

EX-POST EVALUATION DESIGN PROPOSAL FOR THE ROMANIAN YOUTH STRATEGY 2015-2020. AN ANALYSIS OF THE NGO SECTOR IMPACT ON THE RESULTS

Delia - Simina DĂNILĂ, PhD. Student

National University of Political Science and Public Administration
Bucharest/Romania

Abstract

Success or a lesson to learn? In this paper, I propose an evaluation design of the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020 transformative effects, in which I argue for a participative evaluation process, promoting diversity, social justice, fairness and transparency. My focus is not only on the instruments for analysing the objectives, results, resources and impact, but also on encouraging the development of the social values that are attached to this policy. The innovative elements of the suggested design are the introduction of the gender perspective and multiple discrimination and also the reflection on the influence of the NGO sector on the achieved results. It is expected this study to engage the evaluators and the readers interested in the youth issue in a debate for improving the process of assessing public policies and programmes.

Keywords: evaluation design; ex-post evaluation; youth Strategy; NGO sector; impact evaluation.

1.CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

In the EU space, the member states cooperate in the youth field since 2001 under the European Commission White Paper on Youth. Through several cross-sectoral policies young people benefit of protection at work, mobility facilities, access at educational and training programmes in all European Union and many others. The National Action Plan for Youth - Romania (2001) was the first attempt of strategic planning in the youth sector in our country. The first 4 objectives of the document were reunited under the title 'Participation' (economic, civic and political, cultural and in education). To this set of objectives, there were added other 4 regarding: reduction of marginalization and exclusion factors, stimulation of creativity, promotion of mobility in the European space and optimization of the institutional framework. Later, in 2005, was adopted the European Youth Pact as an integral part of the new Lisbon Strategy, followed by the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 which set out two main objectives: to create more equal opportunities for all young people in education and the labour market, but also to promote active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity among all young people.

For the 2016-2018 cycle, there were identified at European level objectives that aim to lead to greater social inclusion of all young people (especially a better integration into the labour market), greater participation of all young people in democratic and civic life in Europe, an increase of the well-being of young people, a better management of the challenges and opportunities of the digital age and of the migration phenomenon in the European Union. Another priority package for young people is the Europe 2020 Strategy that stresses issues such as early school leaving, the low percentage of young graduates and the low rate of employment. The well-being of young people is a stated goal in all three types of growth that the EU aims to achieve: smart, sustainable and inclusive.

The present document, the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020, addresses the situation and policies for young people aged 14-35, as provided by the Youth Law adopted in 2006. The analysis is structured in sections based on the age groups 14/15-19, 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34/ 35 years old. The statistics are presented in comparison to the EU average as standard or to other member

states. Each of the major areas of intervention also has target groups of young people with special characteristics.

From the beginning, we will assume that it was needed a Strategy in the youth sector. I will not argue this assumption from a political perspective, but from an evaluator point of view. Considering the fact that was not provisioned a contra factual ex-post evaluation, it is nearly impossible at this point to conduct an experiment to determine if the changes in the young sector could be reached through other interventions. Therefore, the question is not if it was needed a youth Strategy, but the quality of the policy.

In this context, the main objective of the evaluation is to determine the value of the intervention based on the theory-based programme evaluative approach, using the following OECD evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact. The analysis of effectiveness requires to investigate in the first place the relevance of the objectives, taking into account the needs of the target group and the extent to which the objectives respond to them and may be adapted to change. Moreover, the evaluation will provide data and conclusions related to how well fits this Strategy in the European and national framework, aligning to the other assumed priorities for 2015-2020.

Sometimes, the objectives are too ambitious and the intervention seems to be a disappointment in comparison to its expected impact. For this reason, it is useful to understand if the resources put at disposal were enough for achieving the expected results and if they were managed in an efficient way.

