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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială

Review of research and social intervention

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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Victor NICOLĂESCU

Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2012, vol. 39, pp. 117-133

The online version of this article can be found at:

www.rcis.ro

and

www.scopus.com

Published by:

Expert Projects Publishing House

On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index
(Sociology and Social Work Domains)



Good Practices Assessment in the Sector of Social Economy

Victor NICOLĂESCU¹

Abstract

Social economy is the applied field of intervention aiming to increase the social inclusion of the people from the vulnerable groups; this calls for an efficient relocation of the social economy sector among the social policies in Europe. Within the context of the current prolonged economic crisis, it becomes obvious that the identification, evaluation and valorisation of the best practices in the field of social economy is an action which ensures the promotion and the conceptual and theoretical consolidation of the aspects specific to this form of economy. This article presents the main aspects regarding the acknowledgement and definition of the social economy, the perspectives of this sector considering the economic crisis, as well as several initiatives and methodologies to evaluate the good practices in this field of activity. The article highlights the importance of capitalising on the practical aspects of the previous positive experiences in the field of social economy, when planning the process of social innovation at the European level.

Keywords: social economy; evaluation; social innovation; social inclusion; good practices, practices; incomes.

Introduction

A first observation regarding the conceptual clarifications concerning the social economy shows that this term has multiple meanings whose roots go back to the earliest initiatives in this field. Thus, the opinion goes that social economy appeared simultaneously both within the context of the creation of a social science, and with the purpose to designate a group of practices and institutions (Demoustier, 2004): a) as concept, social economy was launched in the 19th century

¹ “Petre Andrei” University, Faculty of Social Work and Sociology, Iași, ROMANIA; E-mail: vic72ro@gmail.com

and was confronted by several adaptations: a) either as consolidation of the political economy – production of means of existence beyond the material production; this was the initiative of the liberals (such as Charles Dunoyer, in 1830, who provided the launching pad for another author, in 1848 – John Stuart Mill); b) or as a criticism and substitute of the political economy (by the Christians and socialists, such as Auguste Ott, in 1851); c) or as a form of integrating the political economy (Proudhon); d) or as a complement to the economic currents within which the public economies were growing (Walras, 1896; Gide, 1905); b) as an assembly of practices and institutions, social economy became progressively free of the theories developed by the economists, then by the employers, and was gradually defined in terms of economic association. Thus, the rediscovery of the social economy in the 19th century was marked by the higher autonomy of the collective private organisations in relation with their integration within the public interventions, as particular forms of the non-capitalist companies, in opposition with the distrust and selectivity imposed by the competition and by the conditioned funding.

Presently, the social economy is still struggling to acquire acknowledgement of its importance among the worldwide economies; there are distinct support points which may aid the consolidation of this field. Thus, the acknowledgement of the social economy sector can be analysed from the viewpoint of 4 components (Nicolăescu, Căce, Koutmalasou, & Stănescu, 2011: 13-24): the *conceptual component* (elaboration of definitions and typologies); the *normative component* (adoption of new legislative initiatives at the European and national levels); the *institutional component* (emergence and proliferation of the representative structures which promote, develop and monitor specific policies); the *academic component* (establishment of the aggregate scientific resources on the basis of documents). If the analysis of this field of activity is narrowed to the identification of the definitions of the social economy organisations, one may identify two formulas of definition: one with exhaustive meaning and one with narrow meaning. With the *exhaustive meaning*, the social economy entity is defined as the organisation owned and controlled democratically by a group of people, joined on a voluntary basis, whose purpose is to meet economic and social needs, and which generates a significant social impact for the vulnerable social groups (by job creation, by supporting the local development, etc.). With the *narrow meaning*, the social economy organisation has a fundamental social mission, runs economic activities and uses the resources obtained from various sources, to finance forms of social support for the vulnerable social groups (Arpinte, Căce, & Scoican, 2010: 19). Complementary, in support of acknowledging the social economy sector, some authors refer to all the organisations activating somewhere between the public and the private sector in terms of organisation, operation and stated principles (Pîrvu, Ungureanu, & Hagi, 2009: 53), while other authors identify the types of entities that might be included within the social economy sector (Arpinte, Căce &

Cojocaru 2010; Cace et al., 2011): some types of NGOs, but only the associations and foundations which provide social services; the companies with special status, such as the protected workshops, which provide jobs for the people with disabilities; the mutual aid cooperatives for the employees and pensioners, which are mutual organisations; the cooperatives of any kind (consumption, craftsmen, agricultural, transportation etc.); the pensioners associations that supply social services.

