

## **Social Economy Initiatives in the Romanian Orthodox Church: An Analysis of its Contribution to Community Development and Social Welfare**

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### **Abstract**

*The social economy has gained increasing recognition globally and at the European level as a distinct sector, situated between the traditional market and the public sector, with the primary aim of generating positive social impact rather than maximizing profit. This paper aims to explore the social economy initiatives undertaken by the Romanian Orthodox Church, analyzing how they align with social economy principles and contribute to community development and social welfare in Romania. Through qualitative research methods, the study analyzes how this representative institution implements principles of social economy within various charitable and social projects. The findings highlight the Romanian Orthodox Church's strategic use of economic solidarity, cooperative practices, and social entrepreneurship to promote sustainable community development and social inclusion in Romania.*

**Keywords:** social economy, social welfare, Romanian Orthodox Church

**J.E.L. classification:** I31, L31, Z12

### **1. Introduction**

The social economy has gained increasing recognition globally and at the European level as a distinct sector, situated between the traditional market and the public sector, with the primary aim of generating positive social impact rather than maximizing profit (Monzón *et al*, 2008; Noya *et al*, 2007). In the age of globalization (Cornescu *et al*, 2004; Toma, 2005; Marinescu *et al*, 2015a), the European Commission defines the social economy as encompassing a diversity of enterprises and organizations – such as cooperatives, mutual societies, non-profit associations, and foundations, including social enterprises – that prioritize social and/or environmental objectives and reinvest most of their profits to fulfil their mission (European Commission, n.d.). In a context marked by persistent socio-economic challenges, from poverty and social exclusion to the need for sustainable development, social economy actors play a crucial role in offering innovative solutions and strengthening social cohesion (Laville, 2013).

In Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), as the majority religious institutions, is a social actor with an extensive national presence which has developed a complex network of philanthropic and social assistance activities over time. Recently, there has been an increasing orientation of these efforts towards specific social economy models, integrating principles of social entrepreneurship and economic sustainability within its projects. This evolution reflects a deeper understanding of the social economy's potential to generate not only punctual assistance but also long-term community development and inclusion for vulnerable groups (Toma, 2013a; Toma, 2013b). As highlighted by Cace *et al* (2011), the BOR's social programs have intensified and diversified, especially in the context of economic crises, demonstrating the Church's capacity to mobilize resources and respond to emerging needs.

This paper aims to explore the social economy initiatives undertaken by the Romanian Orthodox Church, analyzing how they align with social economy principles and contribute to community development and social welfare in Romania. The work will examine the types of initiatives developed, implementation strategies, and their impact, based on the premise that the BOR

strategically uses economic solidarity, cooperative practices, and social entrepreneurship to achieve its social objectives. The research is structured as follows: the second section presents the literature review. The research methodology is illustrated in the third section of the study. The fourth section exhibits the findings. The paper ends with conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of social economy, although with deep historical roots in the cooperative and mutualist movements of the 19th century (Restakis, 2010), has been reconfigured and has gained new dimensions in recent decades. Polanyi (2001) criticized the tendency of the market economy to detach from society and emphasized the importance of re-embedding the economy in social relations, a central idea for understanding the social economy. The social economy is often described as a "third sector" (Monzón *et al*, 2008), distinct from the public sector (the state) and the private sector (the capitalist market), characterized by values such as solidarity, participatory democracy in governance, and the priority given to people and labor over capital in the distribution of income and surplus (Arthur *et al*, 2003).

