
VOLUNTEERING AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Volunteering represents one of the most efficient mechanisms of social inclusion in contemporary Romanian society, offering opportunities for civic participation and personal development for vulnerable or marginalized groups. This study analyzes the role of volunteering as an instrument of social integration in the Romanian context, examining the mechanisms through which voluntary activities contribute to reducing social exclusion and building a more cohesive society. Through the analysis of specialized literature and available data, the research identifies the main benefits of volunteering for social inclusion, as well as the challenges and opportunities in this field.*

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INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion represents a fundamental priority in Romania's development agenda, being essential for building an equitable and sustainable society (Zamfir, 2019, p. 45). In this context, volunteering emerges as a multidimensional instrument with significant potential for social transformation, offering alternative pathways for participation and integration for diverse categories of people.

Romania faces major challenges in the field of social inclusion, including poverty, exclusion of vulnerable groups, and fragmentation of community cohesion (Teșliuc et al., 2016, pp. 78-92). Volunteering can function as a catalyst for addressing these problems, offering both individual and collective benefits.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how volunteering contributes to social inclusion in Romania, identifying the specific mechanisms through which voluntary activities facilitate integration and social participation.



The concept of social inclusion

Social inclusion refers to the process through which marginalized individuals and groups acquire the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in the economic, social, and cultural life of society (Sen, 2000, pp. 28-35). This concept involves eliminating barriers that prevent equal participation and promoting a society in which all members have access to rights, services, and opportunities.

According to the social capital theory developed by Putnam (2000, pp. 15-28), participation in voluntary organizations contributes to creating social connections that facilitate cooperation and mutual trust, essential elements for the functioning of a cohesive society.

Volunteering as an integration mechanism

Volunteering functions as a complex mechanism of social integration through multiple dimensions, as described in specialized literature (Wilson, 2012, pp. 176-195):

Participatory dimension - offers concrete opportunities for civic involvement for people who would otherwise be excluded from decision-making processes or community activities.

Educational dimension - facilitates the development of personal and professional competencies, contributing to increased employability and self-confidence (Musick & Wilson, 2008, pp. 89-112).

Relational dimension - creates social networks and community connections that can function as social capital for vulnerable persons.

The Context of volunteering in Romania

Romania has developed in recent years a legislative framework favorable to volunteering, through the adoption of Law No. 78/2014 regarding the regulation of volunteering in Romania (Official Monitor, 2014). This legislation created the legal basis for developing an organized voluntary sector and facilitated broader citizen involvement in public utility activities.

Anghel (2018, pp. 134-149) emphasizes that this legal framework represented an important step in the formal recognition of volunteering as an activity of public interest, offering legal protection to both volunteers and the organizations that coordinate them.

According to Eurobarometer data (2019, p. 67), Romania still registers a relatively low level of participation in voluntary activities (14%) compared to the EU average (23%). However, Marian (2020, pp. 45-58) observes an ascending trend, especially among young people and those with higher education.

The sectors with the highest voluntary activity include (National Institute of Statistics, 2021, p. 34):

- Social and health services (32%)
- Education and professional training (28%)
- Culture and recreation (18%)
- Environmental protection (12%)
- Community development (10%).

Inclusion mechanisms through volunteering

Volunteering offers concrete opportunities for civic participation for groups that are traditionally excluded from decision-making processes. Badescu (2017, pp. 23-41) demonstrates that people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, elderly people, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can find ways in volunteering to contribute to society and make their voices heard.

Through voluntary activities, participants develop valuable competencies in the job market (Popescu & Ionescu, 2019, pp. 156-173), such as:

- Communication and teamwork skills



- Leadership and project management abilities
- Empathy and intercultural understanding
- Digital and specific technical competencies.

At the same time, volunteering facilitates the construction of diverse social networks that can offer emotional, informational, and instrumental support to people in vulnerable situations (Granovetter, 1973, pp. 1360-1380).

Joint voluntary activities between people from different social groups contribute to reducing prejudices and promoting mutual understanding. The intergroup contact theory developed by Allport (1954, pp. 261-282) and applied in the Romanian context by Voicu (2018, pp. 89-107) shows that direct contact and collaboration for common objectives can change negative perceptions and promote acceptance of diversity.

