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**The contribution of NGOs to the elaboration and
implementation of youth public policies**

Resume

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Research necessity

First of all, through this research, I aimed to design and test a data collection system regarding youth NGOs, which can be used in future analyses. The research results can serve as a basis for improving the legislative framework in the youth sector, as well as regulations on decision-making transparency and the creation of innovative tools to facilitate civic participation. Additionally, the results can be used to support a funding program for research and evaluation, and to promote the activities of NGOs with the goal of strengthening their capacity as partners in the public sector. Furthermore, the research can help in developing a strategy to enhance the human resource capacity within the relevant ministry and the creation of professional training programs for experts working in the field.

Research objectives

The research question that guided my study was: To what extent does the Romanian youth NGO sector contribute to the development and implementation of public policies in the field at the national level? My research hypothesis is that if the NGO sector were more involved in the decision-making process, then public policies in the youth sector would be more relevant and effective. A secondary hypothesis is that if the non-governmental actor is empowered, youth policies will be improved.

The main objective of my research is to evaluate the contribution of youth and youth-oriented NGOs to national public policies aimed at young people and to identify potential impacts and ways to quantify them. This scientific endeavor is based on a qualitative approach, focusing on the experiences of selected organizations and, to a lesser extent, on extrapolating the results to the entire sector or to public policies in other areas. Understanding the particularities of each organization allows for a better grasp of the factors that determine the different levels of participation in the development and implementation of youth public policies.

Research Methodology

The research involved both document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The sample selected was not representative, but rather a non-probabilistic convenience sample. The main criteria for selecting organizations included the organization's history, size, national reach, visibility in influencing youth public policies, and initiatives related to legislative proposals in the youth sector.

Between 2021 and 2023, I interviewed representatives from 10 national youth NGOs and one European-level youth NGO. These organizations were chosen due to their national coverage and participation in decision-making processes regarding key national youth public policies. Additionally, I conducted interviews with a former Youth Delegate of Romania to the United Nations, a representative from the Economic and Social Council's Education, Youth, Culture, and Sports Commission, and two representatives from the public youth sector.

Limitations of the research

One limitation of the research is the complexity of the subject being addressed. Another limitation arises from the limited access to specialized literature on the concept of "social impact," with few evaluations analyzing this criterion in practice. Additionally, there is a limitation due to the multiple interpretations of the term "youth."

A third limitation of the research is the non-representative sample selection, which means that conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire youth sector and trends cannot be identified in the absence of more data.

Theoretical Framework

To start, I described the context in which I discuss youth public policies, defining the concept of "youth." Additionally, I integrated specific evaluation concepts as a means of establishing value and merit, redistributing resources, and addressing social issues. Moving from the main six evaluation criteria, I focused on a new criterion: social impact. This criterion does not aim to measure the change produced by the intervention but rather to identify which social group benefits from the change and which is at risk of exclusion.

Furthermore, I addressed the interaction between the NGO sector and the public sector from the perspective of delegation theory, specifically the principal-agent model. Using this explanatory paradigm, the youth population delegates their interests to representative organizations, which then act as the principal for the authorities. Therefore, if the non-governmental sector successfully fulfills its role as an agent, the interests of young people should largely be reflected in political decisions. However, the model raises certain ethical issues. It cannot be ignored that the organization may pursue its own interests. Cooperation can be stimulated through repeated interactions over an undefined number of repetitions, accompanied by reciprocity.

The delegation theory, however, does not fully explain the interactions between the principal and the agent in this case. Given the complexity of the target group, group work formulas where there are multiple delegates rather than a single one are not excluded. The interests of these delegates, although related to youth, may be in conflict, and there is no monopoly of a single organization. The authority may face a dilemma in selecting public policy options. The decision-maker risks amplifying existing discontent or even creating new dissatisfaction among young people, which could undermine trust, legitimacy, and power. What are the criteria for differentiation? Is the contribution of the delegate with a history of institutional collaboration more important? Or the delegate with the most thorough analyses? Or the one with the highest public support?

There are theories suggesting that organizations tend toward homogenization over time, either by adhering to norms imposed by other organizations, through mimetism by adopting practices from organizations considered high-performing, or through the process of professionalization.

Results from personal research data

From the perspective of the internalization of organizational culture, member retention levels, and the degree of professionalism in youth work, the research data has demonstrated a trend towards homogenization of organizational practices. In all the studied organizations, it was observed that organizational values are largely internalized and reflected in the members' behaviors. Emphasis is placed on integrity, the promotion of a non-partisan attitude, and the perpetuation of values. Additionally, similarities were noted regarding team composition. According to the data, organizations strictly based on volunteer work are fading away due to a

variety of causes. Thus, through mimetism, organizations have begun to "draw inspiration" from models considered high-performing and adopt the practice of employing specialists with work contracts. Moreover, typical elements of normative isomorphism were identified: organizations operating with teams of experts and professionals in the field tend to advocate for similar interests, such as better regulation of occupational standards and quality standards in youth work, continuous training programs, and the adoption of a competency recognition framework.