Operational definitions of the social economy vary, but common elements include autonomy from the state, a decision-making process not based on capital ownership, and an explicit aim to serve community members or a general interest, rather than individual profit (Cace *et al*, 2011; Monzón *et al*, 2008). Social economy organizations, such as associations, foundations, cooperatives, and social enterprises, are key actors in providing social services, creating jobs, promoting social inclusion, and local development (Noya *et al*, 2007). All of them are socially responsible organizations (Toma, 2006; Toma, 2008a; Toma *et al*, 2011; Toma, 2012) which require effective and altruistic leadership (Marinescu *et al*, 2015b; Marinescu *et al*, 2015c; Toma *et al*, 2020a; Toma *et al*, 2020b; Toma, 2024a), lean (Naruo *et al*, 2007; Marinescu *et al*, 2008; Toma *et al*, 2022) and agile (Toma, 2023a) management, deep strategic thinking (Toma *et al*, 2016a; Toma *et al*, 2016b; Toma, 2023b), long-lasting strategies (Toma *et al*, 2013a; Toma *et al*, 2016c; Toma 2024b), entrepreneurial behaviour (Marinescu *et al*, 2017a; Grădinaru *et al*, 2018; Hudea *et al*, 2021) combined with creativity (Toma *et al*, 2013b; Marinescu *et al*, 2016) and innovativeness (Toma *et al*, 2016d; Marinescu *et al*, 2017b), and continuous learning (Toma, 2008b; Marinescu *et al*, 2013).

Social entrepreneurship represents a dynamic component of the social economy, combining entrepreneurial ingenuity with a social mission (Nicholls, 2006; Zainea *et al*, 2020). Social entrepreneurs identify social problems and apply entrepreneurial principles to organize, create, and manage initiatives that produce sustainable social change (Bornstein *et al*, 2010). This can also include "Knowledge-Based Social Entrepreneurship," where innovation and knowledge play a central role in developing social solutions (Kabir, 2019).

The role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the social sphere and, implicitly, in the social economy, is significant, although sometimes under-theorized in mainstream literature. FBOs, including churches, often have extensive networks, moral legitimacy, and the capacity to mobilize volunteers and financial resources for social causes (Cnaan *et al*., cited in Arthur *et al*., 2003, although Cnaan's direct source is not in the provided bibliography, the idea is generally valid). In Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church has a long tradition of philanthropic activities which, in the current context, are evolving towards structured forms of social economy. The study by Cace *et al* (2011) on the BOR's social programs during the economic crisis highlights this transition and the Church's ability to adapt and respond to pressing social needs. They argue that in a fluid space marked by crises, institutions like the Church can become anchors of stability and essential providers of social support, with religion becoming a refuge for people at risk of exclusion.

The concept of "social and solidarity economy" (Laville, 2013) further expands the framework, emphasizing the plurality of economic forms and the importance of solidarity as an organizing principle. This perspective is relevant for analyzing BOR initiatives, which often combine income-generating economic activities with a mission deeply rooted in Christian values of charity and helping one's neighbor. The BOR's contribution is manifested not only through direct services but also by promoting values such as hope, peace, and equity, considered necessary for Europe (Basilica.ro, 2022g).

However, the integration of FBOs into the social economy framework is not without challenges, including aspects related to governance, professionalization, transparency, and the relationship with the state and other secular actors in the social economy (Cace *et al*, 2011). The development of a favorable legal and institutional framework is essential to support and maximize the impact of these initiatives (Cace *et al*, 2011).

### 3. Research methodology

The research method used is qualitative, consisting of an in-depth documentary analysis of the initiatives of the BOR in the sphere of social economy. The sources include official websites of the Romanian Patriarchate, annual reports, academic articles and papers published on this topic. The thematic analysis method was used to identify the main characteristics of the social activities carried out by the BOR.

### 4. Findings

The analysis of documentary sources, mainly articles published by the Basilica.ro News Agency, Ziarul Lumina, and the Filantropia Federation, reveals an increasingly structured and diversified involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the field of the social economy. This involvement materializes through a wide range of initiatives that aim not only for punctual aid but also for the creation of sustainable support and social integration mechanisms.

- **Types of social economy initiatives developed by the Romanian Orthodox Church**

The identified initiatives can be grouped into several main categories, reflecting the application of social economy principles in various fields of activity:

Social Services with a sustainability and integration component:

Social canteens and bakeries: The BOR has developed numerous social canteens that provide food to disadvantaged individuals. Some of these are evolving towards social economy models by integrating income-generating activities or by involving beneficiaries in activities. For example, the Archdiocese of Roman and Bacău inaugurated a mobile social canteen for 100 people (Basilica.ro, 2023c), demonstrating flexibility in reaching those in need. The Severin Filantropia Association inaugurated a bakery workshop with a religious specificity (Basilica.ro, 2021b), which, in addition to its social purpose, can generate income to support other philanthropic activities and may offer jobs. Another social bakery was established within the project "SOLIDAR" (SOLIDAR – Support for the relaunch of employees and the development of new social enterprises) in the Diocese of Severin and Strehaia (Basilica.ro, 2021c).

