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RESUME OF DOCTORAL THESIS

CONTRIBUTIONS OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS IN ROMANIA TO THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS. AN ASSESSMENT OF ACTIVITES, ROLES, AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE COMMUNITY IMPACT GENERATED BY FOUNDATIONS

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Resume of the doctoral thesis

Keywords: community development; nongovernmental organizations; community foundations; community engagement; perceptions' evaluation; quality of life

In the *context* of continuous evolution of community needs and challenges, as well as the response of community foundations (CFs) and the stakeholders involved in correctly identifying and addressing these issues, this paper takes the form of a literature review analysis, encompassing both national and international perspectives. It aims to expose the identified gaps in the existing literature and provide an overview of the overall activities of CFs, aligned with their mission, roles in community development, and operational principles or standards.

The doctoral thesis addresses a *topic* related to the contributions of community foundations (CFs) to the community development process. It starts by examining the mission undertaken by CFs, the roles they fulfill in the community, the actions they undertake, and the perception of their representatives regarding their activities and the generated impact. These actions often encounter obstacles or inevitable difficulties, leading to frustration and overload. However, CFs embrace and integrate these challenges as relevant stages in any undertaken process. The thesis also addresses these practical aspects in the applied part of the paper. Each of these aspects ultimately shapes a response or confirmation of the genuine involvement of CFs in community development.

The practical aspects mentioned and analyzed in the applied part of the thesis are based on the analysis of the relevant literature, addressed in the chapter titled "Theoretical Framework". Through this analysis, relevant concepts for the scientific endeavor were identified, as well as the connections between these concepts and how they can be demonstrated or put into practice. Identifying the roles of CFs in community development, the dimension of the entire nongovernmental sector, and the significance of their activities and results served as starting points in designing the methodology and design of the thesis, as discussed in the chapter titled "Methodological Framework."

Starting from principles of community development, stakeholders involved in community development, or resources required for such a process, and progressing to the nongovernmental sector as an important actor in community development, its dimension, and the identification of

areas of action, and reaching the community foundation movement as a distinct type of nongovernmental organization that promotes and develops community philanthropy, and thus contributes to the community development process, the thesis aims to connect each sub-chapter in the Theoretical Framework and create an understanding framework for the addressed topic and the possibility of implementation in practice.

The doctoral thesis both theoretically and empirically examines the contribution of community foundations in Romania, a distinct type of nongovernmental organization (NGO), to the community development process. The overall *objective* of the work is a comprehensive one, aiming to analyze and understand how community foundations mobilize resources from within and outside the community, the sources of income, and how these resources are utilized for community involvement. It also seeks to assess the extent to which community foundations fulfill certain roles of NGOs in community development as proposed by the specialized literature. At the same time, it will evaluate the perception of the concrete impact of community foundations in terms of projects and results, as well as in relation to the fulfillment of their mission. This includes identifying the obstacles they encounter in their activities and the ways to address them to understand their expectations in relation to the strategic directions they have assumed for the future.

Through the study of specialized literature, bibliographic sources from fields or areas such as community development, the nongovernmental sector, and nongovernmental organizations were analyzed. The literature also encompassed the community foundation movement, and connections between these areas were identified, particularly the involvement or role of community foundations as nongovernmental organizations in the community development process. Each of these areas or concepts was addressed in distinct sub-chapters in the theoretical framework, along with relevant specificities.

To demonstrate and understand the actual contributions of community foundations in community development, a specific methodological approach was constructed based on the previous theoretical studies conducted by specialists. In the second part of the thesis, a general research objective was formulated, which analyzed aspects of the activities of community foundations. These aspects were addressed in separate chapters through quantitative and qualitative studies.

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The necessity of bringing together complex perspectives arises from the highly developed field of community foundation activities and actions, especially considering the mission assumed at the level of the national movement or network, as well as the local specificity of each foundation and community. The research objective was practically translated into research questions for qualitative analyses and research hypotheses for quantitative analysis.

The selected *research methods* for the qualitative part of the thesis were interviews and document analysis. These methods were employed to complement the results of the quantitative analysis (mentioned below) and to delve deeper into aspects related to the activities of CFs. Thus, the research questions that constituted the foundation of the practical approach through qualitative methods to the theoretical subjects analyzed in the first part of this work are as follows:

RQ1: How do community foundations mobilize resources from within and outside the community?

RQ2: What are the sources of income for community foundations (both internal and external sources)?

RQ3: How do community foundations utilize resources to engage within the community?

RQ4: To what extent do community foundations fulfill the six roles of nongovernmental organizations in community development proposed by William Cousins (1991)?