The impact assessment addresses more than the immediate results, focusing on the more complex, higher-level effects (positive or negative, intended or unintended). The impact evaluation provides a holistic frame of the intervention consequences on longer term and their potential to generate a significant change for the direct beneficiaries and not only. A strong or, on the contrary, a weak contribution of the initiative indicates issues related to the way in which were formulated the objectives and the performance of the policies and programmes under this Strategy. The contribution will be analysed also from the perspective of its probability to last on medium and long term. I consider mandatory very evaluation criterion to be analysed under two transversal concepts: the gender perspective and the multiple and intersectional discrimination.

Another objective is to highlight the lessons learned and the good practices that can improve the future strategic documents in the new programming period. For a better understanding of the mechanism, I would integrate in the evaluation design an analysis of the NGO sector influence on the results in order to conclude if the complementarity of the Strategy is ensured with the actions of the civil society.

1.1. The use of the evaluation

The evaluation of the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020 is a regulated activity in the document itself, but this is not a sufficient condition for the evaluation to be institutionalized. Reaching a mature level of evaluation culture depends on having a well-developed capacity for undertaking evaluations and vice-versa, a better evaluation capacity grows the evaluation culture.¹ This ex-post evaluation should be considered a learning experience and an empowering exercise of consolidating the pluralism in the area of public policies, besides its main scope of identifying to which extent were achieved the expected results and the impact of the initiative in order to improve the management process and sustainability ensuring. The evaluation report may be used by the entities involved in the management of policies related to young people as well as by the civil society. The main recommendations target the decision makers from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of European Funds, Ministry of Public Administration, Ministry of Justice, The Ombudsman, The Romanian Youth Council and the regional and local authorities. The evaluation is a guarantee of the transparency of the governance activity, a form of increasing the collective trust in the representatives and the cooperation between the stakeholders. Moreover, the evaluation process is a constructive way of creating awareness at all levels of

¹ Melenciuc I., *The Emergence of a European Evaluation Culture*, Tritonic, Bucharest, 2015, p. 93-94

decision related to the challenges of the young people in Romania nowadays and a way of promoting the participation and the public dialogue on this topic.

2.EVALUATION DESIGN

Considering the complexity of the Youth Strategy, I would propose an evaluation design that includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. The triangulation of the data collected and analysed from the relevant documents, interviews, focus groups and surveys will ensure the rigor of the findings, conclusions and recommendations. The surveys could measure only the general perception of the beneficiaries on the success of the Strategy, but the interviews and the focus groups have the advantage to explore deeper the mechanism. I would not conduct a rigid evaluation, but a flexible one that allows the participants at the interviews and focus groups to add any reflection on the performance of the intervention. Especially the focus groups may be a great opportunity to increase the contribution of all stakeholders at the improvement of the next youth initiatives. Also, may be selected the most relevant case studies for the good practices and lessons learned.

Below it is presented the problem tree as it results from the statistics exposed and interpreted in the Strategy.

