

# **A research on the role of social projects for disadvantaged groups in community development**

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## **Abstract**

30 years after revolution in December 1989 and the fall of communism, Romania seems to still not have found its way towards sustainable development, facing more challenges that would have been expected for a democratic society. Frequent political changes, controversial economic decisions and measures and the lack of coherence in the implementation of strong and reliable economic, health and social policies have caused a permanent mistrust of the population in a favourable future. Over the years, although technological progress has been visible in all fields of activity, wages have increased and the possibilities for achieving a satisfying living standard have multiplied, some social categories became richer, while others became poorer, external migration increased, some rural communities are facing disintegration and the Romanian population is menaced by demographic ageing. An important part of the population belonging to several categories labelled as disadvantaged or vulnerable are prone to social exclusion or marginalization. Fighting this phenomenon is one of the most important objectives of the European and internal policies and some of the key-instruments supporting this process are the projects implemented in Romania from European funds. Statistics on the degree of absorption of the European financing in Romania are regularly performed, but there are few analyses on the degree of satisfaction and trust regarding these projects' implementation, undergone from the perspective of the beneficiaries themselves. Such analysis is intended through the present article, the results revealing the necessity and opportunity of similar future approaches.

**Keywords:** *community development; social projects; disadvantaged groups; social inclusion; European funds; project implementation; cooperation.*

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## **1. Introduction**

This article aims at achieving an assessment of the impact of social projects on community development, from the perspective of several beneficiaries that are currently implementing projects financed through European funds in Romania. The European Social Fund, the main instrument through which the European Union invests in human capital, favouring social inclusion and a sustainable development in the future, operates

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in Romania through the Operational Programme for Human Capital (POCU<sup>1</sup>). To its broadest extent, this programme is dedicated to obtaining community development by supporting disadvantaged social groups (although there are investment priorities for fighting social exclusion and community development also within the framework of other operational programmes).

Moreover, we will try to reveal the degree of cooperation between the state authorities and the civil society in the context of successfully implementing projects dedicated to vulnerable community groups, as this partnership has a particularly important role in the strengthening of the administrative capacity of the main promoting actors of community development and change. Acknowledging this necessity and assuming common goals is a prerequisite of the success of any other measures and actions meant to create community growth. The measure of the relevance of a social project is given by its effect on the target group and on the extended community, considering that any positive change of a part of the community reflects itself on the entire community.

The impact of social projects is translated, in fact, through the long-term effects that are generated intentionally or non-intentionally. Although the impact of projects financed by the European Union is a frequent discussion topic in Romania, the undergone analyses are often restricted to quantitative studies regarding the absorption degree of European Funds. This fact is, probably, mostly due to the supposition that projects generally cause positive effects and that a higher absorption rate will automatically determine reaching the objectives of the European policies, like community development.

The purpose of our paper is that of being able to extract conclusions about the opportunity and necessity of these projects and their role in achieving sustainable community development, based on the real opinion and implementation experiences of their beneficiaries, bearing in mind that they are the base unit from which positive change and empowerment start.

## **2. Conceptual framework. Definitions.**

### **2.1. Community development**

A basic definition for community development was provided by the United Nations in 1948: “Community Development is a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and fullest possible reliance upon the community’s initiative” (Canadian Global Response 2015).

“Community development is a planned approach to improving the standard of living and well-being of disadvantaged populations [...] internationally. [...]. The objectives of community development include economic development and community empowerment, based on principles of community participation, self-help, integration, community organizing, and capacity building.” (Johnson Butterfield and Chisanga 2013).

Catalin Zamfir (Zamfir 2010: p. 169) identifies “a new paradigm in science that contains concepts, theories, research instruments and instruments for social development oriented social action”. This paradigm is social community development, focused on “how social communities can be supported in order to develop self-

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation from Romanian language: Programul Operațional Capital Uman (our n.)

organization processes to solve their problems and, particularly, exit their *backwardness* state”. The author states that, within developed societies, the struggle for community development emerged not as a concern for *normal* communities, successfully engaged in market economy and, therefore, in progress, but for the marginalized, chronically underdeveloped ones.

## 2.2. Disadvantaged groups

Official documents do not use an exclusive definition of the disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, but they generally refer, when using this concept, to “those groups of persons that experience a higher risk of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination and violence than the general population, including, but not limited to ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, isolated elderly people and children” (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019).

In Romania, there are several important groups that are exposed to social exclusion risks, in ways that are not always related to poverty, although this has been identified by all official statistics as being the most relevant social problem of the present.

