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Article

Mapping challenges of the Romanian NGOs : a focus on human resources

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Reference: Zbucea, Alexandra/Ivan, Loredana et. al. (2019). Mapping challenges of the Romanian NGOs : a focus on human resources. In: Management dynamics in the knowledge economy 7 (1/23), S. 9 - 27.
doi:10.25019/MDKE/7.1.01.

This Version is available at:
<http://hdl.handle.net/11159/4156>

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Mapping Challenges of the Romanian NGOs. A Focus on Human Resources

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Abstract. *The effectiveness of NGOs, similar to other types of organizations, depends on the quality and implication of their employees and volunteers. The literature highlights the role of learning capabilities, organizational learning, networking and community capacity building in ensuring organizational sustainable development in the NGO sector. In this framework, professional human resources should be an important part of the management strategy. Continuous and personalized training would be also important for NGOs. The present paper presents a qualitative investigation aiming to map the training needs and practices of the NGO sector in Romania, both from the perspective of its representatives and its stakeholders. The findings show a general agreement and concern related to the professionalism of the workers in the sector, as well as related to the lack of explicit responsibility/the feeling of being accountable assumed by the members of the sector. The study also revealed a need for closer cooperation between the members of the Quadruple Helix.*

Keywords: *third sector; NGOs; human resources management in NGOs; training for NGOs; NGOs stakeholders.*

Introduction

We observe an increased relevance of the nonprofit sector (the third sector) in terms of impact both on the society, as well as on the economy. This evolution leads to increased attention to the processes specific to nongovernmental organizations and their

relationships with other actors – academia, companies and public bodies. Therefore, we are now considering a quadruple helix ecosystem model or even a quintuple one, not a triple helix ecosystem model of development (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012; Ketikidis, Solomon, Siavalas, & Bota, 2016). This upgraded framework requires a more complex understanding of the challenges facing NGOs both internally and externally.

Nonprofits have to face more challenges than in the past decades, have to be more effective and accountable in front of more stakeholders. Therefore, they have become more business-like (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016) in order to be more cope with this shifting setting. This involves more stress put on human-resources management, both considering employees and volunteers.

Considering the briefly above presented evolution, the present paper aims to understand the state of human resources training in NGOs. The points of reference considered are both external and internal. The main environmental factors considered are networking strategies and stakeholder relationships. The internal environment is evaluated on several directions: marketing, communication, financial resources, project and processes management, risk management and human resources approaches. Several focus-groups comprising NGOs representatives, as well as their stakeholders have been organized for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena investigated.

Theoretical framework

NGOs face today a wide variety of challenges, very dynamic and complex, which form a blur puzzle. Part of this are the contextual external factors which change the “playing field” of NGOs: globalization, technological development, networking, decentralization (VanSant, 2003, pp.2-3). In the shifting external environment, NGOs have to increase their learning capability, as well as their capacity.

Learning capability is concept with complex impact on organizations (Britton, 1998), related to knowledge management, as well as to formal learning processes – among which training is only one element. It is a sine-qua-non condition for organizational development (Hailey & James, 2002) and sustainability (Britton, 1998). Through organizational learning, facilitated by a learning environment, NGOs could critically reflect on their behavior, improve their approaches and strategies, transfer knowledge and develop skills across the NGO. Organizational learning depends on inner characteristics of the NGOs and the internal relationships, as well as by the stakeholders and external context – including the economic dynamics and relationships (Burchell & Cook, 2008). Helping NGOs being more effective and sustainable, it helps them attain their mission.

NGO capacity is another aspect influencing the attainment of an NGO mission (Eisinger, 2002; Hailey & James, 2003). Capacity refers to “organizational attributes that get at such characteristics as institutionalization, competence, adaptability, and durability” (Eisinger, 2002, p.115). An organization should understand its capacity profile and activate it. The elements supporting this process are various types of resources, including knowledge and human capital. Networks and relationships are also significant enhancers of organizational capacity. All these, activated, might lead to organizational sustainable development.

Another significance of capacity building in the case of NGO is related to its clients/beneficiaries/ communities. NGOs can and should contribute to increased community capacity (Craig, 2007; Eade, 2010; Sanyal, 2006). Community (capacity) building would be an appropriate goal for nonprofits. This process is related to practices such as networking, responsibility, accountability and social impact. It is part of the sustainable impact and development of an NGO.

There is, therefore, a tight relationship between capacity and performance. Nevertheless, despite the clear resonance of the concept performance, in the case of NGOs this is not so crystal-clear. Profits or other bottom-lines are not quantitative benchmarks to be considered (Wadongo & Abdel-Kader, 2011, 2014).

