

RESEARCHING SOCIAL ECONOMY IN ROMANIA^[1]

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Abstract

The article analyses research of social economy (SE) in Romania. The first part is dedicated to the SE as a response to the professional insertion of those interested in working in this field. The second part showcases the results of other research performed in Romania on the SE focusing on the vulnerable groups. Romanian studies in SE exploded starting with 2010 mainly due to projects co-financed by European Social Fund (ESF). Directly connected with eligible activities for ESF financing, employment of vulnerable groups is largely approached in analysed volumes. SE is viewed as an innovative response to the problem of securing employment. Among vulnerable groups, roma minority is the most studied. Low availability of research reports and lack of their on-line centralization is an obstacle in accessing obtained results. Analysis of Romanian volumes focus on SE shows a partial correlation with previous research reports. Research is fragmented and partially covers subjects of interest for public policies in the field. Among these, assessment of ESF co-financed projects on vulnerable groups could support adjustments of specific directions of action.

Key words: *social economy, research of the social economy, vulnerable groups*

Labour market insertion of the vulnerable groups is a topic approached both from an economic and a sociological point of view. The article reviews the Romanian publications on the issues of vulnerable groups with an explicit focus on social economy (SE). The objective of

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such a research endeavour is evaluating the state of knowledge, highlighting the results obtained, and identifying the insufficiently analysed items, as well as courses of action for future research. From a methodological point of view, the study is based on desk research of the available data regarding social economy in Romania, and on semi-structured interviews with the authors, beneficiaries (private and public sectors), vulnerable groups and analysed SE entities. The study is original in that it is the first one to analyse the elements which can lay the foundation for the evaluation or consolidation of the courses of action in public policy with an impact on the labour market insertion of disadvantaged groups.

The article targets the analysis of the publications dedicated to SE perspectives for the disadvantaged groups. The first part places this research within the framework of the sociological studies in Romania in general, and of the SE dedicated studies in particular and presents the main characteristics. The second part analyses the vulnerable groups. The last part focuses on the main deficient aspect identified and suggests future courses of research.

Research regarding social economy in Romania

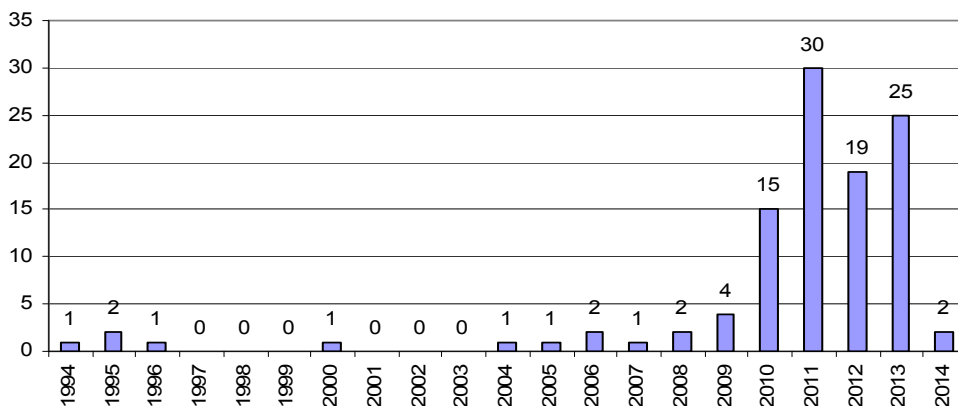
Identifying the SE dedicated publications has proven much more difficult than anticipated, on the one hand because of the complexity of the domain, and on the other hand because there is neither a unanimously accepted definition or available publications on social economy. Last but not least, the cooperation between the economic and social domains in order to ensure citizens' welfare has been analysed from the perspective of employment, poverty, and national welfare system. On this basis, 107 publications on SE have been identified in Romania (Stănescu ed., Asiminei, Vârjan 2013, pp. 47-52).

In what follows we shall introduce the research studies according to their year of appearance, source of financing, topic, and institutional affiliation of their authors.

Most of the publications are sociological studies. The development of sociological activity in Romania after 1944 has been divided into seven phases:

- Phase 1: creation of the sociological community and of the sociological institutional system;
- Phase 2: postwar continuation of the Gustian programme (from 1944, the end of WWII until 1948, after the arrival of the communist regime);
- Phase 3: underground Gustian sociology (1948-1961);
- Phase 4: acknowledgement of sociology as a legitimate science by the communist regime: 1962-1977;
- Phase 5: sociology was marginalised again (1978-1989);
- Phase 6: relauching sociology after the 1989 Revolution: 1990-2008;
- Phase 7: response to the economic, social and political crisis in Romania, aggravated by the global economic crisis (Zamfir a. a. 2010, pp. 4-11).

