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Innovatory Employment in Social Economy: Busting Social Entrepreneurship versus Regulating Social Insertion Enterprises

Simona Maria STĂNESCU¹

Abstract

Social economy is a recent subject of interest for public agenda mainly due to its capacity to support sustainable jobs especially but not exclusively for vulnerable people. The paper explores the profile of Romanian social entrepreneurs with a particular attention paid to social economy area. The research hypothesis is that the empowerment of vulnerable people towards social economy through entrepreneurship is rather an exception than a general sustainable employment solution. The second research hypothesis is that the employment of vulnerable people in social economy area is supported by social insertion enterprises rather than social enterprises. The first part of the paper is focused on international and national regulations as well as institutional framework with an impact on social economy and vulnerable groups. The second part of the paper explores the profile of Romanian entrepreneurs from an international comparative perspective. The third part of the paper assesses outputs of the European Social Fund (ESF) financed projects towards employment of vulnerable people. As methodology, the article is based on desk research on international and national regulations, primary and secondary analysis of EUROSTAT 2000-2012 Eurobarometer databases, and the database of Romanian volumes dedicated to social economy research. Our forecast is that successful implementation of ESF financed projects, especially priority axis 6 “Promoting social inclusion”, main domain of intervention 6.1. Development of social economy depends on the ex-ante assessment of employability of vulnerable groups both as entrepreneurs and employees in social enterprises.

Keywords: social economy; entrepreneurship; social enterprises; social insertion enterprises; vulnerable people.

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Introduction

Growing public attention paid to social economy is based on the recognized influence in creating sustainable jobs for bread earners willing to work in line with a common set of principle among which we emphasize democratic participation to decisions, “one voice one vote” and reinvest profit in the benefit of all members. Pressed to identify rapid and sustainable solutions to current challenges on the labour market, decision makers tend to approach social economy as a universal panacea to labor insertion to vulnerable groups. Social economy includes labour insertion of vulnerables but it cannot be reduced to this relevant but particular aspect (Cojocaru, 2013). Working within the social economy domain is firstly a matter of choice for assuming a set of key principles to be followed in everyday activities rather than an employment alternative open to vulnerable people. At the same time, we agree that employment opportunities for vulnerable groups in social economy’ activities deserve a closer attention. A scientific approach will further support public policy decisions on financial and human resources allocated through ESF mechanisms.

Social economy: regulations and institutional framework

At European Union level, identified regulations with an impact on social economy include support for economic activities of small and medium enterprises (Small Business Act). Aware of the forms of social economy differently regulated in each member state, representatives at European level submitted for public consultation drafts for the European Status of the main forms of social economy: foundations, associations, mutual aid societies, and cooperatives. Despite the major interest in them, only one European Status was voted: the one for cooperatives. All other proposals were withdrawn due to lack of public consensus (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010; Stănescu et al., 2012: 54-55). Another European regulation also relevant for social economy is represented by the European Initiative for Social Entrepreneurship (European Parliament 2012). Member states are invited to adjust their national frameworks, including the harmonization of regulations, towards a better support for such economic initiatives.

Social economy’s first regulations in Romania date back to the 19th century and they were primarily focused on a hybrid form of mutual aid cooperatives: The Project for a Savings and Loan Association (1845). Various regulations with an impact on legal forms of social economy continued to be developed before the communist period. The totalitarian regime changed the shape of social economy in Romania by ideological control in what was meant to like an apparently democratic economic environment. More than 1000 Romanian social economy

entities including specific professional networks were destroyed. Similarly to other communist countries, connotations of cooperatives or voluntary work continue to negatively mark public memory. The first regulations of social economy showed an inappropriate fragmentary approach: the Governmental Decision 829/2002 approving the National Plan on Combating Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion, and the Joint Order 254/1169/2008 of the Minister of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities and the Minister of Economy and Finance (social economy is recognized as a key area of intervention of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development) (Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection, 2011: 41-42).