Volunteering programs dedicated to elderly people have demonstrated efficiency in combating social isolation and improving the quality of life of this vulnerable category. Cristea (2021, pp. 78-95) analyzes initiatives such as "Adopt a Grandparent," which have created valuable intergenerational connections and offered practical and emotional support.

Organizations that promote inclusive volunteering have succeeded in demonstrating that people with disabilities can be valuable contributors in various fields of activity. Diaconu (2020, pp. 123-140) documents these experiences that have contributed to changing social attitudes and promoting a rights-based perspective.

Volunteering programs that involve members of ethnic minorities, especially the Roma community, have facilitated intercultural dialogue and contributed to reducing social tensions. Fleck & Rughiniș (2019, pp. 201-218) analyze these initiatives that have promoted better mutual understanding and created opportunities for constructive collaboration.

Volunteering in Romania faces various structural barriers that limit its inclusive potential (Matei, 2018, pp. 67-84):

- Insufficient financial resources for supporting programs
- Lack of developed infrastructure for volunteer management
- Competition for time with remunerated activities
- Excessive bureaucracy in some fields.

Vulnerable groups may encounter additional barriers in accessing volunteering opportunities (Stanescu, 2019, pp. 45-62):

- Lack of transportation means
- Time constraints due to family responsibilities
- Prejudices from host organizations
- Lack of confidence in own capabilities.

Many volunteering initiatives oriented toward social inclusion face long-term sustainability problems, being dependent on external funding or the enthusiasm of founding volunteers (Mihăilescu, 2017, pp. 98-115).

Recommendations for public policies

It is necessary to create a robust support infrastructure for volunteering, including (Georgescu, 2020, pp. 178-195):

- Volunteering centers at local and regional levels
- Digital platforms for connecting volunteers with organizations
- Training and capacity development programs
- Mechanisms for recognition and validation of acquired competencies.



Developing specific financing schemes for volunteering programs focused on social inclusion could amplify the impact of these initiatives (Dobre, 2019, pp. 234-251). These should include both public financing and incentives for the private sector.

Promoting partnerships between the public, private, and non-governmental sectors can maximize available resources and ensure an integrated approach to social inclusion through volunteering (Vlăsceanu, 2018, pp. 156-174).

CONCLUSIONS

Volunteering represents not only a form of civic participation, but also a valuable instrument for promoting social inclusion in Romania. It creates real opportunities for vulnerable groups – young people at risk of school dropout, people with disabilities, long-term unemployed, or marginalized elderly people – to actively engage in community life. Through the activities carried out, volunteering becomes a bridge between individuals and society, offering chances for personal development, strengthening of social capital, and community integration.

Although its transformative potential is indisputable, there are major challenges that limit the expansion of the phenomenon in Romania. These include the lack of a coherent support infrastructure, weak funding of organizations that coordinate volunteers, and insufficient public recognition of their contribution. Moreover, volunteering is not yet uniformly perceived as an essential resource for social cohesion and local community development.

To maximize this potential, a systemic and integrated approach is necessary. This involves:

Development of support infrastructure, through local volunteering centers, digital connection platforms, and training programs;

Creation of favorable public policies, which should include incentives for organizations that involve volunteers and official recognition of experience gained through volunteering;

Promotion of an inclusive volunteering culture, based on values such as solidarity, diversity, and respect for the fundamental rights of every person.

Thus, volunteering can become not just an act of altruism, but also a genuine strategy for community development and reduction of social inequalities.

Regarding research directions, future studies should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of volunteering programs, tracking how they influence social cohesion, the degree of civic participation, and the integration of vulnerable groups. Likewise, the identification and dissemination of good practice models – whether they come from local experiences or from the European framework – could contribute to consolidating a national volunteering network, capable of providing sustainable solutions for current social challenges.

Therefore, only through such a strategic and coherent approach can volunteering become a powerful engine of social inclusion in Romania, with beneficial effects at individual, community, and societal levels alike.



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