The vital need to increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations has led to organizational diagnosis which determines effective organizational change. In this framework, a three-clustered set of tools measure organizational resources, organizational performance, and organizational sustainability (VanSant, 2003, p.4). To be able to measure all these aspects, proper managerial strategies, tools and skills are necessary. Therefore, a high level of professionalism of NGOs management is desirable for sustainable development of these organizations.

There are significant challenges to evaluating the impact of NGOs (Hailey & James, 2003). A first aspect to consider is that evaluation and control set quantitative levels of performance, while working with humans and impacting society leads to qualitative improvements. Also, the desire to measure and control leads in many situations to setting up a complex indicator system, putting a stress and extra-pressure on people and activities. Another challenge to be considered is the relationship between evaluation and organizational learning. The last is not necessary an outcome of a thorough evaluation, specific mechanisms and organizational culture being required. People, both paid staff and volunteers would need to be trained to ensure their capacity of analyzing the outcomes and assume skills development. By formal training programs, the learning capability of an organizational is enhanced.

Human resources are, for NGOs as well as for companies, an important asset and a challenge in the same time. Specific for NGOs is the cooperation with large numbers of volunteers. In some cases, the volunteers exceed in a wide degree the number of paid staff. It is therefore relevant to know if the paid staff enhance more the organizational capacity compared to volunteers. Studies show that a high ratio of employees/volunteers to clients/beneficiaries is related to a high organizational capacity. In the same time, more paid staff leads to higher effectiveness while a large volunteer base does not necessary involve high levels of effectiveness (Eisinger, 2002).

Strong organizational capacity is also dependent on its human capital. Therefore, practices related to employees and volunteers are influential in organizational development and performance (Farazmand, 2004). Effective practices of human resources management and training can be transferred in NGOs. Nevertheless, some specificities have to be considered. For instance, motivation is strongly influenced by the mission of the organization (Guo, Brown, Ashcraft, Yoshioka, & Dong, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2007), financial incentives might not work as well as in for-profit organizations (Akingbola, 2013; Guo et al., 2011), NGOs workers could influence in a wide degree the decision-making processes.

Human resources management is generally more developed in large NGOs (Guo et al., 2011). Other factors that positively influence human resources – related practices, in the US, are the affiliation to a national umbrella organization and the use of independent contractors. Values are also critical for human resources management in NGOs (Akingbola, 2013). We mention that sometimes the mission and the values previously mentioned might be in conflict with some organizational relationships and external interactions/ processes.

Training and professional development is part of strategic human resources management in NGOs. These approaches should target not only paid workers, but also volunteers of the organization. Provide professional development opportunities for employees is, nevertheless, nor such a common trait in NGOs (as a study developed in the United States shows – Guo et al., 2011).

The work in NGOs is intensive in social skills and labor. Therefore, human capital is extremely important and NGOs workers should benefit from professional development planning and training. This approach, and other strategic human resources management practices have a positive impact on employee motivation, organizational citizenship behavior and work performance (Akingbola, 2013).

Networking and partnerships also improve training, as well as capacity building (Sanyal, 2006). These approaches determine better approaches in the line of values transfer, better responding to community and staff needs, better coverage and field presence, as well as legitimacy. Therefore, external environment and opportunities should be integrated into human resources management.

NGOs are increasingly more strategic in their human resources management (Ridder, Piening, & Baluch, 2012). Strategic and more intense training has positive impact both on employees (morale, participation, etc.) and on the organization's performance.

Training support programs for the Romanian NGOs

According to the data of the National Institute for Statistics (INS,) in 2017, in Romania, there were 195.564 private organizations of all types (excepted SME's or large enterprises), more than double than in 2010 year, when there were recorded 79.381 units (INS, 2017). But this important increase was not homogenous for all types of private administration bodies. The total number of foundations stayed approximatively to the same level (17.724 units in 2017; 17.442 units in 2012). Cultural associations increased significant from 35.980 units in 2012 to 51.038 units in 2017 (INS, 2017).

In conformity with the study of the Foundation for the Development of the Civil Society (FDSC), in 2017, the field of interest of the Romanian NGOs focused mainly on local level (27% for urban area and 15% for rural area), compared to regional level (13%) and a low interest for international level (only 3% from the total of NGOs). The same study emphasized that more than 49% of the activities and projects carried on by the NGOs are in the same region with their headquarters and 13% launched major activities and projects in other regions (FDSC, 2017).

These facts suggest that Romanian NGOs are focused mainly to solve local and regional issues (implementing activities and projects in the same region with their headquarters), being in the same time low involved in major activities at international level. The low connectivity with the international NGOs has multiple consequences, as the lack of benefits of the EU cooperation and networking or low budgets (due the poor rate of absorption of EU funds).