Between 1994-2009, SE as a topic was scarcely analysed by the specialized literature. One of the first publications on SE was the 2005 course support of Daniela Vârjan, from the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. 2010 was the year in which several representative studies were launched. We would like to mention the publication of the results of the first statistically representative nationwide survey on the ratio between the offer and the demand of SE services in Romania (Research of the Social Economy in Romania from a Comparative European Perspective). The vulnerable groups analysed were: the Roma population, beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income, one-parent families, and young people over 18 who leave the institutionalised child protection system.

Fig. 1. *Dynamics of Romanian publications on social economy*

Source: Stănescu ed. Asiminei, Virjan, 2013, Report of recommendations in social economy. Romania 2013, pp. 47-52, United Nations Development Programme Romania

Most of the surveys analysed are sociological studies which involved researchers and faculty members from the university and academic environment, as well as independent experts.

From the point of view of statistical representativeness of analyses, the sociological studies on SE perspectives for the vulnerable groups are based on national (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010) or regional surveys on the development regions South Munteania and South-West Oltenia (Cace, Arpinte, Scoican eds 2010) or Bucharest-Ilfov and South-East (Stănescu, Cace eds 2011; Stănescu, Cace, Alexandrescu eds 2011).

One of the main causes of social exclusion of the vulnerable groups is the labour market insertion difficulty. Access to housing, education and health services, together with a low education level, ethnic affiliation, rural residence, or age can aggravate social marginalisation.

1. Social economy as a response to professional insertion

Identifying innovative employment solutions on the labour market is a constant preoccupation of decision-making factors. Member States are faced with the reduction of welfare costs, and with the challenges of labour market insertion of certain categories of people (e.g. young graduates).

In this context, the potential of the SE to create and secure jobs has been reconsidered. According to the notice of the European Social and Economic Committee regarding the initiative for social entrepreneurship: "social enterprises must be supported for the essential role they can play as social innovation driving force [...] the enormous potential represented by the social enterprise as to the improvement of the access to employment, and the work conditions especially for women and young people, but also for various categories of disadvantaged employees" (ESEC, 2012, p. 2).

The number of European employees in the SE domain has increased from 6 percents in 2002-2003 to 6,5, i.e. from 11 mil to 14,5 mil jobs. This increase is faster than the demographic increase at European level (Chaves, Monzón 2012, p. 47). The fact that so many Europeans choose to build a career in the SE domain shows a keen interest in embracing the SE principles.

In the absence of a unanimously accepted international definition of SE, we approach the concept of SE in the sense of "the kind of economy which efficiently combines individual and collective responsibility, with a view to producing goods and/or delivering services, which aims at the economic and social development of a certain community, and whose main objective is social benefit. SE is based on a private, voluntary and solidary initiative, with a high degree of autonomy and responsibility, it presupposes an economic risk and a limited distribution of profit" (Stănescu ed. a.a. 2012, p. 13).

The entities compliant with the international principles of SE and legally regulated in Romania are: non-profit organisations, employees' mutual aid funds, pensioners' mutual aid funds, credit unions and first tier cooperatives (MMFPS 2010, p. 38). Other organisation forms which

partially observe the SE principles, but whose activity is relevant for the SE domain are: community and joint ownership, authorised protected units (UPA), and social purpose businesses (Stănescu ed. a. a. 2012, pp. 51-52). Within this article we use the concept social enterprise to refer to the SE enterprises in Romania.

2. Capitalising on the work potential of the vulnerable groups

Regulations in Romania contain numerous references to vulnerable groups in general or in connection with the labour market. In the first category the are: vulnerable groups; Disadvantaged groups; risk groups; priority categories in combating/absorbing and social exclusion; individuals and families in difficulty or at risk; social groups in difficulty or at risk generating marginalisation or social exclusion; families with children with increased vulnerability; vulnerable groups or social groups which are subject to social marginalisation risk. With regard to labour market, the references in the official documents are: disadvantaged groups from the point of view of occupational opportunities, disadvantaged individuals on the labour market, vulnerable individuals facing the risk of social exclusion, vulnerable groups; special categories of unemployed as to tax exemption granted to employers and women facing the risk of social marginalisation as to labour market insertion (Popescu, 2011, pp. 13-19).

