

VULNERABILITIES AND THE LABOR MARKET: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NGOS IN SUPPORTING DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

*Lecturer PhD. SÎNZIANA PREDA
West University of Timișoara, Romania*

ABSTRACT: *The article explores the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups in the labor market, highlighting the vulnerabilities that affect their employment prospects, such as poverty, lack of education, and discrimination. It examines the crucial role of social NGOs in supporting these groups by providing training, advocacy, and other services that improve their access to job opportunities. These NGOs help bridge the gap by addressing both the social and economic barriers these individuals face, ultimately contributing to greater inclusion and equity in the workforce.*

Key words: *NGOs; social services; labor market; vulnerable groups.*

Introduction

The integration of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups into the labor market is not a comfortable subject, nor a priority for employers. In Romania, over half of the unemployed registered in the autumn of 2024 were considered “hard to employ and very hard to employ, poorly or unqualified.” (“According to the ANOFM [Romanian National Employment Agency] database, in September 2024, out of 250,000 registered unemployed individuals [...] 61.7% of the total unemployed were hard to very hard to employ, poorly or not qualified at all.”) (EURES, 2025). The pandemic has increased their numbers but has also made their integration into the labor market more visible. Vulnerability translates into a greater difficulty – compared to other categories of unemployed people – in finding and keeping a job.

In 2007, Romania became a full member of the European Union, which, among other things, raised the issue of necessary initiatives for disadvantaged individuals and communities. Before this moment, Romanian society had not been particularly concerned with the idea of a vulnerable group, nor had sustained measures (such as inclusion policies) been implemented to improve the living standards or reduce the risk of poverty for the aforementioned groups. Five years after Romania's accession to the European Union, the majority of beneficiaries of training courses came from vulnerable categories (youth under 25, long-term unemployed, rural unemployed, as well as elderly individuals) (Constantinescu, 2013, p.

51). One of the key components of these measures refers to the integration of disadvantaged people into the labor market, a process in which the state has been involved to a limited extent, creating the conditions for social NGOs to intervene in this area.

Starting primarily from the 2010s, disadvantaged individuals or groups found significant support in Romania through nonprofit organizations. A number of NGOs active in the social sector launched projects dedicated to various marginalized categories. Some of these initiatives aimed to facilitate access to employment by providing basic skill development and occupational competencies, counseling, professional placement, etc. These types of enterprises became more numerous as the number and importance of NGOs grew within Romanian society. One explanation for this is the increasing awareness of the needs of individuals who differ from the majority (people with special needs, and not only those with disabilities).

It is evident that the activities of NGOs have been preceded by initiatives from the Romanian state: public institutions in the social sector have provided and continue to provide support to disadvantaged categories, but this support has been insufficient. “Many of the latter smallscale initiatives have arisen because it was judged that the disadvantaged persons could not make sufficient use of public provisions.” (Nicaise, Bollens, 1998, p. 142). The dissolution of the Romanian system after 1989 affected those already vulnerable more deeply, making them vulnerable in many ways. The nonprofit sector

gradually emerged as an alternative source of support for various marginalized groups, such as “the disabled, young people who have left home, people on social benefits, the homeless, immigrants and ethnic minorities, the mentally ill, (former) drug addicts, former prisoners etc.).” (Nicaise, Bollens, 1998, p. 142). The individuals listed are not easily accepted by society. For those who can and want to work, difficulties in integrating into the labor market are added. The transition from a passive to an active condition represents a necessary and essential change for them. In other words, the transformation – where possible – of a social assistance beneficiary into an employee is a goal both for the beneficiary and for those who operationalize the change and all it demands.

Such missions are assumed by NGOs, entities that get involved with know-how and emotional and/or material support. They guide, create opportunities (e.g., establishing relationships with employers), and inform disadvantaged individuals and groups about the labor market. Disadvantaged people have limited access to such information due to poor training; thus, they need tailored support, both as unemployed individuals and as those who have never entered the labor market (e.g., graduates, homemakers, individuals with certain disabilities, in general, people with no visibility on the labor market, forming a “border zone” of it (Nicaise, Bollens, 1998, p. 122).

Why do NGOs want to integrate disadvantaged groups into the labor market?

Active in the area of social responsibility, nonprofit organizations aim to support marginalized individuals, primarily to promote social equality and combat or reduce poverty. The projects of associations or social foundations train people, place them in jobs, or help them become small entrepreneurs. Obtaining jobs is a fundamental goal in supporting vulnerable individuals, but NGOs also want to transform them into independent individuals, capable of managing on their own, at least from a certain point onward. Especially in small towns and rural communities, where job opportunities are limited (both in number and variety), the mission of NGOs is more than welcome. It translates into training, placement, and other forms of support, which, in many cases, leads to breaking the

vicious cycle of poverty and despair.

Another cornerstone in the vision of organizations in the social services sector is the belief that the right to work is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of their affiliation to one group or another. Therefore, it is essential that disadvantaged individuals also benefit from equal opportunities for employment. It is well known that they are the candidates with the weakest chances in recruitment and selection processes, as employers seek to hire the best candidates. However, some individuals with various disabilities can succeed if they are supported through counseling, training courses, or other forms of assistance. NGOs provide such support and more: they instill confidence in these individuals, creating the idea that, despite their marginalization or disability, they can perform just like everyone else.

Contact with social NGOs opens the path to a mindset change, which is absolutely necessary for those who have lost their self-confidence, their will to fight, and their belief that they can rise above their limits and limitations. This interaction diminishes or even eliminates the feeling of stigma that marginalized individuals often feel, a feeling that can block initiatives to overcome their inferior condition.