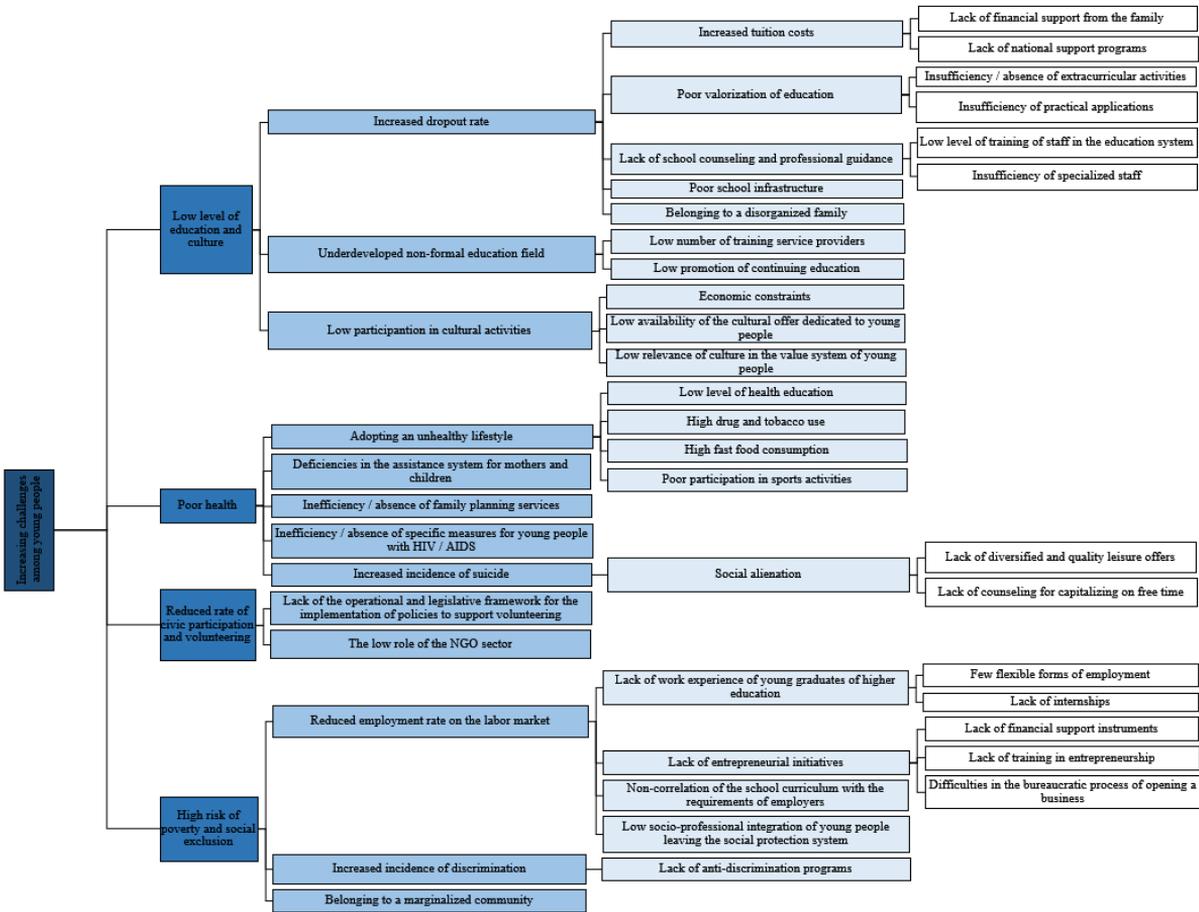


Fig. 1. The problem tree

There is important to make few mentions regarding the figure above. The problem tree approach is useful but not enough to study in depth the challenges of the young people in Romania. The cause-effect relations are enough reduced and may give a false impression on the interactions between the variables. Many causes and effects are interrelated. For example, the material deprivation is a cause for multiple problems: in education, health, employment, civic

participation, cultural participation and so on. As can be easily observed, some problems are treated more in depth and for some effects their roots are clearer. Many problems are cyclic: working in the teenage years for better life conditions leads to school dropout and later the low education level prevents the young adult to access better paid jobs and to follow a career.

Another repetitive element that leads to a reduced socio-economic integration is the vulnerability in all its forms: disability, abuse and exploitation victim, migrant/refugee, ex-convict and so on. The vulnerable categories were identified in the Strategy, as well as the need for a special intervention that covers their needs and generates more equity.

