

CONTRIBUTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROCESS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA*

Luminița Șoproni–Laurențiu Petrila

Introduction and methodology

In the Republic of Moldova, as in the case of other countries following a similar political-economic trajectory, the role of civil society started to become manifest only after the state became independent and sovereign, and freedom of speech was granted to its citizens.

Civil society began to express itself actively in different ways in all former Soviet countries or under Soviet influence only after the changes of the 90s (Mureșan 2023; Brie–Costea–Petrila 2023; Brie 2017).

The representatives of civil society generally struggle to limit any form of direct or indirect abuse attributable to political power. In addition, they initiate measures aimed at strengthening democracy and developing a culture based on free socio-cultural expression, while also making efforts to narrow gaps in terms of development within society at large. Development incongruities can be the result of regional policies, and economic, cultural, and/or political influences. However, differences in socio-economic development may also be associated with the absence of concrete and constant projects, designed for the integration and inclusion of vulnerable groups within society.

Over time, many challenges experienced by societies have been addressed more promptly by civil society, compared to state bodies that are generally slowed down by procedures in their attempt to solve emerging issues. Sometimes the church acts as a civil society organization (Petrila–Țepelea 2022: 64). At other times, civil society acts through a common voice, exerting pressure on the political power to change or correct impending concerns (Petrila–Popescu 2023) or by combating



acts of manipulation by certain political groups that intend to impose other political agendas (Pantea 2023).

Concerning social inclusion, only a prompt response to a particular problem is generally insufficient as more complex mechanisms are required to understand thoroughly the categories facing social exclusion caused by unsatisfactory or insufficient public policies. Considering these challenges, civil society organizations play an extremely important role in constantly identifying specific opportunities, funds, and actions aimed at the socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, but also in developing support networks (hubs) that eventually lead to organic socio-economic development.

Our study starts from the premise that civil society plays not only an important role in supporting social inclusion but also makes a crucial contribution to it, thus generating well-being for the whole community. From a methodological point of view, this investigation aims at a qualitative analysis of the issues, realities, and solutions concerning certain vulnerable social groups in the Republic of Moldova, to contribute to social inclusion and gain the expected effects. Thus, after reviewing the literature and highlighting some conceptual elements, the survey will move on to identifying vulnerable population groups and their needs for socio-economic integration and inclusion. Finally, it will illustrate some of the contributions made by civil society organization representatives to the lives of the categories mentioned above.

Literature review and conceptualization of civil society and socio-economic inclusion as agents of development

Defining civil society has proved to be a rather difficult task, both practically and academically. In most cases, civil society is perceived as an entity that performs at least two basic functions: the provision of services and advocacy (Polgar 2023).

The concept of civil society (Anheier 2014) has evolved. Therefore, by civil society, we refer to that framework in which groups, movements, and associations are organized and strive towards promoting certain interests (Putină-Brie 2023) and identifying deficiencies in society. Civil society refers to all forms of social action undertaken by individuals or groups that are neither connected to nor managed by state authorities. From Cohen and Arato's perspective, civil society represents the framework in which and through which democracy can expand and where rights are won or regained. Also, the actions of civil society are considered victories of society against the state. Also in their understanding, civil society is also a sum of social interactions aimed at solving the shortcomings of development or reducing gaps (Cohen-Arato: 1992).

Today, when we refer to civil society it is important to take into account recent economic and political developments as communities are increasingly di-

vided, inequality is increasing, and populists have gained ground even in advanced democracies. Restrictions on freedom of expression are increasingly common, and recent tensions in international politics have eroded trust in civil society organizations. However, making ideas about civil society more central can clarify many of the issues caused by these recent phenomena as well as societal polarization (Edwards 2019). A civil society organization is an organizational structure whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process. It also acts as a mediator between public authorities and citizens. Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU) acknowledges the role of civil society in the good governance of the European Union. Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union stresses the need for the EU to maintain an open, transparent, and constant dialogue with civil society organizations, for example when preparing proposals for EU legislation (Euro-Lex 2024).

