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Social economy enterprises contributing to the circular economy and the green transition in Romania

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ABSTRACT: Recently, there is a new European Union commitment to the potential of the social economy which is a pioneer in job creation linked to the circular economy that will be further leveraged by the mutual benefits of supporting the green transition and strengthening social inclusion. Considering this general context, we propose in this paper an exploratory research aiming to investigate the potential of the Romanian social economy sector as part of a circular economy approach that could advance the green transition in the following years. Our paper is based on the findings of preliminary systematic content analysis for the identification of the social enterprises in Romania which include circular economy and/or green economy in their business model, and on qualitative research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with the social economy organizations' managers. We have highlighted five good practice examples (Recicleta, Atelierul de Pânză, Educlick/Reconnect, Remesh, and Bio&co Farm), which clearly show that combining the principles of social economy with the ones of circular/green economy is a strategy that might lead to overcoming the current challenges of the society. Our investigations represent the first approach to this topic, aiming to understand the specific challenges of the circular or green economy and social economy models when joining forces together for sustainable development in the context of an emerging social economy, as is the case of Romania.

KEYWORDS: Social economy, Social enterprise, Circular economy, Green economy, Romania.
ECONLIT DESCRIPTORS: B55, L31, O35, Q56.

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RESUMEN: Recientemente, existe un nuevo compromiso de la Unión Europea con el potencial de la economía social, que es pionera en la creación de empleo, vinculada a la economía circular que se aprovechará aún más por los beneficios mutuos de apoyar la transición verde y fortalecer la inclusión social. Teniendo en cuenta este contexto general, proponemos en este trabajo una investigación de corte exploratorio con el objetivo de investigar el potencial del sector de la economía social rumana como parte de un enfoque de economía circular que podría hacer avanzar la transición verde en los próximos años. Nuestro documento se basa en los resultados de una revisión sistemática de la literatura de especialidad, realizada de modo preliminar, para la identificación de las empresas sociales de Rumanía que incluyen la economía circular y/o la economía verde en su modelo empresarial, y en una investigación cualitativa basada en entrevistas a profundidad, semiestructuradas, con los directores de las organizaciones de economía social. Hemos destacado cinco ejemplos de buenas prácticas (Recicleta, Atelierul de Pânză, Educlick/Reconnect, Remesh y Bio&co Farm), que muestran claramente que combinar los principios de la economía social con los de la economía circular/verde es una estrategia que podría conducir a superar los retos actuales de la sociedad. Nuestras investigaciones representan la primera aproximación a este tema, con el objetivo de comprender los retos específicos de los modelos de economía circular o verde y de economía social cuando unen sus fuerzas a favor del desarrollo sostenible en el contexto de una economía social emergente, como es el caso de Rumanía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Economía social, Empresa social, Economía circular, Economía verde, Rumanía.

Resumen amplio

Las empresas de economía social contribuyen a la economía circular y a la transición ecológica en Rumanía

Objetivos

En este documento proponemos una investigación exploratoria destinada a investigar el potencial del sector rumano de la economía social como parte de un enfoque de economía circular que podría hacer avanzar la transición verde en los próximos años. El principal objetivo de la investigación es revisar sistemáticamente las principales iniciativas de economía social en este ámbito, trazando un mapa de los ejemplos más relevantes de organizaciones de economía social en Rumanía a la luz de los puntos de convergencia y de los límites conceptuales entre los ámbitos de la economía social y la economía circular. El objetivo más amplio de la investigación es comprender cómo superar los principales retos de una economía circular en el contexto de una economía social emergente, como es el caso de Rumanía.

Metodología

Para alcanzar el objetivo de la investigación, el primer paso consistió en la revisión sistemática del contenido de diversas fuentes en línea y la identificación de las empresas sociales de Rumanía que incluyen la economía circular en su modelo de negocio: Registro Nacional de Empresas Sociales (versión de febrero de 2020), bases de datos de proyectos relevantes financiados por los Fondos Estructurales Europeos en Rumanía, bases de datos de ganadores de concursos de financiación de empresas sociales en Rumanía (Social Impact Awards Romania 2012 - 2021, Made in Andrei's Country Competition ediciones 2015 - 2017 y 2013 - 2015, Ashoka Fellows in Romania) y consultas a organizaciones de economía social miembros de Social Economy Group (un grupo de medios sociales muy visible y activo en Rumanía). Tras considerar diversos aspectos, seleccionamos para las entrevistas cinco iniciativas, consideradas ejemplos de buenas prácticas en este campo. Estas iniciativas representan el modelo más representativo de empresa social en Rumanía (organización empresarial sin ánimo de lucro) y el modelo operativo más adoptado (el modelo de empresa social de empleo - empresa social de integración laboral). Se llevó a cabo una investigación cualitativa, basada en entrevistas a profundidad semiestructuradas con los directivos de las organizaciones de economía social. La información cualitativa recopilada se analizó posteriormente utilizando esquemas relacionados con el contenido pertinente para los temas seleccionados del documento. En las entrevistas realizadas a los directivos de las organizaciones de economía social se consideraron tres líneas principales de investigación: el modelo empresarial, las interdependencias entre la

economía social y la economía circular en un marco más amplio de desarrollo sostenible, y el futuro de los enfoques circulares.

