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DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY ISSUES BY VOLUNTEERISM APPROACHES

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Abstract
There is a global warning signal regarding youth employability, with an estimate of a quarter of world youth population – i.e. 290 million youth aged 15 – 25 years old included in the NEETs ("not in education, employed or in training") category. Last data provided by EUROSTAT in 2022 shows that Romania have almost 20% of its 15 – 29 years old youth as NEETs (19.8%). This percent is almost double compared to EU average of 11.7%. Therefore, a lot of effort was invested into funding special programs and projects aiming at increasing qualification, professional skills and education levels in youth. Between 2007 – 2015 more than 62% of the budget allocation targeting youth in general and NEETs youth in particular (Priority Axe 2 – Improve the Situation of Youth from NEETs Category), as part of the financial exercise for Romania, came from the Social European Fund, and the impact of this investment has not been assessed, yet (QURES, 2016, pp. 39).
Volunteerism, though, as a means of gaining necessary skills and competences needed to find a job on the labour market, is often disregarded, although there are studies and initiatives that show there is a correlation between volunteerism, competences and increased employability chances, thus, underlining the economic capital volunteerism brings.
The current article proposes to analyse the importance of volunteerism in increasing employability chances in youth in general, NEETs youth in particular, through comparative data showcase and examples from various countries, coming from practice and literature review, including Romania's efforts in this regard.
Keywords: *volunteerism, employability, competences, youth, NEETs.*
JEL Classification: F66, J24, J69, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is a warning signal regarding the issue of youth employability. Estimates indicate that a quarter of planet's youth (approximately 290 million youth aged 15 to 24 years old) are included in the NEETs ("not in education, employed or in a form of training") category (The Economist apud International Association for Volunteer Effort, 2013). This category is defined as being formed of youth who either do not take part in any form of education, are unemployed or not included in any form of training (International Association for Volunteer Effort - IAVE, 2013). Eurostat data from 2022 show that the percentage of NEETs youth 15 to 29 years age in Romania was 19.8% almost double the European Union average of 11.7%. In addition, the occupation rate among young people 15 – 24 years old was 18.7% in 2023, according to the National Institute of Statistics, while Eurostat data from 2014 show the same indicator was 22.3%, which means that over a decade time, the occupation rate among this youth age category in Romania decreased by 3.7%. Overall, the World Bank indicates that almost half of the world's young population either was left outside the formal economy or was contributing less productively than it could (IAVE, 2013).

The above - mentioned data are some of the reasons European Union (EU) funding targeted and will continue to target in the next EU financial exercise the youth employability issue, and not only. The previous EU funding programs, along with other type of government funding, focused on NEETs problem, surpassed 3.5 billion EURO, since Romania entered EU (QURES, 2016, pp.39). The impact of the last EU financial exercise (2014 – 2020) has not been assessed, yet. However, hundreds of projects offering free professional training and qualification have been implemented. In addition, project beneficiaries received subsidies and some of them learned about business plans and set up their own business. Currently, despite all these investments meant to increase youth employability, we still have a high percentage of NEETs youth and labour crisis, and employers looking for employees with certain skills and competences.

Most of the efforts and funding focused only on investment in qualification, training and education. For a segment of the inactive population, volunteerism, as a form of gaining competences and skills, eventually securing and increasing chances for a first or new job, has been oversighted.

On the other hand, at the EU level, Romania is one of the countries with the lowest percentages of people involved in volunteer activities. The European Commission's Eurobarometer from November 2010 showed that the EU average of volunteerism was 30%, 13 EU member states being situated above the average. Romania is below the average, with only 20%, which places our country among EU member states with a low level of involvement in volunteer activities (European Commission Eurobarometer, 2010). The Eurobarometer 75.2 „Volunteerism and intergenerational solidarity" (European Commission,

2011) reveals that only 14% of the Romanians were involved as volunteers, with a 6% decrease compared to the previous year. The most recent data issued by the National Institute of Statistics in Romania reveals that approximately 4% of the Romanians got involved in formal or informal volunteer activities (National Institute of Statistics in Romania, pp. 46).