Anthropological studies indicate that today's civil society organizations (CSOs), formerly called associations, date back millennia and emerged with the global spread of agricultural communities and societies in the Middle East. Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Johns Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies 2024) compiled an inventory of contemporary associations (CSOs) in 45 countries. Among other things, Hopkins' research revealed that CSOs in the United States have always been linked to democracy-building efforts. Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed by the multitude of associations that held that young society together in the absence of Old-World hierarchies. Besides the USA, only the northern European states come close in percentage to the number of CSOs found in the US (Davids–Meijs 2020).¹ This reality is worth highlighting through a correlation with the fact that most of the organizations supporting civil society in the Republic of Moldova, regarding socio-economic inclusion, were predominantly established in the aforementioned countries.

According to Linz and Stepan, civil society is the most important framework for transition states striving to consolidate democracy, since a vibrant civil society can ensure the monitoring of state power (Linz–Stepan 1996).

In the Republic of Moldova, a series of obstacles correlated with socio-economic inclusion are still present. Each individual, regardless of their vulnerability, must be treated as an active member of society. This requires permanent updates and improvements in the educational system and, within society at large, about people's needs (Racu–Cebotaru 2018; Marian et al. 2022).

After the 1990s, changes in the structure of society in the Republic of Moldova generated at least two negative consequences. The initiated reforms led to income differentiation and widespread poverty, which continue to be major social problems in modern Moldova. Poverty is more frequently found in rural areas and small towns. In the absence of public policies aimed at minimizing such public issues, civil society is called to play an important role in efforts aimed at the socio-economic inclusion of deprived individuals and groups (Belibova 2016).



In the process of transition to a democratic society, the roles of the citizen/civil society are particularly important elements for both political democratization and economic freedom (Ciot 2023). A need for radical and rapid change in the mentality and behavior of the majority of the population in terms of civic and social involvement and responsibility has come to the fore. Researchers usually point to a rather low participation rate, as a large part of society does not take direct action. However, such efforts are necessary for ensuring the normal functioning of the community at large and implicitly the activity of the state (Brie 2021; Putină–Brie 2023; Stoica 2013).

By social inclusion we understand the process of improving the conditions that allow individuals and social groups to integrate within society, thereby improving the quality of life and increasing opportunities for development and respect for the dignity of disadvantaged, vulnerable groups (the situation of these groups will be discussed in subsequent sections).

Social inclusion is important not only as an end in itself but also because exclusion generates extremely high costs. How social inclusion is articulated and what constitutes exclusion has a strong temporal dimension. The concept of social inclusion moves the analysis of poverty beyond merely identifying correlations, with the view to uncovering its causes (World Bank eLibrary 2024). While social exclusion generates multiple indirect costs, social inclusion generates social cohesion and economic development. Along with civil society organizations, we have multiple examples of private actions by citizens in different parts of the world who, through their involvement, transform community challenges into development opportunities (Șipoș–Patca–Blajec–Bârza 2023).

The State of Civil Society in Moldova

According to the 2021 *Nations in Transit Score*, Moldova had the highest score for "civil society" among all "democracy" score components (Freedom House 2021). The adoption of the law on non-profit organizations in 2020 is the most important change for the CSO environment in the Republic of Moldova. The total number of CSOs reached 10.966 in 2020 (CSO Meter 2020). As of September 2021, there were 14.748 non-profit organizations. Of these, 10.668 were public associations, 200 private institutions, and 470 foundations. Nationwide, about 41% of active CSOs implement activities in the fields of social protection and education. Consequently, the main target groups and beneficiaries are youth, children, and citizens as a whole. In addition, people with disabilities, women, children, and elderly people are among the most important groups targeted by the Moldovan CSOs (European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in The Republic of Moldova 2021).

The presence of a significant number of foundations and associations about a relatively small population reveals the acute need for third-party interventions

alongside those of the relevant ministries that deal with community problems in the Republic of Moldova. Apart from the organizations that focus on actions and projects aimed at strengthening democracy and European integration, which is necessary in the region, we could observe that an extremely important percentage of organizations (41%) activate and develop projects in the field of social protection. As mentioned above, the existence of civil society organizations is a natural response to the needs of society. (Herța 2023) For example, the challenges of socio-economic inclusion are an important concern for civil society.