Resultados

La propuesta de valor de todas las organizaciones estudiadas es el desarrollo sostenible, garantizado tanto para como con la ayuda de sus socios y clientes, todos ellos beneficiarios de estas empresas sociales. Todo ello combina la eficiencia económica con la maximización de los beneficios sociales y medioambientales. La gestión de residuos es una parte importante de los procesos operativos. Algunas de las iniciativas también ponen en marcha diversos programas de comunicación y educación destinados a estimular la adopción de comportamientos de consumo responsable, basados en el consumo saludable y ecológico, la reducción y la reutilización. Sus empleados (que también son beneficiarios) se enfrentan a condiciones sociales complejas, con un nivel educativo y una experiencia laboral escasos, si los hay. La singularidad de estas empresas sociales se garantiza a través de la innovación ecológica y/o social. Según los resultados de la investigación, el modelo empresarial se orienta hacia el desarrollo sostenible con el apoyo de actividades innovadoras específicas. Entre los retos a los que se enfrentan en la implementación de su negocio, mencionamos la inserción laboral de personas vulnerables y garantizar la sostenibilidad económica. Asimismo, la situación revelada por las entrevistas cuestiona la eficacia de la normativa vigente y muestra la necesidad de apoyo en forma de diversas facilidades ofrecidas a las empresas sociales certificadas en Rumanía. Futuras investigaciones podrían contribuir a la adopción de un marco jurídico más adecuado en beneficio del ámbito de la economía social.

Todos los entrevistados consideran en cierta medida que el modelo económico de posguerra está llegando a sus límites. Por lo tanto, se necesitan nuevos enfoques que apunten a un desarrollo sostenible. Combinar los principios de la economía social con los de la economía circular/verde es una estrategia que podría llevar a superar los retos actuales de la sociedad. Sin embargo, teniendo en cuenta que la sostenibilidad tiene tres pilares igualmente importantes, las dimensiones sociales y ecológicas tienen que ser consideradas al más alto nivel. Los valores sociales y ecológicos están enredados. Se ha observado que las empresas sociales contribuyen al aumento de los comportamientos responsables de sus empleados, socios y clientes. Al adoptar un enfoque ecológico más significativo, incluso como parte de la economía circular, podrían ser ejemplos y educar al medio ambiente y a un público más amplio.

Existe un interés evidente en los planteamientos a largo plazo de las empresas y las organizaciones públicas. No obstante, las soluciones a corto plazo deben aplicarse rápidamente, como por ejemplo la gestión eficaz de los residuos. Los entrevistados también observan que al menos deberían tomarse en consideración cambios legales para que Rumanía apoye la economía social y la economía circular. El Green Deal europeo se considera bien acogido y ofrece un marco de desarrollo tanto para las empresas sociales como para la economía circular. Por lo tanto, será una ventaja para las empresas sociales implicadas en la economía circular o podría estimular a las empresas sociales a implicarse en la economía verde, de forma estructurada. Conducirá al aumento de la economía verde y, por tanto, a la innovación, incluida la innovación social.

Conclusiones e implicaciones prácticas

Los resultados de la investigación aumentan la conciencia sobre el papel estratégico que desempeñan las empresas sociales rumanas dentro de la economía circular y la transición ecológica hacia la consecución del desarrollo sostenible. Los cinco ejemplos de buenas prácticas muestran claramente que los actores de la economía social pueden contribuir a la transición ecológica en Rumanía, avanzando también en el paradigma de la economía circular. Estos ejemplos de buenas prácticas pueden servir de modelo para otros emprendedores sociales o representar modelos que podrían ser adoptados por el sector público, abriendo el camino a nuevas iniciativas en dicho sector. Esta primera investigación exploratoria mostró cómo puede la economía social apoyar a la economía circular en la práctica, siendo ambos nuevos paradigmas transformadores. Un hallazgo importante de nuestra investigación es el hecho de que los actuales retos socioeconómicos y ecológicos a los que se enfrenta Rumanía podrían superarse con el apoyo tanto de los principios de la economía social como de la economía circular/ecológica. Incluso la pandemia COVID-19 se consideró una oportunidad para reflexionar sobre la importancia y el papel que desempeña el desarrollo ecológico. En este sentido, las empresas sociales representan una respuesta adecuada al comportamiento responsable. Al referirse al futuro, se apreció que el Green Deal europeo apoya a las empresas sociales, pero se esperan retos de la normativa rumana para seguir en esta dirección innovadora, por ejemplo, normativas para conectar la contratación pública socialmente responsable con la contratación pública verde en un porvenir, facilitando el acceso al mercado público a las empresas sociales circulares y verdes.

Limitaciones y futuras líneas de investigación

Se llevarán a cabo más investigaciones en la dirección de cartografiar las organizaciones de economía social circular, definir los grupos de empresas sociales activas en la economía circular en Rumanía y analizar las áreas específicas de intersección y relación entre la economía social y la economía circular. Asimismo, se realizarán nuevos esfuerzos investigativos en la dirección de las cooperativas agrícolas y los desafíos específicos del sector agrícola y ganadero, ya que el campo experimentará un importante desarrollo y una mejor identificación con la economía social en Rumanía.

Originalidad

Nuestras investigaciones representan la primera aproximación a este tema en Rumanía, con el objetivo de comprender los retos específicos de los modelos de economía circular o verde y de economía social cuando unen sus fuerzas a favor del desarrollo sostenible en el contexto de una economía social emergente, como es el caso de Rumanía.

