

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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**Abstract:** *Non-governmental organizations play an extremely important role in society, intervening subsidiarily for the welfare of society.*

*This paper describes the results of an exploratory qualitative research, the objective of which is to identify the difficulties and challenges faced by non-governmental organizations, challenges that can generate opportunities for their development. The research was carried out between 2020-2022, on a number of 15 non-governmental organizations from Brasov county. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out with people from the management structures of the non-governmental organizations. The results of the research show that the main difficulties of non-governmental organizations are related to the lack of money, the lack of human resources and barriers in promoting the services offered. As opportunities, we can note the development of organisations through reinvention and interdisciplinarity.*

**Key words:** *Non-governmental Organization, Fundraising, Human Resources, Reinventing, Interdisciplinarity.*

## 1. Introduction

Non-governmental or non-profit organizations (abbreviated: NGOs) are organizations that have proven over time, the extremely important role they play in society, having the ability to influence public opinion (Powers, 2016, Kákai&Bejma, 2022), being increasingly visible through their involvement in raising awareness of citizens to everything that happens around them, for the welfare of the community (Besançon et al., 2022). These voluntary organizations are independent of the government, interested in pursuing a common good, and active in different fields, such as social services, environmental protection, animal protection, human rights, gender equality, etc.

The Covid pandemic has brought new challenges for NGOs in Romania, challenges that were added on top of other difficulties generated especially by the economic

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crisis of 2008-2009, when many NGOs have disbanded, due to the withdrawal of sponsors who financially supported those NGOs. Some NGOs managed to find new sources of funding for their services, in particular by applying for project funding but also by identifying other sources of funding, such as the redirection of 3.5% of the income tax of individuals, according to Government order no. 15/2021 or the redirection of 20% of the corporate income tax of companies, but not more than 3% of the profit, according to Government order no. 1679/2022.

Just as the economic crisis challenged NGOs to find funding solutions, the Covid pandemic also brought positive aspects, which changed many things for the better in the social care system such as the digitisation and technologisation of the system, the possibility for those in the system to participate in online continuing professional development courses but also the valorisation and appreciation of the social worker's work (Bódi, 2022).

But the NGOs are left with two big challenges, for which they have to find permanent solutions: funding and human resources, especially finding and keeping volunteers. What is noteworthy is that these two elements, which should be part of the communication strategy without which an NGO cannot survive, influence each other.

These two major challenges also generate other difficulties that NGOs have to face. Low staff capacity also affects the funding of follow-on projects (Sawadogo-Lewis, Bryant & Robertson, 2022), mainly because of the multiple responsibilities of staff and the bureaucracy of international projects.

Among the main needs of NGOs, we can list: communication and effective networking with stakeholders and the public, poor management and obtaining sufficient funding to ensure sustainability (Abiddin, Ibrahim&Abdul Aziz, 2022).

Although communication specialists recommend that communication strategy should be part of organizational strategy to maximize results (Oliveira, 2019), research shows that the overall revenue gained from fundraising is comparatively low (Sargeant, Jay&Lee, 2006), despite the intense and exhausting work involved in fundraising campaigns.

This can lead to frustration and even to giving up fundraising altogether. Only this can lead, over time, to less communication with stakeholders and the general public, which causes the failure of NGO programmes for their beneficiaries (Singirankabo & Wanjiku, 2023).

Unfortunately, many NGOs feel that they do not need to communicate with their stakeholders and that the projects and activities they carry out speak for themselves, or they are more likely to use the means of communication they used in the past, or use certain ways of communicating intuitively, as they believe they would attract the attention of stakeholders (Carpenter et al., 2016).

Another aspect that has been noticed in recent years is that NGOs are increasingly communicating with stakeholders and their audiences via social media. This work is also time-consuming, especially since constant posting has to be done on these communication channels (Guo & Saxton, 2018).

Although the role of communication by and for NGOs is recognised, recent studies (Chaturvedi&Ashish Kumar, 2022) show that a large proportion of NGOs ignore social communication and marketing strategies in favour of traditional methods.

