

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INITIATIVES SUPPORTING NGOs IN ORADEA MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract: *The paper highlights the main needs and challenges faced by non-governmental organizations that provide social services in the municipality of Oradea and analyzes how they are supported by corporate social responsibility actions. The data obtained show that financial needs prevail and generate difficulties in the functioning of organizations. The support of companies is generally occasional and consists mainly of sponsorships and employee volunteering.*

Key words: *social services, social responsibility, sponsorship, benefits.*

1. Introduction

Prior to 2008-2010, academic research on corporate social responsibilities in Romania was rather limited, but the concerns on this topic intensified with the entry into the EU and the accessibility of grant funding, as well as with the adoption of the National Strategy for Promoting Social Responsibility in 2011-2016 (Pop, 2016).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important concern for companies, motivated by globalization and competition. This form of responsibility focuses on promoting a harmonious relationship between the economy, the environment and society (Gotea and Roşculeţ, 2019). CSR refers to how companies align their values, actions and decision-making process with the expectations and needs of their various stakeholders, not only customers and shareholders, but also employees, authorities, communities etc. (Farcane et al., 2009). Corporate social responsibility is closely linked to the commitment to social, sustainable, and community development (Scutaru, 2007).

In the context of a constantly evolving society, we observe that social issues are becoming increasingly complex and diverse. Thus, to effectively address these challenges, the adoption of innovative and collaborative strategies is necessary. Collaboration between the field of social assistance and corporate social responsibility can bring significant benefits (Gotea & Roşculeţ, 2019) and often addresses the urgent needs of NGOs (Marc, Bacter, & Timofte, 2019; Bacter, Săveanu & Marc, 2021).

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This paper aims to analyze how companies in the municipality of Oradea engage in the life of the local community and support non-governmental organizations in the social domain. The paper aims to answer the following research questions: What are the main needs and problems of non-governmental organizations in the social field that provide services in Oradea municipality? Who provides support to these organizations? What does the involvement of companies entail?

2. Corporate social responsibility and its benefits

The European Commission defines CSR as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society”. CSR is a multidimensional concept that encompasses human rights, labor practices, environmental issues, anti-corruption efforts, community involvement and development, integration of persons with disabilities, good tax governance, etc. (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).

Alongside the quality of products and economic/financial results, a factor on which the appreciation enjoyed by companies significantly depends is their contribution to the social life of the community of which they are part. Thus, CSR has become an essential part of organizations' strategy (Sitnikov et al., 2021).

Managers and those planning CSR activities must make decisions regarding: choosing a social issue, selecting an initiative to address this issue, developing a plan, implementing it, and evaluating the results (Kotler and Lee, 2005). Research from 2010 shows that in Romania a small number of companies base their CSR activities on scientific diagnosis, most of the orientations being determined by discussions with stakeholders, collaborations with NGOs, business interests, employee preferences. Some practices consisted of sponsorships, following project selection (Obrad et al., 2011).

Types of CSR initiatives include: cause promotion, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate philanthropy, employee volunteering and socially responsible business practices (Kotler and Lee, 2005).

Most CSR practices are focused on areas such as education, environment, and community support (Popa, 2015).

Studies show that corporate social responsibility is becoming an increasingly significant aspect for medium and large companies, especially those controlled by foreign investors. These companies are increasingly involved in various CSR initiatives, whether local projects or national actions. Within these initiatives, the main forms of involvement include sponsorships, through financial support for various projects or non-profit organizations, and volunteering activities that engage employees in community and social responsibility actions. These efforts reflect an increased commitment to the community and a concern for the social impact of business operations (Pop, 2016).

In Romania, corporate social responsibility is mainly associated with multinational companies. The government is showing interest in CSR by improving environmental and employment legislation, but civil society and business are calling for more effective regulation (Farcane et al., 2009).

CSR is “treated either as a Public Relations strategy, through which the corporation advertises in disguise or as an economic activity (mainly marketing), with a substantial return rate” (Sitnikov et al., 2021, p. 115).