The latest regulations on social economy area are represented by a draft law on entrepreneurship and three draft laws on social economy. Various confusions and misunderstandings regarding the relationships between the private and public domains (entrepreneurship draft law) or the relationships between social economy and the labour market insertion of the vulnerable groups (second 2011 draft of the social economy law) represented the main reasons for the rejection of these draft laws. The last version of the draft law on social economy appears to be supported by representatives of social economy due to the follow-up clarification of the issue of social enterprises and insertion of vulnerable groups. Despite the fact that Romania publicly debated various drafts of social economy laws, it is included among the countries with a low level of social economy acceptance (Chaves, & Monzon, 2012: 28-29). It is to be noticed that according to internationally recognized social economy principles and national regulations, legal forms of social economy in Romania include: associations, foundations, mutual societies for employed people, and mutual aid societies for retired people, credit unions, and cooperative societies of 1st degree. Other forms of social economy functioning in Romania could be identified. The final decision on a forthcoming law on social economy and its further implementation depends on some key factors among which are the institutional responsibility for social economy and the allocation of resources at local level within the decentralization and regionalization processes, as well as the public administration reform. A strategic vision on social economy would support the harmonization of the economic and social public policies with a direct impact on social economy activities.

As no single definition on social economy is internationally commonly agreed, it was conceptualized either through its legal forms of organizations either through its principles (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010: 20). One proposed definition is “social economy is the type of economy that efficiently blends individual responsibility with collective responsibility in order to produce goods and/or service deliveries, that has in view the economical and social development of a community and whose main purpose is the social benefit. It has at its core a private, voluntary and solitary initiative, with a high degree of autonomy and responsibility and it involves an economical risk and a limited

distribution of the profit” (Stănescu *et al*, 2012, p. 13; art 2 of Draft law on social economy).

From the institutional point of view, social economy could be approached from at least three perspectives: as an economic activity, as a series of particular forms of social economy, and in connection with vulnerable groups. As an economic activity, the institutional responsibility for small and medium enterprises lies with the Department of Small and Medium Enterprises within the Ministry of Economy. As a series of particular forms of social economy, the links between public institutions and various types of social enterprises are regulated. Most forms of social enterprise in Romania could choose to be part of a national network for their specific profile. No unique public institution is designed for social economy (as in France, Belgium) but various institutional responsibilities are shared by various public institutions: the Ministry of Agriculture for agriculture cooperatives; the Department of Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministry of Economy for handicraft and consumer cooperatives; the National Bank of Romania for mutual aid societies as well as credit cooperatives; and the Department for People with Disabilities for private protected shelters. From the third point of view, the institutional responsibility for the social inclusion of vulnerable people rests with the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and the Elderly. As the Ministry of Labour is the promoter for launching the drafts of social economy laws it is expected that the approach to social economy from the insertion of vulnerable groups should be completed with an economic approach. Interministerial decisions on supporting the social enterprises as a whole or support of social insertion enterprises depend on this strategic vision. From this perspective, the article contributes to understanding the position of the vulnerable groups within social economy picture in one of two instances: as social economy entrepreneurs and as employees in a social insertion enterprise.

Vulnerable people: regulations and institutional framework

No official definition of vulnerable people is internationally agreed upon but the categories receiving particular attention are: women and children confronting social risks. International regulations of the issue of vulnerable people include various United Nations Charters on the protection of women, children, aged persons, disabled people and victims of various situations (war, torture, natural disasters). At European Union level, regulations focused on vulnerable people refer mainly to member state’ actions to promote social inclusion mechanisms particularly though employment. The European Employment Strategy and Europe 2020 Strategy contains references to active inclusion. Constant concern for employment as a tool for promoting self reliance reflects the change paradigm from “welfare” to “workfare” in the context of cost cuts of the traditional welfare state.

Recently, recommendations for member states directly addressed the issue of the employment of vulnerable people in social economy.

The analysis of Romanian Governmental Programmes (1992, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2012) as well as Law 292/2011 of social assistance and 2012 draft law on social economy shows a permanent attention to vulnerable groups. According with our analysis, 134 references were identified with respect to 62 different categories of vulnerability (Stănescu, 2013:226-263). Various categories were identified with reference to women, children, Roma people and so on. The analysis of Romanian Governmental Programmes emphasized a social assistance approach to vulnerable groups alongside the provision of financial support for employers of various vulnerable groups (young graduates, people with disabilities, people over 55 years old). Entrepreneurship is approached independently from vulnerable groups. One exception is to be noticed in the case of the second National Strategy for the Roma (2012) which refers to supporting measures for promoting entrepreneurship of the Roma people. According to the regulations of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development, the identified vulnerable groups are represented by women, Roma people, people with disabilities, people in prison, and beneficiaries of minimum income guarantee,

Profile of Romanian entrepreneurs

Based on 2000-2012 Eurobarometre data bases, top three obstacles when setting up a business were selected: lack of financial support, complexity of administrative procedures, and lack of information.