The current research targeted the following objectives:

1. Explore the correlation between volunteerism and employability;
2. Identify employability practices enhanced through volunteerism and their applicability in the Romanian context.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was literature review analysis on the subject of volunteerism, employability and the correlation between the two, focused also on NEETs youth. In addition, we wanted to identify the examples of good volunteerism practices from EU countries and not only, in increasing employability among youth and NEETs youth, especially, and what are the prospects of applying or adapting some of these practices within the Romanian context of volunteerism. To do that, we analysed the information showcased in comparative examples from various countries, presented in two articles and three publications (handbook and guides). This information was correlated with statistical information provided in European Union barometers and Romanian Government's reports and strategies.

3. DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS

3.1. What is the link between volunteerism and employability?

To analyse the correlation between volunteerism and employability, we started from the conceptual approach.

Within the context of this article and out of the numerous definitions that the scientific literature offers to volunteerism, the most appropriate definition is the one offered by the International Labour Organization. ILO defines volunteerism as "unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household or related family members" (Haddock and Devereux, pp.31).

On the other hand, employability is defined as "the ability to gain initial employment; hence the interest in ensuring that 'key competencies', careers advice and an understanding about the world of work are embedded in the education system"(Wikipedia, Berntson Eric, 2008).

Volunteerism is a source of all kinds of capital, from the human, social, physical, to the economic capital (Bates and Davis, 2004). The economic capital of volunteerism can be looked at from the host organization – volunteer paradigm perspective. For the host organizations which involve volunteers in

their activities and which look at the volunteers as a strategic human resource, volunteers' hours of work can be converted into monetary contribution to the organization's budget. If volunteering is measured and monitored appropriately this can be easily done using the Volunteerism Economic Return instrument (VOLUM Federation, Comparative Study, 2016).

From the volunteer's perspective, the economic value of volunteerism translates into competences and skills gained through volunteerism activities which increase volunteer's employability chances. Therefore, we can say that volunteerism and employability are linked through the competencies gained, due to volunteer work. However, to be more intentional in this approach, we also need to consider the kind of motivations underlying the volunteer behaviour. Clary and his collaborators identified six motivational factors, brought together into a Volunteer Functions Inventory Scale, using the functional approach. These are, as follows: (1) motivation factors based on the protection of ego, (2) motivation factors based on values, (3) motivation factors related to career development, (4) social motivation factors, (5) motivation factors based on understanding (gaining competences, knowledge and skills), and (6) motivation factors which enhance personal development and increase self – esteem (Clary et all, 1998). Therefore, Clary and his collaborators identified specific sets of motivational factors which determine people to volunteer, in order to gain competences, knowledge and skills that enable them to find a job (if unemployed), to find a first job (if they are recent graduates of the education system or to change their job, for career development purposes.

We can deduct that the correlation between volunteerism and employability is strengthened through the competences and skills volunteerism is developing. To look at the nature of this correlation, we have done a literature review search and we, then, applied it to the actual Romanian context.

3.2 How strong is the volunteerism – employability link?

To answer this question, we have reviewed two studies made in Great Britain, one in 2000 and a second one in 2013, which aimed to intentionally analyse and research on the same question. The studies seemed interesting, because they are made in Great Britain, a country with a high percentage of the population being involved in volunteer activities. Data provided on UN Volunteers Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism for United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, state that in 2017 - 2018 alone, 64% of the people in England took part in a volunteering activity at least once.

The first study was published in November 2013 by a group of researchers led by Paine A., who wanted to answer the question of employability – volunteerism correlation, around a time when levels of unemployment in the UK was high and, as such the level of interest in volunteerism as a vector for employment was increasing (Paine et al., 2013). They used a longitudinal

perspective, multivariate techniques, focusing on data from British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), 1996 – 2008, which included also questions related to volunteerism and employment. While the authors of this study do not deny the results of previous studies which could identify a connection between volunteerism and employability, in the sense that volunteerism, through the motivational functional approach, can enhance competencies development and new skills gain or skills improvement, through their longitudinal analysis they conclude that the frequency of volunteerism has an influence on the volunteerism – employability correlation. If volunteerism is done monthly, chances to find a job increase. If the frequency is more or less than monthly, it reduces the chances for employability or even, as they say, have a "reverse effect" (Paine et al., 2013, pp. 19). Furthermore, as they conclude, "Overall, volunteering (as measured in the BHPS) does not appear to have as strong or as positive an effect on employability outcomes – on moves into employment, on retention and progression – as suggested in both policy rhetoric and in some previous research" (Paine et al., 2013, pp.19).