Care and assistance centers: The BOR manages numerous centers for the elderly, children, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. A relevant example is the new palliative care clinic in Botoșani, consecrated by His Eminence Teofan, which underscores the importance of caring for one's neighbor (Basilica.ro, 2023f). The "Sf. Voievod Ștefan cel Mare" Social Settlement in Hârja, Bacău County, diversified its social services with the support of the Bacău County Council and marked five years of activity by consecrating new premises, indicating development and consolidation of the services offered (Basilica.ro, 2023e; Basilica.ro, 2021a). The Archdiocese of Iași began the construction of the "Sf. Emilia" Maternal Center during the Month for Life, addressing mothers and children in difficult situations (Basilica.ro, 2023h).

- **Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs):**

These are social economy structures whose main purpose is the labor market integration of people who are difficult to employ.

Production workshops: In addition to the aforementioned bakery, social enterprises were established in Alba County with European funds, including tailoring, candle-making, and bakery workshop (Basilica.ro, 2018). These provide jobs and vocational training for people from vulnerable groups. A new social project in the Diocese of Severin, "Social Economy Business," aimed to establish five social enterprises, including a candle factory, a car wash, and a carpet laundry, with the goal of creating 25 jobs for vulnerable individuals (Basilica.ro, 2020b). A new social economy

structure was also inaugurated in Drobeta Turnu Severin, aiming to create jobs for people from vulnerable groups (Basilica.ro, 2024).

Shops with monastic and artisanal products: The Archdiocese of Suceava and Rădăuți inaugurated a shop with natural products in Câmpulung Moldovenesc (Basilica.ro, 2023g). These shops not only promote products made in monasteries or by local artisans but can also function as social enterprises, with revenues directed towards the Church's social works.

- **Social Entrepreneurship and Community Development Projects:**

The BOR is also involved in promoting the concept of social entrepreneurship and in developing projects that stimulate the local economy with a social purpose. The social entrepreneurship project "SOLIDAR" was presented in Covasna and Harghita, indicating the dissemination of good practices and encouragement of local initiatives (Basilica.ro, 2022f). Also, a social economy project in the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, named "ECOSOCIAL", aimed to establish 8 social enterprises and create 40 jobs (Basilica.ro, 2022a). These projects often benefit from European funding, demonstrating the BOR's ability to access and manage such funds. The impact of jobs generated by the social economy is a topic of interest, highlighting the direct economic benefits brought to communities (Basilica.ro, 2023d).

- **Training, Consultancy, and Awareness Activities:**

In addition to concrete initiatives, the BOR is also involved in training activities in the field of social economy and in promoting this model. The organization of an international symposium on social economy in Sibiu (Basilica.ro, 2023i) demonstrates the commitment to the theoretical and practical development of the sector. The BOR also participates in European consultations, conveying values such as hope, peace, and equity, essential for harmonious social development (Basilica.ro, 2022g). The need for cooperation between the State and Religious Denominations for the good of society is also emphasized, an important aspect for creating an environment favorable to the social economy (Basilica.ro, 2019).

Platforms such as Ziarul Lumina (Filantropie section) and Federația Filantropia (Proiecte section) centralize and present a multitude of such initiatives at the national level, illustrating the scale of the BOR's involvement (Ziarul Lumina, n.d.; Federația Filantropia, n.d.). For example, the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia reported expenditures of 6.6 million euros in 2021 to support vulnerable people, a considerable sum reflecting the extent of social efforts, part of which is undoubtedly directed towards or through social economy structures (Basilica.ro, 2022e).

The social economy initiatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as revealed by the analyzed data, demonstrate a clear alignment with the fundamental principles of the social economy, as defined in the specialized literature (Noya *et al*, 2007; Monzón *et al*, 2008; European Commission, n.d.).

