

# SURVIVING THE CRISIS THROUGH COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS IN RURAL ROMANIA<sup>1</sup>

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*In recent years, there has been a growing interest in developing associations and cooperatives in general amid flourishing policy debates on social economy and social enterprises. This paper will address the key challenges social economy entities are facing in rural areas of Romania through a comprehensive approach based on theoretical and empirical research. The paper will try to map social economy entities in rural Romania, focusing on the profile, structure and dynamics of these collective organizations, and thus completing the insufficient information available on alternative organizations in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe in general. This paper is based on the data about social economy actors in Romania that we have used to compare social economy actors (cooperatives, associations, commons, NGOs). The purpose of this paper is to present and examine the role that social economy entities play in rural development in Romania. A core role in local development processes in Romania is played by NGOs which create innovative programs, services and activities in order to resolve the social problems and respond to social needs. These innovative programs, services and activities change the resources, beliefs, authorities and population perception. The type of services provided by the social economy entities, the effects thereof on the community (social inclusion of vulnerable groups, the creation of new participative development mechanisms, the creation of social infrastructure, the increase of social, human, symbolic capital, etc) determine the major role such entities play within the local development process. The main effects of the activity of these collective organizations over the local development are related to the increase of the social capital (the increase of the faith between the members and inside the institutions, the creation of more powerful relations among the members, the creation of networks with other communities), the stimulation of innovation and the introduction of these innovations in the activity of the local institutions, the increase of the occupancy rate, especially for the people in vulnerable groups, the formation of local development structures (action groups, initiative groups, community centres), the stimulation of the local development potential.*

**Keywords:** collective organizations, social economy, rural development.

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In recent years, the interest in the potential of social economy organisations to support and generate economic and social development has greatly increased, due to various macro-economic imbalances of social-economic organisation systems and some of the failures to integrate vulnerable people and increase the number of employed people. In this context, we are witnessing an increasing interest in social economy research, which has specific features and groups various organisations under the same identity, from NGOs with economic activity (foundations and associations) to mutuals and cooperatives, commons and protected units. All these organisations grouped under the more general concept of social economy are characterised by the duality of their objectives – economic and social; the achievement of such objectives is possible mainly due to the collective nature of these organisations, as they are set up, managed and controlled by their members. Since they are organisations of the members, they manage a multitude of interests of their members to produce goods or provide services necessary to them or to their community, and the cooperation and mutuality principles must be observed, in order to achieve the desired economic and social performance.

We are also witnessing a growing interest in the development of cooperatives and associations following the public debate on social economy and social enterprises, after European funding was granted to these entities to achieve social inclusion through active measures. This paper aims to describe social economy entities in rural areas, focusing on the profile, the structure and the dynamics of such collective organisations in the last decade, and thus to complete the existing information on these alternative organisations in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe in general. The analysis will use data on social economy actors in Romania (cooperatives, NGOs, Commons) collected by the Research Institute for Quality of Life in the research conducted over the past few years, and which will allow us to make comparisons between these entities.

The purpose of this paper is to present and analyse the role of these organisations in the rural development process in Romania. Until 1990, in Romanian rural areas the predominant economic role was played by agricultural production cooperatives (CAPs), followed by consumer cooperatives whose main purpose was “to ensure the exchange of goods between villages and cities” (Crişan, 2010), whereas now an important role in rural development in Romania is played by NGOs, which have created innovative programmes, services and activities in order to solve local problems and meet social needs. All these led to changes in the existing resources, values and attitudes, as well as in the perception of the population and the authorities. The type of services provided and their effects on communities (social inclusion of persons at risk, creation of participatory development mechanisms, creation of social infrastructure, enhancement of human, social, symbolic capital, etc.) have determined the important role that these entities play in rural development (Borzaga and Tortia, 2009). The main effects of these collective organisations’ activities on local development are related to social capital growth (increased trust among community members and in institutions, development of networks between communities, etc.), encouraging innovation and placing it in local institutions, increased employment

especially for vulnerable groups, development of local structures (task groups, initiative groups, community centres), stimulation of local development potential.