The evaluation of NGOs' capacity to identify youth needs led to evidence that contradicts the previously demonstrated homogenization principle. Instead, we can discuss more about the segmentation of "interest markets." For example, youth organizations that aim to represent the interests of small groups of youth (e.g., rural youth) achieve a higher level of understanding of their needs and increased legitimacy within the community. On the other hand, youth NGOs that aim to represent all young people, regardless of their complex social, economic, and cultural specifics, manage to a limited extent to gather information about a broad range of youth, risking underrepresentation of certain groups.

An interesting phenomenon identified in the study was the principal-agent relationship within these youth organizations. For example, large federative-type structures operate by delegating the organization of consultations to member organizations, which can collect data from "the grassroots" but lack the expertise to formulate legislative proposals or engage in advocacy processes. Organizations in direct contact with youth also act as delegates of public authorities through the roles they perform, namely as communicators and mediators of public messages. Legislative initiatives are translated into language accessible to the general public to facilitate understanding of the issues under debate and to obtain valuable contributions for their improvement. Umbrella organizations translate the evidence collected in the field into proposals submitted to policymakers. This process can incur significant time costs, and if there is a considerable delay between the youth consultation and the launch of the public policy, the risk increases that the new legislative framework may be inadequate for new social realities.

From the perspective of financial sustainability, the data contradicts the notion of homogenization among organizations concerning financial sustainability. Respondents perceive available budgets as insufficient relative to the objectives they have undertaken. However, several relevant aspects must be noted when drawing conclusions about this indicator. The dissatisfaction within the youth sector, driven by both the amount and frequency of funding, is reported in relation to organizational needs, including: securing experts' salaries,

carrying out activities with youth, and participating in consultations. While the latter two needs arise from the delegation process related to representing youth interests, the first objective is independent of the represented youth. The decision of organizations to adopt a practice of employing staff over relying on volunteers is an internal choice, not one imposed by external constraints. The transition from volunteer teams to paid staff aimed at achieving better performance and was not a condition imposed by regulatory frameworks. Organizations chose employee remuneration as the primary motivation tool; however, there is no concrete data demonstrating that other incentives would not be as effective in attracting youth to work in NGOs.

The capacity to attract funds varies, with youth organizations employing specialists being more familiar with grant application processes. Youth Foundations represent an atypical type of youth representation organization, having the opportunity to supplement their income through the exploitation of their own assets. Maintaining the existing infrastructure is costly, and not all youth foundations manage it efficiently.

Insufficient funding remains a constant issue affecting both the NGO sector and the public youth sector. Funding from the relevant ministry is low in value and lacks the necessary frequency to meet demand. Thus, in the context of resource transfers between the two sectors—expertise from NGOs to public authorities and funding from authorities to NGOs—the exchange is perceived as inequitable. Organizations expect public authorities to develop and implement a sustainable program to support their activities. Moreover, there is a lack of trust among organizations in the ministry's ability to manage resources and in the existence of good intentions to increase funding. Additionally, the national funding application procedure is perceived as complicated and lacking transparency. The collected data are insufficient to fully understand why the public actor does not undertake actions necessary to meet the needs of the non-governmental sector. Possible reasons could include a lack of motivation among public officials, bureaucratic burdens, or potential conflicts of interest where other priorities prevail.

In terms of advocacy capacity, it can be concluded that there is again a diversity of organizational practices. Homogenization is not favored due to the lack of a functional normative framework. Although there are legal provisions regulating transparency in decision-making processes, the actual organization of debates is unpredictable, which generates difficulties in consolidating participatory practices. Poor planning of debates, late announcement of deadlines, and delays in decision-making are elements that diminish organizations' motivation to continue collaborating.

From the data obtained, it is observed that the NGO sector has attempted to avoid conflicts and has generally adopted a cooperative strategy. Therefore, even though a protest might be more effective in influencing legislative changes, the sustainability of collaboration has been prioritized. Why do organizations still prefer to engage in long-term advocacy processes rather than resorting to democratic mechanisms such as protests or legal claims against public sector irregularities as a form of sanctioning the lack of transparency? The answer confirms Axelrod's theory, which suggests that long-term cooperation relies significantly on reciprocity, even in the absence of trust. Research data have shown an increase in the integration of NGO sector recommendations into new youth public policies, a development that has occurred with the maturation of the involved actors and their collaborative relationships. Thus, the non-governmental actor has received evidence of reciprocity, confirmation of its partnership, and validation of its significant role in the development and implementation of youth programs. However, respondents have also mentioned new expectations for reciprocity: the implementation of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating current policies.

Index proposal

The systematic collection of data using this index can lead to the identification of ways to improve the public decision-making process and strengthen democracy.

GiP = T + R

GiP - the degree of "inclusion" of representative organizations in the public decision-making process concerning relevant policies.

T - the level of transparency in the decision-making process.