A study conducted by Dura and Drigă (2016) on the awareness and implementation of CSR in Romania, based on analysis of the most relevant articles on this topic, highlights that assuming social responsibilities brings long-term benefits to companies, increasing their chances of success and reducing the risk of additional regulations. Large companies should allocate some of their resources to engage in addressing social issues.

Among the long-term beneficial effects of CSR, we mention: increasing the company’s reputation and image capital; gaining a competitive advantage in the market; media visibility; developing partnerships with other institutions, companies, and public authorities; fostering organizational culture; increasing employee loyalty; enhancing team internal cohesion; financial benefits; consumer preference for products and services from socially responsible companies (Scutaru, 2007; Obrad et al., 2011; Popa, 2015; Sitnikov et al., 2021).

A study from 2021 (Săveanu and Săveanu, 2022) regarding social responsibility actions and orientation of small and medium enterprises from Bihor County indicates the following: an increasing involvement in social activities; companies are mostly interested in donating money; the main motivation is the contribution to solving community problems and employee retention.

3. Social responsibility activities supporting NGOs in Oradea

Study objectives. This study aimed to highlight the main needs and challenges faced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the social sector that provide services in the municipality of Oradea. Additionally, it was also analyzed how these NGOs are supported through corporate social responsibility actions.

Methodology and study participants. The method used in this study was interview based survey and data was collected through structured individual interview technique. The data collection instrument, the interview guide, was structured along three dimensions that included questions relevant to the topic under study: needs and problems of social NGOs, partnership relationship and social accountability initiatives.

We were interested in finding out whether NGOs are supported by corporations, how long this practice has been going on, who the initiator is, what steps need to be taken to receive support, how this support is viewed, what the support consists of, what are the difficulties encountered in the work they do and what would they change.

The study involved representatives from ten NGOs providing social services to various vulnerable groups: disadvantaged children and families (large families, single-parent families, at risk of poverty, with low education levels); elderly persons; children and adults with disabilities; children and adults with advanced stage oncological diseases and their families; youth leaving protection systems; individuals with addictions; victims of domestic violence; homeless individuals; children at risk of dropping out of school; Roma ethnic group members; victims of human trafficking; refugees and other foreign citizens.

Five of these organizations started their activities between 1991-1999, three between 2001-2009, and two between 2017-2018. Among these, three provide services exclusively in the city of Oradea, while seven offer services both in rural areas and outside Oradea. Regarding the respondents, the majority were female (9), aged between 24 and 58 years, with work experience ranging from 5 months to 35 years. Six of them hold managerial positions, while four are in executive roles.

Presentation of results. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the results. This approach allowed the identification and in-depth exploration of the main themes emerging from the data collected. The results will be presented in detail for each dimension analyzed, providing a clear and structured perspective on the key issues identified in the study.

Needs and Issues of NGOs in the Social Sector. Non-governmental organizations play a crucial role in providing services to vulnerable groups within the local community. These organizations make a significant contribution to improving the quality of life for the most disadvantaged members of society. We were interested in analyzing the needs of the organizations included in the study and understanding better the issues they face in conducting their activities. To this end, we identified the main challenges and difficulties they encounter.

The vast majority of study participants (8) noted that the primary need of the organization they represent is the financial one (ensuring stable long-term funding), followed by the need to maintain human resources, hire new specialists, or auxiliary staff (6): *Financial resources to cover the current needs of the organization (payment of utilities necessary for the operation of the Day Centre, salary payments, fees due under service contracts (I.2).*

The remaining responses focused on the development of other types of services, infrastructure (including accessibility), but also *adapting to the increasing requirements imposed by legislation (I.3)*, increasing visibility, quality management, improving labor relations and collaboration with other institutions: *The greatest needs of our organization are related to sponsors and partners to support the organization's activities, the need for visibility and promotion which is crucial for attracting funds and resources, and the need for infrastructure and equipment necessary for the efficient operation of the organization (offices, computers, vehicles etc.) (I.7).*