### **RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA**

The basis of the Romanian rural economy is agriculture; only 18.1% of active non-agricultural small and medium-sized enterprises are located in rural areas. Seven years after EU accession, there is little improvement to living conditions in Romanian rural areas, due in particular to insufficient development or even lack of infrastructure (roads, utilities, social), lack of social services (health, welfare, cultural etc.) and lack of employment opportunities (very small number of active companies in non-agricultural fields). Romania holds 29% of the EU's farms, but the great majority of them (over 40%) are not helped with subsidies because their total size does not meet the eligibility criteria for direct payments (farms of less than 1 ha or individual plots larger than 0.30 ha) (The Government of Romania, 2009). The continued existence of these small farms is the result of low economic viability of rural areas, which demonstrates that agriculture continues to play an important role in ensuring self-consumption in rural areas (including mountain areas), helping to reduce the risk of poverty in these areas (Sabates-Wheeler, 2002). In this context, the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) does not have a high added value for the agricultural sector in Romania, given that 70% of direct payments are received by 3% of Romanian farmers who own more than half of the utilised agricultural area (Luca, 2009). In Romania, small farms play an important social role for the whole country as they provide part of the food resources necessary to households. Agriculture is a source of food for the extended family, given that foodstuffs are still 35.5% of total family expenditure compared to 2010 (Romania in Figures, 2011).

The importance of agriculture in the national economy can be demonstrated also by the high level of employment in this field. The highest percentage of employed population in Romania in 2011 is in agriculture – 29%, which proves once again the importance of this field for the socio-economic development of this country. After 1990, this percentage decreased slightly from 32.9% in 1992 to 29.2% in 2011, which shows how vital the development of the agricultural sector is for the population's welfare. Work in agriculture is an opportunity to increase individual welfare, and for many small producers it is an important source of food for their own consumption. According to the 2010 Agricultural Census, over 98% of the people working in agriculture were working in unincorporated farms and only 1.5% in incorporated farms. The comparative analysis of the employed population's professional status by residence areas for 2010 indicates that there are over 90% employed people in urban areas, whereas in rural areas there are 35.7% employed people, 37% self-employed, and 26.7% unpaid family workers (INS, TEMPO database, 2014). The high percentage of self-employed does not indicate increased entrepreneurial spirit in rural areas, but it is rather associated with the practice of subsistence agriculture.

Asymmetric development of rural areas is a major problem throughout the European Union, and Romania fits perfectly in this case. Romania's turbulent recent history combined with its diverse biogeography has created an agricultural country of extremes, where 45% of the population lives in rural areas and about 30% of farms are between 0.5 and 5 ha, while 76% of the Romanian State's agricultural payments go to large farms, which represent about 10% of all farms and use almost 40% of the total agricultural areas (Luca, 2009). EUROSTAT data on utilised agricultural area indicates Romania as the second largest agricultural producer in Central and Eastern Europe after Poland, with 13 306 130 hectares in 2010. According to EUROSTAT, the number of farms in our country is 3 859 040, the highest of the European countries. If we compare the number of farms to the utilised agricultural area, we see that Romania is on the antepenultimate place among European countries, with an average area of 3.45 ha per farm. This fragmentation of agricultural land is one of the main causes of poor performance of Romanian agriculture, although the development potential is huge if we consider the agricultural area and the fact that the basic production factors (land, climate and soil quality) are in favour of Romania. Nevertheless, the technological factors are far behind other Member States and the major constraints on the competitiveness of Romanian produce in a single market, such as the European Union, are caused by the poor technological equipment of farmers and small pieces of agricultural land resulting from ownership fragmentation.

