

CHILD CARE THROUGH THE INVOLVEMENT OF NGOs – AN INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Child protection is a major point of interest not only for the competent institutions in the field, but also for the NGOs that have extended their activity, embracing this category of beneficiaries, too. The vulnerability of the children coming from underprivileged environments, often caused by the precarious conditions existing in the natural families, is the object of several NGOs, which evolved after the 1990s. Democracy restored the civil societies' freedom and courage to pool their resources for non-profit purposes, aiming at increasing the quality of the lives of the children who are in risk situations. This paper grasps, from an internal perspective, the manner in which an association intervenes for preventing situations of child abuse, neglect and even abandoning. The research methodology used a qualitative method, i.e. the interview, in order to observe the impact of the provided social services, from a triple perspective (the associations' president, the association's beneficiaries and the association's volunteers).*

Keywords: child protection, social services, risk situations, prevention, NGO.

1. Introduction

The concepts „civil society” or „tertiary sector” widely refer to the totality of the volunteer associations (whether it be district committees or philanthropic institutions), which operated independently from government and were considered an essential ingredient in the democracy welfare by some authors (Foley and Edwards, 1996: 38). Friedrich Hegel considers that the civil society is the historical product of economic modernization and comprises all the social actors who are not dependent on the state apparatus (Spurk, 2010: 7).

According to Fukuyama (2001: 7), the content of the civil society can be described as an interest group trying to direct the public sources to their favorite causes. In detail, the civil society includes the non-governmental organizations, the private volunteer organizations, the community organizations, the civic clubs, the unions, the cultural and religious groups, charity centers, sports and social clubs, professional associations, academies, consumers and media organizations (Essia and Yearoo, 2009: 368).

Thus, it is important to make the distinction between civil society and non-governmental organizations, as an integral part thereof, although many times these terms are mistaken for each other. According to (2010: 186), non-governmental organizations are „institutionalized, apolitical and non-profit private structures, independent of any public authority, which carry out activities of public interest”. They can be active in any field, such as science, education, social protection, economy, environment, child protection, etc.

The subject of this paper is the non-governmental organizations acting in the field of child protection. In Spârleanu's opinion (2010: 186), they expanded after the fall of communism, adhering to the international model. This field aroused the interest of that time because of the large number of unwanted and abandoned children and the poor conditions in orphanages. The neo-protestant organizations had a special involvement in the social service system centered on the children's welfare, intensely financing this field. The international media campaigns presented the desolating situation of the Romanian institutionalized children,

raising funds from donations. Consequently, if at the beginning the messages were humanitarian and charitable, they became professional over time (Cojocaru et. al., 2011: 66). In Romania, the phrase child protection refers to a wide range of services, such as socialization, hosting, informing, counseling, medical assistance, rehabilitation, education (Spârleanu, 2010: 186).

Cojocaru et. al. (2011: 67) consider that non-governmental organizations are the motors of change of the social system, with implications both at the structural level and at the functional one, in particular. Moreover, the social practices and the pilot projects that non-governmental organizations have promoted in the field of child protection have subsequently been replicated by the governmental system. Additionally, the international non-governmental organizations constituted influence factors in the public policy-making related to child protection.

Although non-governmental organizations in Romanian had numerous classifications along time, the first law in the filed regulating them in the terms of associations and foundations, was the Law no. 21 of 1924, also known as the Mârzescu Law. This law provided a reference framework regarding the stages of setting up civil entities, their entrance in legality and the organization methodologies. Unlike an association, for which the law stipulated that it must have at least 20 members to obtain legal personality, for a foundation no minimum number was foreseen so that it could operate.

In the context of the ordinance nr. 26/2000 with regard to associations and foundations, „The association is the subject of law established by three or more individuals, who, based on an agreement, put together their material contribution, knowledge or work contribution without the right to restitution, in fulfilling activities in general community interest, or in their personal non-economic interest, as applicable”; on the other side, the foundation is defined as follows: „the subject of law set up by one or more individuals by virtue of a legal document concluded between the living ones and upon death, constitutes a permanently and irrevocably affected patrimony for a general or community interest purpose, as applicable”.