When asked to specify who provides support for covering the needs of the organization they represent, the vast majority of responses referred to funders. Half of the respondents indicated that they receive funding from international organizations. Some organizations benefit from financial support from state budget funds, sponsorships, partners, individuals, other NGOs, non-reimbursable funds through project access, or from churches and hospitals/clinics. Their concerns related to covering financial needs also focus on fundraising campaigns and charitable events: *Generally, we receive support from our sponsors, who provide us with various forms of sponsorship (services, financial, material), from partner hospitals and clinics in the city, individual donations, fundraising campaigns, and charitable events (I.7).*

Study participants identified other issues they face in carrying out their activities, in addition to underfunding. These include: bureaucracy, legislative changes (inconsistencies between social services and medical services legislation), tax changes,

staff remuneration in accordance with their qualifications, lack of performance due to a low number of employees, limited availability of places for beneficiaries, lack of opportunities for service development and expansion, absence of specific intervention programs for different categories of beneficiaries, and lack of involvement from authorities in supporting prevention programs.

To manage these problems, support comes both from within the organizations (e.g., the board of directors) through *more rigorous management* (1.5) and from the outside as well. At the local level, help comes from partners, church forums, specialists from other NGOs in the field, and volunteers. At the national level, support is provided through national associations.

Analyzing the answers obtained to highlight the needs and problems of the NGOs included in the study, we were able to get a clear picture of the administrative, financial, and logistical obstacles that can affect the effectiveness and positive impact of these organizations on the community.

The Partnership Relationship. As highlighted in the previous sections, partnership relationships are of major importance for NGOs. These partnerships play a crucial role in supporting the activities and initiatives of the organizations, providing them with the necessary resources and support to achieve their goals. Collaborations with various entities, including other NGOs, government institutions, private companies, and local communities, enable these organizations to expand their impact and respond more effectively to the needs of their beneficiaries.

The NGOs participating in the study have entered into numerous partnership agreements based on the specifics of their activities. Thus, their partners include institutions from various fields, such as social (other NGOs, individual social assistance offices), medical (hospitals, clinics), educational (schools, high schools, universities) and economic (multinational companies, enterprises, companies), both private and public.

The main objectives of the partnership agreements include improving the organization's capacities and resources, providing methodological assistance and support, offering specialized services, developing and implementing collaborative projects, conducting educational activities, facilitating internships or volunteer opportunities, enhancing visibility and increasing the organization's credibility, organizing fundraising campaigns, and obtaining funding/sponsorships: *The objectives generally focus on the institutional collaboration between the parties, mutual assistance as well as specialized and methodological support, participating in various fundraising campaigns, collaborating on different educational projects, conducting clinical internships and practical work for students, volunteer activities, socialization activities and supporting beneficiaries for their integration into society etc.* (1.2).

We wanted to investigate whether there were situations where the obligations set out in the partnership agreements were not respected. In the case of two organizations, it was found that there were issues, particularly related to missed deadlines for completing activities, the failure to provide promised financial support, or the non-payment for services rendered.

The obvious conclusion from the analysis of the responses to the questions related to this dimension is that partnerships are essential for NGOs, providing the necessary support to achieve their objectives through extended collaborations.

Social responsibility initiatives. In the analysis of the first part of the interview, the financial and material support that organizations receive from other organizations, institutions, companies and individuals to support their activities was highlighted.

We have chosen to focus on the aspects related to the support provided by companies. We will explore the ways in which companies contribute to NGO activities through financial donations, sponsorships, corporate volunteering or other forms of involvement. Additionally, we will analyze the benefits and challenges associated with this collaboration as well as the impact it has on achieving the organizations' objectives.

The participants' responses in the study highlighted that support from companies is, in most cases, occasional and consists of: services (e.g., income tax calculation), financial support through sponsorships during holidays/on the occasion of various events, material support (providing food, transportation) and human resources through the voluntary involvement of employees in NGO activities.

This practice has been common in organizations since their inception, and in most cases the first step was taken by the NGO. There have also been situations where in the first years of operation the organization requested support, and later on, it was approached by other corporations wishing to offer assistance.

