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# ROMANIAN NGO'S BOTTOM-UP APPROACH FOR WOMEN SOCIAL INCLUSION

Lucian SFETCU<sup>1</sup>, Corina CACE<sup>2</sup>, Daniela NICOLĂESCU<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of programs, projects and activities of five Romanian women's rights NGOs that are actively involved in the promotion of gender equality, women's social and economic development, and also in actions regarding the social inclusion and economic development of other groups of vulnerable population. They are successfully undertaking a bottom-up approach of community development by acting at the local, regional and even national levels, both by creating public-private partnerships and also alone. These NGOs are also successfully applying the social economy principles and practices for social and economic development. The bottom-up approach for community development is perceived as being a more efficient method compared with the traditional top-down approach which often fails to address context-related problems, resulting in the marginalization of some problematic local and even regional groups of population.

*Keywords:* NGO; gender; social economy; social inclusion; bottom-up policy building.

## Introduction

Although women represent half of the world's population and have benefited more than men from the progress and social development in the last three decades, the access to resources and power remains skewed towards men while women are still overrepresented among the world's most vulnerable groups (Warth & Koparanova, 2012). The general common sense perception about women is still, in many cultures, a traditionalist one, in which women represent cultural values linked to family, traditions and community. This conception should be revised and completed with other values held by women, like change, innovation and entrepreneurship, values that fit and are aligned with today society's trends. Often

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women are metaphorically regarded as bridges linking the traditional values with the present's innovations. Without an active and complete participation of women in the community and civil society, a participative development could hardly be imagined (Cace, Sfetcu, Koutmalasou, & Nicolăescu, 2012).

The promotion of gender equality is the starting point of any strategy that fights against poverty and promotes economic development because women are, in all countries, a central part of all the production processes (Pastore, 2010). The *equality* principle promoted in the European Union's integration policies for ethnic groups and marginalized women, strongly supports gender equality, sustainability and participation. An important process in obtaining gender equality is that of *women's empowerment*, that is women gaining more control and power over their own lives, both within and outside their homes. Gender equality and inclusive growth are two interrelated concepts, the opposite of inclusive growth being poverty. Poverty is not only the result of the diverse forms of financial inequality, that means a lower quality of life, but is a combination of factors like the lack of political power and the unequal access to jobs, information, social services, infrastructure, natural resources etc.

## **The bottom-up approach in community development**

More than fifty years ago, Hirschman argued that economic development does not only depend on an optimal combination of existing resources or production factors, but also on finding and mobilizing hidden, under-utilized assets and capabilities on the ground, searching for bottom-up complementarities (Hirschman, 1958). Community and regional development has been for a long time dominated by economic concerns such as growth income and employment (Armstrong & Taylor, 2000). For Storper (1997), local and regional wellbeing and prosperity is determined by the continuous increase in employment, income and productivity, factors that are part of the economic development, while for Beer et al. (2003), the local and regional economic development could solely account for the development in general. In some countries, in an attempt to challenge the national directive lines, more local, socially-oriented approaches emerged as alternative economic strategies, in forms of community associations and sectorial development agencies (Fitzgerald & Green Leigh, 2002). "Economic development is not an objective per se. It is a means for achieving wellbeing, according to the culture and conditions of certain populations. Nevertheless the wellbeing is not the same for people living in New York or in Maputo; only who is living in New York or Maputo could fix what they want to achieve in the medium and long term" (Canzanelli, 2001).

Community organizations are playing an increasing role in fostering local economic development initiatives by bringing civic organizations, corporate businesses and public bodies into collaborations (Blaxter, Farnell, & Watts, 2003; Silverman, 2001). In the last years, the focus of the local and regional development has slightly shifted from an exclusively economic development to approaches

addressing social, ecological, political and cultural concerns (Morgan, 2004). Promoting environmental sustainability, reducing social inequality, encouraging inclusive government and governance, recognizing cultural diversity, promoting social cohesion and wellbeing have been emphasized within the definitions of local and regional development (Haughton & Counsell, 2004). Changing government agendas and national policies can reshape regional and local development policies but in the end, the local and regional interests determine local development in specific contexts, the particular attributes of different places shaping whether, how and to what degree specific local and regional development takes place (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2007).