The National Strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction (2014 - 2020) includes an analysis that identifies the most vulnerable or disadvantaged groups in Romania and their specific needs, building up the framework for performing efficient programmes with the aim of reducing disparities among the mentioned social categories and the categories not affected or menaced by social exclusion .

Table no. 1. Main vulnerable groups in Romania and their specific needs

Main group
1. Persons affected by poverty
2. Children and young people lacking parental care and support
3. Alone or depending elderly persons
4. Roma people
5. Disabled persons
6. Other vulnerable groups
7. Persons living in marginalized rural and urban communities

Source: Ministry of Work, family, Social Care and Elderly Persons (2014) *The National Strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction (2014 -2020)*

## 2.3. From vulnerability to social exclusion

There is an intrinsic connection between social vulnerability and social exclusion, because, as official documents acknowledge it as well, those groups, communities and individuals that cannot participate within the society in equal conditions with their peers, due to material deprivation or discrimination, are facing the risk of exclusion. Namely, we are referring to persons affected by poverty, single parents, unemployed persons, disabled persons, homeless persons, persons with addictions, refugees, persons discriminated because of their gender, ethnicity etc.

Engles (Engels 2006: p. 109) shows that a paradigm change took place in Europe toward the 1990s, from “poverty” to “marginalization”, the latter concept sheltering the antagonist concepts of “exclusion” and “inclusion”, used in order to capture the efforts commonly dedicated to gaining social cohesion and poverty fighting. The *exclusion*

concept is broad and multidimensional, aiming, instead of the concrete life necessities, at the relations between the individual groups within the society as a whole.

### **3.Social projects as an instrument of community development in Romania**

“Projects have become an important instrument of international assistance and development administration, because they seem to offer major advantages over other forms of planning and management”; through their planning, implementing, monitoring and assessment, they can also act as an experimentation mean for social policies and become “instruments of strategic planning and management” (Rondinelli 1983).

In Romania, the post-revolutionary period and the transition from communism to capitalism have changed the structure of economy and have installed an institutional system inspired from the Western world. Although the new frameworks that defined the economic and political system were similar, the differences appeared with regard to the social structure. “The democratic institutional system was grafted on a completely other social structure than the one of the classical capitalist countries” (Zamfir 2011: p. 13). The same author considers that, during the transition period, due to the fact that the Romanian state was a poor representative of the interests of the Romanian society, the state functions remained at an unsatisfactory level and the unwanted, but inevitable effect of this behaviour was the augmentation of *social polarization*. A little segment of the society became rich, while the most of the community became poor. Once the private health services have begun to develop - to which only the citizen with a medium and superior living status have access- the most of the population has received underfinanced public services.

If, at the beginning of the ‘90s, the percentage of population affected by poverty (40%) seemed unreal, the current estimations place this percentage to 37-38%, an insignificant improvement in comparison with the Romania of the years that bared, still, the shock of the hated *transition*. During all this period, social services, education, health and social assistance remained underfinanced, placing themselves at a much lower level than the services of other European countries. We are all starting to understand that many of the problems that Romania is facing at the moment, particularly its social problems, are also due to a certain confusion in the process of European integration.

The National Strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction for the period 2014-2020 (Ministry of Work, Family, Social Care and Elderly Persons 2014) highlights the governmental objective of granting all Romanian citizen equal participation opportunities in the society, appreciation and valorisation, dignity and respect, in spite of their differences.

Regardless of the significant efforts of the government to finance social economy projects in Romania (over 600 million Euros between 2007 and 2013), the efficiency of these interventions remains low. Moreover, the suppliers of social economy initiatives tend to concentrate their efforts in the most developed areas of Romania, which means that the poorest localities receive very few social services, mostly provided by NGOs. Although the legal framework that allows NGOs to apply for EU funds in order to elaborate social assistance projects is implemented, it does not include any stimulant or requirement that these projects become focused on disadvantaged areas.

One of the key-objectives of the government for the next period is supporting social economy in order to facilitate employment opportunities for vulnerable groups; this target can be reached by:

- facilitating the access to European funds in order to support the social economy sector;
- elaborating the secondary legislation necessary for the sustainable development of social economy;
- encouraging NGOs to become more involved in these activities, by identifying the relevant fields of financial intervention for all types of social economy.

#### **4. Quantitative analysis**

##### **4.1. Purpose and objectives of the research**

The general purpose or objective of our research is to gain knowledge on the opinion of the beneficiaries of projects implemented through the Operational Programme for Human Capital 2014-2020, Priority Axis 4 - Social Inclusion and Poverty Fighting, considering that this Axis supports the addressing of the most pressing social issues in the Romanian society.

