

EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The article presents the main relationship between education and social development: a tool to reduce structural inequalities, to empower active citizenship, to support the integration into the labour market and even an institution of development in itself.*

Drawing on the experience of the project submission in the National Rural Development Program (NRDP) the definitions of “after-school” programme adopted so far seem to be insufficiently consolidated, being able to generate compromises on the quality of the selected projects.

Keywords: educational management, social development, educational projects.

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1. Education and social development

Regarding the relationship between education and social development, Adrian Hastos (2007, 198-202) shows that school can be a tool to reduce structural inequalities, to empower active citizenship, to support the integration into the labour market and even an institution of development in itself.

Although the cancellation of opportunity inequalities through education seems rather utopian, in recent decades there has been initiated a series of more specific policies aimed at assisting disadvantaged groups found in a

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situation of poor educational achievement. In Romania, the major risk of school dropping out is present at the needy families, especially at the boys from the rural areas, the children from the Roma families or the group with special needs (Jigău, 2002 cited by Hastos, 2007, 199). For these target groups, the educational policies should be combined with measures of social nature. At the time of writing this article (November 2016) there are open two calls for proposals within the Human Capital Operational Program (“School for All” and “Motivated teachers in disadvantaged schools”) aimed at reducing school dropping out in disadvantaged communities.

Education is also seen as a means of the empowerment of the active citizenship, because the person who is endowed with attitudinal resources and skills to solve various social problems through collective action is considered to be an “active citizen”. Schools may be effective in promoting civic attitudes and skills, provided that they are not “just a neutral context of familiarisation with the civic discourse, but the place where the inclusive, democratic and participatory ideologies are practised. From this point of view, creating a democratic climate in schools by involving students in the educational process at the school or classroom level is important, together with practicing the participatory skills by getting engaged in various extracurricular activities” (Hastos, 2007, 200).

School and labour market integration. Often, poverty and social exclusion are due to an inadequate labour market position due to insufficient qualifications. Addressing this deficiency can be made through: the development of career counselling services, with activities tailored to the economic development predicted for that specific village / region or by promoting lifelong learning and adult education, retraining being quite often the only viable solution for those in long-term unemployment. This approach is bolstered by public opinion: “in Romania 73% of respondents agree that their school education helped them to develop a sense of initiative and a sort of entrepreneurial attitude” (Dragomir and Panzaru, 2013, 60).

School as a development institution. Thus addressed, school appears as an institution able to mobilize the communities’ resources to solve some collective problems. For this mobilization to be possible, it is necessary the presence of an effective school management and of a systematic guidance of the belonging community.

2. Projects and educational programs with European funding

The developmental potential of the educational establishment is materialized through programs and intervention projects, preferably incorporated within a developmental strategy (school, community, regional, national).

The use of the terms project and program always generated controversy, these two terms being used differently within the European space (Cojocaru, 2004, 25):

- within the Francophone space, the term project is preferred, being considered the best suited to delineate all the planning of the future actions;
- in the Anglo-Saxon literature, the term program prevails, designating also the planning of the activities, but with pragmatic connotations.

In Romania the term project is usually used to denote the intellectual approach to design and plan a certain social intervention, and the term program is appropriate when the focus is on the practical way of implementing the project (Cojocaru, 2004, 25).

For the European Commission (2003, 2005), the project is a logical sequence of different activities coordinated and controlled, carried out in a manner organized methodically and progressively, with time constraints, resources and cost constraints, for obtaining new results, necessary for the achievement of some clearly defined objectives.

In the context of EU funding, the term ‘program’ refers to a set of generous objectives, which may extend much longer in time and space and includes several projects (for example, a program of modernization of the educational infrastructure may include government projects supporting development projects for schools in rural areas, projects of informatization of a certain category of schools, etc.). Under this context, the program is a measure decided by the European Commission, implemented in a number of activities in favour of a country or several countries members of the European Union (or other countries, under special conditions), supported by a financial commitment from the European Commission budget.

