

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

In rural communities in Romania, other forms of aid have a presence and immemorial tradition alive today. Volunteering (activity defined as helping a contractual relationship between an individual and a nonprofit legal entity, public or private) is present but less local rural areas compared with urban areas.

However, the presence of components of voluntary involvement of community members is a necessary component by a series of grant programs (eg, the Romanian Fund for Social Development). Also, active involvement in development projects is desirable (and dotted as it is) in the European funding programs in post-accession period (primarily the National Rural Development Program).

From a sociological standpoint, is that true community development involving voluntarily by those interested in developing a specific project, indicating the need for measures to increase the degree of activism in local communities, primarily the rural ones.

Current characteristics of voluntary work in Romania (definition, statistical data, socio-demographic characteristics of volunteers), features local rural community development and its alleged role in the development of local communities. Presenting both current characteristics and trends of volunteering in our movement and how volunteering can be developed in rural areas as an important component of rural development activities.

Key words: volunteering, community development, rural areas

In the Law of Volunteering (Law 195/2001, with subsequent additions) volunteering is defined as "public interest work done on own initiative by any person, for the benefit of others, without receiving any payment", activity that has to be conducted by a nonprofit organization (public or private), called "volunteering beneficiary" and under a written contract. This is rather a narrow definition, which excludes volunteering within informal contexts (much more common than those based upon a written contract). Volunteering is an activity still too poorly developed in Romania, despite the long tradition of self-help forms and some remarkable initiatives taken by NGOs. Although the Law of Volunteering allows it equally, volunteering development is present almost exclusively within the NGO sector and too little within public non-profit organizations.

Using volunteers in NGOs represents rather an opportunistic type, as a specific way to compensate for their acute staff crisis faced by this field.

The involvement of volunteers is a presumed part of various grant programs available to non-profit organizations (e.g., Romanian Social Development Fund - RSDF) and the active participation of citizens in development projects is desirable (and underlined as well) within the European funding programs in the post-accession

period (primarily, the National Rural Development Program - NRDP).

Community development is defined by Dumitru Sandu (2005, 15) as "voluntary changes in, by and for the community, based on the practice experience in post-December Romania". Thus there are voluntary involved all those concerned to develop a specific project / program, which indicates the need for certain measures to increase the degree of activism in local communities, primarily regarding the rural ones (where civil society organizations are less present in our country).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Due to the limited feature of the legal understanding, it has been tried a development of volunteering definition closer to the local reality, within the National Council of Volunteering (June 2002). The following definition was adopted by consensus: "Volunteering is an activity carried out by any individual, on own initiative, for the benefit of others, without receiving any payment." Due to its nonrestrictive nature and the fact that it was adopted in a consensual manner (by a forum established at national level), this particular definition is more often used in comparison with other definitions used in the associations environment in Romania.

There are many incorrect uses of the terms "voluntary" and "volunteering" in Romania, both in common language and the official one. For example, the regulation regarding "voluntary military service" (the current form of performing military service is non-mandatory), also includes the stipulation that "volunteer soldiers will receive a monthly payment" for the performed work, which is contrary to the legal meaning of "volunteering" mentioned above. Also, the frequent use during the communist period of the expression "voluntary/patriotic work" referring to the mandatory activities still casts a shadow over the real meaning of the term.

In what concerns the incidence of volunteering in post-December Romania, Cristina Rigman described the research done to measure the level of involvement in volunteering reporting by relating to the adult population: the most optimistic assessment is the one made by the Foundation for Civil Society Development, which shows a percentage of 33.5% of Romania's population registered as volunteers, while "all the other researches indicated almost half of the FCSD's research done in 1996 (Rigman, C., 2008, p. 3). Application of the European Values Survey (1999) (Voicu and Voicu, 2003, p. 7) indicates a percentage of 10% of Romanian population stating they are engaged in voluntary activities. The research done by the Association for Community Relations (2003, p. 38) shows a rate of 8% of the population (in 2002), while the Public Opinion Barometer of the Foundation for an Open Society (in spring 2007) indicates 14.4%.