RQ5: What is the concrete impact of community foundations in terms of outcomes and projects? Can these serve as impact indicators?

RQ6: What obstacles are encountered in the activities of community foundations, and how have they been overcome?

RQ7: What are the expectations of community foundations in relation to the strategic directions they have assumed for the next 5 years?

For a holistic approach, the research also included a quantitative perspective. This was formulated with three research hypotheses that were subjected to statistical testing. Through these research hypotheses, the aim was, on the one hand, to determine the extent to which respondents perceive the fulfillment of the mission, the level of community receptivity, and community involvement in foundation activities as influences on the type of impact on the community, whether positive or negative, and the intensity of that impact. On the other hand, the analysis sought to determine the extent to which the perception of the community's level of involvement in foundation activities is influenced by the use of feedback collection mechanisms from the community and the level of community receptivity.

Hypothesis 1: The extent to which community foundations fulfill their mission in the community, the level of community receptivity to foundation activities, and the level of community involvement influence the type of impact on the community resulting from the activities of foundations.

Hypothesis 2: The extent to which community foundations fulfill their mission in the community, the level of community receptivity to foundation activities, and the level of community involvement influence the intensity of the impact on the community resulting from the activities of foundations.

Hypothesis 3: The use of feedback collection mechanisms from the community and the level of community receptivity determine the level of community involvement in foundation activities.

The subject addressed throughout the research is a topical one, given the involvement of NGOs in contemporary Romanian society through awareness campaigns and fundraising efforts, especially in the fields of education and healthcare. This is one of the reasons for choosing this topic. CFs are a small part of the nongovernmental sector but contribute with resources and the know-how required to build stronger communities and contexts for sustainable development. Special circumstances, such as the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) (Federatia Fundațiilor Comunitare din România, https://fsp.ac/d4AS6) or the war in Ukraine (2022) (Federația Fundațiilor Comunitare din România, https://www.fsp.ac/sXnb5), have mobilized CFs alongside the entire nongovernmental sector, leading to support and fundraising actions for those affected by these events. These situations have allowed CFs to create a framework for mobilizing funds and other types of resources in an organized and efficient manner. Although they acted in an integrated manner at the national network level in these contexts, CFs addressed the issues at local level. establishing emergency funds (Fundația Comunitară Vâlcea. https://www.fsp.ac/rYsr4), forming partnerships, and mobilizing local donors to provide funding and support to those in need in their immediate communities. Throughout this period, CFs did not forget their objectives and the missions they had undertaken. They sought solutions and continued their usual activities, albeit under special conditions. They continued to organize fundraising sports events in formats other than physical ones during the COVID-19 pandemic or sought

international financial support for the integration of refugees as potential beneficiaries of foundation programs.

The researched *theme* is firmly rooted in the present, and the subject under investigation becomes relevant for both the academic community and practitioners. The holistic approach provides a novel perspective and significantly contributes as a foundational basis for opinions in the field. Such a comprehensive approach, encompassing an integrated overview of the mission of Romanian CFs and its translation into their daily activities, combined with the principles they embrace and the roles they fulfill, is both new and necessary within the academic environment. Relevant research in Romania that emphasizes the aggregated contributions at the national level of these nongovernmental organizations exists in the form of research reports conducted by researchers within the network of CFs in Romania (e.g., Făgăraș Research Institute) or specialists from various initiatives or funding organizations (e.g., European Community Foundation Initiative). The Community Foundations Federation in Romania produces infographics (Infographic The Community Foundations Movement in Romania 2008-2019, 2022) or retrospectives of their activities (Federatia Fundatiilor Comunitare din România, https://www.fsp.ac/ojPsj) and the evolution of the national CF network, albeit in graphic and narrative form rather than in a scientific manner. Additionally, during the doctoral studies, articles related to CFs activities were authored by the thesis author and published in specialized scientific journals or collective volumes. In the literature review, no research studies addressing this theme at the Romanian level were identified, although there are international studies related to CFs dating back to the 1990s.

A deeper exploration of the subject is opportune both from the perspective of practitioners and specialists within the national network of CFs in Romania. This determination was made based on the author's experience in the nongovernmental sector for over eight years, which influenced the choice of the subject and the comprehensive approach to it. Through various work contexts with CFs from 2016 to the present (2023), including consultancy services and the annual collection of data regarding the evolution of CFs, potential research directions for a more in-depth analysis of their activities were identified. The directions formulated through this research can provide an overall picture of what CFs do in the communities they operate in but in a scientific, academic, and thorough manner rather than just a descriptive or graphic one. In the context of workplace discussions, the need to aggregate information related to CF activities has been raised, which would serve as the basis for shaping potential future perspectives by identifying best practices or improving and streamlining activities.