The top-down policy making process has been built on central decision making, politics, bureaucracy and high level institutions, a system that has often excluded women as they have a low representation in the governmental bodies. In contrast, the bottom-up approach is often constructed on social networks, family relations and local acquaintances, a place where women have a more facile access and can more easily valorize their abilities in the service of community. The existence of a strong civil society that promotes women's interests and gender equality is playing an important role in local and regional development. The civil society is often acting as a linking bridge between the represented and the representatives.

The non-governmental organizations are facing the same situation described above, namely to wait for external support or to take action in order to become as independent of external factors as possible. The bottom-up approach builds on this desire of taking control over one's situation, a community or a group's situation. The bottom-up approach is based on local actions of the civil society that address specific problems found within the local community. In their programs and projects, the civil society organizations should actively work with the person to whom they address their efforts, in order to help them become independent persons and not supported ones, capable to help other communities, groups or persons.

## **Women as vectors of community development**

Due to the cultural sensibility that women poses, and as an answer to the need of working in a society in which the discrimination against them is visible with the naked eye, women are not only very sensible to the causes of the social problems, but also motivated in a sincere way and willing to develop informed measures and social policies. It does not mean that women are, by their nature, more inclined to emotional conscience and subtle perception than men are. It only suggests that, because of the superposing structures that sometimes are in conflict with those of the social identities, women have been gifted with an acute practical sense for handling and answering to a varied specter of difficult situations.

Historically, women have been fighting for the right to vote, the right of occupying public positions, the right of property etc. Now that these rights have

been obtained, they are fighting for these rights to be applied at the informal level, mostly for diminishing the prejudices still present in the society. The most present prejudices against which the NGOs present in our study are fighting, are those related to the traditional viewing of women, views according to which women should stay at home and take care of children, prepare the food, clean the house and others alike, plus the prejudices against women occupying decision making positions both in the public and the private sectors of the economy.

The data from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, confirms that women's representation in the national parliaments has increased over the past decade from 16.2 per cent in December 2000 to 22.2 per cent in December 2010, which is an important positive development. However, with only one woman in five members of parliament, women are still strongly underrepresented in political decision-making (Warth & Koparanova, 2012). "At the education level, the status of women in the sciences continues to provoke concerns, as women remain underrepresented in most areas of science, have low rates of retention and are less likely to reach the higher echelons of research and academic positions" (Merrick, 2011, p.744). The women in the developed countries became increasingly competitive and viable on the labor market because of their higher level of education, which provided them the opportunity to be employed in better positions (Banu, Casapu, Ionescu, & Panait, 2011).

A sustainable community development cannot be attained without equitable resource distribution in the fight against poverty. In the recent years, it has been observed that development goals cannot be achieved without reducing regional inequalities and improving the status of women (Kumari & Pandey, 2012). To offer equitable chances to women means to offer them possibilities of exiting the vicious circles they are in. The majority of the poor population in the world is represented by women, and by poor population we do not account only for the lack of material resources as food, money, living conditions etc., but also for the lack of education, access to health services and social relations. The lack of material capital, goods and properties, leads to a reduced or lack of access to credits, fact that makes it impossible for women to develop small businesses, which means that they are in a continuous dependence of external factors like men or support from different organizations, and this do not determine a durable development of the societies or the vulnerable groups.

Promoting entrepreneurship among women represents an important way of empowering them, and also a sustainable way of social development. The problem of financing the small enterprises will probably be the most important dimension to be considered by the policies of developing the entrepreneurship as a whole, taking into consideration that the entrepreneurship can be applied both in the economic field (business) and in the social field, referring to a behaviour that can be displayed in multiple ways (Cace, Cace, & Nicolăescu, 2011). The development of innovative and entrepreneurial organisations opens the way towards an explicit reference of the social enterprises (Nicolăescu, Cace, Koumalatsou, & Stănescu, 2011). Through personal small business development, women could obtain financial autonomy, could rise above poverty levels and improve their quality of life. In the process of starting small businesses, women are often facing difficulties

caused by a limited access to resources that is added to neutral policies that, in the end, represent an advantage for men.