Economic solidarity and the primacy of the person: The main mission of these initiatives is to support vulnerable individuals and groups – the unemployed, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, single mothers, the elderly, disadvantaged children. The emphasis is on human dignity and providing opportunities, not just material assistance. This aspect is consistent with Polanyi's (2001) critique of the dehumanization of the economy and the call for its re-embedding in social values.

Social entrepreneurship: The BOR demonstrates an increasing capacity to adopt entrepreneurial models to solve social problems (Nicholls, 2006; Bornstein and Davis, 2010). The establishment of bakeries, production workshops, shops, and other income-generating structures, whose profits are reinvested for social purposes or which employ people from vulnerable groups, are clear examples of social entrepreneurship. Projects like "SOLIDAR" or "ECOSOCIAL" indicate a strategic approach to promoting this type of entrepreneurship.

Cooperative and partnership practices: Although detailed information about the internal governance structure of these entities is not always explicit in the analyzed sources, the nature of many projects suggests a collaborative approach. Partnerships with local authorities (e.g., Bacău County Council), access to European funds, and collaboration within networks such as the Filantropia Federation indicate an understanding of the importance of cooperation in achieving social objectives, a central aspect in the cooperative and solidarity economy (Restakis, 2010; Laville, 2013).

Sustainable community development and social inclusion: By creating jobs, providing essential services (health, education, care), vocational training, and support for labor market integration, BOR initiatives contribute to the sustainable development of local communities and to increasing social inclusion. They represent a form of "social capital" and contribute to strengthening the social fabric, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas.

The BOR's involvement in the social economy also aligns with the findings of Cace et al. (2011) regarding the Church's active role in mitigating the effects of economic crises and providing social services where the state cannot cover all needs. A transition is observed from traditional philanthropy, based on charity, to more complex social economy models that emphasize autonomy, sustainability, and long-term impact. This evolution can be seen as a "humanizing of the economy" at the micro-social level, in the spirit of Restakis's (2010) ideas.

However, for a more in-depth analysis, future research would be needed to examine in detail the governance models of these social enterprises, their long-term financial sustainability, the measured impact on beneficiaries, and the specific challenges they face (e.g., regarding professionalization, market access, competition, etc.), aspects mentioned as relevant in the specialized literature (Cace et al., 2011). It is also important to explore how these initiatives integrate into broader local and national development strategies.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the social economy initiatives undertaken by the Romanian Orthodox Church, highlighting their significant role in community development and promoting social welfare in Romania. The analysis, based on qualitative methods and the examination of public documentary sources, has revealed an extensive and diversified involvement of the BOR in this field, moving beyond the traditional framework of philanthropy to adopt specific models of social entrepreneurship and work integration social enterprises.

The main findings indicate that the BOR has developed a considerable network of social economy units, including social services with a sustainability component (social canteens, bakeries, care centers), work integration social enterprises (production workshops, shops with monastic products), social entrepreneurship projects, and training and awareness activities. These initiatives are implemented at the diocesan level, often in partnership with local authorities or by accessing European funds, and are coordinated and promoted through structures such as the Filantropia Federation.

The study underscores the Church's strategic use of social economy principles – economic solidarity, cooperative practices (in the broad sense of collaboration), and social entrepreneurship – to achieve its social objectives. These initiatives concretely contribute to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, job creation, the provision of essential services, and the sustainable development of local communities. They reflect an adaptation of the Church's traditional mission to the contemporary socio-economic context, demonstrating its capacity to innovate and respond effectively to societal needs.

The BOR's contribution to the Romanian social economy is, therefore, substantial, aligning with European efforts to promote a more inclusive and social welfare-oriented economic model. As discussed, these actions fit within the theoretical concepts of the social economy, the third sector, and social entrepreneurship, offering a concrete example of how a faith-based organization can play an active and transformative role in society.

The main limitation of this study lies in the exclusive use of public data, which may offer a partial picture. Future research could deepen the analysis through detailed case studies, interviews with involved actors (managers of social enterprises, beneficiaries, BOR representatives), and quantitative evaluations of the socio-economic impact of these initiatives. A comparative analysis with similar initiatives by other religious denominations or secular organizations in Romania and other countries would also be useful.

In conclusion, the social economy initiatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church represent a vital component of efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion in Romania, demonstrating a profound commitment to community development and the promotion of an economy with a human face.

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