One of the biggest issues for the Romanian NGOs is related to the way of financing of their own activities. In conformity with INS statistics (2016), from a total number of 42.707 active NGOs in 2015, only 5.302 organizations carried on economic activities (12,41% of total). The rest of NGOs were “forced” to apply for sponsorships, fiscal facilities (2% of the tax on individuals’ incomes could be transferred as donations), donations from members, state subventions, etc. A specific analyze of these facts leads to idea that there is a small number of Romanian NGOs capable to be sustainable on long-term based on their own economic activities. Also there is a small number of NGOs sustained mainly from the state budget, being autonomous using this scheme of financing. That means, if the global objective is a better sustainability, it is strongly necessary to improve the competencies of NGOs to manage better their financial issues. Unfortunately, a significant part of Romanian NGOs does not have correct information about the possibility of improving their managerial capabilities using the specialized consultancy and/or training facilities.

In conformity with the FDSC (2017) study data, only 27% of the NGO’s got information about financing funds or specific training activities, when 59% does not got any information from specialized human resources centers. The lack of information, training and specific managerial competencies leads inevitably to certain outcomes. Thus, only 54% of the Romanian NGO’s have built a strategic plan, while 45% have a strategy of communication, and only 25% have a fundraising strategy (FDSC, 2017).

The figures above show the high need for acquiring new specific skills in management, marketing and strategic planning, using the facilities of training sessions, mentoring and coaching programs, for managers and key decision persons. The lack of competencies for planning, implementing and managing NGO activities and programs leads to major risks for the future of an NGO. But definitely, all these above mentioned training needs are not the only ones needed by the Romanian NGOs.

Studying the actual status of the cooperation between informal groups and public administration, the FDSC study emphasized few gaps, especially in the communication field. The recommendation envisaged some types of training activities which are necessary for improving the capacity of informal groups: communication, PR, advocacy, legal, enforcement of the relationships with the public authorities (FDSC, 2017). These types of recommendation were made this time not only for top management of the Romanian NGOs but also for diverse types of employees.

Analyzing the above mentioned information, we remark the need to improve the quality of professional competencies in the Romanian NGOs sector. The first possibility is to enhance the role of specialized human resources centers, launching awareness campaigns, thus conducting to better information about the financing funds and specialized training programs. The second option is to access the facilities of Structural Instruments funds for Romania, but also the governmental funds. Here it could be

mentioned especially the Operational Program for Human Capital (POC), but also the Operational Regional Program (POR) and the National Program for Rural Development (PNDR) for the NGOs established in the rural environment. The third direction (and definitely not the last) is to access direct complementary funds (as the Norway and Swiss funds) or the Thematic Programs under Horizon 2020 (financed under the EU open project competition).

Concluding this subject, we emphasize that the investment in human resources of Romanian NGOs (especially in training facilities) should be an important objective on short and average term, without which the future sustainable development may be in danger.

Methodology

Method

An inductive qualitative approach was used to explore training needs in correlation to organizational and sectorial framework, in the third sector, in Romania. In order to do so, two groups were defined: (1) NGO's representatives – people involved in leadership positions in different non-governmental organizations in Romania who were asked to talk about training needs and experiences from the perspective of their organizations; (2) third sector stakeholders – business representatives, public administration representatives, volunteers from the third sector, academia members – who also described their experiences with the nongovernmental organizations they have worked in Romania. Discussions with participants from the two groups were initiated, using focus group techniques, to capture the experiences and issues NGO's in Romania might have on: financing, project management, human resources management, marketing, networking and advocacy – the main areas identified in the current literature as important for third sector efficacy and success, which also lacks proper training.

Participants and procedure

Three focus groups were conducted, with the two groups: NGO's representatives and third sector stakeholders (see Annex for the structure of each of the four focus groups) and snow balling techniques have been used to recruit participants. Eligibility in the first group (NGO's representatives) was based on the position in the organization (leadership position), whereas for the second group (third sector stakeholders) eligibility was assured by selecting participants who work with nongovernmental organizations in projects or similar activities over the last year (in the year 2016-2017). The selected NGO's were the ones indicated by the stakeholders. The focus groups have been conducted in April-May 2017 and participants were invited to SNSPA, after they have received an official invitation briefly describing the details of the research project and they have signed the informative consent regarding the use of data and the possibility for the discussion to be recorded. In total 16 participants from the NGO's representatives (distributed in two focus groups) and 9 participants from the stakeholders (one focus group) took part in this research study and their conversations were recorded were audio-recorded, with participant consent, and then transcribed verbatim. Participation in the study was confidential and any identifying information

has been removed to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. Each of the focus groups lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and a one of the authors acted as a moderator, while others took field notes.