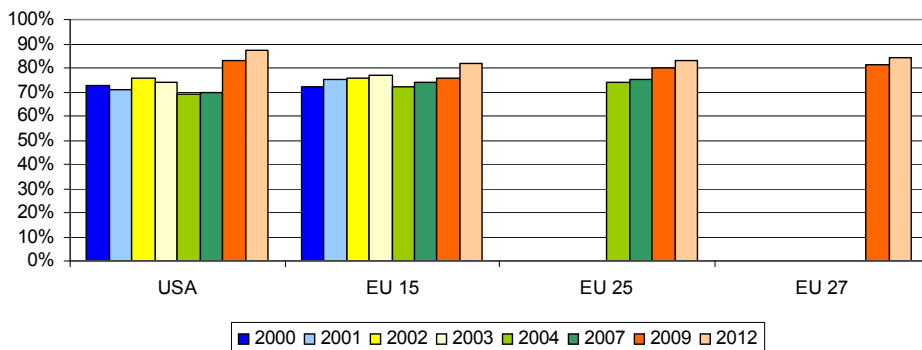


Figure 1. It is difficult to open a business due to lack of financial support

Source: Vasile, Stănescu, Bălan (2013): 132

A closer look at EU 15 shows various perceptions of entrepreneurs. Countries supporting best financial start up of enterprises in 2009 were Finland, Austria and Netherlands, followed by Denmark, Belgium and Sweden. In 2012 Netherlands was best perceived as offering financial support followed by Sweden, Denmark and Germany.

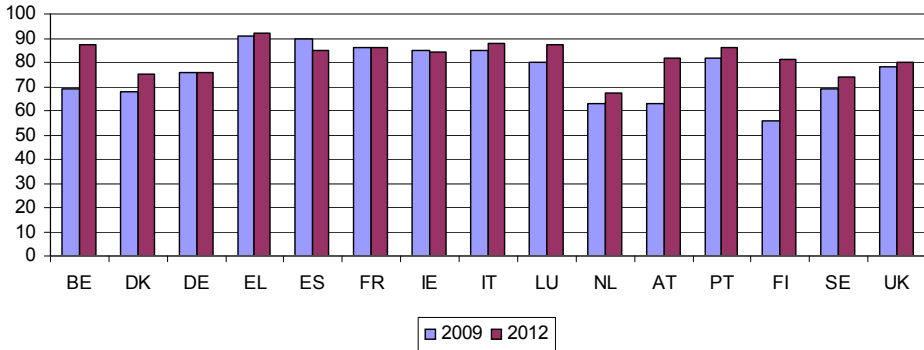


Figure 2. It is difficult to start a business due to lack of financial support (EU 15)

Source: Vasile, Stănescu & Bălan, 2013:132

In comparison with other 11 new member states, Romania presents a constant high value for difficulties in opening a new business due to lack of financial support in both in 2009 and 2012. In 2009, Romania presented the same high 90 percent of entrepreneurs considering that it is difficult to start a business due to lack of financial support as in Slovakia. Higher values were registered in Bulgaria and Latvia (92 percents). The perception of Romanian entrepreneurs in 2012 was exceeded by Bulgaria (92 percents), and Hungary (96 percents).

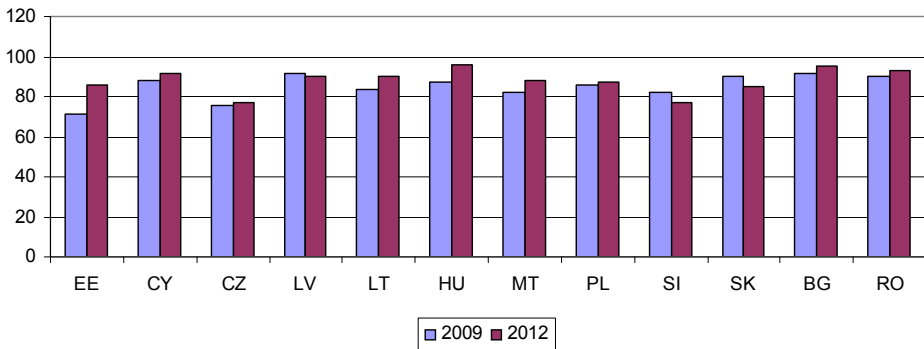


Figure 3. It is difficult to start a business due to lack of financial support (EU 12 new member states)

Source: Vasile, Stănescu & Bălan, 2013:133

The complexity of administrative procedures is more strongly perceived in 2004 EU 25 member states countries in comparison with previous EU 15 and the USA. Among the 2004 and 2007 12 new member states, the perception of Romanian entrepreneurs registers the highest value (84 percents).