The debates also regard the so-called third sector, which refers to a wide range of organisations, beyond the traditional public and private sectors, which include the cooperatives, mutual organisations, associations, foundations, philanthropic organisations, the non-profit organisations, the voluntaryism organisations. This perspective considers that the definition of social economy is not that simple, because this expression is used to define a complex world and a system of relations which govern the third sector and the non-profit organisations: creation of flexible jobs, active citizenship, basic services for the people, decentralised social work, observance of the human rights, consolidated policies of local development and social cooperation. Thus, this is an economy with a variety of actors, from cooperatives to mutual organisations, foundations and associations relying on voluntaryism, as well as other bodies whose common feature is the non-profit. These invisible, yet highly valuable, resources are not the only ones which are important – by making the communities to feel at ease – but they also proved to be important for local economic success and for the political progress (Gittell, 1998). The ambivalent relations between the social science and practice show the importance bestowed on innovation and mutual influence of the two spheres, revealing the importance of the initiatives, in general, and of the projects and of the good practices, in particular, to open new horizons of knowledge.

The identification and evaluation of the best practices in the field of the social economy is an activity which ensures the promotion and the conceptual and theoretical consolidation of the aspects specific to this form of economy. The organised framework for identification, evaluation and promotion of the good practices in the field of social economy provides the support for the accomplishment of the Europe 2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth that depend on research and innovation as key-elements of the social and economic prosperity and of the environmental sustainability.

Within this context, the social innovation and the use of the results produced by the evaluation of the good practices in the field of social economy is an activity which must be consolidated with the aim to support the European innovation policy. Within this context, we anticipate that the application of efficiency patterns built on the basis of the established good practices will be the core of the next generation of programs supported by the European Social Fund. This will have a sound and long-term impact in all 27 member states.

Social economy – perspectives within the context of the global financial crisis

The current global economic crisis has a stronger adverse impact on specific groups of population because their incomes and purchasing power are diminished; consequently, the conditions for their participation in the common life of the community deteriorate gradually. However, the line of social exclusion and poverty is not always discernible, while the relation between the income and social exclusion is not univocal. The successive reduction of the pay for the performed work shows that the additional access to occupation is not always the safest way of protection against social exclusion and poverty. Thus, one may notice two large categories of people who are affected by the economic crisis and who need complex and coordinated measures to control the possible social exclusion that may encompass both the people in extreme poverty and the employed people who live in poverty: a) on the one hand, the individual people and the marginalised groups which don't have enough incomes and which have difficulties to access to labour market and the common life of the community; b) on the other hand, measures have to be considered for the people living at the limit of the social exclusion spectrum and who cannot earn enough incomes, even though they are not excluded.

The social policies of the EU member states aim to protect the unemployed people by controlling the effects of poverty in correlation with the development of that particular member state and of the market (Cace, Cace, Cojocaru, & Nicolăescu, 2012). The measures taken to limit the effect of the crisis at the level of the employment policies didn't yield, however, the expected results on the background of the increasing trend of unemployment at the European level. Thus, the unemployment rate hit a new EU record, 10.7% in October 2012, while it reached 11.7% in the Euro zone, the highest level since the introduction of the Euro. The total number of unemployed people in the EU member states reached 25.913 million people (an increase of 2.160 million compared to October 2011). In just one month (September to October 2012) 204,000 more people turned unemployed throughout Europe (Eurostat, 170/2012).

Compared to the previous trends displayed throughout Europe, the social economy sector increased significantly in importance along the last 30 years in terms of economic activity and social policies planning both in the EU member states and worldwide. This was the effect of the higher unemployment rates of the late 1970 years and of the shrinking aid from the welfare state.

The importance of the social economy was highlighted in the EU member states particularly because it can be found in almost all economic sectors and because there is a legal form of acknowledgement, support and development of the social economy sector. In time, each EU member state made changes in its

legislation following the conferences with selected social economy organisations. Thus, the Permanent European Conference of the Cooperatives, Mutual societies, Associations and Foundations (CEP-CMAF) promoted a regulation of the social economy, the *Chart of Social Economy Principles*.