As a result, since communication is valuable in the process of social change (Thomas, 2014), when you want to communicate with the community, it is recommended to have an NGO communication strategy, which impacts all aspects of an NGO, from hiring professionals, fundraising, recruiting volunteers, to influencing opinion makers and stakeholders (Oza, 2021).

## **2. Methodological framework**

This study presents a qualitative exploratory research, which aimed to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by NGOs in the social services sector. The research questions, from which we started, were the following: What are the main needs of the organization? What are the main difficulties faced by the organisation? What are the ways to solve these difficulties? How do difficulties turn into challenges and opportunities and how do they affect the development of NGOs? The research was carried out in Brasov county, Romania and the data was collected between 2020-2022. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews.

For interviews, I used the theoretical sampling and the snowball technique, taking into account the following aspects: being active NGOs, providing services to beneficiaries, at the date of data collection; being NGOs accredited by the relevant ministry (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity); willingness to participate in the research; I selected the NGOs so as to have in the sample organizations providing services to several categories of beneficiaries: socio-educational services (3 NGOs), socio-medical services (2), social integration and reintegration services (10) that address a wide range of beneficiaries, such as: people with disabilities, elderly people, immigrants and refugees, abandoned children, and families at social risk. This resulted in a sample of 15 non-governmental organisations. Respondents are people from the management structures of the NGOs, 3 men and 12 women, all with higher education, 9 of them having studies in the social field (sociology, social work, and psychology), 4 in the field of economics, one in the field of juridical sciences and one in the field of technical sciences.

For the data collection I used the interview guide, which was structured first by themes, then by additional questions where more data was needed. It should be noted that the interviews had a broader theme, which addressed, in addition to needs, difficulties and challenges of NGOs, topics that are influenced by them: sources of funding, activities carried out with beneficiaries, communication models used by NGOs, possibilities for organizational development. Now, I will present the results of the theme on challenges and opportunities for NGOs.

The 15 participants in the study were informed about the aim of the research and all participants gave their written consent for their answers to be used for scientific purposes.

During data collection, I introduce the data in the Nvivo 14 software, performing a primary analysis to identify the maximum number of subjects necessary for my research. I analyzed and processed the data relating to the content of the interviews. In analyzing the collected data, I used thematic coding.

The 15 conversations lasted between 40 to 70 minutes resulting in around 900 minutes of analyzable data. When I reached theoretical saturation, I interrupted the data collection process, focusing on the thematic analysis and interpretation of the information obtained.

### 3. Findings

Analyzing the data obtained from the interviews, it was found that the majority of respondents emphasized the activities they do with their beneficiaries. Most of the NGOs consider that beneficiaries are the reason for the organisation to exist and absolutely everything is done in relation to beneficiaries.

The main challenge specified by all respondents is the funding of NGOs. Identifying ways of funding is constant for all organisations and is one of the main concerns of all NGO staff: *"In terms of the needs of the organisation I think I would put funding first. We really need this funding in order to continue to support and help as many beneficiaries as possible. It is not easy to have 500 beneficiaries per year and to receive a small budget compared to the needs and problems of all the beneficiaries"* (12).

Identifying sources of funding in order to be able to continue the activities with the beneficiaries means, for all the NGOs in the study, a rather difficult and challenging work, especially when there is no specialist in the organization hired for this purpose: *"Among the needs of the organisation I could mention that it is quite difficult to gather the financial resources needed to carry out our work"* (15).

Closely related to the need for funding, the interviews reveal another difficulty, equally pressing and quite difficult to manage: human resources. Whether it is hiring specialists: *"There are many needs, I don't even know where to start, probably the most pressing need. We need one more team member, but at the moment financial resources don't allow us to do that"* (11) or attracting and retaining volunteers: *"Another need is also volunteers. It is difficult not to receive any help or not to have someone to help the beneficiaries"* (111), the need for human resources is mentioned by most respondents.

Another challenge mentioned by NGOs is to make themselves known in communities where people would need them, a need closely related to the needs mentioned above: funding and human resources: *"lack of promotion of the services we offer so, in some territories it is difficult for beneficiaries to find us and ask for our help"* (16).

Poor communication with the public is also mentioned by some organisations: *"Our organisation is not very well known in the community, although we have some partnerships. However, despite these partnerships, the community does not know us, what we do or which category of beneficiaries we work with"* (112).