This general purpose has a series of corresponding *specific objectives*:

- identification of the main social problems that the project in course of implementation is aiming to address
- identification of the most frequent problems encountered during the implementation of social projects for vulnerable groups
- identification of the degree of cooperation between the state institutions and civil society in the implementation of social projects
- identification of the perception of the beneficiaries regarding the impact of social projects on the vulnerable groups targeted by the project implementation
- identification of the beneficiaries' perception regarding the impact of social projects on community development
- identification of the necessity of future implementation of new social projects dedicated to vulnerable groups

##### **4.2. Work hypotheses**

Apart from reaching our specific objectives, we shall follow the verification of the following descriptive and explicative hypotheses:

- the majority of the respondents perceive the impact of social projects for vulnerable groups as positive;
- the majority of the respondents perceive the impact of social projects for vulnerable groups on community development as positive;
- the majority of respondents perceive the implementation of new future social projects as salutary;
- the majority of social projects for vulnerable groups benefit from the cooperation between state authorities and the civil society, within the implementation process;
- the majority of social projects do not encounter implementation problems;
- the most problems reported by the beneficiaries in the implementation process of social projects are administrative issues;
- there is a possible correlation between the previous experience of the beneficiaries and the problems encountered during the project implementation;

- there is a possible correlation between the problems encountered during the implementation and the beneficiaries' degree of trust in a favourable impact of the project.

### 4.3. Research methods

The research method used for our approach is the quantitative research, performed through the sociological inquiry and the statistical analysis of the data collected through the Google Forms platform.

Research technique: opinion poll.

Instrument: Questionnaire with 12 questions (4 closed questions, 1 open question, 4 half-open questions and 3 scaled questions).

Sampling group: batch of 21 respondents, namely territorial administrative units and non-governmental institutions that are currently implementing projects financed from POCU 2014-2020, Priority Axis 4. The filling in of the questionnaire was performed online, on the Google Forms platform.

Selection of the researched batch: in order to select the research batch, we accessed the lists published by the Management Authority for the Operational programme for Human Capital in May 2017, including the 55 projects admitted for financing. Out of the 51 identified beneficiaries, 30 are territorial administrative units and 21 are NGOs in the social field. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail on the official addresses of the beneficiaries, accompanied by the invitation for its filling in. The questionnaire was filled in and transmitted by 21 of the beneficiaries.

### 4.4. Data analysis and interpretation

In the following, we shall present and interpret the signification of the obtained statistical data and analyse the answers to the open question, aiming at reaching our objectives and verifying the work hypotheses.

The answers to the first question: *Are you currently implementing a project for vulnerable groups financed from POCU/18/4/4.1 or POCU/20/4/4.2?* confirmed that all 21 respondents are, indeed, implementing one or several projects for social vulnerable groups in Romania. This also confirmed that the research batch had been correctly identified and selected.

To the second question: *Is this the first project for vulnerable groups that you have ever implemented?* 50% of the respondents answered "Yes" and 50% answered "No", which separated the research batch into two categories: beneficiaries with previous experience and beneficiaries with no previous experience.

Question no. 3 was intended for clarifying the type of vulnerable group that the project is dedicated to.

Table no. 2. Vulnerable target groups of the implemented projects

Vulnerable group	Number of projects	Percentage
Persons of the Roma minority	9	45%
Persons affected by poverty	11	55%
Children	5	25%
Persons addicted to drugs or alcohol	0	0%
Female gender persons	1	5%

Homeless persons	0	0%
Disabled persons	0	0%
Unemployed persons	5	25%
Persons affected by other risk situations leading to social and economic vulnerability	14	70%

The answers to the question above revealed that, in many cases, the vulnerable groups are overlapping, meaning that the target groups may belong to several risk categories at once.

Question number 4: *Which is the social problem that the project is aiming to address?* revealed the following distribution of social problems targeted by the project implementation:

Table no. 3. Social problem addressed by the project

Social problem	Number of projects	Percentage
Poverty	20	95.2%
High unemployment rates	7	33.3%
Illegitimate work	0	0%
Criminality	0	0%
School abandon	5	23.8%
Family violence	0	0%
Family abandon	0	0%
Inequality of chances	13	61.9%

As it can be noticed, the most pressing social issues that the projects are aiming at reducing are poverty and inequality of chances. By comparing these answers to the ones offered for the previous question, we deduct that poverty covers almost 100% of both rankings, concluding that the majority of the members of the project target-groups are affected by poverty.