This research approach combines *theoretical concepts* of community development with practical perspectives characteristic of the nongovernmental sector, especially through the examination of community foundations as active actors in community development. Thus, this work focuses on the activities of organizations that transform communities and the lives of people living in them. These are organizations that are part of a sector that emerged and developed in response to recurring needs in today's society, arising from deficiencies in the provision of services by the public sector. Nongovernmental organizations have emerged as an alternative to public services in various areas, such as education, health, social inclusion, or the environment. They mobilize resources from communities (Hassan, 2022) and create the necessary opportunities for citizens to benefit from them, but at a high-quality level and tailored to their needs. Tailoring refers to factors such as the age group of potential beneficiaries, their background (urban, rural), gender, and even whether they belong to groups at risk or disadvantaged categories.

Similar to nongovernmental organizations and the entire nonprofit sector, CFs have also emerged, concurrently developing the concept of community philanthropy (Leat, 2004). What sets them apart from other nongovernmental organizations, and further contributes to the evolution of community philanthropy, are: their specific role as grantmakers (Nickels & Rivera, 2018) or mobilizers of resources that are reinvested in the community in various forms (grants, scholarships), and their specific geographic focus (targeting the communities in which they operate and acting at the local level) (San Diego Foundation, 2021). As a result, these organizations were expected to mobilize resources from the community and reinvest them in the community at a higher quality level and with the involvement of various community actors, experts with shared goals, community engagement, and positive transformation, as well as the enhancement of the well-being of their members. Historically, at the beginning of the CF movement internationally, these organizations represented a new form of philanthropy, coordinated by entrepreneurial bankers who aimed to identify community needs, build funding sources, and distribute them within the community to address identified needs. Numerous factors have contributed to the expansion and development of these foundations on local, national, and international levels in different periods, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries (Sacks, 2000).

CFs have expanded internationally and have also reached the Romanian context, where they have been operating since 2008, promoting community philanthropy at local level. Their evolution has involved intense processes of community organization, the aggregation and mobilization of individuals and resources, the establishment of funding sources, collaboration with various community actors, and continuous community engagement (both by the foundations and the community in their projects) in 19 communities across 19 cities in Romania. The areas of action of CFs in Romania align with those outside its borders and involve community interventions in education, health, social inclusion, environment, culture, and the arts. Over the past 14 years of activity in Romania, these foundations have attracted over 117 million RON from individual donors, companies, or public funds and have invested over 63 million RON in the community, in addition to costs or expenses related to staff, maintenance, or event organization. By addressing community needs and making concrete contributions to the community, CFs actively engage in and positively influence the community development process.

The need for community development arises from the issues identified in the community by its members, which take the form of needs that must be met and satisfied. In community development, the emphasis is placed on people as part of a group with common values and goals, thus representing a collective good (Ostrom, 1992). NGOs and CFs, in particular, are part of community development processes, driven by the interest to help and contribute to the collective well-being of groups in need, through their very existence or the purpose of assisting a specific category of individuals.

To test the already formulated theories, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed, focusing on key managerial figures and board members from 18 community foundations (N=19).

For a comprehensive approach, different respondent samples were used. In the *document analysis*, infographics summarizing the activities of the community foundations during the period 2008-2021 were reviewed. These infographics were created based on annual data collected from the 18 community foundations that are part of the national network in Romania. The infographics were complemented by annual reports from the 18 community foundations, which were published on their official websites. Additionally, under the same research method, the *second document analysis* involved monitoring the evolution of community foundations' activities over a five-year period (2017-2021).

The third research method was a *survey*. The research instrument for this method, the questionnaire, was constructed based on existing data about community foundations, which were analyzed in previous chapters of the research, as well as on indicators related to community impact. These indicators were developed based on the conceptualization of the nonprofit sector and the needs of community foundations in terms of community impact. An attempt was made to apply the research instrument to the entire statistical population, as the number of employees in community foundations is small (with an average of 4 to 5 employees in the 18 community foundations), and the number of board members is similar, with an average of approximately 5 to 6 members. Given the small number of individuals in the statistical population, a sample could not be constructed, and instead, a comprehensive approach covering the entire statistical population was chosen. A total of N=37 complete and valid responses formed the final database, with 26 respondents being part of the executive teams of the foundations, and 11 respondents being members of the Board of Directors.

The final research method employed was the *interview*. Interviews complemented the quantitative research and provided insights into the personal perspectives of the subjects involved. Thus, with a sample of N=21 respondents, this research recorded substantial responses that highlighted the importance of the three questions from the interview guide.