In what follows we present the results of the analysis of all the research performed in Romania on the vulnerable groups, from the SE perspective. 107 publications have been identified, of which a quarter are dedicated to the study of the vulnerable groups with reference to SE. The research carried out in Romania has been published on paper or in electronic form starting from 2005 and has been mostly financed through co-financed European Social Fund (ESF) projects. Although since 2010 we have witnessed a constant increase in the number of SE studies, they remain inconsistent with each other, evince overlapping as to the discontinuation or non-use of the results obtained, as well as non-compliance with the scientific criteria (Stănescu, 2013a). This leads

to a paradoxical situation in the sense that even if the number of publications on SE is relatively high, some relevant topics to decision-makers or the general public still are insufficiently approached. Among these are: the degree of SE awareness of the public, the profile of the Romanian entrepreneur in the SE domain, the challenges of the SE entities which were operational before the ESF projects, the sustainability of the social enterprises created through the ESF projects.

The SE perspectives on the disadvantaged groups can be analysed in two ways: on the one hand from the perspective of the employers in the SE domain, and on the other hand from that of the disadvantaged groups with reference to the SE domain. Regarding the latter aspect it is necessary to differentiate between the studies which tackle the issue of employment among the vulnerable groups in general, and those which deal with this aspect in close relation with the SE domain.

Within the first category, the publications can be analysed along two coordinates: the theoretical ones, referring to the general working principles, and the empirical ones, referring to the employers' or employees' perception of having a colleague from a vulnerable group.

A series of publications contribute to a better and deeper understanding of the elements which ensure the optimal operation of the SE entities. The following have been studied: the management of the social enterprise (Boboc, Boboc 2009; Vlăsceanu 2010; Anca 2012; Barna a.a. eds 2012; Cace a.a. 2012a; Stănescu ed. a.a. 2013 a; Stănescu ed. a.a. 2013cb Stănescu ed. a.a. 2013c; Stănescu ed. a.a. 2013d), aspect referring to the financial framework (Bădescu 2010; Nicolăescu et al, 2012; Stănescu, Neaguț 2012), employment of the vulnerable groups (MLFSP 2010; Popescu 2011; Stănescu, Cace eds 2011, Stănescu, Cace. Alexandrescu eds. 2011; Constantinescu 2012; Tancău a.a. 2012; Constantinescu 2013; Buzducea ed. 2013), gender approach (Liapi, Anemțoaicei 2012), chance and gender equality (Paulischin a.a. 2007; ProFamilia Association 2011), and last but not least, monitorisation and evaluation within the social enterprises (Neaguț a.a. 2011). The analysis of the social enterprises in the rural areas has been performed especially from the perspective of the development potential of the local resources (Boboc, Boboc 2009; Crișan 2010; Dragotoiu a. a. eds 2011; Mihalache, Croitoru 2011).

Employers are generally open to employing vulnerable groups, but not equally so to all of them (MLSP 2010; Chiribucă ed. 2010, 2011a, 2011b). There still is the reticence towards the Roma population.

As a general remark on all the SE publications, the vulnerable groups are generally analysed, irrespective of whether they are a case of ESF financing or not. The studies which benefited from financing other than ESF (Burada 2008; Constantin 2008) analyse, however, the issues of insertion enterprises in general, not a specific vulnerable group. Since the implementation of the projects financed through the ESF, the studies have focused on certain vulnerable groups. The selection was in keeping with the applicant's guide and the specificity of the activities to be implemented in each project. The vulnerable groups analysed with priority were: the Roma population, women, people with disabilities, beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income, one-parent families, young people who leave the child protection system and prisoners. Among these, most of the studies are dedicated to the Roma population (MLSP 2010; Stănescu, Căce eds 2011b; Anca 2012; Căce a.a. 2012b; Petrescu 2012; PNUD 2012; Stănescu ed. a.a. 2013a).

Beside the relevance and contribution of these scientific research endeavours to the implementation of the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Roma Situation, the promotion of entrepreneurial initiatives is very likely to be successful thanks to the specificity of the traditional occupations. "Their advantage is that they are a continuation of tradition and cultural education. (...) they generate income close to and often higher than that of modern professions. However many of the independent businesses are fluctuating and vulnerable. They often border on or trespass the limit of legality, with all its implications on family life" (Zamfir, Zamfir 1993, p. 164).

The results of a national inquiry carried out in 2011 with the help of questionnaires show that "Roma people are still unlikely to succeed on the labour market" (Stănescu 2011, p. 130). From the point of view of the hierarchisation of the "disadvantaged categories (...) as to the necessity to solve their problems", people "opt with maximum priority in favour of helping orphaned or abandoned children, as well as disabled people" and is reluctant to supporting the Roma (Ștefănescu 2011, p. 263).