Data collection

The interviews were translated from Romanian to English for analysis purposes. The interviews included and introductory discussions about NGO's in Romanian that participants admire, and details of participants' experiences regarding best practices and challenges while working in/with NGOs. The discussion with the stakeholders explored participants' opinions on NGOs of the main research topics: (1) examples of good practices in NGOs, challenges in NGOs activities, including the issue of impact of NGO's activities; (2) financing issues – access to finance, way of financing, problems of financing, crowdfunding, accessing funds, corporate social responsibility and NGO's involving and strategies to attract sponsorships and other types of corporate involvement for different projects; (3) project management and issues regarding projects in NGO's activities – from writing proposals to writing reports for ongoing projects; (4) Marketing activities in NGO's – from marketing plans to marketing tools and strategies they use in specific activities. Here we explore also the use of some strategic communication tools, as for example newsletters and press releases; (5) human resources management – from leadership to volunteers and human resources specific training and coordination; (6) networking and advocacy and how these are used by NGOs; (7) risks and problems NGOs face and strategies used to minimize the risks.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using the QSR NVIVO software package to facilitate the development of the major themes of discussion in the two analyzed groups: NGO's representatives and stakeholders. Analysis began with open coding, followed by axial coding, and then selective coding (Strauss, 1987). Thus, the discussion from the three focus groups, recorder and transcribed verbatim, was coded inductively on the seven topics of discussion outlined in the interview guide and described above. The findings presented here outlines the discourse of both NGO's representatives and stakeholders constructed around the four points of discussion, as the analysis as grounded in the experiences of the participants.

Findings

Examples of good practices in NGOs, challenges in NGOs activities

Stakeholders perceived that many times the NGOs they work with do not have a long-term vision and do not approach them as partners. They reported moments when interacting with NGOs which show no preparation for the meetings and no information about what stakeholders can provide.

There were NGOs which came from the beginning with good quality projects and they have thought about our involvement and what we can offer and the resources that we have, the issues that we can get involved in. Others, on contrary, do not have a vision, not a clear idea about the project itself and how we can become partners in their

projects. They only look for more partners but they did not do their homework before the meeting. This last approach is not proper from our point of view, as we cannot get involved in any project that has nothing to do with our purpose or our mission. (stakeholder, cultural sector)

Stakeholders underlined that the cooperation proposal not only has to be “clear” and “nice” – exciting to get them involved but also to fit the goals and the mission of the organizations they represent. Other stakeholders discuss the fact that not all partners involved in projects are serious enough, some are always behind the timeline, or do an improper work.

It happened to me several times, we got the projects and all the necessary approvals, but not all the partners did their jobs. Now I am thinking that maybe that is not specific for the NGOs’ world, as it also happened to me when I worked with other institutions as well, including private companies. (stakeholder, public administration)

The solutions suggested by stakeholders to such situations are: planning in advance any meeting or proposal and carefully look for trustworthy partners or partners with which the organization has fruitfully worked before. Such solutions reveal the need for training in the third sector and the importance of strengthening networks between NGOs so that partners will get in contact with each other and get familiar with projects’ expectations before the projects start.

Talking about the same issue, NGOs representatives stressed more the needs for training and the deficits of specialized personnel in the third sector.

When asking for funding, a corporation expects that you will come with a project manager, a PR person, people they would normally have in a corporation. They expect people who are specialized in project management, people who know how to write a general report, a financial report, a GANTT and similar things. Still, in the NGOs world, in Romania, nobody has such organizational culture and it has not been that much of investment in human resources until now. You don’t have these types of specialized people and you mostly relay on volunteers, you are very much dependent on volunteers. (NGO, education and social services)

NGOs representatives underlined the differences between third sector and private organizations in Romania, in terms of organizational, culture, specialization and investments in human resources. The differences between expectations and reality are described by several participants in the focus groups, creating a gap in communication between stakeholders and NGOs. Therefore, on the one side third sector’s representatives admit the importance of training for the personnel in their organizations, and on the other side, stakeholders should be aware of third sector limitations and differences when working with organizations that relay mostly on volunteers.

In addition, NGO’s representatives brought into discussion the issue of accountability in the third sector and the difficulties they have with making people accountable for their actions. This is a serious issue affecting their job routine and the way people working in this sector perceive their role and involvement in different tasks.

Accountability works and it is important when people were used to this in their previous activities. Instead some will say.... well here we work in a NGO, so we are not

accountable. Give me a break.... here things should be relaxed. (NGO, education and social services)

The fact that third sector is perceived by people as being “more relaxed” and with a lot of escape from accountability might be a serious issue that needs further exploration. In this respect some NGOs representatives blame the organizational culture creating little room for accountability, while others put a blame on individuals’ socialization – with people who have always had jobs in the third sector being expecting less accountability compared to private sector.