Although NGOs are aware of this, they consider themselves unable to make a difference, finding themselves dependent on financial sources, which when they have, they allocate entirely to activities with beneficiaries. Despite the fact that communication through social media has increased, especially after the Covid pandemic, there are still situations where NGOs fail to reach their beneficiaries or other people interested in the services they offer: *"Unfortunately most beneficiaries do not have access to the Internet and usually learn about our services from hearsay, from other former or current beneficiaries of ours or family members, or from the print media if they have access to it"* (I8).

A point that all respondents mentioned was the desire to develop the organisation in terms communication and marketing. Unfortunately, only large organisations with national and international offices have such services, the other local organisations try to learn and adapt according to their budget. This means that these small, local NGOs, although they do not have a budget or a communication and marketing department, try to promote themselves and their services through communication methods that are not always very effective: *"The lack of a person specialised in marketing means that the strategies to publicise our services are not very well targeted"* (I7).

Some NGOs believe that the most effective method of promotion, especially among stakeholders, is the human-to-human approach, where trust in the founders and in the past activities of the organization is essential: *"It's the best tool, because as I was saying, people over time, over the years have discovered that we do what we say and then they have gained trust and every time we have acted it has proved to be more successful through direct approach than through advertising one way or another"* (I12), *"They have come from all over the country from people we don't know, because the association has become very credible"* (I15).

Despite all the needs and difficulties NGOs face, optimism and confidence in the services they offer lead NGOs to discover new opportunities for organizational development or, as one respondent states, *"But we don't give up, I mean we reinvent ourselves every time"* (I14).

Thus, one of the methods to continue the activities dedicated to beneficiaries is to plan as efficiently as possible and to constantly identify funding sources: *"We try not to take on more than we can carry, we plan our activities, our programme very well and we constantly look for funding resources"* (I2).

Reinventing also means developing sources of funding, partnerships and finding new innovative ways of promotion: *"We are planning a series of new events for next year, we are thinking of organising festival and we are also thinking of a way to involve both the employer and the employees to donate, so we would target larger companies that could bring in more funds"* (I10).

An opportunity for NGOs are students doing internships or volunteering who are extremely important vectors both for the current activities of the organization and for the communication and promotion of NGOs: *"The curiosity of the students when they visit us brings us future volunteers who are interested and willing to learn as much as they can or the fact that knowing the services they can share the*

information in the community and thus learn more people about our organization" (14).

Community-based projects are seen as opportunities for NGOs to make themselves known: "opportunities come from implementing projects at the community level and through the involvement and dedication of people willing to help" (15). Partnerships are also seen as opportunities, for the creation of networks of NGOs to support each other: "*generating a hub, a co-kindness space, yes, like home co-working spaces, where several professionals meet and merge and end up developing a business network, that's how we want to make things work and have a network of good facts, a network of projects*" (111). This builds communities of specialists from different fields that contribute to the development of social services, adapted to the continuous changes in society.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The needs, difficulties and challenges of social services are intensely perceived by NGOs and greatly influence the achievement of organizations' objectives and their long-term sustainability.

The most intensely perceived challenges of NGOs are the need to find stable sources of funding, the need for human resources and the need for communication and promotion of NGOs. Among the challenges faced by NGOs, in addition to finding solutions to the needs mentioned above, we can identify the continuous development of NGO activities.

Reinvention seems to be a word that characterizes the activities of NGOs, which must adapt to the rapid changes in society. Interdisciplinarity is also mentioned by many respondents, being aware that they need specialists to come up with new methods of promotion, communication and building the organization's image, so that long-term sustainability of the NGO can be maintained. This involves, especially for local organizations but not only, a revision of the organization's management strategy, which includes an effective communication, promotion and marketing plan, with which to reach the target audience.

Although the study is conducted on a relatively small number of organizations and the results cannot be extended to a wider level, the research comes to emphasize the most pressing needs and difficulties of NGOs and the way they face the challenges generated by the changes in society. Starting from these organizational needs, the following studies could generate viable solutions in terms of covering these needs but also other innovative methods of developing the non-governmental sector.

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