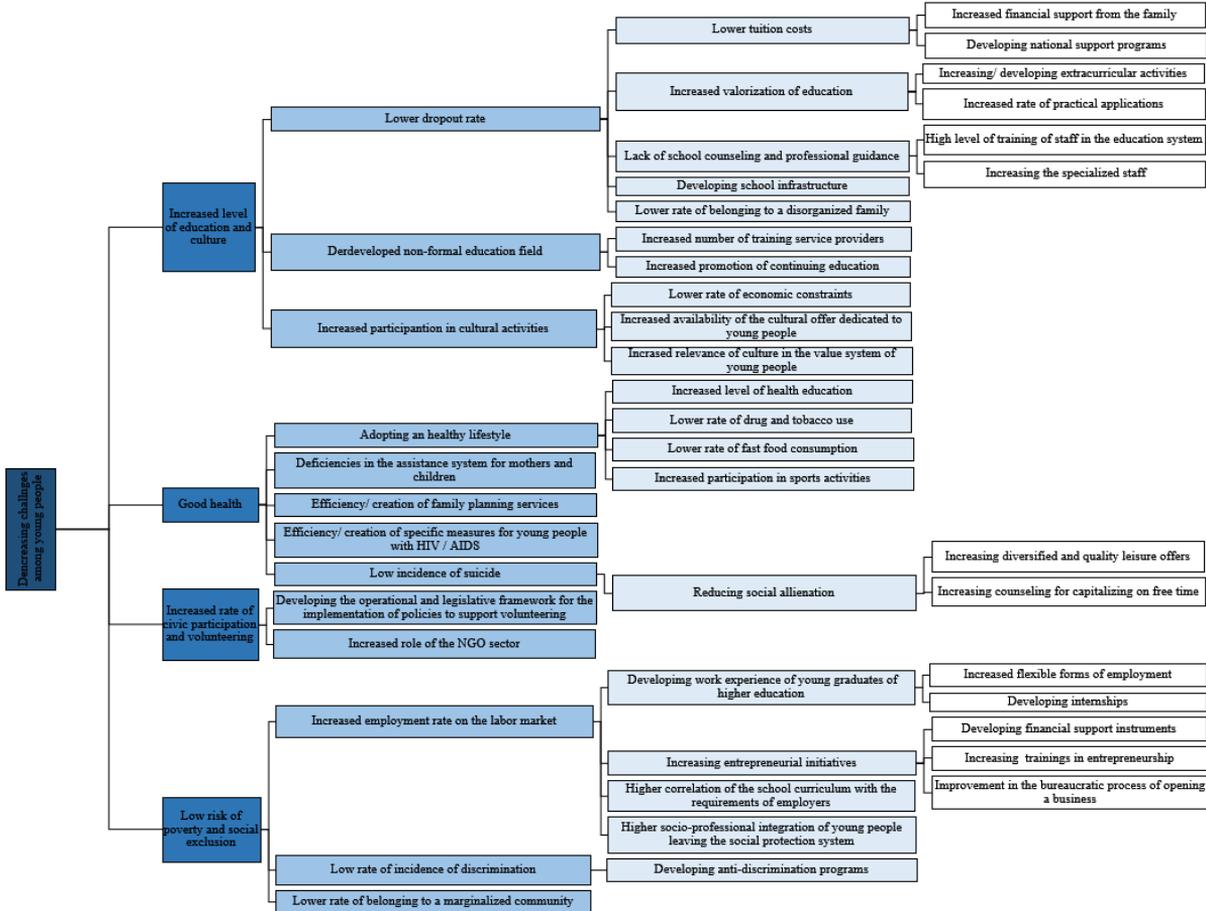


Fig. 2. The objective tree

Following the logic model, the identified problems should find their correspondence in the specific objectives of the Romanian Youth Strategy. The mission of the current evaluation is to identify if the objectives are SMART, if the chosen indicators are precise and enough or could be selected others, if the measures suit the objectives. For example, some soft measures (promoting activities, informing campaigns) for operating an objective may reveal the fact

that the implementation of the Strategy will be done in synergy with the implementation of other interventions (that provide other instruments, harder incentives - financing, law amending). Also, there are measures that do not result directly from the needs analysis but are in line with the European Union's priorities (for example, the measures referring to the reducing of the number of car accident victims).