Developing an appropriate environment for women's social development represents a challenge that should be addressed at local, regional and even national and global levels. Implementing policies for sustaining women's equilibrate time distribution between work and home activities could represent a good solution for a sustainable social and economic growth. Moreover, the employers could reduce their costs by adopting supporting policies for employees' families. The policies supporting both the professional and personal development could determine the growth of human resources quality, an essential aspect for sustainable economic growth of societies. Anyway, the use of any single political strategy doesn't remove the causes for the disparities in opportunities accessed by women: inequitable distribution of the household chores and implicitly the reconciliation of the professional life with the family life (Rădoi, 2012).

Being considered a vulnerable group, women and especially women from certain marginalized communities and groups of population, are facing exceptional life challenges to which they need to find solutions. In order to get by, women in these situations have two main alternatives, namely they could fight and dominate their problems or they could stay in a waiting mode for external forces to get them out of their situations (NGOs, state's help, well intentioned individuals or organizations etc.). The first of the two is preferable, namely taking control over their lives, process that is known as empowerment. Poverty and social exclusion among women are mainly results of gender inequalities. Women are, in general, viewed as a vulnerable population, fact that leads through itself to their marginalization. The promotion of gender equality and population wellbeing within the European Union is a principal objective on EU's agenda. Although the European Union does not have direct competences in improvement of social wellbeing, the EU's institutions can influence it through different policies. From the European point of view, the fight against social exclusion is a joint pre-occupation of the member states (Achimescu, Cace, & Stănescu, 2011) and the social economy is one of the principal areas of interests given that it addresses all forms of social needs (Nicolăescu & Nicolăescu, 2012).

Gender development objectives should be part of any organizational context that should be addressed by all departments, at all levels within the organization. Another notable and important step in reducing gender inequalities and women exclusion would be to promote and develop a series of principles among men, principles that should assist men revising their attitudes towards women. In order to attain this objective, men should develop a level of understanding based on the contexts experimented by women, in order for men to become more responsible for their actions and also be more critic of other's actions with a discriminatory character directed towards women. Men should also be more sensible to women's efforts both in their personal and professional activities, and understand that women are often facing resisting attitudes to which they have to respond with supplementary efforts. The society as a whole should stop using false dichotomies and artificial gender specific attitudes. Moreover, everyone should understand

that gender diversity represents an important social catalyst within local communities and also public and private organizations.

## **Romanian NGOs for women's rights**

Our study focused on 5 NGOs that are actively contributing to the fight against women marginalization within the Romanian society. The NGOs participating in this study were chosen by means of availability and they are not representative for the totality of women's rights NGO in Romania, thus we cannot extend our conclusions beyond these 5 participating NGOs. The data was gathered using a self-administered questionnaire which consisted in several questions related to the NGO's identity, activities and projects undertaken over the years. The main purpose of these NGOs is to reduce gender discrimination and to help women integrate in all social structures of the society. The projects and actions of the organizations are aimed at different categories of women, from those socially marginalized through poverty, lack of education, lack of health services etc., to business women, entrepreneurs, highly qualified professionals and so on. The efforts of bringing women closer to the decision making positions in the governmental structures are also important for these NGOs, trying to contribute in this way to the reduction discrimination at all levels of the society.

