

Book Review

BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS: THE OFFER OF SOCIAL ECONOMY IN BUCHAREST-ILFOV AND SOUTH-EAST REGIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

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Social economy offers presently solutions to reduce social exclusion by increasing the employment rate of the vulnerable persons and by creating the mechanisms that may help these people (Arpinte D., Cace S., Cojocaru Ş., 2010, p. 66). While the focus on the practical implementation of Europe 2020 strategy is associated to the definition of the social economy as a serious partner of the civil society and of the state (Zamfir E., Fitzek S. 2010, p. 8), there is a critical need to monitor and evaluate the initiatives in this field and to present the mechanisms which establish a healthy and vibrating ecosystem through this form of economy supported by innovating social entrepreneurs (Cace S., Arpinte D., Cace C., Cojocaru Ş., 2011, p. 65). Thus, social economy evaluation and monitoring is a challenge both for the beneficiaries

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and for the structures running social economy projects (Katsikaris L., Parcharidis I., 2010). Another important aspect regards highlighting the proactive ways to incorporate the experiences which prove that social economy may actually contribute to achieving social cohesion and that it may be one the major players fighting social exclusion (Cace S., Nicolăescu V., Scoican A. N. (2010, pp. 192-193).

The book "Between opportunities and risks: the offer of social economy in Bucharest-Ifov and South-East regions of development" (Expert Publisher, Bucharest, 2011), was developed within the framework of the project *INTEGRAT – resources for the socially excluded women and Roma groups*, co-financed from the European Social Fund (ESF) 2010-2013 through the Sectoral operational program Human Resources Development, 2007-2013, priority axis 6 "Promotion of social inclusion", major area of intervention 6.1 "Social economy development". The project is implemented by a consortium coordinated by the Association for socio-economic development and promotion Catalactica, as coordinator, in collaboration with the Research Institute for Quality of Life (IQL) belonging to the Romanian Academy and with the international partner Bolt International Consulting L. Katsikaris & Co. Limited Partnership. This book, coordinated by three researchers of the Research Institute for Quality of Life, contributes to the active promotion of the social inclusion on the labour market by the activation of the social economy (SE), of the women and of the Roma groups. It provides the basic arguments for the development of partnerships and to stimulate the involvement of the socially excluded people from Bucharest-Ifov and South East regions of development (RD) into the life of their community.

The book makes an innovating analysis of the developmental stage of the social economy in Bucharest-Ifov and South East regions of development, being oriented towards gathering information on the offer of social economy. From the very beginning, the book defines the offer of social economy as the "entire supply of goods and services available in a society at a particular moment, offered through specialised providers" (p. 21). Thus, SE offer is presented from the perspective of the representatives of SE organisations (NGOs, CAR units, credit cooperatives and cooperative societies), paying particular attention to the professional insertion of the vulnerable groups, particularly of the women, of the Roma population and of the people with disabilities. The book consists of five main sections: the first section describes the national framework of organisation and functioning governing the social economy organisations; the second section presents the social economy organisations from Romania as classified by the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection (non-governmental organisations, mutual aid organisations, credit cooperatives and cooperative societies); section three makes an analysis of the human resources involved in the SE from the perspective of a group of beneficiaries confronted with difficulties of insertion on the labour market (people with disabilities) and from the perspective of specialist SE suppliers (graduates of master programs

specialised in social economy within Romanian universities); section four makes a qualitative analysis of the SE, both theoretical and methodological and empiric; the final section is a summary of the conclusions and recommendations for social economy development in the two regions of development, and of the national trends for this form of economy.

The field survey which gathered data on the offer of social economy had two components: qualitative and quantitative. Thus, within the quantitative component, the project team investigated 692 social economy organisations: 229 non-governmental organisations, 235 cooperative societies and 228 mutual aid organisations from Bucharest-Ifov and South-East RD. The qualitative analyses, based on interviews or focus-groups, conducted in the localities and counties included in Bucharest-Ifov and South-East RD, yielded 69 case studies. Besides these detailed information, of context, supplied by the qualitative research, the team has also nuanced the interpretation of the quantitative data.

The first part of the book (including two chapters), reviews the history of the legislative framework for the organisation and operation of SE organisations in Romania, and analyses the perceptions of the SE organisations representatives regarding the impact of the recent legislative changes on the SE activities, the propositions for the improvement of the legislative framework and the perceptions regarding the institutional construction and the collaboration both with other SE organisations, and with the representatives of the public administration with responsibilities in this field. The concluding remark shows that the “current legislative framework regulating the activity of the SE organisations operating in Romania is efficient, particularly in the case of the CAR units” (p. 68); however, the “employers have to be sensibilized and informed on SE matters, and they must be supported financially; mechanisms have to be developed for the preparation of the vulnerable groups for insertion on the labour market” (p. 68).

The section dedicated to the Romanian social economy organisations debates on the non-governmental sector, a subject rather less approached by the analyses on the NGO sector in Romania. Another subject refers to the situation of the mutual aid houses of the employees (CARS) and to their role of supporting the welfare of the employees both during the crisis period and during the period of economic relaxation. The other chapters of the book describe the mutual aid houses of the pensioners (CARP) and make complementary analyses on the cooperative societies in terms of their function of social protection of the cooperative members and of the community, and in terms of their economic activities (state of development). This section also makes a synthesis of other analyses of the distinct sectoral interventions in the field of social economy (Alexandrescu F., Mihalache F., 2011; Stanilă G., Cace C., Preoteasa A.M., 2011; Cace S, Nicolăescu V., Anton A.N., Rotaru S. 2011).

The third part of the book analyses the human resources involved in SE activities, focusing on a distinct category of vulnerable persons, and to the persons creating the services of social economy offer. Thus, the people with disabilities lead to the idea of transforming the SE organisations from “fighters for the cause of the people with disabilities” to organisations that provide competitive services and opportunities for the people with disabilities. From the perspective of the potential entrepreneurs and creators of public policies in the field of social economy, the book makes an analysis of the representations and expectations of the graduates from master studies in social economy at four universities from Romania (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea and Timișoara), whose first promotion will go in business in 2012.

The qualitative analysis of the volume, structure presented in part four of the book, includes three chapters: a chapter on the typology of SE organisations, which provides theoretical and methodological headings for the definition and enunciation of the operational principles of the social economy; a chapter showing the social economy profile in 13 counties selected from South-Muntenia, South-West Oltenia and South-East regions of development; the final chapter gives some case studies of some representative SE organisations.

The closing section, dedicated to conclusions and recommendations, shows that “the integrated national strategy to support SE organisations must rely in their sustainable elements and must include several degrees of support to the SE organisations” (p. 361).

By the complementary approaches relying on methodologies of quantitative and qualitative research, the book has an applied value providing, with arguments and justifications, very many directions for further investigations in this field. The coordinators of the book agree in the final section that “The analyses included in the book fundament the intentions to develop action plans initiated by the representatives of SE organisations, of local, regional and national strategies to promote social economy in general” (p. 363).

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