#### **SOCIAL ECONOMY – DEFINITION, FEATURES**

According to the European Commission (2013), the term social economy defines a specific part of the economy which groups organisations that aim mainly at social purposes and are characterised by participative governance systems. The social economy is a dynamic, multidimensional framework, which includes non-profit organisations, mutuals and cooperatives, entities that differ from both the public and the private sector of the economy in certain characteristics, such as voluntary participation of members, the existence of social and economic objectives at the same time, democratic governance and participation of members in decision-making, limited distribution of profit (Defourny, 1988; Defourny and Monzon Campos, 1992). The concept of social economy tends to emphasise both the social and the economic value of organisations by combining economic and social activities carried out by entities of the third sector or of the community, aimed primarily to meet the needs of the society (social, environmental, etc.) and not to maximise profit (Amin, 2009). The social economy is at the border between the third sector, the market and the State, providing welfare in a non-bureaucratic and close to the individual and community needs way, thus managing to make the connection between offered services and self-help, development of individual and community abilities, and social integration (Amin, 2009; Pearce, 2009).

Social economy entities have a collective nature as they are set up by groups of people to address the different needs they have and also because they involve different actors in governance – from founding members to beneficiaries, providers and other

stakeholders in the community. As already stated, their primary purpose is social, but this does not mean that they do not aim at making profits in order to achieve their purpose; therefore, they are characterised by the presence of a social and economic duality in their goals and objectives. Due to all these features plus those related to the origin of funding sources, their management structure, resources used, and ownership rights, social economy entities are considered economic hybrid organisations.

The connection between these organisations and local development is demonstrated also by the nature of the reasons behind their establishment, which most often are related to solving various social problems faced by their members or by their members' communities. These people usually form small groups defined by certain interests or characteristics (people who need to sell their production, who need quality products, who need to have access to certain products or services etc.) and which, most often, are located geographically.

Social economy entities are important actors in sustainable community development due to the impact of their activities on the welfare of their own members, but also on the welfare of the community. The positive impact on community development is due to the following:

- They stimulate local economic development – they are local employers and use mainly community resources;
- They reduce poverty – social enterprises create local jobs, thus reducing unemployment; they can employ people with disabilities, former prisoners, single mothers, post-institutionalised young people, long-term unemployed people, people with lower education levels, etc.; they provide training for people with a low level of qualification;
- They provide socio-medical services – in rural and poor communities, socio-medical services are offered by the public system with difficulty due to the lack of personnel and infrastructure, and to a very small extent by the private sector due to the impossibility to make a profit;
  - They achieve social inclusion of vulnerable groups;
  - They develop the social and cultural capital of the community;
  - They address environmental issues – recycling, eco-tourism, environmental education, etc.

#### **SOCIAL ECONOMY ENTITIES IN ROMANIAN RURAL AREAS – PROFILE AND DYNAMICS**

According to the data taken from the balance sheets for the activity carried out in 2010 by the social economy entities (INS, REGIS database), there are 29 226 entities, the largest proportion being represented by NGOs (26 332) (including agricultural associations and commons), followed by cooperatives (2017) and mutual aid associations (887). These entities have a total of 116 379 employees, of which over half are in non-governmental organisations (*Table 1*). The analysis of the dynamics of these entities over the past 10 years indicates a large increase in

the number of NGOs and mutual aid associations. The number of NGOs increased from 10 494 in 2000 to 26 322 in 2010, while the number of mutual aid associations increased from 380 in 2000 to 887 in 2010. The increase in the number of NGOs was constant, whereas in the case of mutual aid associations the highest increase was between 2000 and 2005, from 380 to 742. As far as cooperatives are concerned, we could say that their number has remained relatively constant for the past 10 years. If we analyse in parallel the dynamics of the number of employees in these entities, we see that it tripled in NGOs (from 19 172 in 2000 to 60 947 in 2010), it increased in mutual aid associations (from 12 320 in 2000 to 17 268 in 2010) and it decreased dramatically to almost one third in cooperatives (Petrescu, 2013).