1. Introduction

Social economy and circular economy are different concepts, but they have numerous meeting points, such as both models place individuals and sustainable development at the center of their concerns, and a key factor of their success consists in strengthening creative and innovative capacity at the local level (Monzón & Chaves, 2017, p. 31). As outlined in the CIRIEC report 2017, in Europe, the social economy was a pioneer of the circular economy in reusing and recycling waste, energy, and agriculture. The European Commission, in its EU action plan for the circular economy, recognized that social economy enterprises will make “a key contribution to the circular economy” (European Commission, 2015). Moreover, recently, there is a new EU-level commitment to the potential of the social economy, which is a pioneer in job creation linked to the circular economy that will be further leveraged by the mutual benefits of supporting the green transition and strengthening social inclusion, notably under the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2020a). Also, the current EU SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe recognizes the role of the social economy as a driver of the sustainable transition: “Almost a quarter of SMEs in Europe already enable the transition by offering green products or services and many SMEs (including social economy enterprises) are already doing a lot for the communities where they are based” (European Commission, 2020b). The social economy can play an important role in supporting the actual green transformation (Constantinti, 2019: 19-23) and social enterprises have the potential to become an integral part of the fair, green, and circular transition in Europe Green Deal and Sustainable Europe Investment Plan (Caritas Europe, 2020). The unique characteristics of social economy organizations to ensure that the green and digital transitions leave no one behind are also highlighted in the current public debates concerning the European Action Plan for the social economy (Schmit, 2021). On the other hand, it is also important to mention that The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014) noted the importance of the Social and Solidarity Economy, indicating that it could play a key role in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Social and Solidarity Economy, as an alternative development model, holds considerable promise for addressing the economic, social, and environmental integrated approaches to sustainable development (Barna, 2020). At the beginning of 2022, OECD, together with European Commission launched the report “Policy brief on making the most of the social economy’s can contribute to the circular economy”, detailing how specific assets of the social economy can contribute to the actual circular economy challenges: the social economy has a demonstrated experience in developing circular activities, the social economy makes the transition to the circular economy more inclusive, the social economy can inspire business models and practices based on collaboration at the local level, the social economy furthers stakeholder engagement and improves social acceptance of circular products and green technologies, and it promotes more circular and sustainable behaviors (OECD/European Commission, 2022). This high contribution is possible because social economy entities have a series of characteristics that fit especially well, compared to other types of economic

actors, in the development of the circular economy, such as they have strong social capital, they have social and environmental missions at the heart of their operations and business models, they have inclusive and participative governance structures, they typically operate at the local level and are very well local anchored being used to collaborate with other actors from a given territory, and they have a strong proven experience in various raise awareness initiatives. For example, previous research showed that the transition to the circular economy would be labor-intensive, often calling for manual roles in processing, collection, sorting, repairing, and repurposing that can require less training and will be geographically spread. This fits well with the fact that many social organizations operate locally and engage people with less formal education. It is especially the case of work integration social enterprises (a very popular model also in Romania), and it could be a win-win situation when it comes to ensuring a sufficient supply of labor and decent work opportunities in the circular economy for people facing challenges in the labor market (Goodwin Brown, E. & all, 2020).

We can find around Europe many outstanding social economy initiatives which are advancing the green transition and/or pioneering the circular economy. For example, many of the renewable energy communities which foster citizens' participation and control over decision-making in renewable energy are organized as cooperatives. Germany and Denmark, two countries with strong traditions of community ownership and social enterprises, have the highest number of citizen-led energy organizations: 1750 in Germany, and 700 in Denmark (Caramizaru & Uihlein, 2020: 4-5). Also, The REScoop model is becoming an increasingly extensive model in Europe. REScoops are energy cooperatives, a business model where citizens jointly own and democratically control an enterprise that works on renewable energy or energy efficiency projects. The REScoops are also known as a citizen or renewable energy communities. The REScoops do not necessarily have the legal statute of a cooperative, but they distinguish themselves by the way they do business, typically respecting the principles outlined by the International Cooperative Alliance (REScoop.eu, 2021). Currently, the REScoop.eu network is a growing network of 1.900 European energy cooperatives, representing 1.250.000 citizens who are active in the energy transition (REScoop.eu, 2021). The renewable energy communities have a high social innovation potential and lead towards innovative social enterprises in Europe. The JRC report shows that they might engage in some or all of the following activities: generation, supply, consumption and sharing, distribution, energy services, electro-mobility (car-sharing, car-pooling and/or charging stations operation and management, or provision of e-cards for members and cooperatives) and in other activities such as consultation services to develop community ownership initiatives or to establish local cooperatives, information, and awareness-raising campaigns, or fuel poverty measures (Caramizaru & Uihlein, 2020: 15).

Clear progress in the identification of the relationships between social economy and circular economy in practice is demonstrated by the big membership of the RREUSE international network representing social enterprises active in the circular economy, notably in the field of reuse, repair, and recycling (30 member organizations spread across 28 countries). By working with 24 different material streams, which range from textiles, furniture, and electronics to food distribution and composting, RREUSE social enterprises generate invaluable social,

economic, and environmental impacts by providing local and inclusive employment as well as a strong sense of belonging for the most vulnerable in their communities (RREUSE, 2021). We mention that three initiatives analyzed in this paper (Educlick/Reconnect, Remesh, and Bio&co Farm) belong to the NGO Workshops without Frontiers, a Romanian member of RREUSE. Also, one of these initiatives (Educlick) won second prize in the category of Shaping a Circular Industrial Ecosystem and Supporting Life-Cycle Thinking in the first edition of the New European Bauhaus festival in 2022.

Recently, an academic and practical debate and an increase in interest from researchers in how to connect the transformative paradigms of social economy and circular economy across the European Union, and not only, has been started. Circular economy, along with other new concepts such as social innovation or collaborative economy, was seen as an area of system transformation, which is transversal to the public, business private for-profit sector, and third sector and must be considered complementary and even revitalizing the concept of the social economy (Chavez & Monzon, 2018). Nevertheless, the topic is still underexplored at the moment. But previous research discussed important topics that emerge from synergizing social economy and the circular economy: broader conception of the economy, the social dimension of circular economy, alternative economics as a political project, and localizing economy within a global perspective (Bellmare M-F. & all, 2022).

2. Research objectives and methodology

We propose in this paper an exploratory research aiming to investigate the potential of the Romanian social economy sector as part of a circular economy approach that could advance the green transition in the following years.