The revival of traditional occupations supported by the solidarity of the communities is hindered by the weak local capacity to initiate and promote such projects. Creating structures which ensure technical assistance in this respect can contribute to the professionalization of the available human resources (Botonogu, Tomescu 2011, p. 216). The results of the 2001 evaluation of the Strategy for the Improvement of the Roma Situation have proved the existence of implementation actors and mechanisms both centrally and locally, although “in many cases (...), mechanisms are rather formal and the actors involved do not yet have the capacity to make decisions to solve the problems” (Preoteasa, Cace, Duminičă 2009, p. 78). This makes all the more valuable the contribution which the SE can make to the professional insertion of the Roma, by rewarding in 2013 the project Romano Cher of the KCMC within the European competition for Social Innovation. Three of the social enterprises developed within the rewarded project have been evaluated as examples of best practice regarding the SE insertion of Roma people (Alexandrescu 2013, pp. 19-26).

With reference to women, employment difficulties are maintained also by the “legislative and institutional deficit to offer mothers with small children work opportunities with reduced hours and work reintegration” (Zamfir a.a. 1999, p. 300). In this respect, involving women in SE can represent a sustainable solution especially to the extent to which it refers to insufficiently covered domains such as baby care.

The areas in which interventions are possible with a view to implementing the principles specific to gender approach within the SE entities are: the recruitment and selection process, training and development, promotion, transfer and work contract termination, work organization, work conditions, and adapting the measures to fight sexual harassment in the workplace (Liapi, Anemțoaiței 2012, pp. 127-158) or the mobbing phenomenon (Tomescu, Cace eds 2011).

The analysis of workplace satisfaction of women employed by SE entities shows that these “evince very high values. Women share the perception that working in an SE entity yields results on the social level, thus succeeding to really help people. On a personal level women consider that such a workplace offers professional development,

acknowledgment, success and financial satisfaction” (Achimescu, Cace, Stănescu 2011, p. 196).

In spite of the progress made by the protection of people with disabilities, these continue to face a series of obstacles when they look for a job: the lack of professional qualification in accordance with the labour market requirements, gravity of the disability, family, degree of social service development (Dima 2011a, p. 239). Employing people with disabilities in SE entities equally depends on ensuring “the accessibility of the physical, informational and communicational environment”, access to education as well as “the transformation from «fighters for a cause» into competitive offerers of services and opportunities for people with disabilities” (Dima 2011b, pp. 218-219).

The analysis of the situation of the beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income, of the young people over 18 who leave the institutionalized child protection system and of the people with disabilities with respect to SE is still modestly studied in our country. The conclusions show the potential of the vulnerable groups for employment in income generating activities, especially the SE domain (MLSP 2010; Alexandrescu, Stănescu 2013, pp. 13-16; Bojincă, Stănescu 2013, pp. 13-16; Ernu, Stănescu 2013 pp. 13-17; Rădulescu, Stănescu 2013 pp. 13-17).

Continuing the studies on this topic is so much more interesting as the children with disabilities or those belonging to the Roma minority have been identified as “two groups with very high risk of school non-attendance” (Pop, Voicu 2000, p. 324).

As a general remark on all the modernisation measures of the Romanian judicial system we remark the transfer of the “sanctioning system, wherever possible, from a closed environment (penitentiary) in an open one (society), or in other words, the introduction in the Romanian legal system of the institution of *probation*, especially through the execution of the sanction in a free environment, at the same time as the supervision (Abraham 2000, p. 419). As a discipline of study, probation belongs to those issues and areas that require a continuous exchange of ideas and experiences. The development of modern institutions must be made in accordance and in close connection with the respective legislation (Tomita 2012, p. 17). The Law 82/1999 on the replacement

of the contravention prison term with the sanction of the obligativity on the part of the offender to deliver community service foresees “assistance and counselling activities both of the convicts in the penitentiary, and especially of those who execute their sentence in custodial arrangements” (Abraham 2000, pp. 419-420). The involvement of the latter category in economic activities is limited to the reluctance of the community members to resort to employment in order to support their work capacity.

Three studies referring to the involvement of the convicts in SE activities (Filantropia Foundation 2011; Durnescu, Descarpes 2012) have been written, offering information on a map of employment opportunities (Tancău a.a. 2012). However, with respect to criminals, the SE studies refer mainly to prison convicts, rather than those who execute their sentence in custodial arrangements.

