

EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH THE PEOPLE

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Abstract

This article aims to offer a model of good practice that People Development Foundation, Cluj branch, implements in the social economy domain, for the benefit of young people with disabilities or those from marginalized social groups. The idea to develop the concept of social economy started from a personal experience of the organization and the need found in society. One of the most pressing problems of the last years which addressed our organization is the increased risk of dropout among students. The number of these children has gradually increased, and at the present moment, the children became young adults affected by the inability to integrate on the labor market. Based on examples from our partners abroad and with the help received from our local and national partners, our organization is implementing an integrated program of intervention (social - educational - professional) in a protected workshop which has as main activity the production of PVC double glazing carpentry.

Key words: *social economy, partenership, workshop, integrated program, young with disabilities*

1. Attention to reality

After 16 years of activity, People Development Foundation remains true to its mission to provide educational opportunities and socio-

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professional integration for persons in social risk. In our view, each person can make use of the talents with which was endowed.

People Development Foundation (FDP) has its headquarters in Bucharest, three branches in the country (Arad, Cluj and Dambovita), it operates at the level of four regions in Romania (Bucharest - Ilfov, West, North West, South-Wallachia) and is present in Cluj since 1997, developing social and educational programs for children and youth in need.

Since 2009 FDP Cluj is authorized by the National Employment Agency Cluj as a provider of social service (information, counseling and mediation) on the internal employment market, and in 2010 the organization began offering services of integration to the marginalized groups, on the labor market.

Also, our organization has two other educational credentials on social services and a Center for the Development of Independent Life Skills, namely Information and Counseling Center for Children and Parents.

A problem that has always concerned us is that every year, on average, in Cluj County, a number up to 35 young people are leaving child protection institutions without any prospect of employment or a safe means of subsistence. 20% of them are employed part-time or even full-time but in temporary jobs, and the support period within the same job lasts for max. 3 months. To find a solution it was first necessary to go through a direct experience. This occurred when, in our interventions, we met by chance five young people with psychomotor disabilities. They didn't have jobs and barely scrape along. Like them, there were many others. From there, everything started.

2. Let's see what our partners have done!

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics, regarding Cluj County, the number of adults with disabilities, not institutionalized until 31.10.2010, amounts to a total of 19,168 people. Of these, 7473

persons are severely disabled, 10,241 people with accentuated disabilities, 1,451 medium disabled and three people with mild disabilities.^[1]

In the light of this reality, which was present throughout the country, People Development Foundation, together with its branches from Dâmbovița, Arad and Cluj, and four transnational partners (Employers Association Unimpresa - Unione delle imprese italiane in Romania, Foundation UNIMPRESA Formazione, CDO OPERE SOCIALI, ASLAM - ASSOCIAZIONE SCUOLE LAVORO ALTO MILANESE) started in 2010, a large project for social integration and the development of new social economy models, in four regions of Romania (Bucharest - Ilfov, West, North - West and South-Muntenia), on one hand to facilitate access for 240 people which were excluded or were at risk of social exclusion from the labor market and, on the other hand, to promote an inclusive society.

In order for us to significantly contribute to the socio-professional inclusion of people from marginalized groups, we have learned a lot from the experience offered by social cooperatives from Italy. With the support received from our partners, we have participated in a series of exchanges of good practices, which included visits to cooperatives, organizations and social enterprises with tradition and experience in providing such social services.

Our perspective after these visits had become clearer: our beneficiaries need a place to grow, to develop, to work. A place suited to their needs, a place to feel appreciated. A protected unit.

3. Back home...

The first step was to project an idea, to establish whether undertaking the opening of the protected workshop is cost-efficient; and if so, in which domain? These questions could only be answered by running a pre-feasibility research. We subcontracted specialized companies that offered us the support needed to make the research, starting from the

² <http://www.insse.ro>

premises that we need a niche in the market which was not fully explored yet, that would correspond with the expertise already accumulated by our management team members and also with the potential of our beneficiaries.

The main areas of interest researched were: carpentry, the manufacture of wooden crafts, professional cleaning services and maintenance and green spaces landscaping. We finally decided on carpentry, more specifically the segment of thermo isolating carpentry used in the building construction industry. This decision was based on the fact that this small segment within the large industry of construction grew significantly over the last couple of years.

But we wanted more than just a carpentry workshop. We wanted innovative ideas, attention for quality and focus on the needs of our workers. Our social enterprise aims to both create career opportunities for our beneficiaries and a space where they can develop the necessary skills needed for employment and also to offer a new and innovative educational program for the beneficiaries that had social integration problems, due to their disability, poverty or lack of social support.