Social Economy Principles included in the Chart of Social Economy Principles:

- Primacy of the individual and social objective on the capital;
- Voluntary and open affiliation;
- Democratic control through the membership status (this principle doesn't apply to the foundations, because they don't have members);
- Combination of the members/users' interests and/or the general interest;
- Defence and application of the principle of solidarity and responsibility;
- Autonomous and independent administration from the public authorities;
- Most of the surplus is directed towards the objectives of sustainable development, towards the services of individual/general interest.

Source: Preoteasa, Arpinte, Hosu, & Cace, 2010: 7.

Social economy is particularly important for the development of the European Union because by its activities, it supports the economic and social development of the European Union, having a significant impact across Europe: *it contributes to an efficient competition on the market; it provides potential for job creation, for labour force employment and for new forms of entrepreneurship; it relies largely on activities run in order to meet own needs; it favours the participation of the citizens and the voluntary activities; it consolidates solidarity and cohesion; it contributes to the integration of the economies from the candidate countries* (Myers, 2009: 36).

The increasing importance of the social economy organisations is acknowledged by the national authorities and by the European commission. A recent study identified 82 support measures in 31 European countries, grouped in five large categories (Heckl, 2007: 3): *legal provisions* (21 analysed measures); *financial support* (26 analysed measures); *business support* (13 analysed measures); *measures to improve cooperation* (8 analysed measures); *EQUAL* (8 analysed measures).

The process of European inclusion and the Lisbon Agenda played an extremely important role for the development of social economy in Europe. In most countries, the Joint Inclusion Memorandums and the National Plans also had a major impact, the latter ones marking the social exclusion and poverty. The focus on European programs, the need to mobilise all stakeholders, the involvement of the social economy in pre-accession projects and the structural funds, all of them exerted an influence on the social economy activities (the legislative changes included). Furthermore, these programs augmented the role of the social economy

as provider of social work and increased its visibility in front of the political and public decision-making factors (Leø & Jeliaskova, 2007: 202). The European Social fund is the most important and powerful instrument on the labour market; it is the result of an experience of more than 50 years of the EU (set by the 1957 Rome Treaty) (The European Social Fund, 2007). The draft of regulation for the ESF (COM, 2011, 607) for 2014-2020 includes a budget envelope of 376 billion Euros; the following provisions will ensure the concentration of funds in agreement with the principle of achieving a sufficient and demonstrable impact: a) the support for the administrative capacity should be limited to the member states with less developed regions, or eligible for the Cohesion Fund; b) at least 20% of ESF budget should be used to promote social inclusion and to fight poverty; c) financing through operational programs should focus on a limited number of investment priorities.

In agreement with the draft of ESF regulation for 2014-2020, this instrument will target four thematic objectives in the European Union: a) promoting employment and supporting labour mobility; b) investing in education, skills and life-long learning; c) promoting social inclusion and combating poverty; d) enhancing institutional capacity and efficient public administration.

The social stake of the European Union to consolidate the level of welfare of its member states is particularly active through the promotion of good practices in the field of social economy, with a rather wide range of programs available for this sector. On October 6, 2010, the European Commission approved the initiative of innovation which sets a strategic approach led from the top political level. The union of innovation will focus the European efforts towards meeting the challenges of society, such as the climate changes, energy and food safety, population health and ageing; *it will use the intervention of the public sector to stimulate the private sector and to remove the obstacles which prevent the ideas to reach the market* (these include the lack of financing, the fragmented research markets and systems, the insufficient use of the innovation means and the delayed use of the standards). The Union of innovation is the “admiral ship” of Europe 2020 Strategy, which pleads for a strategic and integrated method of research and innovation. This initiative sets the framework and the objectives that should be financed by the future EU financing for research and innovation, based on the provisions of the treaties (COM, 2010: 546).

The re-emergence of the social economy sector as important agent for employment, economic growth, social solidarity, associationism and social work, triggered a lot of debates (Nicolăescu, Cace, & Cace, 2012: 520) and coincided with the enhanced importance bestowed on running program and project-based activities in all European countries, irrespective whether they were member states or candidate states. The development of social economy is at a crucial moment due to the present economic crisis, which will validate or invalidate the particular economic patterns. This is why the process of evaluation and monitoring of the social

economy projects is a priority, which will demonstrate the necessity to continue these innovative initiatives that may change people and communities.