This study aims to grasp the impact that the associations acting in the field of child protection have on the prevention of abuse, neglect or even the child’s separation from the natural family.

2. The design and methodology of research

The present paper sets out to analyze the impact that the social and philanthropic services provided by a non-governmental organization have (the Association „Children without Childhood from Vâlcea County”), by supporting the vulnerable families with the aim to prevent poverty, the children’s abandoning and neglect, starting from the following general goals: observing the target group and the social problems that make the subject of the association’s activity; identify the services provided by the association; grasp the impact that the services offered have on the beneficiaries.

The research methodology uses a qualitative method, namely the interview-based survey, being an exploratory research. The interviews were semi-directed in order to encourage the free flow of thoughts and opinions and their reasoning.

The sampling used was a non-probability, availability one. Hence, 8 people were interviewed, as follows: the association’s president, 3 volunteers of the association and 4 parents of the children, beneficiaries of the association.

The data collection was performed on the basis of three interview guides, adapted in accordance with the respondents’ category. The interviews unfolded in a room of the association, in a private environment. In order to maintain the confidentiality required by the interviewed people, their names were coded with their initials in the results section. First, the interview with the association’s president included questions on the following themes: the

association's financing, its main activities, its human resources, the accessibility of the services provided, the categories of beneficiaries of the association, and, consequently, their needs.

The interviews addressed to the volunteers of the association aimed at collecting data regarding their motivation, the activities they carry out and also the limits or difficulties they faced when doing volunteer work.

The interviewed beneficiaries talked about the matters related to the way or moment when they caught the attention of the NGO, the changes that occurred with the association's intervention and other matters that they considered relevant.

3.Results

In a foreword of the interview, the president of the Association described the profile of the NGO and presented its brief history. In detail, the Association „Children without Childhood from Vâlcea County” started its activity in 2019 by setting up a place where they collected clothing and footwear items, medicines and other goods (furniture, electronics and home appliances) necessary for the improvement of the supported people's quality of life: *„we started our activity in a garage, then we continued in a former garbage room”* (S.I. – the president of the association). At present, the Association carries out its activity in two rented warehouses: one in which food, clothing, footwear and household objects are collected and the other one where recyclable waste is stored, separated and handled. The waste is collected by our own means from all the localities in the county, with the volunteers' support.

The questions regarding the beneficiaries' profile have revealed over 1000 poor or sick children in Vâlcea county, which represent pressing social cases, in the light of the poverty or medical problems they are facing: *„together with the big-hearted people in the county, we make up an unstoppable force against the shortcomings of the children around us, forgotten by all, except us.”* (S.I. – the association's president). The cases are referred by the local authorities, teachers, by the church, by the neighbors or by the beneficiaries themselves, who are aware of their problems and limits and ask for help: *„they see the posts on facebook or hear about us from friends or neighbors and come to us full of hope, they pour their heart out and it's impossible to stay indifferent”* (S.I. – the association's president). In addition, institutions, such as the school or the church get involved actively and support the actions performed in their localities by the association, which resulted in a trustful relationship, not only with respect to the referral of the cases, but also with respect to their monitoring: *„we keep in touch with the priests and teachers from the county, who notify us about the urgent needs and help us be as close as possible to our beneficiaries”* (S.I. – the association's president).