The situation of vulnerable groups in the Republic of Moldova

Inequality and vulnerable groups in society are defined and analyzed from different perspectives: gender, age, ethnicity, disability, territory (urban and rural environments), finance, and education.

The *Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies* defines vulnerable groups as segments of the population that are more likely to experience harm, discrimination, or disadvantage due to various factors such as social, economic, or geographic location, gender, age, ability, or physical circumstances. These groups include children, older people, individuals with disabilities, women and girls, ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTQIA+ people, immigrants and migrants, refugees, and displaced persons (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies 2023; Social Protection & Human Rights 2015).

Other sources (The American Journal of Managed Care 2006: 348-352) include economically disadvantaged people, racial and ethnic minorities, children from low-income families, the elderly, the homeless, people with HIV, and those with other chronic health conditions, as well as people suffering from severe mental illness, in the category of vulnerable populations. Rural residents, who often encounter barriers to accessing healthcare services might also be integrated into the aforementioned group.

The "Unequal Moldova" report, produced by the Chisinau-based Centre "Partnership for Development" (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a), identifies inequalities in Moldovan society based on an analysis of the positive and negative effects associated with each area and aims to improve the situation of marginalized and vulnerable groups by promoting the principle of equality and non-discrimination in the development and implementation of public policies. The analysis starts from the premise that, in a society where the discrimination and exclusion of some groups are not present, the weight of positive and negative effects should be equal for all groups, and the existence of differences reflects the degree of inequality among those groups. Inequalities were examined in five relevant areas: income – analysis of poverty and income levels; community services – access, cost, and quality of local services (water and sanitation, street lighting, waste management); participation – level and availability of participation in local



decision-making; health – access to health insurance and basic health services; safety – perceptions of personal and community safety and the prevalence of gender-based violence.

Income inequality, access to social services, and access to health services

The main source of income in the Republic of Moldova is wage activity (50.7%), followed by income from social benefits (20.3%, of which 15.8% are pensions) and income from individual agricultural activity (7.8%). Transfers from abroad contribute 12.0% of disposable income formation.

The structure of disposable income differs by category, depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of the households and the area of residence. Thus, there are differences between urban (average monthly income of 5355.3 lei/person) and rural (35284 lei/person) areas regarding the socio-economic status of the household (wage earners and self-employed in non-agricultural activities exceed the average income, while pensioners and self-employed in agriculture are below this level) (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023a: 23).

The significant and growing poverty level of Moldovans is indirectly affected by inflation, which reduces purchasing power. In addition, inflationary costs are unevenly distributed across people with different income levels, thus having a greater negative impact on certain vulnerable groups.

Low- and middle-income households tend to be more vulnerable to inflation than richer households, as food and energy products account for a larger share of consumption in low-income households (the product categories with the highest price increases in recent years). The inflationary surge in 2021–2022 has hit more strongly both low- and middle-income urban households. The explanation lies in the fact that rural households while recording high values of food and energy consumption, have higher income in kind, which allows them to cover a larger share of their expenses (Fală 2022: 7–9).

Poverty levels are higher among vulnerable groups compared to the general population, the persons with disabilities, Roma people (and within these groups, women are poorer than men), and children (especially those from large families in urban areas) being more strongly affected by it. Household size and the number of children in the household often determine the level of vulnerability of both households in general and of the households with children in particular (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 3-4; National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023b: 7–8).

There are also significant differences between women and men in terms of earnings. According to the *Gender Equality Index 2023*, the gender pay gap has been constant in recent years in the Republic of Moldova. In monetary terms, this inequality has worsened, with women's annual financial loss being much higher than that

of men (21,092 MDL in 2022 compared to 10,550 MDL in 2013). Gender inequality has also increased significantly in terms of income from self-employment in non-agricultural activities: only 34% of entrepreneurs are women, this gap being the result of women's limited access to resources and financial capital, along with barriers in accessing investment resources (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2023: 9).