The main research objective is to systematically review the main social economy initiatives in this field, mapping the most relevant examples of social economy organizations in Romania in the light of the meeting points and of the conceptual boundaries between social economy and circular economy concepts. For achieving the research objective, the first step consisted in the systematic content analysis of various online sources and identification of the social enterprises in Romania which include circular economy in their business model: National Register of Social Enterprises (February 2020 Version), databases of relevant projects financed by European Structural Funds in Romania (project of ROREC “Increasing the opportunity for social inclusion by creating social economy structures for vulnerable groups of the population in three development regions of Romania; project of Alături de Voi Foundation “Accelerator of Social Enterprises”, project “ASSIST - Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprises in Transylvania”, implemented by SC Pro Xpert Consulting SRL, in partnership with the “Ernest Lupan” Institute for Research in Circular Economy and Environment and the Fidelitas Association for Youth Miercurea Ciuc), winners databases in social enterprises financing competitions in

Romania (Social Impact Awards Romania 2012 - 2021, Made in Andrei's Country Competition editions 2015 - 2017 and 2013 - 2015, Ashoka Fellows in Romania) and consultations of social economy organizations members of Social Economy Group (a highly visible and active Social Media Group in Romania).

The database comprised 20 initiatives (including 6 cooperatives), but after a preliminary check, only 14 of them seemed to still be active. Selecting relevant examples from these initiatives proved to be a difficult challenge, considering the great diversity of options. After considering various aspects, we selected for interviews five initiatives, considered good-practices examples in the field. We considered these initiatives to be the most representative of the Romanian reality concerning the circular social economy sub-sector advancing the green transition because they activate in one of the most representative fields for Romania: Recycling (Recicleta), Recycling & Reuse (Atelierul de Pânză, Educlick, Remesh) and bio social farming (Bio&co Farm). Also, if we are applying well-known typologies for models of social enterprises (Defourny J. & Nysses M., 2016; Alter, K., 2007), we mention that these initiatives represent the most representative model of social enterprise in Romania (entrepreneurial non-profit organization) and the most embraced operational model (the social enterprise model of employment - work integration social enterprise). Analyzing good practices allows a deeper understanding of the field and also contributes to a better understanding of specific challenges and the way to surpass them. Observing good practices helps other organizations gain knowledge, to be more effective, encouraging leadership in the field.

Qualitative research was carried out, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with the social economy organizations' managers. The interview guide was designed as succinctly as possible to let the interviewees express freely their opinions and experiences, ensuring wide coverage of topics and situations. The guide included nine questions covering the profiling of the business model considered, the opinions referring to the interdependences between social economy and circular economy in a wider framework of sustainable development, as well as the opinions regarding the future of circular approaches in the context of social economy (see Annex I: Interview guide with representatives of social enterprises). The broader aim of the investigation was to understand how to overcome the main challenges of a circular economy in the context of an emerging social economy, as is the case of Romania.

The collected qualitative information was further analyzed by using content-related schemes relevant to the selected topics of the paper. Following this path, the in-depth interviews were analyzed by various relevant researched themes.

3. Social economy in Romania – an emergent sector, including initiatives related to the circular and green economy

In Romania social economy is still an emerging sector compared to other European countries. According to CIRIEC Intl Report 2017, Romania's social economy sector is enjoying only a moderate level of public recognition, coexisting alongside other concepts, such as the non-profit sector, the voluntary sector, and social enterprises. As stated in a recent European Commission report concerning the social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe, the social enterprise sector in Romania remains little known by policymakers and the general public and exists at the margins of the welfare state, social enterprises being included in the policy toolkit for modernizing the welfare state, ignoring their potential to address complex, economic and environmental challenges (Lambriu & Petrescu, 2019: 82-84). CIRIEC Intl report 2017 presents the most recent data on the social economy sector: the Romanian social economy provides under 2% of the working population (136.385 paid employment); the associations, foundations, and other similar accepted forms count 99.774 jobs, 42.707 entities, and the cooperatives and other similar accepted forms sum up 31.573 jobs, 4.934 enterprises and 3.032.000 members (including credit unions) (Monzón & Chaves, 2017: 91). In Romania, like in some other European countries, the actors of the social economy are the engine of a new endogenous economic development model. They can revitalize territories, by internalizing externalities, eliminating asymmetrical information, and using and enhancing social capital as a new endogenous resource of great importance. Reviving the social economy in Romania – emerging social enterprises in all sectors, surviving communist coops, and other traditional actors, means in fact alternatives for subsidiaries of globalization actors, all together in the same global economic system, all of them playing a specific role, and creating as a whole the path towards territorial locally based development in Romania (Barna & Vameşu, 2014: 13).

The Romanian Law of Social Economy No. 219, adopted in July 2015 recognized the social economy sector in Romania, even if it is still a small sector. The Methodological Norms for applying the Law of the Social Economy were adopted by Government Decision no. 585 in August 2016. According to the legislative text, in Romania are recognized as part of the social economy (can obtain the certificate of social enterprise) the following categories of entities: cooperatives, associations and foundations, credit unions for employees or pensioners, agricultural societies, and other organizations that comply with the principles of organization and operation stipulated in the law. The certificate of social enterprise is granted to those social enterprises that meet the following criteria: act for social purposes and/or in the general interest of the community, allocate at least 90% of the profit made to the corporate purpose, and the statutory reserve, undertake to transfer the assets remaining after the liquidation to one

or more social enterprises, and apply the principle of social equity to employees, ensuring fair pay levels, between which there can be no differences exceeding the ratio of 1 to 8. Also, the Law of Social Economy recognized the social insertion enterprises, a popular type of social enterprise in Romania. The social insertion enterprise is the social enterprise that has, permanently, at least 30% of the employed staff belonging to the vulnerable group, so that the cumulated working time of these employees represents at least 30% of the total working time of all employees; and it aims to fight against exclusion, discrimination, and unemployment through the socio-professional insertion of disadvantaged people.