As for the financing, apart from donations and sponsorship, the association also supports itself by capitalizing on the recyclable materials, which are first collected and sorted: *„we enjoy trust, initiative and constant support by the selective collection of waste from over 20 localities in the county and its capitalization, always to the benefit of our children”* (S.I.– the association's president). These efforts were joined by the partners and collaborators represented by school establishments, parishes, economic agents, the Horeca system, hospitals etc., who supply recyclable materials, such as: bottles, jars, cans, cartons, wastepaper, scrap, defective electronics and home appliances. Taking into account that the association started to operate a little earlier than the start of the Covid 19 pandemic, one of the questions was relating to the activity carried out in that particular period: *„it was indeed a hard period, because poverty and disease never take a break”* (S.I. – the association's president). A major impact was exerted by the measures imposed for social distancing, as the volunteers' presence decreased, as well as the number of donations and sponsorship: *„people lost their jobs, many of them turned from donors into beneficiaries overnight”* (S.I. – the association's president). The services rendered to the beneficiaries were affected to the same extent, as they suffered setbacks due to the situation set forth above.

The questions on the main activities performed by the association highlighted several large campaigns for the whole county, including: Our Lord's Resurrection in the Houses of the

Children without Childhood, The Sad Mărțișor, The Merry Little Schoolbag, The Magic Pantry, Our Lord's Birth in the Houses of the Children without Childhood, Each Girl Matters, greening campaigns, fund raising campaigns for medical cases: „*our children don't eat only on Easter and on Christmas*” (S.I.- the association's president). Following such campaign, many children in the county received holiday specific food, schoolbags and school supplies absolutely necessary for pupils, garments and shoes suitable for each season depending on everyone's age and characteristics, canned food for winter, hygiene products, toys and even medical services against payment, settled by the association : „*the key driver of our motivation is deeply rooted in our being, in the thirst for helping, for changing some destinies*” (S.I.- the association's president).

Another important aspect tackled in the interview was the fact that many beneficiaries kept in touch with the association even after their social situation was alleviated or solved, as the case may be, and they carried out volunteer work in their turn in order to help others: „*they say that if they have been helped, it's their turn now to help the others, because generosity is the path to blessing*” (S.I. – the association's president). Therefore, under the title of volunteers, they sort the waste, they select the clothing items according to the age and even distribute the requested products to the families on the ground.

The interviews addressed to the volunteers started with questions regarding the reason or the moment that prompted them to get involved in the activities carried out by the association: „*I have followed their posts on facebook from behind, so to speak, I praised their initiatives, then I began to sort the home waste and I took the plastic bottles and cartons to the center every week*” (O.I.- volunteer), „*my daughter received a large package within a campaign conducted by them, and ever since I've begun to follow them and that's how I became a volunteer; I don't know how they found out about us, not even now*” (A.L.- volunteer), „*at the beginning I used donate money, clothes or whatever I had in my house, then I lost my job and I thought it was appropriate to do something useful; I really like it!*” (M.R.- volunteer). One of the volunteers' motivation comes precisely from the fact that she experienced a miserable childhood and knows the associated risks: „*I lived without parents, too, and I know what it means no to have and if I can help, I'll do it with all my heart; I don't have money to donate, but God made me fit for work*” (A.L. -volunteer).

The activities carried out by the volunteers are various, depending on the requests or the material donations made on the relevant day/ week, which can be under the shape of garments they must sort, or recyclable materials, which they must handle and separate, too. Moreover, each campaign is prepared in advance, in tandem with the regular activities: „*by Christmas I stayed up until midnight to finish packing the presents on time for the little children*” (M.R. – volunteer), „*in the evening, when the vehicle with recyclables arrives, we start sorting; if we let them pile up, it will be hard for us*” (A.L. – volunteer).

As regards the volunteers' satisfactions, they unanimously claimed that the help they give make them feel valued: „*nothing is more satisfactory in the world, than when you see tears of joy in a child's eyes*” (A.L.- volunteer), „*I ask for nothing in return, I go home with a smile on my face thinking that at least one child won't go to bed hungry*” (O.I.- volunteer). On the other hand, the difficulties faced are related to overload and exhaustion: „*it's not easy to juggle a job and volunteering, you've also got things to solve at home, but which one should you renounce?!*” (M.R.- volunteer), to which excessive affective involvement adds up: „*when you see a barefoot child in the rain, who gobbles up anything you would hand him, that picture lingers in your mind over a long period of time; you can't get over it too easily*” (A.L. – volunteer).