Previous research coordinated in 2000 by Andy Hirst, to explore the link between volunteerism and employability, focused on the nature of this link, the operating mechanisms and the circumstances in which unemployed volunteers increase their chances to find a job, compared to the unemployed who do not volunteer (Hirst, 2000). Their analysis concluded that volunteering activity had a more positive impact on unemployed people's chances of finding a job, with more than 50% of the unemployed getting a job, following volunteer initiatives. Another finding was that the nature of volunteering (number of volunteer hours, whether or not they received training during the time they volunteered, variety of volunteer activities, etc.) makes a difference and that more benefits relate to the ones who had previous jobs and are in search for a new one, compared to people who are new – entry into employment (Hirst, 2000).

In December 2012, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), organized a Dialogue on Youth, Volunteering and Employment, as part of the 22nd biennial World Volunteer Conference, held in London, with the participation of corporations, youth, NGOs and policy analysts. Part of this London Dialogue included also the results of a survey made of 200 leading UK businesses, on the value of volunteering. Here are some of the employers' perspective on the added – value of volunteering:

- 73% of the employers would recruit candidates with experience gained through volunteerism, meaning that they recognise volunteerism as work experience;
- 80% of the employers declared is good to have volunteerism activities mentioned in a CV, as they appreciate reading about that in a CV;
- 70% said volunteerism is a premise for a bigger salary and promotion opportunities;

- 84% agreed there are chances youth can find a job through volunteerism (IAVE, 2013).

While studies made by Hirst and Paine (along with previous studies they cited in their research articles) do not identify a clear, definitive link between volunteerism and employability, employers' opinions seem to be quite encouraging in this respect, for Great Britain's context.

3.3. Good practices in increasing employability through volunteerism Projects

In countries where volunteerism is highly developed (UK, Norway, Netherlands), volunteerism is recognized as a contributor to increased chances for employability. To do that, volunteer management must intentionally aim at developing skills and competences, which will be useful in the future career and even in getting a job. It is also essential in volunteer recruitment and retention processes, if properly made, focused, and a genuinely structured work experience. This counterbalances with the motivation for volunteerism.

In a comparative study made by VOLUM Federation, regarding the good practices examples present at the European level in recognizing and certifying competencies gained through volunteerism, results are diverse and non-consistent. In Croatia, volunteerism and gained competencies have "generated a certain degree of competition on the labour market and increased employability, in general" (VOLUM Federation, Comparative Study, 2016), while in France, categories most interested in the issuing of a volunteer passport, are young people in search for a first job, with inclusion problems or in school abandonment situation, along with employed and retired persons.

Netherlands is presenting the "validation of prior learning" – VPL model, which validates gained competencies, while Scotland is intentional in using volunteerism to increase employability. The model's name is „Vskills for Employability", and the targeted group are the unemployed. "In Scotland, volunteerism is not separated from employability and people look at volunteerism as an instrument to increase individual skills for employability, to prepare for employment and a means of connection to job opportunities offered at the local/ regional or national level." (VOLUM Federation, Comparative Study, 2016, pp. 9) However, data lead to the conclusion that volunteerism is not a solution for every unemployed and does not guarantee you finding a job.

Slovakia, for example, has concluded, after implementing a project and approach like Scotland, that volunteerism is mainly important as work experience for the NGO sector.

3.4 The NGO Experience in Romania

A step forward in recognizing the economic and social value of volunteerism was made along with the approval of the new Law of Volunteerism

- no. 78/ 2014, lastly up-dated in April 2024. The added - value of the legislative improvements consists in recognizing volunteerism and competencies gained through volunteerism through the national certificates for volunteerism offered and clear stipulations regarding the contract – based relationship between the volunteer and hosting organization. These include formal documents like volunteer job description (the equivalent of job description for and employee) and the security and protection form for the volunteer (Law of Volunteerism no. 78/ 2014, updated April 2024).

Despite it, up to now the economic value of volunteerism is entirely oversighted, while the social value of volunteerism is, more or less formally recognized in the community.