Table 1

Socio-economic indicators for social economy entities (2010)

2010	Number of organisations	Long-term assets (EUR)	Income (EUR)	Surplus/Profit (EUR)	Employees
<b>NGOs</b>	<b>26 322</b>	<b>1 288 910 314</b>	<b>1 261 105 288</b>	<b>186 877 976</b>	<b>60 947</b>
NGOs with economic activity	2 730	605 167 631	493 998 528	58 388 661	22 860
<b>Mutual Aid Associations</b>	<b>887</b>	<b>285 205 941</b>	<b>33 376 955</b>	<b>6 927 047</b>	<b>17 268</b>
Employees' Mutual Aid Associations	684	135 391 923	15 249 338	3 755 874	15 962
Retirement Mutual Aid Associations	203	149 814 018	18 127 616	3 171 173	1 306
<b>Cooperatives</b>	<b>2 017</b>	<b>216 668 248.9</b>	<b>360 152 899.1</b>	<b>9 559 347.33</b>	<b>38 164</b>
Workers' cooperatives	857	131 583 002	166 660 447	6 553 880	25 109
Consumer Cooperatives	958	44 267 516	125 564 271	1 346 501	7 485
Credit cooperatives	75	25 716 271	41 137 487	1 261 032	2 003
Agricultural cooperatives	127	15 101 460	26 790 693	397 934	3 567
<b>Total</b>	<b>29 226</b>	<b>1 790 784 504</b>	<b>1 654 635 142</b>	<b>203 364 370</b>	<b>116 379</b>

Source: Prometheus project data, processed by RIQL and UB, 2013.

According to INS data, consumer cooperatives (74%), agricultural associations (65%) and commons (83%) are mainly active in rural areas. The presence of workers' cooperatives, NGOs and mutual aid associations in rural areas is quite low (Table 2). The presence of cooperatives in rural areas is influenced by the specific activities carried out by them over time. During the communist period, workers' cooperatives were present in urban areas, being considered organisations of workers and small artisans, and they produced goods (especially industrial goods or constructions) and services (repair of vehicles and household items, health and spa services etc.) for the population. In rural areas, consumer cooperatives were present during the communist period, operating mainly in wholesale and retail trade, and also providing services (repairs, health, tourism and restaurants etc.); their most important role consisted in purchasing the surplus of agricultural products (especially from households) and distributing/selling them. This role disappeared after the communist period once the

VAT on food was introduced, but consumer cooperatives have maintained all the other services carried out in rural areas, even if the number of employees and members has decreased dramatically. Agricultural cooperatives have almost disappeared after the fall of communism, especially due to the negative perception among the population of this type of association. The INS records show that there were 20 agricultural cooperatives between 2000 and 2009, whereas in 2010, following agricultural policies that encouraged this type of association, there were 127 cooperatives. Unlike European cooperatives, Romanian agricultural cooperatives carry out their activity in the production field and not in the processing or marketing fields.