Thus, organizations in the social sector offer personalized support, compared to public employment services. While national agencies cater to a large number of candidates for various positions, NGOs tailor their training offerings to the specific needs of certain beneficiaries, adapting to their difficulties, showing more patience and providing long-term support. The social and labor policies developed by NGOs take into account the distinct barriers that affect disadvantaged groups' access to various opportunities on the labor market. In developing these policies, NGOs conduct detailed assessments of beneficiaries' needs, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of not only their immediate problems but also the recognition of their strengths and aspirations.

In this way, NGOs facilitate and optimize the connection between job seekers and potential employers. Some organizations can only offer counseling and basic skill training. Others provide professional training and have established relationships with various companies over time, enabling them to guide their beneficiaries more effectively in finding jobs. Partnerships with

companies that are willing to hire are particularly necessary in disadvantaged or economically weak regions, as NGOs that generate job opportunities have local knowledge and strong networks.

Equally important, another aspect promoted by social service NGOs is the perception of individuals integrated into the workforce as contributors to the local and economic development of the communities they are part of. Moreover, social activists believe that disadvantaged individuals represent "an underutilized resource", both for their own benefit and for the job market. Through success stories, NGOs believe they can change the negative perceptions that employers and society have of certain categories of people.

What is the vision of NGOs in the sector?

In general, the actions of NGOs within this sector are framed by similar perspectives and objectives. The following section will summarize several examples, represented by the most prominent organizations in the field.

Mission: "We support people who have been labeled as "unemployable."

Once they join AFF, they are no longer passive and dependent recipients of social assistance. We help them transform from excluded and marginalized individuals into independent and dignified people. From passive beneficiaries, they become active citizens and taxpayers.

To fulfill our mission, we have created four socio-professional integration workshops – educlick, remesh, bio&co farm, and logietic – where we provide personalized services such as social support, employment integration counseling, psychotherapy, and educational support for skills development for disadvantaged individuals.

The principles that guide us are the following: people are at the heart of all our activities and projects. Partnership, the sharing of experience, and openness to others are the foundation of all our actions. We integrate into everything we do the principles of sustainable development, social equity, equal opportunities, fairer distribution of resources, collective and individual responsibility, and the social and circular economy.

We offer these individuals real work placements — employment contracts and salaries

— so that they can access their rights, rebuild their lives, and learn work-related skills. At the end of their socio-professional support pathway at Ateliere Fără Frontiere, we support them in finding employment on the conventional labor market or in protected forms of employment." (Ateliere Fără Frontiere web page).

"Values: In the next 10 years, we aim for all young people aged 16-25 from foster care centers in Romania, people with disabilities, and others in vulnerable situations to receive counseling and consistent support to start their careers and/or find a job suited to their qualifications, skills, and desires.

Vision: We believe that human dignity is a fundamental value that must be respected and protected. At the same time, we believe that this dignity largely depends on the freedom to choose one's occupation and the right to work. Therefore, we are dedicated to facilitating access to the labor market and supporting individuals who have difficulty identifying a job, getting hired, or integrating into the workforce (those in vulnerable situations). 90% of our profit is reinvested in our social mission.

Mission: In the first 3 years, our focus will be on the needs of young people aged 16-25 from foster care centers in Cluj County. Our first step in these efforts is to raise awareness and sensitize the local business community in Cluj about the challenges faced by people in vulnerable situations during the hiring process and the benefits companies can gain by employing and integrating these individuals into the workforce. We can only realize this dream with the support of the community!" (Ancora Social web page)

"Vision: The goal of RISE is to promote the social, professional, and economic integration of disadvantaged individuals in Romania into the labor market through the development of social enterprises. RISE advocates for social, economic, and environmental policies that ensure the full exercise, with respect for human dignity, of everyone's access to essential rights such as employment, education, housing, maintenance, culture, and well-being, including those who are excluded and marginalized." (RISE web page).

Conclusions

In Romania, the public sector has undergone numerous changes and turbulences since 1990, which explains its inability to manage the interests

of various disadvantaged categories. To address this, the non-profit sector has taken on initiatives for professional training and integration. With previous experience in the state system (e.g., social assistance services) and/or drawing inspiration from Western models, NGOs manage to cover a small portion of the job needs for those whom employers tend to overlook. The situation becomes more difficult when it comes to training, a process that requires numerous human and financial resources. It is unclear whether the National Employment Agency (ANOFM) is more effective in meeting these needs. Its professional training programs cater to broader categories of the population. However, the initiatives of NGOs are more clearly constructed and tailored to the profiles and needs of marginalized individuals and/or groups. In other words, the goal is to find a job for a person, not a person for a job.

Beyond the numerous individual cases they support, the activities of organizations have an impact on the community from which the beneficiaries come. Improving the living standards of a number of individuals also improves the lives of their families, and supporting multiple families results in a functional

NGOs thus prove to be vectors of change, through their commitment to create opportunities for less-favored individuals and groups. They also contribute by creating best practice examples and transferring know-how. The long experience of NGOs in the social sector has already generated a significant body of knowledge, not only regarding the needs of beneficiaries but also the outcomes of training programs, the obstacles hindering access to the labor market, and potential solutions to be considered and adopted through the involvement of multiple social actors. Where beneficiaries – as well as institutions, decision-makers at various levels, and society as a whole – understand how to become active participants in their relationship with social NGOs, the impact can become real and sustainable, as well as the economic growth.

NGOs in the social sector have created an ecosystem that manages to generate options for various vulnerable categories. This ecosystem is fragile, resources are limited, and state support is weak, but these entities manage to function and provide solutions by their ability to adapt more efficiently to the needs of individuals, groups, and their circumstances.

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