Organizations follow several steps in their efforts to obtain support, including identifying needs and setting clear objectives, prioritizing available resources and existing needs, identifying potential partners and possible sources of funding, drafting a support request, making initial contact with company leadership and if the request is approved, signing sponsorship contracts.

The support received by organizations is highly appreciated. *It constitutes an important source of revenue, essential for the organization's proper functioning (1.2) and has a significant impact on the organization's ability to fulfill its mission (1.7), making it possible to continue activities (1.5). Additionally, it serves as an encouragement for continuing the organization's work and mission; it makes it accountable for the expenditure of sponsorship money - to be efficient and in full accordance with the sponsor's wishes (1.10).*

Regarding the difficulties encountered in this partnership, half of the participants stated that they do not face any problems. When issues do arise, they are mainly caused by short-term support and the lack of clear criteria for obtaining sponsorships: *In terms of working with companies, the difficulties are due to the fact that the support is for a short/very short period and cannot be taken de facto, there are not necessarily some unitary criteria, criteria in which, if you fit, you can benefit from sponsorship (1.3).*

They also invoked communication problems and aspects related to respecting the dignity of beneficiaries, due to sponsors' requirements to make the beneficiaries' life stories public: *We want to focus on the positive, on supporting progress in public stories, but many companies first want the tragic and emotional story and the exposure of beneficiaries, and we cannot accept this compromise (1.8).*

The proposals that came from the representatives of the NGOs included in the study regarding the changes they wish to see for improving the situation were diverse. The emphasis was placed on the need to develop *marketing programs for NGOs* (I.8), promoting and incentivizing volunteer activities within the community, initiating awareness campaigns to inform about supporting these services (I.2) and hiring specialists to carry out these activities so that social workers or other members of the organization involved in intervention tasks can be relieved of these duties (I.8, I.10). Another change proposed is that of changing the public perception of the social field and the involvement of the local community in problem management (I.2, I.6), as well as changing the way NGOs are perceived by the state: *It is necessary for the state to perceive organizations as partners in solving problems and thus to provide adequate funding* (I.3). Until this is possible, *it is proposed to encourage corporations to become more socially involved, to be more active in the communities in which they operate* (I.4).

The reduction of bureaucracy was also indicated: *(...) I would change the process related to bureaucracy, which is quite difficult and which leads to delay, inefficiency and affects the achievement of the objectives and activities proposed by the organization* (I.7).

In terms of future plans, there is a desire to continue the activity, as well as to develop the services, *by getting involved in fundraising actions to ensure the continuity of services* (I.2, I.3), attracting non-reimbursable funds (I.2), but also promoting the social responsibility component in all types of businesses (I.5). Some organizations propose the hiring of a fundraiser to make this activity more efficient, others, which have had this initiative in the past, have judged that: *the results did not match the investment* (I.4).

4. Conclusions

The research focused on identifying the main needs and problems faced by social NGOs, such as insufficient financial and human resources as well as administrative and logistical challenges.

The study also explored the forms of support provided by companies through social responsibility actions. These initiatives include sponsorships, partnerships for joint projects, corporate volunteering and other types of contributions aimed at supporting the activities of NGOs. The analysis revealed the impact of these actions on the efficiency and sustainability of non-governmental organizations.

The data revealed that even though companies provide various forms of support, this is generally occasional and not part of a sustained strategy of long-term collaboration with NGOs. There is thus potential to develop stronger and more sustainable partnerships between the private sector and these organizations.

In conclusion, the research provides an overview of the functioning of social NGOs in Oradea and emphasizes the importance of collaboration between these organizations and companies to effectively address community needs. This contributes to creating a favorable framework for the development of social initiatives and strengthening the support network offered by companies, to the mutual benefit of society.

It is necessary to recognize the involvement of these NGOs in addressing local social issues and to identify sustainable solutions to support them so they can continue to provide the necessary assistance to vulnerable groups.

Partnerships facilitate access to funding, expertise, volunteers and other resources, contributing to the development of support networks and the improvement of social services provided by NGOs, generating sustainable change in the communities they serve.

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