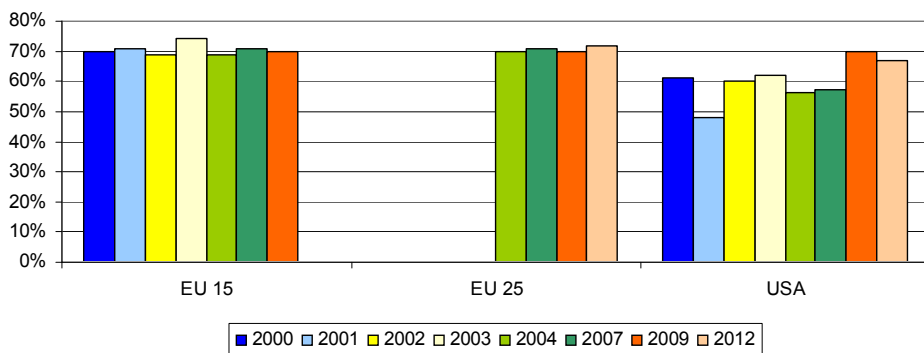


Figure 4. It is difficult to start a business due to complexity of administrative procedures

Source: author's calculation based on Eurobarometer reports

The same pattern applies in the case of lack of information on how to start a business. The perception of entrepreneurs in EU 25 showed a less friendly environment in comparison with EU 15 and the USA. Among the 12 new member states, the perception of Romanian entrepreneurs registers the highest value (68 percents).

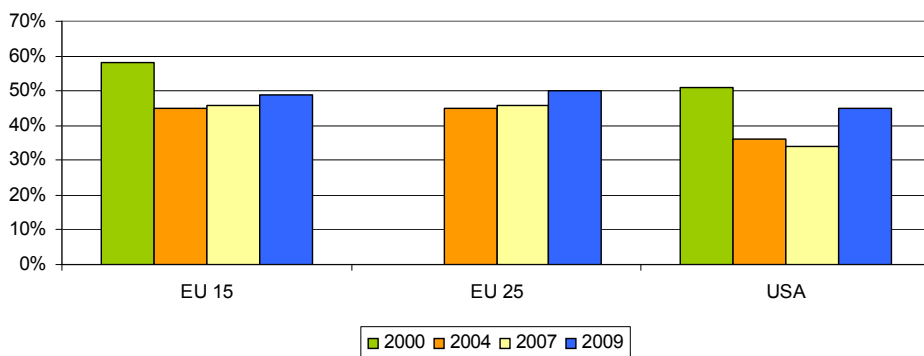


Figure 5. It is difficult to start a business due lack of information

Source: author's calculation based on Eurobarometer reports

Based on the analysis of Eurobarometer data bases, Europe seems to be less supportive of entrepreneurship activities than the USA. The old EU 15 better support entrepreneurs' initiatives than EU 12. Among the new member states, Romania has one of the highest values in financial support when opening a business, in complexity of administrative procedures, and in lack of information on business.

European Social Fund financed projects for social economy

Projects co-financed by ESF are focus on the employment of vulnerable target groups through two modalities: either as entrepreneurs or as ordinary employees in a social enterprise. The research of the profile of Romanian entrepreneurs emphasized a more negative perception of economic environment. Three main difficulties confronted with at European level were analyzed: the lack of financial support when willing to set up a business, the complexity of administrative procedures, and the lack of information on business. These results showed a higher pressure on the shoulders of Romanian entrepreneurs in comparison with other European countries and the USA. In comparison with other EU member states, especially the newly member, Romanian entrepreneurs perceived the national context as less friendly and supportive.

Absorption capacity of European funds is low and caused by various factors among which: expertise and capacity to design technical proposals, management capacity, relationship with contracting authorities, delays in advancing the funds, and gaps between program's priorities and social economy organizations' needs, capacity to asses development opportunities. Potential positive elements supporting a better absorption are: role of Small and Medium Enterprises included among eligible applicants, previous financial and technical experience (Arpinte & Baboi, 2009: 41; Tomescu & Stănescu, 2009: 27; Brăgaru, 2011: 199).