Even if the size and dynamics of the sector are not yet comparable with European countries with tradition in the social economy, in Romania there is a diversity of organizations and fields, models of classic social enterprises, hybrid or sometimes even innovative models, including models that have pioneered the circular economy paradigm and/or advance the green transition. The Atlas of Social Economy (Barna, 2014), but also other reports developed by the Civil Society Development Foundation (Kivu et al., 2017) showed that non-governmental organizations are important actors in the social economy sector in Romania. According to the most recent available data, 3% of the Romanian NGOs (1233 organizations) acted in Environment / Ecology field in 2015. Regarding the dynamics of this field of activity, the organizations stand out through a significant numerical increase in the period 2000-2015; recording growth rates of over 50% every 5 years: 81% growth rate in 2010/2005, and 66% growth rate 2015/2010 (Kivu et al., 2017: 27). Many NGOs acting in Environment / Ecology established social enterprises in line with their mission related to environmental protection. By a way of example, we can mention the social enterprises developed by "Viitor Plus Association" from Bucharest (Recicleta – a social enterprise collecting paper, PET, and aluminum doses in small quantities (up to 150 kg) using cargo-tricycles that do not pollute the air, thus offering legal and stable jobs; and "The Canvas Workshop" – a social enterprise created in 2009, based on the principles of social involvement, minimal impact on the environment, an activity that allows economic sustainability), or the social enterprise developed by the "Mai Bine Association" from Iasi (CUIB - a concept store in which are integrated a bistro where people can serve ovo-lacto-vegetarian drinks and snacks from local, natural ingredients; a store for the sale of solidarity, ecological, fair products and a space for organizing socio-cultural and educational events). These social enterprises are successful examples in Romania, opening the way for new initiatives embracing circular and green paradigms (e.g., in 2013 Recicleta won the grand prize, in the Environment Section, in the Social Innovation Tournament organized by the European Investment Bank Institute and in spring 2015, it won the social entrepreneurship project competition, organized by ING Bank, and CUIB was the winner of the National Competition for Social Enterprises offered by NESST, winner of the national competition "Your Choice, Your Project"). Such successful examples have opened the way to new initiatives creating awareness about the role of the social economy in advancing the circular economy and the green transition in Romania.

We estimate that in the near future, the trend of developing social enterprises active in the circular economy could continue. A recent study investigating the understanding of the social economy and circular economy practices by social organizations in Romanian shows the most

preferred environmental practices to apply in social enterprises are the use of renewable energy (26%), recycling (24%), and selective waste (19%), social entrepreneurs being aware of the opportunities that bring the circular economy (Danciu et al, 2019: 5-18). On the other hand, Romania is now in the middle of the implementation of the European Structural Funds grants financed under the Call Human Capital Operational Program 2018 "Strengthening the capacity of social economy enterprises to operate in a self-sustaining manner - Support for the establishment of social enterprises" which means that new social enterprises start-ups active also in the circular and green economy could be set up. For example, in the current project "AS-SIST - Social Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprises in Transylvania", SMIS code 126610, and implemented by SC Pro Xpert Consulting SRL, in partnership with the Institute for Research in Circular Economy and Environment "Ernest Lupan" (IRCEM) and the Association for Youth Fidelitas Miercurea Ciuc, the main target is represented by social enterprises start-ups with a focus on the circular economy.

At the same time, it begins to become visible the fact that the social economy actors contribute to the green transition in Romania: we can find more and more successful examples of agricultural cooperatives, social farms, or agricultural associations which are promoting environmentally friendly practices or are going circular, succeeding to produce and sell bio or eco products to their customers. By a way of example, we mention Biocoop -SIB from Sibiu, "Bio Cătina" Cooperative, Roua Cooperative, "Bio Carpathia" Association from Braşov representing producers of ecological raw materials from Braşov county and the mountainous area from Covasna county (animal breeders - sheep, cows, birds, as well as vegetable and cereal growers), "Valea Aşăului" Association from Bacău representing producers of cow milk, diet cheese, kneaded cheese, ewe - cheese, butter, and cream, Bio&co social farm developed by "Ateliere fără frontiere" Association, Amurtel social Bio Garden from Buzău, social farm Bettine from Găgeşti, etc. The positive trend of the agricultural cooperatives was shown by the Atlas of the Social Economy 2014 edition: in 2012 in Romania, there were 356 agricultural cooperatives, with a growth rate of 30% compared with the number of organizations in 2011 (Barna, 2014, p. 85). At the same time, the Atlas of Social Economy 2014 Edition analyzed the situation of the agricultural associations and other associative forms in agriculture. Agricultural societies are hybrid forms of organization that have both aspects of a non-profit organization and aspects of a cooperative, respecting for example the cooperative principle "one man, one vote". Romania had in 2012 a number of 2225 agricultural societies, with a growth rate of over 100% compared with the number of organizations in 2011 (Barna, 2014: 61-62). These first data on agricultural cooperatives and agricultural societies understood as social economy actors have highlighted the potential of the social economy sector for developing agriculture since 2014. Currently, agricultural cooperatives are more and more visible in the economic landscape and recent reports elaborated by the Romanian Center of Public Policies show that the positive trend is continuing. According to the Trade Register, in 2020 in Romania, there were 1485 registered agricultural cooperatives, and compared to 2017, the sector grew by 40%, and compared to 2014, the number of agricultural cooperatives in Romania doubled. The same report explains that in the period 2014-2020, the farmers' association in Romania was supported

with the help of European funds for rural development, mainly through the strategies of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) (Toderiță, Ganea, & Popescu, 2020: 1-38). Therefore, we consider that this continues a positive trend concerning agricultural cooperatives, and the fact that the Romanian National Federation PRO AGRO is a member of Copa-Cogeca creates good premises for advancing the green transition and the bioeconomy in Romania. Food production and land management have been put in the spotlight as key areas to help achieve the new European Green Deal (COPA COGECGA, 2021). Consequently, we think that the Romanian farmers and their cooperatives could become major actors in ensuring its implementation on the ground in Romania, using environmentally friendly practices, and implementing circular bioeconomy approaches in their current activities.