Initiatives and methodologies to evaluate the good practices in the field of social economy

Setting a set of criteria for the identification of the best practices in Europe and worldwide has the purpose of enhancing the growth of social economy, of the competitiveness and quality of life of the people and communities (Cozarescu, 2012: 134). The “good practices” and the “evaluation” can be found and analysed in detail on the interdisciplinary and very broad field of the social domain, which requires, for rigour and clarity, a brief definition and an analysis of those conceptual areas concerning the relation between evaluation and good practices.

Similarly with the concept of social economy, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of good practice, so that we will give several definitions, for a better understanding of this concept. *A good practice is a technique or methodology which, by experience and by research, proved to lead for sure to the expected outcome.* The commitment to use the best practices in any field is the commitment to use all the available knowledge and technology to ensure the success (Rouse, 2007). Perrin (2003) considers that a good practice is *any social intervention which functions (totally or partially) and which proves to have practical relevance at any level and in circumstances other than its original context of application (transferability).*

On the other hand, evaluation is a procedure that is used periodically (before project implementation, half-way during the implementation period or at the end of the implementation period) with the purpose to estimate *the accomplishment of the objectives* in relation with the project results and to determine the factors responsible for the success/failure of the project (Măţăuan 1999: 61). Within the context in which the evaluative process is used as *decision-making instrument* (Măţăuan 1999: 61), which presumes the analysis of the efficiency, efficacy, impact and durability of the project, evaluation is used as decision-making instrument during project implementation to determine the efficiency of using the resources and to avoid the identified mistakes (Negut, Nicolăescu, Preoteasa & Cace 2011: 48). The evaluation of the social interventions uses the same methods irrespective of the level of intervention, so that the same methods are used at the micro- or mezzo- level; these methods are mainly quantitative and they are also used at the macro-social level, where the policies are made (Arundel et al., 2000). Therefore, the “practice of evaluation presumes the systematic collection of information about all activities, characteristics and results, staff and deliverables of the program, with the purpose to be used by particular people in order to reduce

incertitude and to improve efficacy and to take decisions regarding that particular program” (Mătauan 1999: 63).

The way to determine what a good practice or a success story is determined by rigorous evaluations. These evaluations also appeared from the wish for transparency and from the will to determine the impact of the different projects and programs. The main *obstacles* in the way of determining the good practices in social economy are: the lack of clarity of the conceptual framework (Cojocaru, 2010); the lack of methodological knowledge; the absence of resources for a thorough analysis (Cace, Nicolăescu, & Scoican, 2010: 112). The reviewing process regarding the European employment strategy specifies that (European Commission, 2005): a) the good practice should be relevant for the current political priorities and for development; b) the good practice should bring concrete answers to the problems approached by the current policies and by the development; c) the good practice is set to be “good” on the grounds of demonstrated and certain results; d) the good practice is evaluated as “good” if the potential users consider they might adopt it, when the potential of transfer to beneficiaries is evaluated.

In the 2002 paper on the EQUAL Conference from Barcelona regarding the network of inclusion, the European commission suggests that the following requirements should be ideally observed in order to be qualified as good practice:

- *Innovating* – it provides new, creative resources for the current problems of the social exclusion, discrimination and inequality on the labour market;
- *Efficient* – it deals in a different manner and has a positive, material impact on the life of the socially disadvantaged individuals, groups or communities;
- *Competent* – it is the most advantageous;
- *Durable* – it produces long-term benefits for the participants and for the community in general;
- *Reproducible* – it has the potential to be reproduced within a similar context, serving as patterns for the emerging initiatives and for the policies worldwide;
- *Transferable* – it has the potential to be transferred within different contexts and/or for different problems;
- *Politically relevant* – it addresses real problems and answers the needs of those who make policies.

