level. Progression creates the premises for designing an integrated system in which the theoretical dimensions developed as part of the method lead to interdisciplinary analysis and put pressure on decision-makers to take correction measures with regard to community problems. This is due to the identification of the causes behind socioeconomic facts and phenomena and to the creation of interdependence relations, which helps government design intervention programs or channels individual efforts towards various forms of community-based association or action.

The results evaluation method has the following functions:

- **of diagnosis.** The application of the method ensures an optimal knowledge of the setting and leads to problem definition and solution identification. Describing the situation realistically and considering all aspects involved is the first phase of the action-taking process aimed to improve people's standard of living, and it is its accuracy that determines the soundness of the program of public/private measures to be implemented;

- **of action-taking.** The results evaluation method is an indication of the social action that will follow, by establishing the cognitive/practical content and preparing the process of transition from theory to reality;

- **of motivation.** The implications of using the method guides the motivation of the people involved in solving those challenging situations defined and known in the process of analysis.

The results evaluation method contributes to knowing reality and analyzes the impact of human action, particularly with regard to public policies, on the standard of living, although the theoretical-methodological corpus applies to any field of knowledge, even to high-level scientific research in physics, chemistry or health. The benefits of using

the results evaluation method lie in the ease of use and in the consequences related to its capacity for problem synthesis, in the form of the relation between the setting and the resolution-focused action in support of the population.

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