In the financial year 2014-2020, the educational projects can be financed through various programs co-financed by the European Commission and Romania: the Regional Operational Program (for items of educational infrastructure in urban areas), the Human Capital Operational

Program (see the examples already mentioned), and the Rural Development National Program (RDNP) etc.

3. An atypical component: the after-school infrastructure in rural areas

In the RDNP, investments in infrastructure for local authorities are included within the Sub-measure 7.2. “Investments in the creation and modernization of the basic infrastructure at a small-scale”, within which the first call for proposals was released in May 2016. Going through Section 2.3 Guidelines for Applicants for Sub-measure 7.2 of the RDNP, published by the Agency for Rural Investment Financing (ARIF), at the types of investments and eligible expenditures are also included “investments in the establishment and modernization (including the equipment) of nurseries as well as the infrastructure of the after-school, only for those outside the enclosure of the rural schools”. This type of investment is introduced – despite the fact that its very name refers to school – in the “investments in social infrastructure” and not in the “investments in educational infrastructure” (along with those in kindergartens, upper secondary and vocational schools in rural areas).

Within the guide there isn’t a clear definition of the “after-school infrastructure” and it doesn’t describe the types of activities that should be conducted after financing these investments. Unlike the other types of projects of educational / social infrastructure, the term (included in the guide, in English) of “after-school” cannot be reported to a usual standard of activity, quantifiable (such as those for nursery, kindergarten, upper secondary and vocational schools), both by AFIR and the authorities who will need to approve this type of investment (the Public Health Department, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, etc.). As such, there may be difficulties in assessing the eligibility of the expenditures and monitoring the post-implementation in the absence of a legal framework of reference.

Currently there is a reference standard for the projects of the “after-school infrastructure” type, namely the 5349 Order of 7 September 2011 on the approval of the Methodology of organization of the “School after school” Program. The arguments are many in this respect:

- the term “after-school” is here translated as the “School after school” Program (SAS), defined as a “complementary program to the compulsory school program that provides formal and non-

formal learning opportunities for strengthening the skills, remedial learning and accelerated learning through educational, recreational and leisure activities” (Article 2 (1)), and the “offer of the SAS Program is designed to meet the priority needs of the students belonging to disadvantaged groups” (Article 3 (2)) (which corresponds to its classification as an investment in social infrastructure, cf. Guide Measure 7.2);

- the order states that any program SAS must be organized following a needs analysis conducted at the level of the local community (art. 3), which also notes “the materials needed to run the service, depending on the target group”. In other words, the investment is dimensioned starting from this phase, and the needs analysis is validated by the authority competent in the field, the County School Inspectorate;
- every SAS program includes mandatorily minimum 12 hours of activity / week (art. 5 (1)) in groups of minimum 12 pupils (art. 9) and “offers different types of activities aimed at training and developing the skills specific to primary / secondary education, personal and interpersonal development / life preparing, harmonious development of the student’s personality”(art. 5 (2)). By doing this, a real, quantified impact of this type of investment is ensured;
- various educational packages are described and they can be offered to learners from primary or secondary education (art. 6 and 7); from them those corresponding to the identified needs in the local community can be chosen. Both in project assessing and monitoring their implementation on a period of five years, offering these educational packages can be an assessment indicator.

Throughout its duration, the SAS program requires the involvement of teachers (art. 14) “it is supported by teachers or it takes place under the teachers’ supervision, where staff external to school coordinate the activities.” (NGO, within the Sub-Measure 7.2), hence ensuring a default quality level.

4. Conclusions

Although schools have a recognized potential of social development (in terms of the four perspectives described above), they are not fully involved in the development of the community projects, including those with European funding.

Moreover, there are operational programs in which some educational projects are classified in the social sphere, situation which may generate multiple problems in writing, managing and ensuring their sustainability.

For example, because the after-school centres in the rural areas are considered elements of social infrastructure, they will be subject to the accreditation procedures for this type of services, where the educational component is much less present than in the existing educational standard regarding the "School after school" Program.

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