The first step of the efficient interventions in the field of social economy refers to the knowledge of the main operational mechanisms of the social economy organisations (see the table below):

<i>Main operational mechanisms of the social economy</i>			
	Non-governmental organisations	Mutual associations	Cooperatives
Role	Supply services to their members and/or to the entire community.	Supply services to their members and to their families.	Supply goods and services to their members and, in specific circumstances, to the community.
Types of products and services	Goods and services that, generally, are not on the market, but there also are demands which display an increasing trend. Depending on the methods of implementation, quite variable, both their members and the community may enjoy the advantages provided by these goods and services.	Services that are not, essentially, on the market. The benefit of the members depends on their needs.	Market goods and services. Each member has benefits depending on the number of transactions accomplished for the cooperative.
Membership	Individuals and entities, privately.	Only individuals, privately.	Individuals and entities, privately.
Power division	The principle "one man, one vote" is applied during the general assembly.	The principle "one man, one vote" is applied during the general meetings of the members.	The principle "one man, one vote" is applied during the general meetings of the members.
Financing	Fees and/or donations. When the members withdraw/resign, their fees are not reimbursed.	Fees paid at regular intervals. When the members withdraw/resign, their fees are not reimbursed.	Subscriptions for stock of capital and/or contributions at regular intervals. When the members withdraw/resign, their financial contributions are reimbursed.
Distribution of the surplus	Never distributed to the members. Must be invested in an activity of social utility.	Never distributed to the members. May be used as reserve fund and/or to decrease the fees and/or to increase the benefits.	Partially distributed to the members. May be used as reserve fund to improve the services and to develop further the activities of the cooperative.

Source: Defourny, J.; Develtere, P., „The Social Economy: the worldwide making of a third sector”, in Defourny, J.; Develtere, P.; Fonteneau, B. (eds.) (1999), *L'Economie sociale au Nord et au Sud*, De Boeck, Bruxelles.

The current financial limitations point to the necessity to measure the success of a project so that, on the basis of evidences quantified with methodologies validated by practice, one may determine the project outcomes with the purpose to continue financing or to multiply the action within other initiatives. The social economy (economic or social) activities are characterised by three main elements (inputs, processes and outputs) which have to be revealed both individually and in combination within the context of project implementation (Cojocar, 2009):

- *Inputs* – can be: financial resources, work (paid and not paid), knowledge/research, capacity building, learning opportunities, state policies, state legislation, infrastructure, community organisation etc.
- *Process(es)* – efficiency and efficacy are two important criteria for process evaluation. They may include: how is the work done, including the values they embody and the relations they strengthen; how are the administrative practices, the partnerships, the participation to decision-making (for instance, the democratic processes), human capital development, results (services, products etc.) innovation etc.
- *Outputs* – the two main criteria of evaluation which usually have a great importance are the impact and the durability. Within the context of the social economy, there are two main results that we want to measure, the economic and the social one. However, there also are other non socio-economic results that are, nevertheless, important, such as sector development.

The results of the social economy can be quantified with different indicators (Cace, Nicolăescu, & Scoican, 2010: 110): general indicators, economic indicators, employment indicators, visibility and promotion indicators, innovation indicators and partnership indicators (collaboration). The project “Proactiv – from marginal to inclusive” used several criteria that were applied in order to identify the good practice in Greece and in other EU member states: the innovative character of the activities; bottom-up approach; promote the complementarity of the assistance supplied by other actions and policies implemented locally; sustainability; encouraging the business activities; transferability/reproducibility (Cace, Nicolăescu, & Scoican, 2010: 150-151).

The evaluation of the good practices doesn't refer to the identification of an isolated socio-economic identity that shows success and which can thereafter be copied and reproduced. The creation or identification of a good practice pertains to the representation, sketching and reflection on the key actors, structures and situations that made that practice work. Nevertheless, there is no good practice pattern that is good for all organisations and in any situation, and no good practice pattern remains valid for long because the people continue to find more efficient modalities to make a particular thing.

The next section reveals several initiatives of the socio-economic networks from related areas, considered to be the best suited cases for the social economy.