The lack of accurate information and awareness on the importance of volunteerism is one of the causes for inconsistent, less rigorous management of volunteers (sometimes even the lack of it), in public and private institutions. NGOs continue to be, in this case also, the structures that involve volunteers on a larger scale. Even in their case, as it is specified in one of the position documents of VOLUM Federation, there are „barriers that limit the potential of volunteerism" which are related to the lack of a long – term vision, that will encompass "support mechanisms for volunteers and for organizers of volunteer activities, such as: access to appropriate funding means, capacity building for NGOs running volunteerism programs; coherent public policies which reduce barriers in organizing and carrying on volunteer activities, data gathering and analysis systems regarding the impact and economic and social value of volunteerism, as well as systems to measure and recognize competencies gained through volunteerism" (VOLUM Federation position document, pp.9).

The General Secretariat of the Romanian Government has published, in 2019, under the program "The Promoters of Volunteerism in Romania", a guide entitled "Guide regarding the Optimization of the Partnership between Public Administration Authorities and the Associative Environment, in Support of Volunteerism". This is sending a strong sign that volunteerism began to be regarded as generator and enhancer of employability in Romania, through more consolidated partnerships among local public authorities and the associative environment in Romania. In addition, The National Strategy for Youth 2024 – 2027 (Annex) mentions that the focus must be on "increasing the extent to which youth participate in community and social activities" and on "reducing labour poverty and occupational exclusion" (pp.4 – 5), which, again, shows a potential correlation between volunteerism and employability. NEETs youth are part of the analysis and action plan included in this strategy, along with volunteerism, each of the two components are being addressed through specific general objectives. To increase youth participation through volunteerism, the strategy includes information and awareness campaigns, partnerships al local/ regional/ territorial level in support of volunteerism, increasing the number of

volunteerism networks (Romanian Government, 2023). Although the strategic document does not correlate employability with volunteerism directly, it can constitute a starting point in this respect, through the manner in which funding and projects will be designed and implemented.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Related to the first objective of the research, the analysis of the literature review points out to the conclusion that the link between volunteerism and employability is contradictory and somehow weak. The three studies made in Great Britain by IAVE, Paine and Hirst, based on an analysis of previous research made, lead to this conclusion. The perspectives about the concepts and definitions of the NGO's roles for employability represents a basis for future researchers. Our paper makes the connection between the articles involved in some analysis regarding the skills of NEETs. However, there are some aspects in need of further investigation.

For the second objective of the research, we identified there are several practices and projects implemented, some even covering a large period, like Vskills employability in Scotland, from which Romania can learn as a country. The current legislation for volunteerism in Romania, improved through the addition of provisions regarding the recognition of volunteerism as work experience and the added - value in the selection process, is an excellent starting point. The Law of Volunteerism is also offering specific information regarding means of monitoring volunteer contribution and the volunteer management process overall.

However, despite the efforts made by the NGO sector to bring up to light these provisions and point out practical ways to apply it, the low level of volunteerism in Romania is an indication that a first more intentional step would be to increase awareness on the legislative provisions among volunteers, NGOs, local authorities, universities and employers, and other stakeholders of volunteerism. This could be mainly beneficial, within the current EU financial exercise (2023 – 2027), and the allocation of funds focusing on youth employability, especially NEETs youth employability. Volunteerism could play also an important role, alongside professional training courses, subsidies and entrepreneurship, in increasing employability, through its economic value, but also through the other kinds of capital it carries.

The conclusions of our research are:

1. An important preparatory step in increasing youth, especially NEETs youth employability, would be a nation – wide awareness and information campaign on up – to – date Volunteerism Law and its provisions;
2. A second step would be an intentional approach to youth employability, which involves all volunteerism stakeholders, namely youth looking for a job, potential employers, universities, NGOs involving volunteers, state institutions,

by developing joint projects which link volunteerism to employability and have the power to attract de funds made available by European Union and other financers, during the current financial exercise (2023 – 2027);

3. More volunteer management trainings, especially for smaller NGOs and state institutions, that will familiarize them with the management instruments provided in the Romanian Law of Volunteerism;

4. Establish a unitary methodology and instruments to measure the economic value of volunteerism in Romania and its contribution to the Romanian GDP;

5. Improve the certification and formal recognition system of volunteerism;

6. Identify a coordination body that would manage all these processes, and other Governmental strategies that have included volunteerism on their agenda. This coordinating body should also coordinate and monitor the use of all funding available through different channels, so that in the end the objectives are being met.

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