

Cultural NGOS as Means for Quality Life for the Elderly in Urban Areas from Transylvania

Introduction

Romania as almost all the other former Eastern and Central-European socialist countries has been facing ageing in the last few decades. The process must be seen in its complexity, both in its temporal and multi-dimensional (demo-economical and social and cultural). Even if most analyses refer in its causality only to the structural changes Romania has undergone during the transition in the post-1989 period, this is only partly true. If we want to have a better understanding of the processes of aging we must see it also as an outcome of the structural changes, a result of the former complex socio-economic and cultural processes during the last century. Altogether ageing has become one of the most stringent problems Romania has to face at the moment. So ageing in its complexity cannot be fully understood without reference to the cultural and political legacies of both the communist and pre-communist past, and shifts from the community-related cultural values to the individualist values (changes from the Tönnies model)

Ageing seen from a demographic perspective

Population ageing is determined primarily by decrease in fertility rates and secondarily by mortality rates. In Romania in the nineties there have been significant changes in the fertility patterns, both due to the socio-economic situation leading to significant international out-migration of the young fertile population, both to changes in the mentality. The evolution of the significant international migration in post-socialist Romania (studies speak of a number of 4-5 million labor migrants) is explained extensively through a changed "neoclassical economic theory" (Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969) has an important recent literature, the social phenomena related to migration are considered to affect also family structure, its functions and values. A recent study on Romania's demographical situation has stated that between 1990-2006 the loss of population in Romania is estimated to be almost 1,5 million inhabitants¹, this is aggravated by the fact that these people considered to be "lost" are mainly young and their absence in the demographical structure can lead to a further decrease of fertility rate, demographic dependency ratios; mostly the elderly-dependency ratio (the number aged 65 years or older per 100 persons of labour force age) indicate the dependency burden on workers and how the type of dependency shifts from children to older persons during the demographic transition.

At the moment one out of seven Romanians have more than 65 years, this will change in 2030 to a ratio of 1 to 5 in case natality will still remain at present standards. Now Romania is considered to be among the top-ranked five countries from the EU (besides Slovakia, Poland, Letonia and Slovenia) that have the fastest rhythm of ageing for the next decades.

¹ "Declinul demografic si viitorul popулatiei României". O perspectiva din anul 2007 asupra popулatiei României în secolul 21", elaborat de Academia Română, Institutul de cercetari economice, Centrul de Cercetari Demografice Vladimir Trebici, autor Vasile Ghetau, Editura Alpha MDN, 2007.

Ageing seen from an economic perspective

Economists in Romania consider that ageing is a serious economic problem affecting Romania that is not taken care of and on the long run this might have serious consequences. EU reports consider that the first economic consequence of ageing and decrease of the total population is the decrease of the potential GDP through the diminishing of the contribution of labor force as well as of the capital, as a consequence of internal economy. Romania's potential GDP has decreased to 1,3% in 2013, from 5% in 2004, caused by the contraction of private investments².

The most "visible" indicator through which economists can analyze ageing is that of the economic dependency ratio (number of pensioners), and besides the indicator of demographic dependency this can really show the dimensions Romanian ageing can take in short and medium term.. Most experts consider that one of the best ways to stop the increase of the economic dependency ratio is to facilitate the (re)integration of the population over 65 years through active measures at policy levels....Even if Romania has such measures of positive discrimination of the economic unit that takes such employees (over 50) it is very difficult to say they are of real efficiency, the policy of most large firms is to hire young people, mainly with not a great experience but with a willingness to work hard for lower wages.

Ageing seen from a broad social perspective

Maybe one of the dimensions that is not so well conceptualised is that of the social one and it can include several aspects mostly related to social care. Social care through the number of carers and cared can be quantified, but it is very difficult to talk about the real effects on the broader society. At the last census from 2011, Romania's population has shown a decrease with 1,7 millions related to the census from 1992, caused by low fertility rates, higher mortality and extensive out-migration.

Also the percentage of the young population (0-14 years) has decreased from 22,7 % in 1992) to 15,9% (in 2011) and that of aged (over 65 years) from 11,0 % in 1992 to 16,1% (in 2011)³, so the percentage of the aged population is continuously increasing and seems to constitute a problems which proves to be more than just a demographic one, but a burden for the whole society . There is little said about the causes of these phenomena, this is why we consider that it might of interest to take a good like on them.