Program for local economic and employment development (LEED, OECD)

A qualified source in this field is the Program for local economic and employment development (LEED, www.oecd.org/cfe/leed) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). LEED is a Program of Action for Cooperation which, since 1982, was dedicated to the identification, analysis and dissemination of the *innovative methods and good practices* to stimulate the *local economic development by creating more and better places of work*, enhancing the *social inclusion* and favouring the *good local administration*. In order to enhance the collaboration of the local initiatives, LEED Program established a Network of Partners in 1990, addressing the governmental organisms at the local and regional level, the development agencies, the profit and non-profit organisations, the private sector and the foundations that act for the accomplishment of a sustainable economic growth and employment. Within this context, LEED runs an intense program of competency development at its Trento Centre in Italy, which comprises specialised seminars, workshops and the presentation of “active” employment policies. The OECD LEED Centre for Local Development (www.trento.oecd.org) from Trento has been established in 2003 by the Italian Government and by the Autonomous Province Trento (Italy). The Centre is an integrated part of the OECD LEED Program. The mission of the Trento Centre is to develop competencies for local development in both OECD member and non-member states. Among other objectives, the Trento Centre for Local Development aims to strengthen the relation between the decision factors, the specialists in local development and the scientific community and to facilitate the *transfer of competencies and the exchange of experience* between the economies of the OECD member and non-member states. With this regard, an area of interest for the Trento Centre is the *social innovation, social inclusion and social economy*; it aims to improve the social cohesion by the identification and dissemination of local innovations and also to identify and analyse the role of the social economy in the emergence of new economic activities and in the creation of new mechanisms for social inclusion.

EQUAL Community Initiative –Sharing the good practices

EQUAL was the Community Initiative implemented by all the member states according to common guidelines set by the Commission. It was the largest program ever which supported social innovation in the field of social inclusion and labour force employment. *The Equal Program was not continued as separate action of the Community after 2006; rather, it was included among the Ope-*

rational Programs of the ESF, by capitalising on, and integrating the principles which contributed to its success: partnerships; preferential support to innovation; priority to equal opportunity and non-discrimination; stress on the transnational cooperation. This allowed collecting and sharing the good practices along its six years of operation starting with 2002. EQUAL produced evidences for innovative and adaptable politic strategies, as well as mechanisms for the distribution of information which support a higher inclusion on the different labour markets throughout Europe. This was the result of 3,480 partnerships for development with more than 20,000 partners including over 200,000 people in Europe. The learning experience within EQUAL Program focused on the investigation and testing of more efficient methods to curb social exclusion and to fight discrimination on the labour market and labour force employment, as well as on *sharing the examples of good practices across the borders* with the aim to influence the policy and general practice. As mentioned in the report “*EQUAL Opportunities for all: supplying the Lisbon Strategy by social innovation and transnational cooperation*” (European Commission, 2008), the innovative solutions are not implemented automatically, but the innovators must be fed and encouraged all along the process of innovation. This means that they have to supply evidences and must be able to demonstrate that the solutions are: a) *adequate* (for instance, advantages compared to the current practice and other innovating options which generate added value and which are relevant); b) *achievable* (for instance, they are realistic, can be used as patterns and can be implemented anywhere); c) *acceptable* for the groups of disadvantaged and excluded people, for the administrators and for the stakeholders.

EQUAL has proved the advantages of the innovative solutions in two ways: a) it produced very many evidences on the benefits of the good practices that were fully validated – some of the most relevant ones are presented in the subsequent sections; b) it involved the stakeholders in the development and validation process, so as to put into application the evidences produced by the opinion leaders and by the decision factors.

NONHabitat: Best practices and Local Leadership Program (BLP)

Best practices and Local Leadership Program (BLP - <http://www.bestpractices.org/blpnet/BLP/index.html>) is a global network of institutions dedicated to the *identification and exchange of success solutions* for sustainable development. The best practices for the improvement of the life environment are defined by the United Nations and the enlarged international community as being those successful initiatives with proven and tangible impact on the improvement of people’s quality of life, which are socially, culturally, economically sustainable, the result of efficient partnerships between the public, private and civil sectors of the society. These practices are promoted and used by the United Nations and by the enlarged

international community as means of improving the public policy on the basis of what works, as means of making the decision factors at all levels and the public at large aware of the potential solutions to the social, economic and environmental problems, and to share and transfer knowledge, competencies and expertise by the establishment of networks and by learning from the partners. The network of BLP partners identify the initiatives in different fields such as dwelling, urban development and administration, environment, economic development, *social inclusion*, crimes prevention, *reducing the poverty rate*, *supporting the women and the young people*, infrastructure and *social services*.