Public policies aimed at maintaining the income of the population at an appropriate level have generated some positive effects (increase in the minimum pension; increase in the guaranteed minimum wage in the budget sector; provision of compensation to cover energy payments during the cold season; adjustment of the legislation on wage transparency, including the definition of the gender pay gap and the obligation for employers to inform employees and authorities about the gender pay level). However, these actions proved insufficient to protect the population's income and moderate inflationary developments (Fală: 2022: 10–12). Moreover, the actions were not aimed at reducing disparities between the general population and vulnerable groups, making it necessary to implement effective solutions and concrete measures to better target social assistance and compensation, and wage transparency measures so that disadvantaged groups may effectively benefit from them.

Although access to social services has increased over the last decade, certain groups continue to be disadvantaged. Households in rural areas, where most of the population lives and where the poorest families are found, have twice the rate of access to services compared to those in urban areas and contrast to the high-income population. Vulnerable groups have even less access to community services (women, the elderly, poor rural households, Roma people, and people with disabilities), which makes them live in precarious conditions, or perform basic, time-consuming tasks that do not provide them with the material and financial capacities to connect to services (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 4).

The Government of the Republic of Moldova is currently in the process of implementing the reform of the social assistance system, which prioritizes the creation and development of social services, with a focus on uniform and equitable access to services throughout the state for all vulnerable categories of the population. At the same time, it recognizes the need to create partnerships with civil society organizations, which will contribute to improving the social protection system. Thus, the project "Promotion of CSOs as partners in the development of resilient social services", funded by the European Union, will be implemented in the period 2023–2025. It aims to increase the access of vulnerable groups to laundry, personal hygiene, and social services (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2024).

The main challenge of the health system in Moldova is the coverage of compulsory health insurance. Health insurance coverage is directly proportional to income levels and is higher among the urban population. Poorer population groups and Roma people do not have health insurance, the main reason being unemployment and limited financial possibilities (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022: 32–35; Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 20–21).



The cost of services is one of the main factors preventing people from accessing healthcare. Households that include people with disabilities and poor households have the lowest capacity to purchase health services, with around 40% of these households being in a position to renounce seeking health services due to lack of money or inability to cover the cost of medicines. Financial reasons, which generate a reluctance to access health services, are complemented by other causes, which vary by group: mistrust of health workers and lack of time (more pronounced for women), informal employment (rather characteristic of men), which limits their social security (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 22–24).

In this area, too, vulnerable groups are most at risk of not being able to benefit from the facilities ensured by the state, for reasons of social status, gaps in education, or lack of financial means.

Although the level of awareness in terms of the population's rights in accessing public information, as well as the level of information about the work of the public administration, has increased in recent years, vulnerable groups, in particular people with disabilities, the elderly and the Roma population, continue to have a lower level of participation and involvement in the decision-making process. The main causes for such a situation are poor accessibility of infrastructure and information, limited transparency of local public administration, or the perpetuation of discriminatory practices against the Roma population. Disability, age, and ethnicity are impediments to more effective involvement and participation in decision-making. At the same time, education and income levels influence the access to information as regards the activity of public administration (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 28-35; Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021b: 8).

Table 1. Participation Index in the Republic of Moldova

Degree of Participation and involvement in decision-making 2018 and 2021	2018	2021
General population	0.17	0.21
People with disabilities	0.14	0.19
Roma citizens	0.13	0.17

Source: Centre "Partnership for Development" (2021): Social Cohesion in the Republic of Moldova 2021. Chisinau: 8.

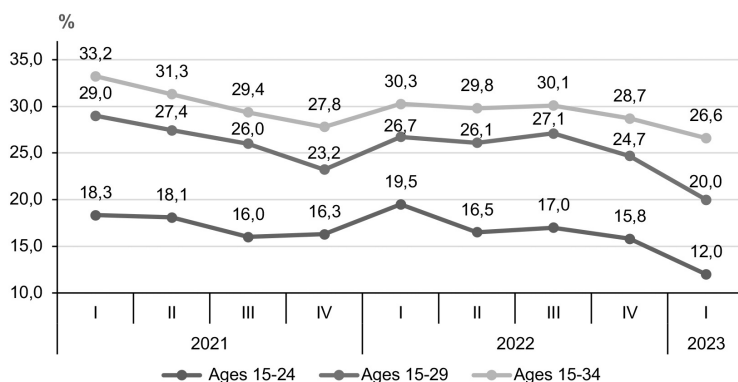
The table above (*Table 1*) shows that the degree of participation and involvement in the decision-making process within the state structures of the Republic of Moldova has increased for each social category between 2018 and 2021. An extremely important role in the process of increasing the degree of participation among vulnerable people has been played by civil society through projects that are aimed at social inclusion and, implicitly, at economic development.