The way in which a vulnerable person looks for a job is not always very successful. The results of a national inquiry carried out in 2011 with the help of questionnaires have led to the identification of certain obstacles in accessing the labour market with respect to the mainly informal way of looking for a job and reduced participation in qualification training. The most vulnerable occupational categories include “the situation of the long-term unemployed, unemployed persons over 50 and of the housewives/housekeepers” (Preoteasa 2011, p. 153).

From the point of view of SE perspectives on the vulnerable groups, they do not know SE entities. The percentage of those who tried to find employment is relatively small, although both managers and employees declare they are open and have had positive experiences working with these people (MLSP 2010, pp. 113-115).

In comparison with other SE entities the employees’ mutual aid funds are most widely known among the vulnerable groups. Among the characteristics which motivate the demand for SE “the population identifies along the personal need, the deficient community one” (Ilie 2011, pp. 163, 172).

The SE development in Romania is currently not supported by a national strategy (Cace, Arpinte, Scoican eds 2010a, p. 233; Stănescu coord. ș.a. 2012, p. 65). Without reducing SE to the insertion of the vulnerable groups on the labour market, “the availability of the public

institutions to support the structures which target the vulnerable groups is very limited” (Cace, Arpinte, Scoican eds 2010a, p. 234). The elements of such a strategy are: “legal acknowledgement and definition of the SE domain [...], adaptation of the regulations within the POSDRU programme, especially the intervention domain 6.1 dedicated to the development of the SE [...], granting fiscal facilities, [...] stimulating the integration of these organisations within networks [...], promotion in the media” (Alexandrescu, Cace, Stănescu 2011, pp. 361-362).

3. Is social economy an option for the disadvantaged groups?

Involving the vulnerable groups including in the SE domain may represent an alternative to the welfare system and an efficient instrument in the struggle to reduce social exclusion (Zamfir 2010, pp. 103-105; Cace coord. Nicolăescu, Scoican 2010b, p. 193; Dragotoiu, Marinoiu 2011a, pp. 74-75; Dragotoiu, Marinoiu, Stănescu eds 2011b, pp. 7-9; Pavel 2011, p. 97; Stănescu ed ș.a. 2012, p. 65). The transfer of the successful entrepreneurial experiences from the international level to Romania can be made on the basis of SE incubators or other support structures. As priority directions we wish to mention: local/regional growth, microfinance and improving the abilities of and support for social enterprises (Cace, Arpinte, Scoican eds 2010a, pp. 188-192).

Ensuring employment in general, and via SE in particular contributes to the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals and of the Europe 2020 Strategy (Dragotoiu, Marinoiu 2011a, pp. 73-76; Stănescu 2013b, pp. 62-67).

Although SE has more and more supporters, both among the entrepreneurs and workers, and from the public authorities, “the SE sector in Romania is undersized as number of employees in comparison to its share in other European states” (Stănescu 2011, p. 132).

Implementing projects co-financed through the European Social Fund, and launching bills for social entrepreneurship and SE have brought this topic into the public debate. Publishing and disseminating information on examples of best practice contributes to better know-

ledhe nationwide, and creates the premises that such social enterprises be replicated in other regions of the country as well.

The public at large is familiar with the organisation of certain presentation events of entrepreneurial initiatives, where they meet them directly, talk and purchase their products. We wish to mention the organisation by the MMFPS of two editions of the SE Fair: in Timișoara (April 2011) and in Bucharest (October 2011)^[1]. Other events supported again through ESF co-financed projects have been organised yearly: the Fair for Authorised Protected Units, organised by the Foundation "Alături de Voi" from Iasi, starting from 2011, and the ONGFest, organised by the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society. The competition for Social Enterprises launched by the NESsT has already reached the fourth edition. More recently the initiatives for corporate social responsibility also aim at supporting the social enterprises in disadvantaged communities (the competition "Țara lui Andrei" organised by Petrom).

Among the key conditions to be met in order for SE to become a sustainable option for the vulnerable groups, are analysis and research of the domain, financial support and awareness of the general public. The extent to which this wish will become reality depends on the SE promotion mechanisms of the financial, legal, institutional and social frameworks.

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^[1] The events were organised within the POSDRU/14/6.1/S/2 project „ Social economy – an innovative model for the promotion of active social inclusion of disadvantaged people”, whose beneficiary is the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection – Department of Social Services and Social Inclusion. The project was financed by the ESF via the POSDRU 2007-2013, Priority Axis 6 „Promoting Social Inclusion”, Domain of Intervention 6.1 „Social Economy Development”. The project has a duration of 36 months (November 2008 – October 2011).

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