R - the resources required for participation by organizations (including human resources, time resources, and material and financial resources)

In this context, "inclusion" refers to creating and promoting an environment where all organizations have equal opportunities to participate and contribute to the development and implementation of public policies that affect the groups they represent.

Between the two components, namely the state and non-governmental actors, there is a constant, dynamic transfer of resources—a supplier-beneficiary relationship. Organizations transfer expertise to the public sector, while authorities provide financial resources for representation structures and a legal framework conducive to participation. If $T = 0$, meaning the level of transparency in the decision-making process is zero, this likely indicates a non-democratic regime where decisions are made not through consultation but by a leader or a group that holds all political power. Conversely, if $R = 0$, this demonstrates that the democratic state fails to support one of its fundamental pillars: civic participation. In such a case, the lack of resources necessary for participation undermines the effective involvement of organizations in public decision-making processes.

Scenarios for Testing the Proposed Model

Scenario 1: $T > R$

If the level of transparency in the decision-making process is perceived as high, while the consumption of resources by organizations for participation is minimal, non-governmental structures might be more motivated to maintain long-term collaboration. However, an excessive amount of information and public consultations could amplify social frustration, creating a sense of powerlessness in participating in all decisions that the state makes and which are of public interest.

Scenario 2: $R > T$

The likelihood of long-term cooperation between non-governmental actors and authorities could be threatened if a portion of resources (R) is dependent on transparency (T) (e.g., financial resources and participation conditions imposed by the legal framework). While R might address the issue of expertise, it does not resolve planning and transparency issues, which are fundamental for effective civic participation. Therefore, if this relational model is replicated, there is a risk that R 's interest may diminish and even lead to a state of conflict between the two actors.

Limits of the Proposed Model

The GiP index cannot quantitatively measure the exact contribution of a specific number of resources consumed by the state or the NGO sector but rather reflects the perception of resource consumption. Empirical testing of the index is required, and establishing a statistically representative sample may prove challenging. Additionally, the perception of resource consumption alone is insufficient to understand the types of resources consumed during participation.

Conclusions

From the presented analysis, it can be concluded that there is no homogenization of the non-governmental youth sector in Romania across all four dimensions. This lack of homogenization is largely attributed to the instability of the environment.

Considering these aspects, the research hypothesis can be confirmed: the involvement of non-governmental youth organizations has led to youth public policies aligned with young people's needs. This contribution has been direct through the expertise provided by the NGO sector to policymakers during policy formulation. The expertise is derived from a deep understanding of youth issues and the specific competencies of youth workers. To strengthen this component, NGOs need better mechanisms for consulting young people, a functional framework, resources for conducting advocacy campaigns, and improved regulation of the youth worker occupation. Enhancing organizational capacity in these areas would ensure an increase in expertise and, consequently, an improvement in youth public policies.

Understanding that there is an imbalance in the benefits of youth policies across all youth categories, coupled with previous findings about the diversity of non-governmental youth entities, has led to the proposal of a new index for measuring participation in the decision-making process. The GiP index refers to the degree of "inclusion" of non-governmental actors in the decision-making process, where inclusion means having an environment where all organizations have equal opportunities to participate and contribute to the development and implementation of public policies. The formulation of the index resulted not only from observing the diversity of organizations and their varying experiences in decision-making processes but also from identifying the perceived inequitable transfer of resources between the NGO and public sectors. The index consists of two perception indicators

of resource consumption in the political decision-making process: on one side, resources from public administration, and on the other, resources from civil society representatives. Given the lack of homogenization among organizations, monitoring the integration of each perspective on strategic initiatives of interest to young people is essential.

In this process of civic participation, we should also reflect on how we perceive the importance of youth-related issues in the public space. The involvement of other actors such as the media, the private sector, and academia would be necessary.

Future Research Directions

Monitoring the developments in the legislative framework for youth and its compliance is fundamental, as is monitoring the way public consultations on political decisions are conducted to ensure they meet the needs and aspirations of young people. Additionally, it could be very useful to investigate whether the system we proposed for collecting and interpreting data about youth representative organizations is functional in other European countries and can be periodically replicated. This would allow for observing trends in meeting indicators and the evolution of positive and negative factors influencing outcomes. It would also be interesting to test whether the data collection matrix we developed is relevant for evaluating the contribution of the non-governmental sector in other public policy areas, or if this hypothesis is invalid and the model is only compatible with the youth sector.

I believe it is necessary to continue research efforts to explore the use of the concept of “social impact” and its internalization in evaluation implementation. Another research direction could be testing the introduction of a GiP-type index—measuring the degree of inclusion of representative organizations in the decision-making process—as an element that could add value to operationalizing social impact.

For example, based on the collected data, we may find that we have achieved a limited understanding of certain issues, such as the causes of low decision-making transparency or the causes of complicated bureaucratic procedures in the view of NGO sector representatives for obtaining funding. Additionally, I consider it absolutely necessary to involve public sector representatives in youth-related research to strengthen partnerships with non-governmental entities and reduce informational asymmetry.