Actions of civil society organizations in the Republic of Moldova contributing to the process of socio-economic inclusion.

The data presented above also highlight the progress made in recent years towards reducing certain inequalities to which vulnerable groups are exposed (in terms of access to community services, security, and participation). However, the persistence of significant inequalities demonstrates the inability of the authorities to address the specific problems of these groups and the existence of a gap in inclusive public policies. This gap can be reduced by attracting projects and funding from representatives or collaborators of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Such activities complement the process of shaping and implementing public actions and policies. In many cases, civil society has made up for the lack of response or insufficient public policies of the state, and, at the same time, some civil society actions have led to constructive reactions in terms of creating or supplementing new public policies or implementing projects that can address sensitive social challenges. The means at its disposal include (Ciocan 2019: 34): informing people from vulnerable groups about their rights, stimulating them to solve the problems they face and participate in the decision-making process; facilitating dialogue between citizens from vulnerable groups and public authorities, creating mechanisms that influence public policies; using participatory techniques to collect data on the issues that lie at the basis of public policy proposals, or to evaluate current public policies.

Vulnerable groups (pensioners, people with disabilities, Roma citizens, women, rural citizens, individuals with smaller incomes, young NEETs²) have a lower perceived level of safety, as they are at greater risk of experiencing situations that affect their safety (violence in public spaces, verbal violence, domestic violence, gender-based violence, different forms of bullying, isolation, social and economic vulnerabilities, and inequalities, etc.) (Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare 2021a: 35–39).

Figure 1. Evolution of NEET youth rate by age group, 2021–2023





	2021				2022				2023
	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I
Ages 15-24	18.3	18.1	16.0	16.3	19.5	16.5	17.0	15.8	12.0
Ages 15-29	29.0	27.4	26.0	23.2	26.7	26.1	27.1	24.7	20.0
Ages 15-34	33.2	31.3	29.4	27.8	30.3	29.8	30.1	28.7	26.6

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2023c)

The graph (*Figure 1*) shows how people included in vulnerable groups can evolve positively. Of course, these interventions are also made through state authorities, but organizations representing civil society have an important role in reducing the number of those who may be included in vulnerable or at-risk groups.

Over the years, civil society has contributed, on several occasions, through concrete projects and actions, to the process of socio-economic inclusion in the Republic of Moldova.

A successful example is the project entitled *Civil Society Contributing to Economic and Social Development*. Among the objectives of this project, one can mention: supporting the reform of the Labour Code to ensure an inclusive labor market through advocacy, training, and coaching of CSOs, SMEs, and final beneficiaries. Another objective is to improve the business environment by promoting different methods of employment and entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship, along with other development and monitoring objectives. The project received almost \$2.5 million and was funded by the European Union with co-financing from Sweden. Important results include the creation of 81 new jobs in different areas of Moldova, including in the Gagauzia region (Fundăția Est-Europeană Moldova 2024).

Another example of action is the project *Civil Society Contributing to Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Development in the Republic of Moldova*, funded by the European Union and co-financed by Sweden. The project is implemented by the East-Europe Foundation, through which grants have been awarded for the sub-project *Economic Empowerment and socio-vocational integration of NEETs with disabilities*. The program supports several entrepreneurship funds that provide technical and financial assistance for the economic activities of NEET youth and also funds 10 consortia of civil society organizations that develop and provide inclusive employment services for vulnerable groups. The project ensures funding for the creation and development of 15 social enterprises that will integrate vulnerable people into the labor market and will fund six regional business support centers (Moldopres 2024).³

Keystone Moldova organization is probably the most important representative of civil society that is actively involved in the field of economic and social inclusion actions in the Republic of Moldova. It promotes the social integration of people with disabilities, children with special educational needs, and persons at risk.