The questions for the beneficiaries started by pointing out the event or situations that required the association's intervention in each case. The social situations are quite diverse: „*last winter, because of the chimney, our house got burnt and we became homeless with 3 small children and no income*” (B.S. – beneficiary), „*my little daughter was born blind, she needed crystalline lens implant in both eyes, and we had no incomes, only the children's allowances*” (D.M. – beneficiary), „*when I got pregnant with my third child, my husband left me; being scared that I would have nothing to give them to eat, I thought of abandoning him in the maternity hospital ...*”

If it hadn't been for these people, I would have made the biggest mistake of my life" (V.O.-beneficiary). Thus, the association provided them with construction materials and workforce, where necessary, in order to rebuild or consolidate their houses, settled medical services which could not be postponed and for which their own funds would not suffice and also supplied food, milk and other products (non-perishable food, medicines, garments, baby bottles, diapers, prams, cradles) with the aim to prevent the newborn's separation from the mother.

The beneficiaries unanimously admitted that the support from the association, be it material or financial, helped them overcome the difficult moments in their life: *„ever since I have felt that I am not alone in my life anymore and some strangers could love you more than the close ones"* (V.O. – beneficiary). Moreover, besides the individual problems they faced, they received support on the occasion of each campaign, because they were in a data base of the Association.

Many of them became volunteers themselves over time or began to collect the waste separately in their household, understanding the utility of its capitalization for helping other children or families in need: *„in the past I used to burn all the cartons and plastics, now I gather and take them to the Association"* (B.S. – beneficiary), *„I haven't had the possibility to donate, instead I can give up at least an hour of my time for other children; they did that for me too at a certain moment"* (T.P. – beneficiary).

4. Discussions

Grasping the activity of the NGO from three different perspectives emphasized by the three interviewed categories, namely the association's president, the association's volunteers and the association's beneficiaries, allows us to depict a comprehensive picture. According to the results, the association particularly addresses the children from underprivileged environments and, hence their families, who are experiencing tragic events (fires, urgent medical problems), or need additional help in order to improve the quality of their life (material and financial support for the purpose of preventing the children's separation from their family).

Jianxiu (2006: 16) considers that NGOs are actually constituted as a bond between population and authorities, having as strong points cost-effectiveness, the capacity to serve the population in the poorly accessible, rural areas and the involvement of the local communities. Also, the positions of NGOs gives them the possibility to communicate both vertically (from beneficiaries to authorities and vice versa), and horizontally (to other organizations providing similar services). The results of this research paper illustrate the fact that the association collaborates with the local authorities and other institutions, too, such as the school, the church, social centers knowing or closely observing the people's needs. Very often, the latter are not sufficiently aware of their rights or do not know whom to turn to. Such collaborations facilitate the beneficiaries' access to the services that are addressed to them.

In terms of financing, the association has developed a community network of recyclable waste collection and sorting, which became the main source of income alongside donations or sponsorship. Such initiatives tend to increase the visibility of the non-governmental sector in Romania for the people and for the society. The financial support is the main preoccupation of NGOs in the absence of consistency, taking into account that the sources are in general donations, fund raising and governmental ones. If during the 1990s, non-governmental organizations in the social field were intensely supported from international funds, only after this period have public-private partnerships been achieved, materialized in internal funds (Lambriu, 2011: 172). Because NGOs are largely based on external income sources, any economic decline influences their activity directly and proportionally. Basically, NGOs have to restrict their activity due to the lack of funds, paradoxically right in the moments when new vulnerable groups, needing help appear (Ceptureanu et al., 2017: 2). In the case of this research, the Covid 19 pandemic caused, as expected, a significant reduction of income and, hence, the limitation of activity. In contrast, the number of requests rose, given the families' economic destabilization and the impossibility to provide the basic needs.