The conclusion of this work manages to capture relevant responses related to the initially formulated research questions and makes significant contributions to this extensive field.

The *research results* were shaped through the analyses conducted. In a first step in the scientific endeavor, a document analysis was performed to fulfill part of the general objective by formulating research questions. These questions aimed to identify and explain how community foundations mobilize resources from within and outside the community, the sources of these revenues, and how they utilize them by creating specific funding pools dedicated to community projects or initiatives. With over 63 million RON in funding over 14 years of activity, community foundations support community development in essential areas (education, health, social inclusion) by organizing fundraising events that target the entire community, including citizens, potential sponsors, and donors, as well as local authorities and other NGOs. Subsequently, through the mobilized financial resources, they establish funding pools to support ideas and projects from the community that involve and benefit the community.

The next step in the research involved another document analysis as part of the general objective. In this part, research questions aimed to determine the extent to which community foundations fulfill the six roles of nongovernmental organizations in community development proposed by William Cousins (1991) (Abiddin et al., 2022). These roles include infrastructure development and operationalization, support for innovative projects, facilitation of communication, research, monitoring, and evaluation, provision of technical assistance and training, and advocacy. One conclusion of this analysis could be that out of the six roles presented and analyzed, taken from the literature, each foundation fulfills them to varying degrees depending on their mission, local specificities, and local contexts. Among the 18 community foundations analyzed, all of them fulfill at least three roles proposed by W. Cousins (1991), specifically, facilitating communication, conducting research, monitoring, and evaluation, and providing technical assistance and training.

The analysis focused on one of the general objectives of community foundations, namely, the generation of positive impact within the community, which can be evaluated through the improvement of residents' quality of life, as assumed by their mission. This represented the quantitative research aspect of the thesis. The analysis of the survey data comprised two parts: quantitative analysis (closed-ended questions) and qualitative analysis (open-ended questions). Quantitative analysis was conducted through univariate analysis (frequency of responses), bivariate analysis (linear regressions and correlations), and a comparative analysis of perceptions between the two groups within the statistical population (the executive team and the Board of Directors).

Qualitative analysis was conducted using an analysis grid for responses from the questionnaire. The confirmation of the analyzed hypotheses contributes to the current research and demonstrates that the mission fulfilled by community foundations influences various aspects, including community impact. Alongside the levels of community receptivity and involvement in community foundation activities, it also influences the intensity of such impact. Among the mentioned aspects, two types of statistical relationships were identified, both correlation and causality, as evidenced by the significance and values of the coefficients specific to the two types of analyses conducted (linear regressions and correlations).

The comparative analysis revealed both similarities and differences in the perceptions of two groups of respondents, namely, the executive team and the Board of Directors, regarding the fulfillment of the mission, the type of impact, and its intensity. The areas in which community foundations primarily contribute were related to the quality of life for citizens and the improvement of community impact. However, differences of opinion between the two groups were also identified, especially concerning future involvement.

As for the qualitative analysis of responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire, these responses were grouped into categories, leading to the identification of three general types of community impact initiatives: fundraising events and their significance in the community mindset, the development of local funding sources and project implementation for the community, and the mobilization of community foundations in emergency or crisis situations, the development of specific funds, and the support provided within the community.

The research also included a qualitative component, aiming to capture the obstacles encountered by community foundations in their activities, the ways in which they have overcome these obstacles, and their expectations for the future, considering the experience and profile of each foundation. Regarding the research question concerning the obstacles faced by community foundations in Romania and the methods used to overcome them, three general categories of obstacles can be appreciated: those related to the relationship with the community, issues related to the perception of community foundations, and internal organizational challenges. Regarding the last research question, respondents identified numerous expectations for the future, which they intend to address from a strategic perspective to further the development of community foundations. In terms of the frequency of responses, these expectations revolve around three general directions: internal capacity development (resources, donors, processes), the establishment, resumption, or improvement of partnerships or collaborations, and strengthening their role within the community, both as leaders in the local NGO sector and as aggregators of resources within the community.

This research opens up avenues for *future perspectives* in terms of the subject, methodology, and, most importantly, results. These perspectives have the potential to contribute to the understanding of community development by analyzing the involvement of community actors, in this case, community foundations, and the significance of their assumed missions. Furthermore, they contribute to the measurement and evaluation of the community impact of their actions based on how it is perceived by community foundation representatives. In its entirety, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of the researched subject through a comprehensive

exploration of theoretical and practical dimensions. It also facilitates a holistic understanding of the two parties involved and makes significant contributions through the coherent presentation of ideas related to the subject matter. This, in turn, aids in understanding the terms outlined in the specialized literature as points of reference in their practical application within various perspectives related to community foundation activities.

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