Also, NGOs representatives discuss the importance of a proper legislation in Romania, addressing the third sector and the top-down approach that need to be changed when talking about best practices. Ministry and national authorities are regarded as “the supreme authorities” and for some aspects there is a lack of legislation - putting sometimes NGOs in difficult situations and with no freedom to tackle priorities and areas that need urgent interventions. Some of the respondents admitted that their proposals many times address issues “labeled” by ministries or different national/local authorities as “priorities” and target to a lesser extent communities’ priorities. They would go for topics which are “easy to be funded” by different ministerial or governmental programs and not for topics they are specialized in or they issue emergent in the communities they work with. The top down approach is discussed in the way third sector in Romania chose priorities to action, the type of grants they have access to and the freedom they get in creating a community intervention. Moreover, the respondents condemn the lack of professionalism in public administration:

Public authorities... generally speaking, they lack the specific knowledge or specific legislation. The worse is that you do not get to speak with the same person and have a long time strategy. When a person [from the administration] finally gets the idea, you are assigned to another one – as the decision making persons in these institutions are changing all the time. (NGO, social services)

Also people who work in NGOs are changing constantly.

For a person to know a bit this domain and what is all about, you need minimum 2 years... and many times people do not stay 2 years in the same organization. (NGO, cultural sector)

One important barrier in working in the third sector is the volatility of the personnel and the fact that people do not stay longer enough in the same organization. Respondents talked about a minimum of two years to get professionalized in working on a certain problem in the third sector and also about the fact that often we do not meet people with that much expertise. In addition, the same volatility is to be found in relation to stakeholders, especially when we talk about public authorities and people from the local administration. In this way, the gap in communication between NGOs representatives and administrative representatives is continuously maintained.

One aspect that underpins the whole discussion with NGOs representative is the fact that NGOs should “hold a business mentality”. The lack of financial and economic knowledge of people working in the third sector was mentioned as a limit for the lack of “business mentality”. Others accused the lack of long term orientation and that third sector has to save money for time periods when there are not ongoing projects. The difficulties to have full-time employees and pay salaries on time are seen as

consequences of the “non-business” mentality. The integration of business practices in the NGOs was mentioned by several of the NGOs representatives.

Interesting enough the discussion over the role of the European funds on the development of third sector in Romania underlined some negative aspects: (1) some NGOs gave up to their initial mission and priorities to “hunt for” grant and fit the priority axes of diverse European funding lines; (2) applications had as a result an excessive bureaucratization of the third sector in Romania; (3) financial difficulties and inability to stay financial stable once the funds are coming with delays, in some cases for several months or even years. Again the NGOs representative underlined the need for a long term vision and saving for third sector in Romania in order to survive the impermissible environment of the European funds.

There were cases when the funds had serious delays and we were wondering – do we have the money to pay people’s salaries? But you have to have some money saved and there was not the case, because business practices are not integrated in NGOs. (NGO, social services)

When asked to give specific examples of NGOs that could be seen as examples of best practices, participants revealed few aspects that are considered key in evaluating third sector in Romania, at least in an academic perspective: (1) the fact that an NGO addresses a urgent need of community and shows significant impact in dealing with an important issue that affects the life of that community; (2) running fundraising campaign that attract public visibility and public involvement for a significant number of people (general audience); (3) managing to link between different types of NGOs thus contributing to the development of the third sector in Romania; (4) managing the link between different types of stakeholders with divergent interests and different profiles and getting them to work successfully together.

Financing issues in NGOs activities

Stakeholders rise the problem of financial accountability and that fundraising activities should be followed by a detailed report about how the money has been used and in which way the financial resources served the purpose of the project. They reported projects in which “they have never heard” about how the money has been used or they have been announced after they explicitly asked for it. A periodic announcement and proactivity in offering information have been elicited by the majority of the stakeholders.

We have many organizations that we finance and we support many causes, and this year, with one organization that we have regularly supported in the past... we did not get any information regarding the money. We do not talk about a detailed report, but a newsletter or something like this... in which they should have specify how they used the money. (Stakeholder, public administration)

The fact that stakeholders expect information about the way money they allocate or donate has been used, pushed NGOs not only to continuously update their internal financial reports, but also to be more aware of their financial accountability and the use of modern ways to communicate: as newsletters, personalized messages, info graphics and so on. Some of the stakeholders reported that when asking for such reports or informative letters, NGOs representatives were reluctant or they were less familiar with these ways to communicate: *They asked us – what do you expect from us? In which form*

do you want the financial report. Here we identify the urge need for training of people working in the third sector in Romania, and also a potential gap in communication between stakeholders' expectations and NGOs' reactions.

From the point of view of NGOs representatives, other difficulties are to be mentioned in the relation to the stakeholders, when it comes to financial domain. They explain that adding salaries of the personnel in the budget, when they ask for funding, significantly decreases their chances to get the grants or the donation. This poses a serious limitation for the organizations who want to work with specialized persons and not only with volunteers as they cannot secure they salaries. NGOs representatives notice that such practices of rejecting salaries from the budget happened not only when they ask for funding from public authorities, but paradoxically for them also when they apply for funding to private organizations and profit based corporations. Therefore, the view over the clear distinction between third sector - as being based particularly on volunteer work is shared not only among people who chose to work for an NGO - who potentially look for less accountability and more relaxed environment - but also from the business sector - that expect different exploitation of the funds in the third sector in comparison with the private sector.