The activity of the non-governmental organizations studied here, demonstrates a high level of involvement of the civil society in promoting the equality of chances for women and men alike. An interesting aspect found when analyzing the activity of these NGOs is that, unlike other kind of non-governmental organizations, that concentrate their efforts exclusively for supporting certain categories of population or certain marginalized groups, the women's rights NGOs have a larger view, a wider area of action, because women are present everywhere, in all contexts and aspects of life, and their wellbeing is closely linked to the wellbeing of the entire population. For example, educational or health related programs implemented by these organizations are aimed at both women and men, without discriminating between the two genders. In the struggle against women discrimination, these NGOs understood that they should treat women and men alike, and not distinctively because, in fact, doing so would be also a form of discrimination and discrimination cannot be reduced through more discrimination.

All studied organizations have been and still are actively involved in national and international cooperation projects with partners from all over the world. The partnerships do not only consist in applying for fund from foreign organizations, but also in bi-lateral cooperation and supporting projects at the same level. The women's rights NGOs focusing mainly in supporting business women, entrepreneurs and highly qualified professionals have a high profile presence both nationally and, more importantly, at the international level, their members and programs being well recognized and appreciated by other organizations alike or by other kind of organizations and bodies. These women's rights NGOs are also

better financed and are conducting larger programs and actions at regional and even national scale.

The organizations are active and critic members of the civil society, involved in the decision making processes by working close to the Romanian authorities in an attempt to better accomplish their goals of reducing gender discrimination, promoting women's rights and improving their chances in the social and economic space. They are continuously organizing and participating in workshops and debates on different issues relevant both for women and also for the entire society, with the purpose of disseminating their activities, the gender related issues and possible solutions for reducing women discrimination. The lobbying activities for policies and regulations for the common wellbeing of the population is an activity conducted also by all five studied organizations. The studied organizations are continuously conducting fund raising and humanitarian campaigns in order to support diverse categories of people in need for help.

A very important feature of the organizations presented here is the fight against young women's physical and emotional abuse, against women trafficking, prostitution, and the right for abortion. These problems are still widespread in Romania, mostly in rural areas but also in big cities. The NGOs understood that these kinds of problems are present due to the high levels of poverty, determined mostly by the lack of education. In order to support the reduction of these phenomena, the NGOs are frequently organizing trainings, support groups, both in schools and colleges, but also for the mature women that are not pursuing at the moment any kind of formal education. Another type of activity, intended specifically for women in special need, are the shelters for abused women, mostly abused within the family, but also young women, victims of physical abuse. These shelters have undisclosed locations, do not permit outside visits unless the visiting person is trusted and approved by the person that is being visited. In this facilities, women benefit of psychological and medical assistance, are offered food, clothes and, most importantly, security and support for an eventual reintegration into society.

Another essential and worth mentioning feature of some of the studied organization is the promotion of social economy among women and men alike, in rural and urban areas. Moreover, social economy is developed as a mean of obtaining a higher level of financial independence in order to be able to develop and implement different projects. This way of auto-financing is a desirable one that implies higher autonomy and control over the NGO's activities and pursued goals. Some of the studied organizations already developed their own social economy entities through which they are obtaining funds for specific activities and projects, mostly for those that are not part of the national or international policies and, for this reason, are not financed by governments or other funds and foundations.



## Conclusions

The programs, projects and activities conducted by the studied organizations are proving an active and relevant implication in solving society's problems, with a focus on women but not exclusively, opposed to other, more specific oriented organizations. These good practice models are worth studying and following by any kind of organization due to their pro-social purpose and high level of implication and determination to shape a better and healthier society. Through their activities and projects, these organizations are proving their understanding and adherence to the bottom-up approach of policy building, because they are not only following the directions coming from national or international governmental organizations and bodies, but are also innovating and taking initiative in order to respond to diverse local and community problems that are not or could hardly be addressed by national or international policies.

At the national level, the involvement of non-governmental organizations in social economy-specific activities is situated at a starting point of constructing and recognizing this form of economy (Nicolăescu & Rotaru, 2011). The utilization of social economy by some of the studied NGOs is an important step towards a sustainable development of civil society's organizations. The social economy provides financial independence, allowing the organizations conducting this kind of activities to pursue their goals without being constrained by the governments or other sponsors and, in this way, to better address specific local problems.

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