4. Social enterprises contributing to the circular economy and the green transition in Romania

4.1. Good practice examples

In the period April – May 2021 we have conducted research with the main rationale to analyze the pioneering contribution of the Romanian social economy organizations to the circular economy and their high potential to advance the green transition in our country. After an initial mapping and short analysis of the most known and relevant initiatives of social economy organizations with an incidence in the circular or green economy, we have chosen five good practice examples based on the following criteria:

1. The organization must be a social enterprise (other alternative terms used: social economy organization, social economy structure). We have not considered a mandatory condition that the social enterprise has a social enterprise certification from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, because currently, not all social enterprises have obtained this certification.
2. Social enterprises can have any kind of legal form (association, cooperative, credit union, limited liability company, etc.), but they must respect the principles of the social economy provided in art. 4 of the Law on Social Economy 219 /2015.
3. The economic activity of the social enterprise must be related to the circular economy or the green economy.
4. The social enterprise must be active, with verifiable coordinates (website, address, contact, etc.), and preferably be a well-known social enterprise in the landscape of the Romanian social economy sector.

Table 1. The initiatives analyzed

Initiative	Organization	Year	Web address
Recicleta	Viitor Plus	2009	https://recicleta.ro/
Atelierul de Pânză	Viitor Plus	2014	https://www.atelieruldepanza.ro/
Educlick	Ateliere Fără Frontiere	2009	https://www.educlick.ro/
Remesh	Ateliere Fără Frontiere	2011	https://www.remesh.ro
Bio&co Farm	Ateliere Fără Frontiere	2016	https://bio-co.ro/

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Short description of the NGOs and their social economy initiatives:

Viitor Plus (<https://www.viitorplus.ro/>) is a Romanian NGO established in 2006 to contribute to the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in Romania. It has four main pillars of involvement: social entrepreneurship, education for the environment, volunteering for the environment, and infrastructure for the environment. The values guiding its activity are Integrity, Transparency, Own example, Consultation with stakeholders, Personalized, practical, and long-term approach, Replicability, and Promoting a balanced and harmonious life. The organization has many green/sustainable projects, but we included in this study two significant circular economy initiatives: Recicleta and Atelierul de Pânză.

Recicleta is a social enterprise established in 2009, offering collection services for paper and board, plastic cans, aluminum foils, and cans for recycling. The transport of materials is pollution-free, done with cargo-tricycles and electric cars. The services are paid for by beneficiaries. The business model received awards in the past years, among which in 2013 - grand prize, the environment section - Social Innovation Tournament organized by the European Investment Bank Institute and in 2020 - Gold Community Index - Environment: Waste Management.

Atelierul de Pânză (the Cloth Workshop) is a social enterprise-protected unit established in 2014. It aims to reduce the consumption of plastic bags by producing textile bags. A special line of bags, the Puzzletex, uses textile waste as a raw material in the production process. Most of the products are sold by e-commerce, but some distribution partnerships are also active.

Ateliere Fără Frontiere (Workshops without Frontiers - <https://www.atelierefarafrofrontiere.ro/>), established in 2008, is an NGO aiming to contribute to the social, professional, and civic integration of vulnerable, excluded, and marginalized people. It is part of the SOS Group - International action, a global network working to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. It has launched three social enterprises in the past decade: the Reconnect workshop, the Remesh workshop, and the Bio & co farm. These three insertion workshops are entities without legal personality. The incomes from their economic activities and the funds obtained from grants and sponsorships are used exclusively for the activities of the association.

Educlick is a social workshop established in 2009. It collects, tests, reuses, and recycles Waste Electrical Equipment and Electronics (WEEE) that gain a second life after their repair/refurbishment in disadvantaged schools in Romania or are valorized as secondary raw materials. It also uses an online platform for computer donations to schools and other organizations in need.

Remesh is an insertion social workshop established in 2011. It designs and produces various bags, fashion accessories, and home-deco by recycling OOH advertising materials (banners, meshes, flags).

The Bio&co Farm is the only case not placed in Bucharest but in a rural area. It was established in 2016 as a social enterprise. It produces organic vegetables and also reduces waste and pollution by collecting organic waste and composting it, turning it into fertilizer for BIO agriculture.

4.2. Discussion of findings

Three main lines of investigations were considered by the interviews conducted with managers of the two NGOs: the business model, the interdependences between social economy and circular economy in a wider framework of sustainable development, and the future of circular approaches.

4.2.1. The business model

The value proposition for all studied organizations is sustainable development, ensured both for and with the help of its partners and clients – all of them being beneficiaries of these social enterprises. They combine economic efficiency with maximizing social and environmental benefits. Waste management, both considering their own and collecting and recycling waste from other organizations, is an important part of the operational processes. Some of them (Bio&co, Recicleta, and Atelierul de Pânză) also implement various communication and educational programs aiming to stimulate the adoption of responsible consumption behaviors, based on healthy and green consumption, reduction, and reuse.