Table 2

## Social economy entities in rural areas – dynamics 2000–2010

Workers' cooperatives	2000	2005	2007	2009	2010
<b>Workers' cooperatives</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>771</b>	<b>799</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>857</b>
% Rural Workers' cooperatives	0.5%	0.6%	0.9%	0.6%	0.8%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>78 117</b>	<b>47 457</b>	<b>34 087</b>	<b>25 553</b>	<b>25 109</b>
% Workers' cooperatives with profit	85.0%	73.0%	69.8%	56.6%	56.8%
<b>Consumer Cooperatives</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>941</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>894</b>	<b>958</b>
% Rural Consumer Cooperatives	76.2%	74.7%	74.3%	74.4%	74.2%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>13 402</b>	<b>11 287</b>	<b>9 124</b>	<b>8 547</b>	<b>7 485</b>
% Consumer Cooperatives with profit	89.0%	83.2%	78.5%	61.3%	55.3%
<b>Credit Cooperatives</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>75</b>
% Rural Credit Cooperatives	41.3%	17.4%	12.4%	9.9%	8.3%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>1 713</b>	<b>1 456</b>	<b>1 315</b>	<b>1 419</b>	<b>2 003</b>
% Credit Cooperatives with profit	81%	72.7%	65.6%	49.2%	58.7%
<b>Active Associations and Foundations (INS)</b>	<b>10 494</b>	<b>16 532</b>	<b>19 354</b>	<b>22 589</b>	<b>26 322</b>
% Rural Active Associations and Foundations	17%	17%	17%	19%	20%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>19 173</b>	<b>48 238</b>	<b>51 912</b>	<b>48 633</b>	<b>60 947</b>
% NGO with net result of the year – surplus	41%	38%	42%	43%	46%
<b>Employees' Mutual Aid Associations</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>572</b>	<b>657</b>	<b>703</b>	<b>684</b>
% Rural Employees' Mutual Aid Associations	6.5%	6.8%	6.2%	7.4%	7.3%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>11 014</b>	<b>1 704</b>	<b>19 409</b>	<b>16 275</b>	<b>15 962</b>
% Employees' Mutual Aid Associations with net result of the year – surplus	86.6%	86.5%	82.2%	81.9%	61.6%
<b>Retirement Mutual Aid Associations</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>1786</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>203</b>
% Rural Retirement Mutual Aid Associations	6.8%	7.1%	7.0%	7.3%	6.9%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>1 306</b>	<b>2 055</b>	<b>2 219</b>	<b>1 959</b>	<b>1 306</b>
% Retirement Mutual Aid Associations with net result of the year – surplus	91%	87.1%	88.7%	88.6%	60.1%
<b>Agricultural Associations</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>1 293</b>	<b>1 620</b>
% Rural Agricultural Associations	29.1%	51.4%	58.7%	64.2%	65.7%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>481</b>	<b>1 557</b>	<b>4 032</b>	<b>3 740</b>	<b>3 614</b>
% Agricultural Associations with profit	53%	35%	40%	48%	46%
<b>Commons</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>597</b>	<b>726</b>	<b>969</b>	<b>1 106</b>
% Rural Commons	80.0%	85.9%	81.7%	83.1%	83.2%
<b>Total no. of employees</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>2 255</b>	<b>2 603</b>	<b>3 354</b>	<b>2 752</b>
% Commons with profit	45%	59%	61%	65%	56%

Source: Prometheus project data, processed by RIQL, 2014.

Mutual aid associations provide financial services (loans) for their members and have a low presence in rural areas mainly because, in order for them to be profitable, they should have a larger number of members; this is why most of these associations are in cities and only have branches in communes and villages. Employees' mutual aid associations have a low presence in rural areas also due to the small number of economic units in communes.

The percentage of rural associations and foundations increased between 2000 and 2010 from 17% to 20%, but it is still low given the existing problems in rural areas. We must point out that a number of associations and foundations carry out their activities in rural areas even if their headquarters are not there.

### CONCLUSIONS

The level of individual participation in associations is extremely low in Eastern European countries, and Romania is no exception; in rural areas, it is even lower (Voicu, 2006; Voicu, 2010). This is mainly due to factors related to the specific socio-economic and political context of these countries, which led to the erosion of trust at community level. A major impact on the propensity of individuals from rural areas to form associations was generated by the communist regime which, through forced collectivisation of peasants and constant surveillance of the population's activity using various oppressive mechanisms, contributed substantially to the erosion of the population's trust in public institutions, as well as in others. This general mistrust dominated the Romanian society even after the fall of communism, when most of the people in rural areas preferred to work on their own the land that was given back to them. The lack of coherent policies in the '90s to support farmers' associations, as well as leadership issues at community level have almost led to the extinction of associative forms.

Budgetary constraints have caused the gradual diminution of the public entities' role in providing welfare services in a number of countries; the gap left by them was gradually filled by other institutions, such as NGOs or cooperatives. This change in the role of actors in generating and providing welfare has led to a series of organisational and legal changes in many countries. This trend also exists in former socialist and communist countries, where NGOs and cooperatives still continue to have enough untapped potential, being largely underestimated, compared to other organisational patterns (such as capitalist companies – which are normally preferred in the transformation process of state enterprises, or other social economy organisations, such as non-profit organisations) (Borzaga and Spear, 2004: 3–4).