In terms of sources of finance most of the NGOs relay on the European funds and public funds and some mention self-financing (especially in the educational sector). The self-financing on long term, in a sustainable way, is a challenge and raises some difficulties for the third sector in Romania: (1) the inconsistency in the public policies in Romania and financing lines NGOs can apply for; (2) the lack of long term vision of the programs proposed by the public authorities and the vacuum in the legislation - especially when talking about the partnerships with the business sector; (3) the lack of non-refundable funds at the national and local level to be accessed by organizations from the third sector on a regular basis; (4) the fact that some of the European funds are difficult to access by small and medium size NGOs, require specialized human resources and capital deposits.

Project management and marketing activities in NGOs

The idea that people working in the NGOs have poor marketing and project management skills has been underlined both by NGOs representatives and by the stakeholders.

In some projects with very good ideas they did not know how to communicate that idea, they did not succeed in building from it so they could grow. Instead a chaotic approach has been implemented. Many are afraid that someone would still their ideas, but in fact they lack project management skills. People working in NGOs are "one-man show" - they do all kind of things they are not specialized in and they lack know-how for some key aspects of the projects. (NGO, education and cultural sector)

The idea of "one-man show" working in the third sector is a metaphor (used by one of the participants) underpins the lack of specialization of human resources in the third sector, in Romania. In this respect our participants (particularly the NGOs representatives) underling the need for specialization especially in marketing and project management areas. Some indicate the need for PR specialization in the third sector in Romania or the importance of management studies for those occupying management positions in different NGOs.

Also people with more experience in working in NGOs signalize the differences between large NGOs (ex. those who have branches in other countries or who are internationally supported and small or local NGOs, the later with less specialized and more volatile personnel. Therefore, the lack of specialization of human resources and the lack of training in marketing, project management, communication and PR areas is merely specific to the local and small organizations, thus creating a gap between the potential of these organizations and the one of the large NGOs active in Romania.

When it comes about writing project proposals, there is a gap between large and small NGOs. The larger ones already have experience on this, for the small ones.... sometimes they even do not have the proper resources. They always ask the help of a specialist or the recommendation for a person who can write the proposal. (NGO, cultural organization)

In addition, people brought into discussion the idea of corruption in the allocation of funds for projects that are subjects to competition and the fact that seldom in these competitions evaluation process is not done properly or ethically. In this context the fact that project management specialists are asking a percent of the grant (if the proposal is successful) to write the proposals is considered as non-ethical and corrupt situation. Still these are considered “normal practices” for small and local NGOs who lack human resources and project management specialists in particular.

Though some of the NGOs representatives admit that such practices for project management and writing proposals are current in the Romanian third sector, some consider that the person who contributed to the success of the proposal is entitled to such percentage, while others blame the practice. When describing their personal experiences with the payment of a percentage of the grant value to some specialist who helped writing the grant proposal, some describe the process as happening only after the grant has been successful, whereas other described the process as one in which the NGO has to pay a part of the money in advance regardless of the successful of the proposals and another part after the grant has been received.

Normally such practices maintain a low professionalism of human resources in the project management area, when we talk about the third sector and also raise some important ethical and procedural questions: (1) who are the persons who help small size organizations from the third sector to write project proposal?; (2) in which way these experts are payed after the solicited grant are approved? Can we talk about a situation that force NGOs to use illegal or semi-illegal strategies in writing project proposal and then administrating the funds they got?; (3) if we can talk about enterprises specialized in helping NGOs to write proposals, whose interests these specialists represent and how the fee is shared between different stakeholders involved in the process?

As participants declare: “we do not dare to go further” with asking such questions, though they admit this is a serious issue that raises some concerns and need to be further explored.

Human resources management and needs for training

Besides the need for specialists in project management, NGOs representatives talked about the visibility of NGOs in online and offline. In this context, the importance of training in communication and PR for people working in the third sector:

Visibility is a big challenge. We have to be aware of each other activities. We do not have community centers and we try to build such centers now. This because in order to have a strong community, we need community centers. Previously, in the communist times, there were cultural centers which have not been replaced with anything else. (NGO, education and social services)

The idea that NGOs representative have to act like community facilitators is underlined by several participants. The revival of community centers and community life in general is seen as a central objective of the third sector in Romania. As a result, the importance of training people working in NGOs to work as community facilitators.

In addition, the fundraising and marketing skills are valued and underline the importance of training in these areas. These, in the context of difficulties to work with volunteers, the insufficient number of volunteers and the difficulty of retaining them within organizations of the third sector, were presented as serious challenges.