2.1. Evaluation questions, criteria and indicators

In terms of relevance, the main evaluation questions that should be answered are: Were the objectives of the Youth Strategy relevant for the period 2015-2020? and How sensitive were the objectives at the changes in the target group's needs? Having as target to answer in the end that the objectives were relevant and sensitive at changes in target group's needs, should be studied as indicators the proportion in which the needs of the target group were correctly identified, the proportion in which they were reflected in the proposed objectives, the percentage of objectives adaptable to change and the degree in which they succeeded to adapt to change. Furthermore, looking at the objectives, there has to be an assessment on how accurate was the SWOT analysis and how well the indicators describe and explain the findings.

When we discuss about coherence, we should refer to both internal and external coherence. The evaluation may reveal if there were interlinkages between the proposed interventions and their type. A high number of strong synergies may be an useful advantage in the implementation of the measures. Also, it has to be analysed how compatible was the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020 with the European and the national legislation in the youth related fields. For example, in the intervention area of education, would be useful to study the National Education Law from 2011 and to identify if the measures proposed in the Youth Strategy require an update of it. Doubtlessly, at European level, the most known programme for education is Erasmus+ and its instruments for recognition of competences and qualifications: Europass, Youthpass, European Qualifications Framework, European Credit Transfer System, European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, European Register for Quality Assurance in

Higher Education, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Regarding the work issue, there are several relevant laws at national level such as: the Labour Code, the Law on stimulating the employment of pupils and students, the Law on the unemployment insurance system and employment stimulation, the Law on the establishment of information and counseling centers for youth. At European level, there are some initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee addressing the difficulties of the young people that just ended their studies or lost their jobs and the EURES network which aims to facilitate job mobility in EU.

In the civic participation area, there are few initiatives that should be assessed during the evaluation process of the coherence of the Youth Strategy 2015-2020: the Law on the regulation of volunteer activities in Romania (Law 78/2014), Law no. 351/2006 - on the establishment, organization and functioning of the National Youth Council of Romania, Law no. 146/2002 regarding the legal regime of the county foundations for youth and of the municipality of Bucharest and of the National Youth Foundation. An opportunity for young people to participate in volunteering activities outside their country of origin for a set period of time is represented by the European Voluntary Service. The data on the number of Romanian young people benefiting from this programme may reveal how well are promoted the European volunteering opportunities in our country, how accessible are, how developed is our volunteering culture.

On the health topic, it is important to investigate the links of the Strategy with Law no. 69/2000 on physical education and sports and the national and international strategies and programmes related to HIV/SIDA, mother care, drug and tobacco use. The Youth Strategy 2015-2020 also aims to reduce the risk of social exclusion, a matter tackled at national level by Law no. 116/2002 on prevention and combating social marginalization, the Decision of the Romanian Government regarding National strategy for social inclusion of young people leaving the child protection system, Law 646/2002 on state support for young people in rural areas. At EU level, there are numerous actions related to the social inclusion under the Cohesion Fund.

Another key issue refers to the balance between the inputs and the outputs. Are the efforts (financial, expertise, time, advocacy and lobby process etc.) justified for the achieved results? Is it optimal the conversion of the inputs into outputs? What could have been managed more economically for a greater performance? The evaluative approach aims to identify the alternatives for better solutions and not to lead to corrective actions.

Fundamental for evaluating the merit of an intervention is the proportion in which the objectives are achieved. But this indicator is not enough to allow us to understand all the layers of implementation. It is significant to identify the positive and negative, internal and external, factors that influenced the achievement of the expected results. In the case of the positive factors, it is interesting to investigate further if they were used as opportunities and if their influence was maximized. On the other hand, the negative factors have not to be neglected and I suggest an analysis of how they were controlled. A legitimate evaluation question is regarding the risk management for ensuring the effectiveness of the Strategy. How many risks were identified, what type of risks and how they were minimized?