Their employees (who are also beneficiaries) face complex social conditions, with poor educational status and work experience, if any. The insertion workshops have a strategic approach to training at the workplace, comprising three stages – stabilization, development, and professionalization – after which stable and adequate workplaces are looked for and offered to their beneficiaries.

For these people (e.g. those from socially disadvantaged groups) there is no solution in Romania. The level of training is low, emotionally they do not trust themselves (...), even the desire to work is debatable (...) and then what we do in our workshops is to offer them a framework through which to learn what it means work processes. (...)

(L.C., Development Manager, Ateliere fără Frontiere)

Most of the five organizations are mainly aimed at clients in Bucharest, especially individual consumers. Recicleta aims mainly at businesses, being easier to collect recyclable materials. It extended to owners' associations and schools. In 2020 its clients count 200 companies, 20 schools, and 600 apartment blocks. Reconect and Educlick aim mainly at schools (in rural areas).

The uniqueness of these social enterprises is ensured through green and/or social innovation.

Our service is a unique service, innovative in that we approach the logistical principle of first-mile pick-up of small quantities of recyclable materials that we store intermediate in hub-type containers until the arrival of the large collector interested in quantities over 500 kilograms. In addition, the means of transport [used] are electric, the latest model of cargo-tricycles being produced in Romania.

(G.I., Customer Manager, Recicleta)

The main challenge is to ensure economic sustainability. The pressure on financial reliability is double – it refers not only to ensuring the wages of the employees and the operational costs but also to obtaining profits for supporting the social and educational projects that the “mother” NGO develops. This economic sustainability is a difficult task since the green and social operations determine higher costs compared to other organizations (for instance for “normal” farms of home-deco designers).

Besides the financial difficulties, absolutely all the obstacles we encounter in a social business are much harder to overcome than those of an “ordinary” business. From employees with specific needs, with limited productivity or integration problems, to higher operational and administrative costs, costs that are given exactly by this context. On top of that, it is extremely important to maintain a high level of quality and remain relevant in the market. Therefore, these difficulties are felt much more in a social business.

(A.S., Manager, Atelierul de Pânză)

Funding comes from selling the products produced, but also from various sponsors supporting the values associated. Some also accessed European funding. Nevertheless, the financial flows are difficult, but most of them succeeded to be sustainable and to develop their activities over time. Ateliere fără Frontiere seems to have a more developed stakeholder management strategy, including sponsors. The support offered by the state, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, is considered minimal at most.

The levels of expertise and productivity of their employees (who actually gain professional competencies at the workplace) are also sensitive issues. The Bio&co farm has an additional problem with hiring well-trained agronomist engineers with the same values as the organization, accepting a lower level of payment compared to profit-oriented bio farms, multinationals, or supermarkets. The market's components are not favored to a wide degree by such organizations, both considering the competition and the clients.

The social and green dimensions of the Bio&co farm do not offer a competitive advantage. (...) We are also at the goodwill of nature (...) Those who are our subscribers are the ones who like organic so much that they accept limitations (i.e. we do not have very great diversity).

(L.C., Development Manager, Ateliere fără Frontiere)

Nevertheless, clients might be familiar not only with the products they are buying but with the entire organization and its values. They would support these initiatives considering all dimensions, not only the products themselves, which might be also acquired from other providers. This decision-making mechanism might constitute a competitive advantage.

Challenges also come from the external framework. The economic situation, the legislation, and the loose application of the regulations, as well as the publics' behaviors and mentalities, determine additional special measures, generating additional concerns and costs. The circular economy is not yet supported by proper regulations.

Recicleta is not legally recognized as a social enterprise or is interested in obtaining such a status because its business model is not economically sustainable, for the moment. However, we have chosen to highlight also this initiative of Viitor Plus Association in our research because it could be an inspirational model for the public administration in waste management, on the recycling component.

Atelierul de Pânză is a self-sustainable social enterprise. It is a social enterprise with the status of an authorized protected unit (at least 50% of its employees are people with disabilities). It is accredited by the Romanian Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

Ateliere fără Frontiere is not yet legally registered as a social enterprise, as well as a social enterprise of insertion. The advantages brought by this status are not considered to bring supplementary benefits compared to the present NGO status, but this is the intention to *"change, improve the system from within (...) and to better advocate for this system"* (L.C., Development Manager, Ateliere fără Frontiere).

4.2.2. Circular and social economy joining forces for sustainable development

All interviewees consider to some extent that the post-war economic model is reaching its limits. Therefore, new approaches are needed, aiming a sustainable development. Combining the principles of social economy with the one of circular/green economy is a strategy that might lead to overcoming the current challenges of society. Nevertheless, considering that sustainability has three pillars equally important, the social and ecologic dimensions have to be considered to the highest standards.

The social and green values are tangled. For instance, the manager of Atelierul de Pânză observed that the social dimension with no interest in the green aspects could not be properly considered:

I believe that a social economy cannot have long-term effects without respecting the principles of the green economy, without having an impact on the environment as well. Practically, without carefully calculating the natural resources and without the increased attention given to all aspects related to the production process, the social impact would not be enough.

(A.S., Manager, Atelierul de Pânză)

... whatever you do at this moment, you have to think that you should do everything with the lowest possible environmental impact, even if the object of activity is not related to the environment (...). [For instance] You have to do something to reduce the amount of waste ... We think in everything we do to have a low environmental impact, to reuse waste, to come up with innovations for the green economy (...) I think all social enterprises must think to do something about the environment. If we look at the purpose of the social economy, the respective persons (i.e. working for social enterprises) (...) can function in certain fields of activity in the circular economy. These sectors could be dedicated to the social economy of insertion...