By their answers, the association's volunteers have stressed an increased preoccupation for philanthropic activities, which is actually their motivation in work and the steps they take. Borgaza și Tortia (2006: 226) consider that the workers in the non-profit sector have a greater satisfaction than the workers in other organizations, even if the wages are small or there is no remuneration at all. Although, most often the workload is bigger and the resources are limited, the motivation is bigger and hence the satisfaction, too. This makes them become loyal to the organization, on the principle that the work performed is a kind of donation. That is why, in order to understand the volunteers' behavior, we must first identify the reasons for which they devote their work and time to a cause. Basically, in spite of the difficulties they faced and which they admitted, the volunteers have built resources from the purpose of the work they have done.

Furthermore, I have noticed that many of the association's volunteers come from families who have benefitted or are still benefitting from support for their children, being satisfied by the services they have received and eager to support the future actions. Such characteristic of the volunteers is particularly an evidentiary effect of the efficiency of the services provided by the association; not only did they attain their goal, but they also succeeded in building models of good practice and even change mentalities.

The beneficiaries' answers have revealed a wide range of services intended for the children from underprivileged environments, materialized in the financial or material support. They can be directed to a situation or a single moment, as necessary, or they can extend over an indefinite period, should the social situation so warrant. Additionally, the association's campaigns occur throughout the year, marking the holidays and other equally important moments of the year. On such occasions, the beneficiaries are visited by the association's volunteers who know the needs on the ground and intervene in accordance with each specific situation. In conclusion, the social services represent the activity or the set of activities centered on social needs as well as on the individual, family or group needs. They aim at overcoming hardships or preventing social exclusion, as applicable, by raising the quality of life. (Androniceanu and Tvaronavičienė, 2019: 106). To sum up, the services offered by the association pursue the increase in the quality of the children's lives and hence, of their families, in order to prevent all forms of abuse and promote social inclusion.

5. Conclusions

Children are a category that has aroused the interest of the specialists in the social field since the earliest times. Both age and its related characteristics facilitate the premises of their vulnerability. Moreover, the family environment plays a key role in the children's development, therefore its functionalities or, on the contrary, dysfunctionalities are reflected on the children's welfare. Consequently, in the results section I ascertained the fact that the lack of material and financial sources in a family definitely influences the quality of the children's lives, making them vulnerable.

Alongside the services that the state institutions render to the children in risk situations, non-governmental organizations have developed a complementary network, pursuing an increase in the quality of life and currently they manage to meet a large proportion of the needs in this field. Considered an important component of the social system, the non-governmental organizations in the field of child protection are on the rise, making real progress in regard to infrastructure and the range of services provided.

Through this study I grasped a part of the social problems that the children from underprivileged environments experience, from the perspective of a non-governmental organization, in the present case an association, which serves specifically this category of beneficiaries. Whether we speak about single moments, such as, for instance, a house burning, or indefinite periods of vulnerability, in particular the prevention of a newborn's separation from the mother, the services provided by the association proved their efficiency.

The association also runs campaigns with various themes throughout the year, which allows the widening of the scope of action in the sense that the support is constant and is intended for more beneficiaries. At the same time, the communication between the association's representatives and the people sent on the ground facilitate the beneficiaries' access to the services intended for them. In the small communities, the risk situations are known not only by the local authorities, but also by the church and the school. Thus, this tacit partnership of the association with the priests or teachers helps to increase the visibility of the association's activity in the disadvantaged, poorly-accessible areas.

The volunteers' involvement in all the actions of the association, including those implying direct contact with the beneficiaries is constituted as the motivation for the work they perform. Thus, I noticed a high degree of satisfaction among volunteers, driven by the purpose of their actions. In addition, the selection of the volunteers from the former or even current beneficiaries is an evidentiary effect of the efficiency of the services provided by the association. In relation to the moral considerations, they perceive their own work as a donation on the one hand, and a return of the help received, on the other hand.

All in all, the organizations' activity tends to become more and more visible and accessible even among beneficiaries from disadvantaged environments. The aim of such steps is to prevent situations of child abuse, neglect or abandoning, as outlined in the results section.

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