First it is important to talk about the premises of this situation. As we have pointed in the beginning it is not enough to mention the postcommunist transition as definitory, but we have to admit that in our case it has been so. Socio-economic restructuration- destructuration of the former structures, desindustrialisation has led to hundreds of thousands of people unemployed in the early nineties. In a short time the population from Romania had faced a new condition, that of the „voluntary” unemployed and retired (after 55 years in that context it was possible) to retire if one wanted to obtain certain rights, to get a pension after one year. But even with these measures transitional nineties are seen as a period of reluctant privatisation (politics still dominated the economy), post-industrial economy did not manage to come with a strategy of inclusion for most of the transition losers (people over 50, low-skilled,Romas,disabled). For them post-transitional period has continued to be a difficult one, without any economic strategies that would help them reinsert in the new socio-economic structures based on a classic capitalist approach (in the last decade have been attempts to introduce elements of social

² Report of the World Bank

³ Apud Institutul National de Statistica, 2006.

economy but they have failed as Romanian society is still not prepared to accept them as a possible way of re-integration of the marginalised categories).

Another element that must be pointed out when we speak about ageing is that of the socio-cultural background. As mentioned above Romania's society and its values are a mixture of pre-modern and modern which defines the way society handles the problem of aging as specific to premodern societies: ageing seen as a curse (after Peter Laslett one of the functions of the traditional family was that of taking care of the elderly), aged people were supposed to be taken care of by the community and not marginalised. Specific to modern societies was the individualism seen as the marching successful ethical value, ageing seen mostly in its demographical and economical dimensions.

Civil society and its role in changing traditional(ist) mentalities

In Romania the upbringing of civil society was done from 1989 onwards from several directions (mostly bottom-up). In the first decade the number of NGOs was over 1000 (basically social NGOs). Their activity was mainly connected to the international charities. Several NGOs were (re)formed as after 1950 they were prohibited. After 1989 their activity was continued by those young retired (in their early fifties) who still had a picture of how these NGOs functioned before the fifties (personal information from their inside communities).

Regionally there were serious discrepancies, civil society has developed more rapidly in Transylvania and the Banat (the Western and South-Western Romania had a higher level of community involvement), these are socially and economically the most developed regions. Other discrepancies are settlement-based and ethnically different (87% of the NGOs functioning in the urban area) and Hungarians, German and Jewish communities had been more efficient in revitalising the pre-communist NGOs, strengthening by this their identity they have lost after communism. Romania's communist system is considered to have been one of the most nationalistic ones, with several attempts to wash out the ethnical and cultural identity of the non-Romanian minorities.

“Culturally” active ageing

One of the strategies of the young retired after 1989 was to keep themselves “visible” inside the community-mainly through cultural and economical NGOs. Most of the leaders (and the volunteers) intended to increase their social capital through these measures), hoping to maintain a positive image of themselves, they did not intend to “hide” after their retirement. This is why they have founded or re-founded NGOs, as a basis of their activity in the community, mostly volunteering. But who are these volunteers?....Mainly men with higher education level (mainly university level) located in the urban area. Another question to be answered was they have chosen to build up cultural NGOs? Because (at least at the beginning of the nineties) there was a negative image of the political NGOs...

Presentation of the case-study

For a better understanding on how these cultural NGOs have functioned, we will present one of the associations that came into being after 2000, even so it can be considered as one of the late-comers. The Kolozsvár Társaság Association was brought into life in 2003 by a group of Hungarian intellectuals from the city of Cluj/Kolozsvár. Their credo was (in documents and actions) the promotion of community-based values, connecting the different social strata (as it can be seen in their platform as revitalising the old values and transferring them to the young.

President of the association has become Mr Kántor Lajos as a Hungarian philologist, who has activated in Cluj in a series of other top cultural revues. Another defining element is that members of the leader committee are mostly retired human intellectuals now in their seventies who during their activities have promoted a real intergenerational transfer of knowledge and who also activate in other NGOs through this they could manage to make a network of such cultural NGOs, building an important social capital as their activity has been carried out in parallel. The active NGO has proven to be functional and so can promote much of the aims of community involvement, through enhancement of the cultural identity of the Hungarian local community. Nowadays its activity is specialized in several forums, as film and television, public life and the newly-founded forum for young musicians. I wanted to present through this example a success-story, one of the few that can be done so as most of the NGOs found after 1989 have been dismissed, their activity failed. What is the key of this success-story? A difficult question to answer...

In the Appendix you can see part of it, as many of the members of the community are present at the activities of the NGO, keeping the flame of the cultural identity “alive”.

References

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Appendices