Question no. 5: *Which is the dimension of your target-group?* received the following answers: 500-700 persons for 61% of the projects; 300-500 persons for 28.6% and more than 700 persons for 9.5% of the projects.

To the 6<sup>th</sup> question: *Have you experimented/ Are you experimenting difficulties in the project implementation?* 61.9% of the respondents answered that they have had or are having difficulties in implementing the projects, while 38.1 % offered a negative answer.

Question no. 7 asked the participants to name the experimented problems, if they confirmed this aspect by answering the previous question. This question returned 13 answers, as follows:

Table no. 4. Problems encountered during the implementation of projects for vulnerable groups

No.	Answer
1.	At the beginning of the implementation period, the employment modalities for public workers were unclear; many rules that appeared during implementation.
2.	Lack of involvement from the target group.
3.	Scepticism of the target group.
4.	Building the target group, especially according to the “education” condition. Those affected by poverty are precisely those mostly affected by poverty.
5.	Some members of the target group do not participate in many activities.
6.	The members of the target group barely get involved in the activities that are not financially stimulated.
7.	The illiteracy of the target group.
8.	Some of the members of the target group have expectations exceeding the framework of the project; they require help for personal issues.
9.	Difficulties in contracting the staff - unclear rules.
10.	Some children do not attend the activities within the project.
11.	Much more difficult implementation than POSDRU.
12.	The reporting procedures are difficult, many materials to draw up.
13.	The target group- many members neglect the participation in the activities; they have to be constantly stimulated.

Analysing the 13 answers given by the respondents, we notice that 9 of the mentioned issues are caused by the target group and 4 are related to administrative or bureaucratic aspects.

Question no. 8: *Have you benefitted/ Are you benefitting from help in the implementation of the project from other institutions or authorities?* returned a mostly positive feed-back, 90.5% of the respondents answering that they received external support during the implementation process.

Question no. 9 intended to clarify the nature of the external help provided: *If you answered Yes to the previous question, which are these institutions/ authorities?* The answers are included in the table below.

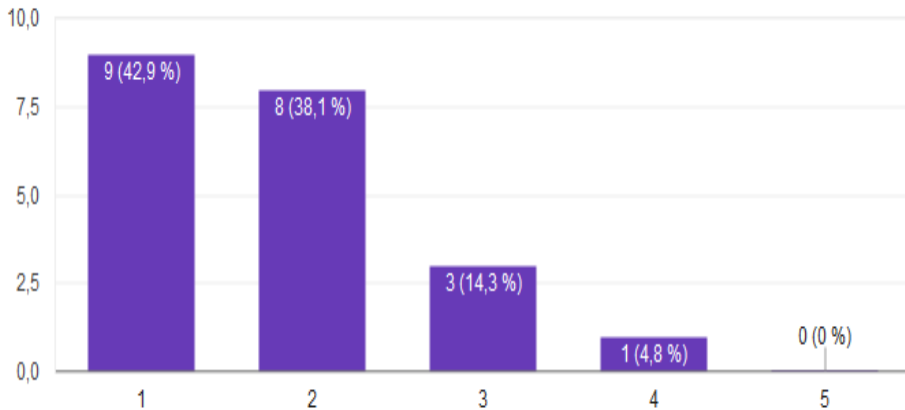
Table no. 5. Institutions/ Authorities providing support for the implementation of the projects dedicated to vulnerable groups

Institution/ Authority	Number of projects	Percentage
Local public authorities	10	52.6%
County public authorities	4	21.1%
Financing authorities	6	31.6%
Education institutions	4	21.1%
NGOs	4	21.1%
Other institutions/ authorities	4	21.1%
Other options	1	5.3%



Question no. 10: *To which extent do you consider that the project implementation will have a positive impact on the vulnerable group to which it is dedicated?* returned the following results, on a scale from 1 to 5:

Fig. no. 1. Impact of the project on the vulnerable group

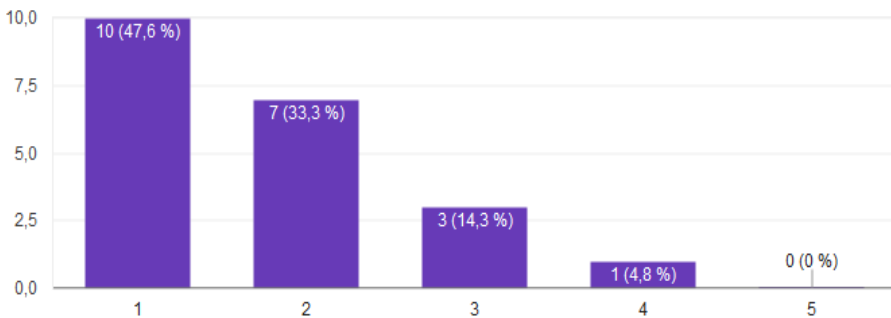


The respondents answered this question, by appreciating:

- 1 = to a very big extent: 42.9 %;
- 2 = to a big extent: 38.1 %;
- 3 = to a small extent: 14.3%;
- 4 = to a very small extent: 4.8%;
- 5 = not at all: 0%.