A mature evaluation will take into account also the secondary intentional or unintentional effects of the intervention. These unexpected effects may be difficult to measure and difficult to be attributed only to the implementation of this Strategy. Their existence may result from the convergence of a set of similar initiatives that functioned in a complementary way. It is important for this evaluation question to be gathered data from all the key stakeholders to reduce the risk of a subjective perspective from the initiators of the policy. The tendency of the authors and implementers of an initiative is to overestimate its success and to attribute any positive change to the intervention. Additionally, I would undertake a meta-evaluation, investigating the quality of the monitoring process, as well as of the periodical evaluations, as they are planned in the Strategy and their contribution.

Are the identified accomplished results enough solid to resist the test of time? The sustainability assessment should start from the question if exists a sustainability plan to be followed post 2020. This plan establishes the actors responsible for maintaining and multiplying the benefits generated by the

Strategy and the sources that will assure the financing of the measures in the near and far future. In this phase, may be recommended to the decision makers a plan of redistribution of the resources. For each measure, should be estimated a period of time in which may be kept active. Also, should be identified the target group that will continue to benefit from the intervention and the categories that are no longer supported. If there are vulnerable groups that return to the initial status, the one pre-intervention, then there is the possibility of losing a big part of the gained progress. Even in this worst scenario, the effects should not be underestimated. Some realities cannot change in a radical way and it is better the approach of the incremental change consisting in developing over time by small alterations. Therefore, even if through some measures were not achieved the target indicators, it may be a wise decision to compromise and to continue the implementation of the measures for a later transformative effect. It is very important to reduce the segregation of the vulnerable groups, to use this intervention as opportunity to penetrate their environment and to facilitate the access to them in order to provide help.

The impact evaluation is one of the most complex dimensions of the ex-post evaluation process. Had the Strategy contributed overall to reducing the risks and challenges of the young people in Romania? Had the Strategy contributed to the well-being of beneficiaries others than the ones that the initiative addresses to? If the time and the budget allow, may be assessed the impact of the initiative on the macroeconomic indicators (GDP growth rate, GINI index, inflation rate, trade indicators etc), on phenomena as migration, natality, climate change or on reducing the democratic deficit.

Also, should be studied the growth of the autonomy of vulnerable young people influenced by the implementation of the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020. The developed individual autonomy is an eloquent indicator of the efficiency and effectiveness of the initiative. The beneficiaries of this Strategy may become the next contributors to other policies and programmes for the next generations.

2.2. Gender perspective

European Institute for Gender Equality defines gender equality as equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys. In this sense: 'Gender equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but their rights and responsibilities and possibilities will not depend from birth as a woman or as a man. Gender equality requires to be taken into account the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men, thus recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women problem, but should look after and fully engage both men and women. Equality between women and men is considered a human rights issue and a condition, an indicator of development and human-centered democracy.' Moreover, 'Gender mainstreaming is not only about promoting equality and going so far as to implement specific measures to help women, but also about mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically to achieving equality, taking into account actively and openly, at the project stage, the possible effects on the respective situation of women and men (gender perspective). This involves systematically examining measures and policies and taking into account such possible effects in defining and implementing them.'¹

It is essential to understand that the challenges faced by girls/women are different from the ones of the boys/men. It is not a matter of a type of challenges being more numerous or harder, but just different. For example, statistically, the domestic violence victims are more women than men and more women stay at home with the children than men do. Understanding which stereotypical roles are attributed to women and men in the Romanian society and their dynamics may help at adjusting the inequalities.

Therefore, the same intervention cannot have the same effects on women and men. Defining correctly the needs of each category, that at some point may enter

¹ Communication of the European Commission: Incorporating equal opportunities for women and men into all Community policies and activities, COM (1996)

even in conflict, is the first step in elaborating and implementing valuable measures for them.

2.3. Multiple and intersectional discrimination

It is important to clarify both for the decision makers and for the policy evaluators, that the target group of this Strategy is a heterogeneous one, characterized by diversity in all aspects. Therefore, an important dimension to explore by the evaluators is the one of the discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status, and in all its forms: direct, indirect and especially structural, taking into account the patterns of attitudes and behaviour that lead to obstacles in achieving real social equality.