In addition to actions implemented directly with vulnerable groups, Keystone Moldova has implemented major projects supporting other civil society organizations, with less capacity to act, so that they can complete different projects, thus contributing to the development of sustainable community support networks.

Activities within the project entitled *Civil Society Organisations Acting for Better Social Services* began in 2021 and are expected to continue until the end of 2024. This project is financed both from European funds and with the support of other foundations. It aims to increase the capacity of 40 social CSOs to develop and implement sustainable social services for vulnerable groups, while also creating an enabling environment for ensuring the financial sustainability of social CSOs and strengthening the role of civil society in creating inclusive communities (Keystone Moldova 2023).

Keystone Moldova implements another program, which is important, both in terms of impact and funding: *Promoting CSOs as partners in the development of resilient social services*, a project that aims to make sure that at least 1500 people from vulnerable groups will benefit from social services. The project also attempts to increase the capacity of 15 CSOs and LPAs (Local Public Administrations) to develop resilient, inclusive laundry, personal hygiene, and social services for vulnerable groups (Keystone Moldova 2024)⁴.

Another relevant project was implemented in 2020-2022, whereby eight civil society organizations received support from the European Union to promote gender equality and combat violence against women and children. The project had a budget of over €5 million (UNICEF 2020).

Like the other countries in Eastern Europe where modern democracy has little history, the Republic of Moldova faces a series of challenges regarding the consolidation of democracy and fundamental rights. On the one hand, society is divided, on the other hand, the border war makes the democratic processes more difficult to implement. In this sense, civil society representatives come up with applied solutions for certain vulnerable social categories. From what we presented in our study, we tried to show the role of civil society through different organizations regarding the social inclusion process. Our study has some limitations because these organizations mostly describe the projects and objectives, but on the other hand very few present the final results with the actual impact, and the country-level reports on the activity of the civil society organizations present their actions in a summary way. Thus, our study with its limitations is nevertheless novel and an important starting point for further exploration of the topic.



Conclusions

According to the report entitled *Civil Society Actors as Factors of Change in the South Caucasus and Moldova*, published by People in Need (Komm–Zamejc–Terzi 2021: 30–46), civil society has assumed the role of initiating projects in areas less addressed by the authorities and focused on solving specific problems. In this context, CSOs from the Republic of Moldova collaborated with local public authorities and focused on aspects such as local development, economic development, youth, women, and social services. Moreover, they have continuously contributed to raising awareness and monitoring the implementation of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement, supporting the acceleration of the country's European integration process (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2024).

Such actions enhance the positive image of CSOs within the community, built on their ability to bring resources to regions and areas that are underfunded by the public budget. This capacity is currently being strengthened by the adoption, by the Government, on November 1, 2023, of *The Civil Society Organizations Development Program 2024-2027 (CSODP 2024-2027)*, which has as its main objective the improvement of the state's cooperation mechanisms with civil society organizations, the development of communication and coordination platforms and an increase in the financial sustainability of CSOs (Government of Republic of Moldova 2024).

Although the Republic of Moldova has a high score on the "civil society" indicator as a component of democracy, the relatively small number of CSO initiatives and projects is determined by the difficulty of identifying funding sources. In this context, the CSO sector is dependent on external funding. The most important financier is the European Union, followed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and other UN agencies (USAID et al. 2020). In addition to external support, funding sources include traditional local donations, support from the business domain, crowdfunding, SMS or online donations, the percentage designation mechanism, state support, membership fees, and economic activities, including social entrepreneurship (CSO Meter 2023). The main beneficiaries of projects initiated by civil society are young people, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities (European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in The Republic of Moldova 2021).

Societies that still go through a period of strengthening their democracy while also facing multiple geopolitical challenges seem to have a much greater need for CSO interventions and concrete actions. In the Republic of Moldova, there is still a struggle regarding political influence and direction. Such contexts are detrimental, particularly to those who belong to vulnerable groups, and are not considered a priority in the policies and public actions developed by the authorities. Against the backdrop of an urgent need for the socio-economic inclusion of these groups, civil



society organizations have proven to be the right solution and an ally for vulnerable people, who need to benefit from the necessary integration, which involves broad inclusion and is expected to have positive and constructive long-term results.