Question no. 11: *To which extent do you consider that the project implementation will have a positive impact on community development?* returned the following results, on a scale from 1 to 5:

Fig. no. 2. Impact of the project on community development



The respondents answered this question, by appreciating:

- 1 = to a very big extent: 47.6 %;
- 2 = to a big extent: 33.3 %;

- 3 = to a small extent: 14.3%;
- 4 = to a very small extent: 4.8%;
- 5 = not at all: 0%.

The final question was intended to obtain an overall image of the beneficiaries' perception on the implementation of social projects for vulnerable groups: *Do you consider that the implementation of other similar projects dedicated to vulnerable social groups is favourable in the future?* The respondents unanimously offered a positive answer.

#### **4.5. Conclusions of the research**

Our research aimed at identifying the impact that the currently implemented social projects financed from the Operational Programme for Human Capital 2014-2020, Priority Axis 4 have on the situation of vulnerable groups, on the development of the communities at the level of which they are implemented and on community development in general.

We consider that all intended *specific objectives* have been reached, given that:

- we identified the most important social problems that the projects in course of implementation are trying to address. These are: poverty, inequality of chances, high unemployment rates and school abandon;
- we identified the problems that are most frequently encountered during the implementation of projects for vulnerable groups; these are more related to the target group itself than to administrative aspects;
- we identified the degree of cooperation between the state institutions and civil society in the implementation of social projects, this being more than satisfying (90.5% of the beneficiaries confirmed to have had received external support during the implementation);
- we identified the perception of the beneficiaries with regard to the positive impact of social projects for vulnerable groups on the target-group itself (81% of the respondents) and on community development (81% of the respondents); we consider that the degree of scepticism of the other 19% of the respondents for both questioned aspects is related to certain problems encountered in the implementation process;
- we identified the necessity for implementing similar projects in the future, given that 100% of the respondents unanimously answered in favour of this proposal.

As for the *work hypotheses* that we considered in the framework of our research approach, 4 of them were confirmed and 4 were denied. In fact, as opposed to our initial perspective, the majority of social projects do encounter certain problems during their implementation stage; the most problems experienced during the implementation of social projects are not of administrative nature; there is no possible correlation between the previous experience of the beneficiaries and the problems encountered during the implementation and, moreover, there is no visible correlation between the problems encountered during the implementation and the degree of trust that the beneficiaries put in necessity of future similar projects.

## **5. General conclusions**

Discovering the conditionality between social projects dedicated to vulnerable groups and community development implied researching the impact of these projects on the social groups menaced by social exclusion.

We have chosen to analyse this conditionality from the perspective of the most important actors in the process of implementing projects financed from European Funds, dedicated to vulnerable social groups - a concept that we explained during the first part of our article, together with other connected concepts - given that the assessment of the impact of these projects at community level is, generally, scarce and only refers to statistical data concerning the absorption rate of the financial allocations for the respective operational programmes. These statistics do not include the perception that the beneficiaries of social projects (we used this term to describe the institutions and authorities that have accessed financial resources with the aim of supporting disadvantaged groups) have on the implementation process and also do not envisage the success prognosis that they give to the implementation of such projects in improving the situation of the supported communities and in making a step forward in the direction of community development.

We also consider that an assessment of the impact of social projects from the perspective of the target-groups themselves would also be very useful for the future, given the fact that, although there is a centralized feed-back of the concrete implementation results, there has not been made an analysis of the effects at the level of the individual or collective mental perception of the members of these groups, that should allow the public and the stakeholders to understand to which extent these initiatives really do empower the disadvantaged communities to develop solid life abilities and to face life challenges with a larger sense of trust, to become involved and actively integrated in the society and to participate in the decision making process.

We appreciate that the unanimity of the questioned participants with regard to the positive impact of the social projects and the necessity of their future implementation is a positive fact that points out their degree of availability and their will to take on an active role in the promotion of social change and development. A higher absorption rate shall contribute to reaching the European social cohesion objectives, contributing to the fighting of social exclusion, perhaps the most menacing social phenomenon of our times.

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