It is difficult to attract volunteers who can get involved with national projects. It is hard to get professionals to work in large scale projects, except from the situation in which you work in collaboration with different corporations [private] and you can do a barter. In this situation you can hire somebody from a marketing and communication agency. When you work with volunteers... students... they do not know that much and you also have to pay them for large projects. I guess faculties have to oblige them to have relevant internships and not only internships on paper. (NGO, education and culture)

The need of specialized human resources in Romania is approached by different techniques by the organizations from the third sector in Romania and training is not really seen as a common practice. Instead they look for collaborations with the private sector that could provide them with professional resources or for dedicated agencies (PR and marketing). Working with students and generally speaking with volunteers proved to be difficult and non-sustainable, therefore NGOs found alternatives in creating links with the private sector.

The obstacles for any NGO who tries to find solutions for the lack of specialization of its human resources are not only the financial resources and the impossibility to pay its employees at the level of private sector, but also the limited possibility to use modern tools from marketing and communication domain:

If you want to use marketing tools there is a problem. I will give you one example. I had a volunteer who could help with the social media aspects, using Facebook ads, Instagram and things like this. Then she told me that many of the tools are not for free. If you want to increase your visibility on Facebook, you need to pay for these tools. (NGO, social services and education)

Also, NGOs representatives discuss the lack of legislation that could help the third sector to evolve in Romania, in term of the professionalization of human resources. Particularly the dedicated law concerning voluntary work and the delay to discuss this law in the

Parliament was criticized. As a result, even in the organizations which have many volunteers, their limited involvement is an issue difficult to solve. The fact that volunteers ask for diplomas and different types of certificates for any type of involvement is an obstacle in working in the third sector – volunteers' motivation is perceived as episodic, mainly intrinsic and short term motivation, financially driven. The so called "certificates" are the part of portfolios that students gather targeting a better job in the private market, while NGOs expect them to be motivated to stay working in the sector. In addition, "hunting for certificates" is presented as a generalized practice with negative effects in various life-spheres, outside of the NGO world.

We had a national activity and we had more than 6000 children from the poorest areas in the country participating in a contest and we had children who did not take part in the contest, even if they initially subscribed for – even those asked us for the certificates. They motivated the fact that their teachers are asking for the certificates, for getting points for extra-curricular activities. (NGO social services and education) A friend of mine told me that she organized a charitably activity in a project and people could donate clothes for others and some persons asked for certificates because they brought clothes. (NGO, education)

The fact that volunteers are running after diplomas, certificates and others similar documents creates a clientelist relationship between the NGOs representatives and potential volunteers. The idea of reciprocity between volunteers and the organizations their work for is more a model that participants will look for in recruiting personnel: they admit that organizations should use people's potential and allow them to develop through working in organizations, while volunteers should show humanity and intrinsic motivation in the tasks they want to get involved. The fact that some volunteers are badly treated or ignored in the organizations they chose to work for was discussed as a practice that contributes to the reluctance of young people, at the beginning of their career, to look for voluntary enrollment in different NGOs. The solution suggested by the participants is reciprocity and creating an environment for the volunteers in which they will feel valued and they will estimate that they could grow professionally speaking. In this respect the need for career plan training for both volunteers and people who recruit volunteers appeared in the discussion and was supported by some of the participants.

When NGOs representatives were asked about the type of training they have had for their personnel, some areas were predominant: (1) project management and writing a project proposal; (2) fundraising; (3) management and leadership; (4) lobby and advocacy. Some organizations mentioned more specific trainings, as in the field of personal responsibility – training people to be more efficient and take more responsibilities at work, or head-hunting – learning how to recruit the right persons for the right jobs. Also others mentioned the lack of mentorship in the third sector and the fact that implementing mentorship programs would maybe increase volunteers' retention. All participants agreed that "the one-man show" – people who do everything and nothing in a very specialized way – is a model of human resources in the third sector that creates lack of efficiency and poor performance.

Conclusions

In order to be effective and sustainable and effective, NGOs should strategically use their organizational learning capabilities, considering both internal and external

environment, including stakeholders of all types. Human resources management and training strategies are part of this equation.

The NGOs employees/ volunteers/ representatives, as well as the way they relate to external stakeholders are influential in terms of attracting resources and partners, of developing networks, of increasing the organizational capabilities. Since, in Romania, they do not benefit in the eyes of stakeholders and being professional and reliable, training seems to be a compulsory approach. This should be a priority for the Romanian NGOs considering both that the formal educational programs for NGOs workers are thin and do not fit to cover the demand. The empirical investigation showed a strong need for capabilities development and training of NGO workers in order to increase the strategic approaches.

Beside training, the investigation revealed the need for strengthening the networks among the representatives of the Quadruple Helix. Closer cooperation, long-term successful joint projects and activities, not only that would increase the trust among partners, would lead to better understanding of specific needs and practices, also would lead to increased capabilities and the development of the skills and knowledge of those involved.