Besides the opportunity to be part of a safe working environment, in parallel, the beneficiaries are integrated in an educational program for Developing Independent Life Skills, correlated with work education, tutoring and mentoring, a program that takes place at the Centre for Independent Life Skills Development in our foundation.

Currently, from five young people who are active in the protected workshop, three are employed. We also plan to qualify another fifteen, five of which will be employed in the production segment.

After completing the specific professional development program, the young people will also acquire and will be able to implement skills such as: hygiene rules, household management, time and money management, social values, prioritizing tasks, etc.

All participants will be accompanied during the practice by a tutor who will monitor the practice and supervise them, in order to provide social support and help them adapt to labor market requirements. A

special education teacher will offer support and assistance for the beneficiaries and will handle the Life Skills Development program. In addition, the program will give young people a starting point in their career.

G.P., one of the beneficiaries now employed said: "Starting a protected workshop is a huge step for disabled people. It's an opportunity to have an activity; otherwise we would stay home all day because nobody wants to hire us".

4. We have plans for the future

During an event organized in Cluj by Confindustria partners, in November 2011, we had the opportunity to meet with representatives of several companies producing PVC carpentry in the country and abroad. Being impressed by our ambition to develop a protected unit to produce PVC carpentry with young people with disabilities, the representatives of a foreign manufacturing company have proposed us collaboration.

Mokoryte Company has given us the possibility to fabricate the PVC carpentry in our workshop, while they will handle the purchase of materials as well as the export and sale of the products. Also Routier European Transport Ltd Company, has given us its support by providing the space and the equipment for the manufacture of PVC carpentry.

The collaboration began by establishing the steps of production and quality standards for the products. In the near future we will start the production. Currently we are working on a catalog to promote our products, and in the shortest time we will be able to send some models abroad.

5. Instead of conclusions...

A social enterprise, a protected unit, or an NGO business is the means by which our organization aims to develop the ability to be self sufficient, being itself a social services provider.

In order for such a “business” to have potential and to last, it will have to rely on the innovative, creative and sales skills offered by the human resources found in the organization.

In addition to the fact that the offered services or products must respond to specific market requests, it is important not to lose sight of our organization mission and, of course, the needs of the beneficiaries. The chosen direction, namely the development of income generating activities, even if this income is reinvested, becomes a challenge both for social services providers as well as for any private cooperative.

And then the question arises: How could we, being nothing more than social workers, psychologists or teachers, develop a viable business plan and make money from "dry stone".

Surely ambition, the openness to new, and of course the challenge to "do best" what we do, urges us to study and to seek all resources, human or material, to fulfill our purpose and to invest in creating a lasting work.

Having this in mind, we applied the incubation competition of social enterprises launched by NESsT Romania, and, at the present moment, we have received expert support from the organization, in order to design a feasibility study and a business plan.

Reinventing NGOs, in terms of income generating activities, this being the case of our foundation, comes amid financial support received by the European Social Fund, which enables us and gives us opportunities for growth and quality and quantity improvement of our work. Therefore our organization also sought resources, invented ideas, adapted models, learned ... and continuously tried to develop and to grow.

The project that made possible the launching of the social economy field is "Active partnerships for the development of social economy", financed by European Social Fund, SOPHRD 2007 - 2013, Priority Axis 6 "Promoting social inclusion", Key Area of Intervention 6.1 "Development of social economy". In the near future a new social enterprise will be opened in Bucharest, as part of the same project, also addressed to young people with disabilities, which will produce ceramic mosaic in partnership with a construction company.

With regard to our organization, it went through a time of change that made possible this creation by developing this social enterprise. We arrived to establish the social enterprise using, on one hand, the experience of other organizations with similar models in the country or abroad, and on the other hand exploiting our own human resources and our desire to provide real support to the disadvantaged people.

An important ally are the partnerships with companies or public authorities, which, if any, will certainly cover one of the basic resources to develop a social enterprise, and gives the organization sustainability mainly because it does not work alone but together with a company or a major player in the community.

This niche, that is the occurrence of social economy activities in Romania, brings new opportunities for staff training, namely "social enterprise manager" or "specialist in social economy"; these are truly training resources in this area and can be a solid part for implementing the social enterprise activities.

It may be that our initial plan was not sufficiently well defined and did not take into account all the premises, but we learned from our mistakes, and, keeping our passion and desire to succeed, we keep going further. The essential element is always a well made plan and having the necessary resources to start the activity.