The activities carried out by each of these social economy organisations influence their goal setting and their involvement in the community life. Those engaged mainly in manufacturing or trading of goods and services emphasise their prominent role in the economic welfare of their members (cooperatives, agricultural associations, Commons, employees' mutual aid associations), and those providing also social services declare as their main objective the social welfare of their members (retirement mutual aid associations). In most cases, this is also the purpose

of their association/cooperation, if we talk about cooperatives and agricultural associations. Commons are collective organisations managing a joint asset, namely forests, pastures and even alpine lakes. Their main stated purpose is to achieve economic benefits for their members as a result of the management of their joint assets. The economic activity carried out by these collective organisations consists in cutting and processing wood, rental of pastures for sheep, cattle and goats, selling and processing wild berries and mushrooms, concessioning land for various tourist facilities, etc. Most of these organisations believe that, if they ensure economic welfare, it will lead to social welfare. Moreover, the term *social welfare* is associated with social inclusion of people from vulnerable groups, and they say that they do this also due to the nature of their establishment.

The nature of the members is a factor that has implications for the organisations' objectives. Since they are collective organisations, the members are the ones who decide on the mission and goals of the organisation, according to their needs and interests. Those wishing to join the organisation later must match the initially established typology of members. The members of mutual aid associations are people with small and medium income, which is why the main perceived goal of most organisations is to improve their members' social welfare. The loans granted by mutual aid associations are an attempt to improve not only one's financial welfare, but also, and especially, the social one, as often such loans are requested for various medical conditions, family events, purchase of household goods and services, etc.

The institutional, political and socio-economic context in which these organisations carry out their activity strongly influences their evolution. For cooperatives, this context is rather hostile to their development, due mainly to problems of perception, as evidenced by the dramatic decrease in the number of their members and employees, and by the reduction of their productive economic activity. In the last 7–8 years we are witnessing a stimulation of association and cooperation in agriculture through various incentives granted under public policies to the members of such structures. It is a slow process and sometimes is done formally, but it is a first step towards solving the problem of association of small agricultural producers.

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**I**n ultimii ani asistăm la o creștere a interesului pentru dezvoltarea de cooperative și asociații, pe fondul dezbaterei publice în ceea ce privește economia socială și întreprinderile sociale. Articolul urmărește să analizeze principalele provocări cu care au de-a face entitățile de economie socială din mediul rural în România și își propune de asemenea să descrie entitățile de economie socială din mediul rural, concentrându-se pe profilul, structura și dinamica acestor organizații colective în ultimii zece ani, completând astfel informația existentă despre aceste organizații alternative în România și în Europa Centrală și de Est în general. În analiză vor fi utilizate date despre actorii de economie socială din România (cooperative, ONG, obști/composesorate) culese de către Institutul de Cercetare a Calității Vieții în cadrul cercetărilor întreprinse în ultimii ani, care vor permite realizarea de comparații între aceste entități. Scopul este de a prezenta și a analiza rolul acestor organizații în procesul de dezvoltare rurală din România. Un rol important în dezvoltarea rurală din România a revenit ONG care au creat programe, servicii și activități inovative, cu scopul de a rezolva problemele locale și a răspunde nevoilor sociale. Toate acestea au dus la schimbarea resurselor existente, a valorilor și atitudinilor, dar și percepției populației și autorităților. Tipul de servicii furnizate și efectele acestora asupra comunităților (incluziunea socială a persoanelor aflate în situații de risc, crearea de mecanisme de dezvoltare participative, crearea de infrastructură socială, creșterea capitalului uman, social, simbolic etc.) au determinat rolul important pe care aceste entități îl joacă în procesul de dezvoltare rurală. (Borzaga și Tortia, 2009) Principalele efecte ale activității acestor organizații colective asupra dezvoltării locale sunt legate de creșterea capitalului social (creșterea încrederii între membrii comunității și în instituții, crearea de rețele între comunități etc.), stimularea inovației și introducerea ei în cadrul instituțiilor locale, creșterea ratei de ocupare în special pentru grupurile vulnerabile, formarea de structuri locale (grupuri de acțiune, grupuri de inițiativă, centre comunitare), stimularea potențialului local de dezvoltare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** organizații colective, economie socială, dezvoltare rurală.

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