The concept of multiple discrimination is operated in correlation with the one of cumulative disadvantage, meaning more burdens to be handled. Sequential multiple discrimination is manifested when a person is a victim of discrimination on different grounds on separate occasions. Each isolated incident may be judged individually.

'Intersectional discrimination happens when two or multiple grounds operate simultaneously and interact in an inseparable manner, producing distinct and specific forms of discrimination' (Council of Europe 2020). For example, for a Roma girl who lives in a marginalized community, that is a disabled person and also a teen mother may be even more difficult than for her peers to continue her education. As an adult, for the Roma woman may be challenging to find a job. In our society, there are still present the stereotypes that perceive the Roma people as being traditionally dangerous, not serious, lazy, conflictual. Also the employer may be reluctant at the idea of employing a young mother that has particular needs as a flexible working program. Graver, this kind of discrimination may occur in the situation of needing services of public healthcare. The refuse of treating Roma patients based on stereotypes may lead to tragic consequences. In this case, there is a strong need of a package of integrated measures that respond to such particular cases. Also, it is very

important to be included in the evaluation process victims of multiple discrimination from an ethical perspective, for increasing the awareness of this phenomenon, the promotion of tolerance and respect for diversity and for including their valuable contribution in the next strategic planning for young people.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE NGO SECTOR IMPACT ON THE RESULTS

The NGO sector has a particular role in this Strategy, being a part of the problem but also a partner in solving the problem, sharing the task of implementing and/or promoting the measures. The institutions responsible for the implementation of the Strategy manifested their availability to cooperate with the civil society for achieving the objectives in all the intervention areas, not only in the one of volunteering and participation. Both big international NGOs with consistent resources such as UNICEF and the small local NGOs are important in the implementation of the intervention. The second category is valuable for its access to the young people in marginalized communities, the most vulnerable groups that need immediate action.

How the non-governmental organizations could contribute at the outcomes and the impact of the Youth Strategy? First, the representatives of the civil society may shape the decision makers' attitudes through constant communication and sharing their know-how and expertise. In this regard, NGOs may conduct independent studies and analyses to provide relevant recommendations throughout the policy cycle, from initiation to final evaluation. When constituted in a network, NGOs may have greater power influencing the public opinion and even putting pressure on the authorities for taking action through protests. However, another question raises: Is it enough the financial support of the state for the NGO's to manage their activity? It is possible the resources invested in the advocacy process to be disproportional to the results. It is important to understand that the advocacy activity is not treated as a profession

and sometimes not even as main mission. On long term, the intrinsic satisfaction is an argument that does not motivate all the members activating in volunteering regime. For an NGO to function with a stable team and without significant personnel fluctuations, it is needed a target to fight for and the guarantee of a stable job. In this case, are the NGOs able to identify alternative financing sources and to absorb the public and/or private funds?

The non-governmental organizations are also providers of social goods and services, contributing directly to the achievement of the proposed indicators. However, the volunteering history in Romania is recent and the role of the NGOs is not clearly defined and consolidated. The assessment of the public goods and services provided by the NGOs is the topic of another evaluation process, but may the selected the initiatives that were in complementarity with the Youth Strategy (here it is important to distinguish between the assistance as charity work and the activities that created sustainable social services).

CONCLUSIONS

The model proposed for evaluating the Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020 may seem under some points too extensive, requiring a huge input of time, money and human resources. Anyway, I am confident that these limitations may be reduced and that even at a smaller scale the evaluation process may be useful for elaborating specific and horizontal recommendations for the decision makers in the youth field. In my opinion, my paper is not a normative standard, but a starting point for further studies and even for the implementation of the ex-post evaluation itself, with a special attention on the transversal concepts: gender perspective and multiple discrimination. An inclusive evaluation process focused on taking into account the needs of the minorities of any kind is crucial for improving the public policies and programmes.

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