In conclusion, the percentage of those who stated they had been volunteers in Romania currently varies between 10-15% of the adult population and the differences between the percentages of people who report volunteering in Romania are due in particular to the understanding of the term "voluntary" within various investigations. For example, this percentages decrease if the chosen criterion is the type of association in which Romanians say they are volunteers. Bogdan Voicu (2005, p. 128-130) stands for the exclusion from this category of trade unions (which are "quasi-voluntary, both in what concerns the participation as a member and the active involvement in the organization, which in many cases represents preconditions for any employee"), political parties (where unpaid participation in the activities is substantially rewarded with access to profitable information, public image promotion etc.) and religious organizations where volunteering exists. After excluding these three types of organizations, the proportion of volunteers in Romania compared to European countries can be assessed (based on the "European Values Survey - 1999) as one of the lowest. The seven percents of the population engaged in "voluntary activities within any kind of organization, except for political parties, trade unions and religious organizations" are only a

quarter of the average percentage of the Western Europe countries and less than half compared to the average of ex-communist countries. The conclusion of this analysis is that "localization in Romania has the most negative influence (except Russia) on the individual probability for volunteering" (Voicu, 2005, 124).

A recent study (published by the European Commission in February 2010) on volunteering at European level underlines (in the country report dedicated to Romania) that, when invoked the result of investigations on the percentage of volunteers within population, special attention should be paid both to different research methodologies used (e.g. items used or sampling method) and especially to "several shortcomings of these data sources: first, they rely on self-assessment and do not provide other objective ways of measuring" (European Commission, 2010, 3), which makes the precise determination of the volunteers not very exact. This situation can be exemplified with the results of the "Public Opinion Barometer" (Badescu, 2007) which indicates an obvious discrepancy between those who declare themselves "volunteer members of an association" (between 9.2% in 2000 and 7.2% in 2007) and those who can be identified with certainty as active volunteers (those "who provide volunteer work each month), which represent less than 2% of the adult population.

In recent years it is known a slight numerical increase in volunteering in Romania: implementation of the "European Values Survey in 2008 indicates a 12.8% percentage of volunteers among the adult population - increased compared to 1999 - a growth also confirmed by the main *stakeholders* in local volunteering (European Commission, 2010, p. 6). This trend is consistent with the increased visibility of volunteering in recent years (due to the development of the network of volunteering centers, awareness campaigns and the involvement of public figures as volunteers, especially from the media).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding those who have done voluntary work after December '89, we could identify five researches aimed to establish with great precision the "profile" of the Romanian volunteer:

1) "The philanthropic and associative behavior of the population" (1996 and 1997). The research was undertaken by the Foundation for Civil Society Development, "by field mediation and sociological expertise of the Urban and Regional Sociology Center in Bucharest." The two researches were made by sociological investigation on a nationally representative sample of population, based on survey applied by interviewers. The questionnaires contained three sets of items, among which one dedicated to

volunteering, who "kept constant, so that comparisons are possible with a more pronounced degree of safety" (Saulean, 1999, p. 1). The set of items on volunteering was an adaptation of an American model, "*Giving and Volunteering Survey*", proposed for implementation in the countries participating in "*John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project - Phase II*."

After the research was done, results have been obtained regarding the status characteristics of the volunteers in Romania, which reflect "a moment of passage from a context of social optimism and relative relaxation of social issues, to a context of skepticism and tension of everyday problems" (Saulean, 1999, p. 37).

2) "*European Values Survey*" / "*World Values Survey* (1999), a research conducted by the Institute for Quality of Life Research of the Romanian Academy, as part of an international research project. The original objective of the research was to compare the value systems that those living in the European Community states adhere to, using representative samples of the population of over 18 years old in the countries under examination. In terms of volunteering, this research provides for Romania certain data directly comparable with those obtained in other countries, such as those relating to the percentage of volunteers, mentioned above.