Both stakeholders and NGOs representatives are conscious of the need of training in the third sector. A common explanation offered is related to poor organizational culture and improper human resources management in NGOs. This suggests the need of training not only at operational level, but also at upper hierarchical levels.

The NGO representatives seem to accept this situation as natural considering the characteristics and the poor resources of the sector. Some seem to accept a lower level as professionalism as being the state of the art in the sector, which cannot be changed. This suggests also the need to action at the level of mentalities, a more dynamic attitude and less stoic approach being necessary in the Romanian third sector.

Speaking of mentalities considered widespread by the participants, we spotted the lack of feeling to be accountable. The research suggests that wanting to do good and being involved in projects with a positive impact on society are not enough to make people responsible and do their best. These aspects should be more in-depth explored, since this mentality – if it is widespread – would negatively influence the effectivity of the sector.

Several problems with which NGOs confront at the level of human resources were revealed. Besides the flaws in accountability and responsibility, the most often specified aspects are the increased volatility of the personnel and the loose organizational culture. These issues are potential perpetrators of a lesser level of professionalism in nonprofit sector, compared to businesses – which is considered a model of good practices in the field of human resources and management strategy. We also mention that the public organizations surfaced as being similarly influenced by more or less common factors.

Not surprisingly, obtaining the necessary funding emerged as an important concern of NGOs. Again the business-model was positively proposed, while the European funding – although desirable – was highly criticized. More training and a more professional attitude in the context of sponsorship and financial management might also release the

pressure from NGOs facilitating more effectiveness in securing and using the necessary funds. Also, different perspectives between NGOs and stakeholders considering the use of funding revealed the need of more discussion and empathy from their part. A double standard in terms of financial processes was identified.

The participants in the focus-groups proved to be rather critical referring project management and marketing approaches of NGOs. This was surprising considering the relatively large number of training programs for NGOs in the field of project management and the opportunities they have to learn by doing – in the process of gaining grants and implementing different types of projects.

An explanation that emerged for this negative evaluation was that many people working for NGOs are “one-man show”. The need for specialization is not necessarily a simple solution. It does not depend only on the professionalization in a certain field. Participating in training programs is necessary and but enough. People working in NGOs should have the opportunity of applying what they learned in a job specialized in that field, not trying to do simultaneously all sorts of task. Therefore, this is also a matter of management and how responsibilities are allocated, but also a matter of having a large enough employee community to allow specialized posts. Training might not be enough.

The dimension of the NGO is a critical aspect. Not having enough people for specialized responsibilities, leads to a lesser level of professionalism. Externalization of services is also perceived as one factor leading to smaller capabilities for NGOs. Among the skills which are not so developed in NGOs, communication and marketing were more often mentioned.

Volunteers proved to be a sensitive issue. Even if many NGOs rely on them, volunteers are not positively perceived. And the main issue in discussion is not that they are not specialized enough, but their attitude towards the work in the NGO and their motivation which is not stimulating then to be responsible and effective. Reciprocity and training (providing professional development opportunities) for volunteers are among the solutions offered.

Contradictory aspects have been revealed while specifically considering the training the NGOs provide. Despite the problems identified, the participants indicated a wide array of training programs covering many aspects of the activity in an NGO. This shed a shadow on the effectiveness of these programs, on their impact on the organizations providing them.

Acknowledgements. *This paper has been based on research generated by the Erasmus+ project "Advancing the Third Sector through Innovation and Variation" (Grant Agreement No.: 2016-1-EL01-KA204-023550). The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*

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Appendix

Table 1. The structure of the participants to the focus groups

Characteristic	Number of participants
Stakeholders' representatives	
Age	
18-24	1
25-34	4
35-44	4
45-54	0
55 or more	0
Level of education	
Secondary education	0
Higher education	0
University Degree	9
Years of work experience	
Less than a year	0
1-3 years	2
4-7 years	4
Over 7 years	3
Position	
Intern / Volunteer	1
Employee	1
Middle management	3
Upper management	4
Type or organization	

Public administration	4
Business	2
University	1
Public / Private nonprofit organization	2
NGOs' representatives	
Age	
18-24	3
25-34	4
35-44	8
45-54	0
55 or more	1
Level of education	
Secondary education	0
Higher education	3
University Degree	13
Years of work experience	
Less than a year	0
1-3 years	2
4-7 years	5
Over 7 years	9
Position	
Intern / Volunteer	2
Employee	1
Middle management	10
Upper management	3
Type or organization*	
Culture	5
Development	2
Education	2
Health	1
Social	6
Youth	5

** Most NGOs represented are active in more than one domain*

*Received: October 10, 2018
Accepted: January 14, 2019*