(L.C., Development Manager, Ateliere fără Frontiere)

Some of them observe that the health crisis of 2020 has pushed back the interest in green development, at least temporarily.

A holistic and fair approach is needed to resolve the complex crisis facing humanity - social, climate / ecological and economic.

(G.I., Customer Manager, Recicleta)

It has been observed that social enterprises contribute to increasing the responsible behaviors of their employees, partners, and customers. By adopting a more significant green approach, including as part of the circular economy, they might be examples and educate the environment and a wider public.

There is an optimistic perspective regarding the development of the social and green sectors.

This sector (i.e. bio market) will expand in Romania, and we have a good position. All depends on succeeding to organize ourselves better and grow. But we know we cannot develop instantly.

(L.C., Development Manager, Ateliere fără Frontiere)

4.2.3. The future

There is an obvious interest in the long-term approaches of businesses and public organizations. Nevertheless, short-term solutions should be fast implemented – such as effective waste management. The interviewees also observe that at least legal changes should be considered for Romania to support the social economy and circular economy.

The European Green Deal is considered welcomed and offers a development framework both for social enterprises and for the circular economy. Therefore, it will be an advantage for social enterprises involved in the circular economy or it could stimulate social enterprises to

get involved in the green economy, in a structured way. It will lead to the increase of a green economy and, therefore, to innovation including social innovation.

Recicleta aims to be a model for public administration which should *“adopt the complex model of education and transport to collect materials correctly and separately, to capitalize as much as possible through recycling, to provide green jobs, which increase the quality of the environment and public space, proactively increase the quality of life in cities”*. (G.I., Customer Manager, Recicleta)

5. Conclusions and discussions

The paper prospects the interdependences between social economy and circular economy towards boosting the local potential for sustainable development especially focusing on green transition and promotion of social inclusion. The EU SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe emphasized the crucial role played by the social economy as a driver of the sustainable transition. Alongside this, the European Action Plan for the social economy follows the same path.

Compared with other European countries, the social economy in Romania represents an emerging sector despite technical support provided by projects implemented with the support of European funds during the last decade and the adoption of a Law on Social Economy in 2015. Consequently, public recognition as well as on behalf of the policymakers remains rather low. However, we have to mention a recently important step for the favorable evolution of the social economy sector in Romania: In March 2022, in the context of the reform of the social economy foreseen in Romania’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the Romanian Government approved the Government Emergency Ordinance amending and supplementing Law no.219/2015 on the social economy. The contribution of the social economy to the transition to the circular economy was highlighted in this governmental ordinance, opening up new opportunities for consolidating the relationship between the social economy and circular economy, and well aligning with the European Social Economy Action Plan.

The broader aim of the investigation was to understand how to overcome the main challenges of a circular economy in the context of the emerging social economy, as is the case of Romania. In this respect, five good practice examples (Recicleta, Atelierul de Pânză, Educlick, Remesh, and Bio&co Farm) of social economy initiatives in Romania from two organizations (Viitor Plus and Ateliere fără Frontiere) were exploratory analyzed through qualitative research methods (semi-structured in-depth interviews). These social economy enterprises were set up between 2009 and 2016 and their selection was made based on criteria detailed within the paper. We have chosen to analyze social economy initiatives developed by NGOs because associations and foundations currently represent the most important actor in the social economy in Romania. In 2015 (the most recent aggregated data at the national level) they represented 42.707 entities, while cooperatives and credit unions were 4934 entities (Monzón & Chaves, 2017). Further research will be done in the direction of agricultural cooperatives

and specific challenges of the agriculture and livestock sector as the field will experience an important development and a better identification with the social economy in Romania. Only in March 2022, in the context of the new ordinance mentioned above, the list of categories of organizations that can be social enterprises has been explicitly completed with agricultural cooperatives.

According to the research outputs, the business model is oriented towards sustainable development with the support of specific innovative activities. Among the challenges faced in implementing their business, we mention the labor insertion of vulnerable people and ensuring economic sustainability. Some analyzed social economy enterprises did not apply to legal recognition of their activities (certificates of social enterprise or social insertion enterprise) either due to low advantages obtained after such an application or due to characteristics of their economic model (not yet self-sustainable as it was the case of one initiative - Recicleta). This situation questions the efficiency of the current regulations and shows the need for the support in form of various facilities offered to the certified social enterprises in Romania. Further research in this respect could contribute to the adoption of a more appropriate legal framework for the benefit of the social economy field. But the most important finding of our research is the fact that the current socio-, eco- and economic challenges faced in Romania could be exceeded with the support of both social economy principles and circular/ green economy. Even the COVID-19 pandemic was considered an opportunity to reflect on the importance and role played by green development. In this respect, social enterprises represent an appropriate response to responsible behavior. When referring to the future, the European Green Deal was appreciated as supporting social enterprises but challenges of the Romanian regulations are expected to further follow up this innovative direction. Some steps were already done, as pointed before in the new legislative ordinance, and there is also a public debate among the practitioners and policymakers about how to connect socially responsible public procurement with green public procurement in the near future, facilitating access to the public market for circular and green social enterprises.

The research findings raise awareness of the strategic role the Romanian social enterprises are playing within the circular economy and green transition towards the accomplishment of sustainable development. The five good-practice examples clearly show that the social economy actors can contribute to the green transition in Romania, also advancing the circular economy paradigm. These examples of good practice can be role models for other social entrepreneurs or represent models that could be adopted by the public sector (e.g., Recicleta), opening the way for new initiatives in the sector. This first exploratory research showed how can social economy support circular economy in practice, both of them being new transformational paradigms. Further research will be done in the direction of mapping circular social economy organizations, defining clusters of social enterprises active in circular economy in Romania, and analyzing specific areas of intersection and relationship between social economy and circular economy.

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