Leader+: Initiative of the European Community

Another source of learning lessons on how to make a typology of the best practices is the European Structural fund “LEADER+”, initiative of the European Community. Its aim is to help the rural communities improving their quality of life and their economic prosperity (“*Leader+*” – *‘Relations between actions for the development of the rural economy’ is a Community initiative launched by the European Commission and coordinated by the Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development*). A publication of the Leader+ program, “The best practices of Leader+” identified seven criteria for the Leader methods, as follows: 1. Area-based method; 2. Ascendant method; 3. Partnership method and the “local group of action” (LGA); 4. Innovation; 5. Integrated method; 6. Development of a network of collaboration and cooperation between areas; 7. Local management and financing. Within one year, and with the assistance of its units from the national network, the Contact Point Leader+, assisted by experts, collect the good practices from the Leader projects across the EU and selects part of them which are included in the database with the best practices from the website of Leader+ program (<http://ec.europa.eu/leaderplus>). The method presumed for the beginning a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) in the member states regarding the nature of the best practices. The main partners from the member states for this exercise were the national network units (NNU). The result of the analysis was that all the criteria for the identification of the good practices were related to the seven Leader+ elements. Leader+ observer added two more European criteria which highlight the European aspect of Leader+ program: the transmissible character and the sustainability.

In conclusion, all the organisations and initiatives presented in this section have in common the fact that they identify a list of patterns for the selection criteria which proved the validity of the best practices under an almost equivalent form. The evaluation grids of the good practices frequently include a criterion, “innovativeness of the proposed intervention” (or syntagma with a similar meaning). Within an environment with fierce competition for financial resources, the

success of an intervention project depends on a high or very high level of innovativeness. Thus, at least two directions of analysis should consolidate: a) the first direction concerns the way in which the innovative interventions are evaluated, meaning that there are several limits derived from the approaches used by the evaluation (Perin, 2003); b) the second direction takes into consideration the fact that in the social life nothing is done as planned, and that the consequences of an intervention are determined by the manner of its application, not by the initial plan (Vedung, 2000).

Conclusions

In each European country we meet different practices of social economy which refer to a broad range of establishments with different forms of organisation (such as associations, cooperatives and foundations, mutual aid units); however, we need to determine a set of criteria from the literature and from the case studies. It is necessary to monitor and evaluate the initiatives run by this sector and to present the mechanisms which create a healthy and vibrating ecosystem through this form of economy which supports the innovating social entrepreneurs (Cace, Arpinte, Cace, & Cojocaru, 2011: 65; Neguț, Nicolăescu, Preoteasa, & Cace, 2011). Within the context of the economic crisis, we may say that Europe must develop its own distinct method of innovation, built upon its strengths and which benefits of its values by the involvement of all stakeholders and of all regions within the cycle of innovation: not just the large companies, by the SMEs, the public sector, the social economy and the citizens, which means “social innovation”.

The *social innovation* by capitalising on the positive experience of other projects-programs of inclusion and social economy form an important area which should be supported by using the *spirit of the philanthropic institutions, of the associations and social entrepreneurs to find new methods of answering the social needs that are not adequately covered by the market or by the public sector*. The same spirit should be used to dynamise the behavioural changes needed to tackle the main social changes such as unemployment and the climate changes. Besides answering the social needs and approaching punctual challenges, the social innovation by the good practices existing at the level of the social economy give more power to the people and create new social relations and patterns of collaboration. The essential element in the generation and consolidation of the social capital is provided by the real innovation and by the actual participation of the citizens to the elaboration, management and evaluation of the social policies (Pastor Seller, 2011: 24). The European Commission supports and promotes social innovation through the European Social Fund (ESF) on the basis of the significant investments in social innovation along the past ten years, all along the cycle of innovation. Social innovation will become a point of attraction in the next generation of

programs of the European Social Fund, where the member states are encouraged to start already making efforts for the promotion of social innovation through ESF. This activity will be complemented by the support for the innovating social experiments to be developed within the European Platform against poverty and social exclusion. It is extremely important to continue the extensive theoretical research which recommends the development of a comprehensive methodology to identify the best practices used to enhance social inclusion through the specific activities of social economy which help going past the economic and occupation crisis in Europe.

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