Challenges of regulating social insertion enterprises

Without reducing the social economy exclusively to employment of vulnerable groups, it is to be noticed that analysis of public policy reflect the tendency to perceive social economy as answer to social problems and to press it towards labour market insertion of the most vulnerable (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, 2010:75). Taking into account PHARE experience of Romanian social services providers, the transition to European Social Funds give them not so many options to continue what was built mainly due to general design and established priorities and domain of interventions (Arpinte & Baboi, 2009: 45-46). Openness of social economy organizations towards employment of vulnerable

people is rather low and exceptional (Cojocaru & Bragaru, 2012). Besides, support from public institutions is not consistent (Arpinte, Cace, & Cojocaru, 2010: 78).

Despite European recommendations to support employment in the social economy area especially in the case of vulnerable people, information and awareness campaigns on their work capacity were not followed up by adoption of supporting financial mechanisms. Alongside, legal status of social economy organizations in Romania does not refer to employment of vulnerable people as compulsory (Cace et al., 2011). The potential swift from the status of being a beneficiary of social assistance system to being a person working in social economy (as entrepreneurs or as ordinary employee) is not supported by a public-private strategy.

Social insertion enterprises in Romania are not regulated but one legal form could be identified. It is the case of *authorized protected shelters* in which 30% of employees should be people with disabilities. State subventions for employment of some vulnerable groups (graduates, people more than 55 old) are provided but funds are limited and no regular assessment of the impact is made.

A 2012 survey carried out by Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy on Roma elite: intellectuals, political leaders and businessmen emphasized the dimension of their modernization. It is notice ‘the double hypothesis of the waves of modernization and regress to the traditional patterns and of the social-economic non-homogenous development of the population’ (Zamfir, 2013: 149, 164). Employment of vulnerable groups in social enterprises in Romania continues to confront stereotypes especially in the case of Roma people (Cace, Preoteasa, Tomescu, Stănescu & 2010: 124, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection 2010: 94; Stănescu & Cace 2011; Stănescu, Cace & Alexandrescu 2011; Cojocaru, Stănescu, & Sfetcu, 2013).

In this context, entrepreneurship initiatives involving them represent a good example of innovatory employment especially for rural areas (Dragotoiu et al, 2011 Alexandrescu, 2013: 17-46, Bojincă, 2013: 17-28; Ernu, 2013: 19-36; Rădulescu, 2013: 19-35).

From the perspective of social resilience of vulnerable people, identification of innovatory ways that vulnerable could enter labour market could be viewed as one protection factor (Tomită, 2013:47) with impact on community development.

Conclusions

Policy decisions on adopting supporting mechanisms for employment of vulnerable groups in social economy implies a good understanding of both economic, legal and institutional obstacles confronted by social enterprises and entrepreneurs as well as opportunities and strengths related to work capacity of people in need.

Analysis of Romanian Governmental Programs reflects a constant preoccupation for identification of various vulnerable groups. High number of identified vulnerable categories and modifications in approaching them impacts on measures oriented to their social inclusion including allocation of international funds.

Differences are noted between the USA and Europe in the sense of a more positive perception on the part of the entrepreneurs willing to open new businesses in the USA. At a closer look, the economic environment is perceived as less favorable to new economic initiatives in new member states, particularly in Romania. Employment in social economy organizations is recommended as an innovatory employment opportunity due to commonly shared principles focus on both concern for people and economic survival. What makes the difference to ordinary economic agents is the reinvestment of profit in the benefit of social economy organizations' members. In comparison with the USA and EU countries, Romanian entrepreneurs perceived the economic context as more difficult from the perspectives of all three top obstacles when setting up a business: the lack of financial support, the complexity of administrative procedures, and the lack of information. Pressure on social economy entrepreneurs is even higher as only few supporting mechanisms to employ vulnerable people in social economy organizations are designed. Regulation of social economy enterprises could represent a solution if some cumulative conditions will be accomplished: efficient financial supporting mechanisms, motivation of entrepreneurs, previous experience in working with vulnerable groups, and last but not least information and awareness of social economy organizations service's consumers and customs. From this perspective, entrepreneurs from vulnerable groups are to be supported as they are potentially more open to promote social inclusion among people in need.

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