Regarding the distribution of volunteers by types of organization, it is noted that volunteer participation is lower than in Western Europe or the ex-communist countries for each type of association in part, with two exceptions: participation in trade unions is greater in Romania than in the two categories of countries and in Romania, 0.4% of volunteers work in associations for "third world countries development or human rights", while in the other ex-communist countries this particular category is not represented.

3) "Trends of the philanthropic behavior in Romania: Individual Donors and Companies." The survey was conducted by Metro Media Transilvania (in June 2002), based on a representative sample of the adult population in Romania. The research also contains an overview of the Romanian volunteer profile, in 2002: "Volunteers and especially the volunteers who have worked for several organizations in the last year are mostly young, have a higher income than those who aren't volunteers (not much higher, though) have a higher education level, they are more often men (although there is a weak relationship in this matter) and they come from big cities (with over 200,000 inhabitants). Volunteers are generally employed (only 8.3% of the volunteers and 8.2% of those who have worked as

volunteers repeatedly are unemployed, compared with 18.3% among those who were not involved in such activities). Those who have repeatedly engaged in voluntary work are generally employees of private companies (37.7% compared to 22.8% among those who had not been volunteers)" (The Association for Community Relations and Allavida, 2003 p. 50).

4) "Volunteering in Romania: The state of the field (2007). The research was ordered by the National Centre of Volunteering "Pro Vobis" and carried out by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Babes-Bolyai in Cluj-Napoca. The demographic profile of the respondent volunteers in the research is described by the following variables: gender (female: 61.4% male: 37.9%), native language (Romanian: 91.1%, Hungarian 5.6%, other: 2.1% ; marital status (unmarried: 82.7% married: 15.2%, other 1.2%), religion (Orthodox: 75.6%, Greek Catholic 3.5% , Roman Catholic 2.8%, Reformed: 1.4%; Baptist: 2.8% Pentecostal, 2.3%, Adventist: 0.5% Atheist: 6.1% other: 4.0 %), education (highest level completed: without high school graduation: 4.2% of baccalaureate diploma: 51.5% university diploma: 21.5% postgraduate diploma: 5.4%; still in school : 14.5% other: 1.6%), employment status (full time: 22.2%; part time: 8.0% when not at school / college: 4.2% ; disease pension: 0.2%, retired: 3.5%; currently a student: 49.4%; currently a pupil: 9.4%; housewife / with no other source of income (male/female): 0.7% Unemployed: 0 , 7%).

5) *Study of Volunteering in the European Union. Country Report Romania* (2010). The research provides information about those practicing volunteering today: gender affiliation ("It seems not to be a clear relationship between volunteering and gender affiliation), age (the vast majority of volunteers are under 30 years old of age), area of residence ("large cities or very small communities), educational level ("almost half have graduated high school)" and are usually employed, mostly in private companies (European Commission, 2010, 7-8).

CONCLUSIONS

Volunteering in Romania is an emerging social practice, which (still) has the status of social innovation. In the sciences that study sustainable development of rural areas , the topic is almost neglected, despite the fact that volunteering facilitates a genuine community development: "A voluntary participation, free of constraints requires mostly, the size of finality (too), of involvement in action or in change in order to meet some internal needs of most members of the group or of some of

them who are perceived as being in a really difficult situation (Sandu, 2005, 26-27).

Community development has a much broader range of coverage than volunteering, including numerous human activities which do not exclude from the start the co-interest and the obtaining of benefits, including material ones, being "a tolerant label for a family, relatively disorganized of practices or models of local intervention which have or tend to have as a result "the welfare of the community" (Sandu, 2005, 15). W this form of social development, volunteering is usually included, which is addressed in this context especially in relation to the necessary capacity for community development (United Nations Volunteers, 2004).

In the Romanian rural areas, the development of volunteering involves, in addition to overcoming some general problems of Romanian society (like underdevelopment of associativity, assigning of a prominent role to authorities in social development, etc.) certain specific steps to encourage this social practice with multiple beneficial effects.

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