Based on the present study, we might conclude that civil society organizations play an extremely important role in eliminating or reducing social gaps and disparities. Social inclusion not only solves the problem of social exclusion, which is very expensive, but it also generates well-being and development on several levels. The role that civil society plays in reducing the problems of societal security is even more important the more often security risks are discussed in the context of European enlargement (Dolghi 2013).

In addition, the study provides valid arguments supporting the initially formulated hypothesis: *civil society plays not only an important role in terms of social inclusion but also contributes to it essential way, thus generating well-being for the whole community*. Civil society organizations represent an essential actor of democracy, economic freedom, and sustainable development, being an important source of information and representativeness for citizens' needs, as well as a basic pillar for strengthening democratic institutions, improving the decision-making process, ensuring transparency and responsibility in governance.

Bibliography

- Anheier, Helmuth (2014): Nonprofit Organizations. *Theory, Management, Policy*. New York: Routledge.
- Belibova, Silvia (2016): Social integration of children with intellectual disabilities from poor rural families of the Republic of Moldova. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16., (1.), pp. 989–993. DOI:10.1111/1471-3802.12243.
- Brie, Mircea (2017): The Cross-Border Cooperation Between Romania and Ukraine in the Context of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Association Agreements (AA). *EUROPOLITY. Continuity and Change in European Governance*, 11., (2.), pp. 51–78.
- Brie, Mircea (2021): Comparative Conceptual Perspectives on Identity Borders in the Republic of Moldova. *EUROPOLITY, Continuity and Change in European Governance*, 15., (2.), pp. 5–29.
- Brie, Mircea–Costea, Ana Maria–Petrila, Laurențiu (2023): Perceptions of civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (2.), pp. 99–118.
- Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare/ Centre Partnership for Development (2021a): *Moldova inegală. Analiza celor mai relevante inegalități din Republica Moldova. [Unequal Moldova. Analysis of the most relevant inequalities in the Republic of Moldova]*. Chișinău. CPD_MOLDOVA-INEGALA-2021.pdf (progen.md) (Accessed: December 10. 2023).
- Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare/ Centre Partnership for Development (2021b): *Coeziunea socială în Republica Moldova 2021. [Social Cohesion in the Republic of Moldova 2021]*. Chișinău. CPD_Coeziunea-Sociala-in-Moldova-2021-1.pdf (progen.md) (Accessed: December 10. 2023).



- Centrul Parteneriat pentru Dezvoltare/ Centre Partnership for Development (2023): *Indexul Egalității de Gen 2023. Tendințe privind nivelul egalității între femeile și bărbații din Moldova. [Gender Equality Index 2023. Trends in the level of equality between women and men in Moldova]*. Chișinău. cpd_ieg-2023.pdf (euneighbourseast.eu) (Accessed: December 10. 2023).
- Ciocan, Ludmila (2019): *Ghid privind monitorizarea și evaluarea participativă a serviciilor sociale destinat organizațiilor societății civile [Guide on participatory monitoring and evaluation of social services for civil society organizations]*. Chișinău: Fundația Soros Moldova. Fundatia-Soros-Moldova_Ghid_OSC_MEP.pdf (Accessed: December 12. 2023).
- Ciot, Melania-Gabriela (2023): Romanian Civil Society and the Preparation of Romania's Accession to the EU. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (4.), pp. 221–242.
- Cohen, Jean–Arato, Andrew (1992): *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- CSO METER (2020): Assessing the Civil Society Environment in the Eastern Partnership Countries. *Republic of Moldova Country Update*. Moldova Report CSO Meter 2020 EN final.pdf (Accessed January 21. 2024).
- CSO METER (2023): A compass to conducive environment and CSO empowerment. *Moldova 2023 Country Report*. Moldova 2023 CSO Meter Country Report 2 EN.pdf (Accessed January 21, 2024).
- Davids, Irene M.–Meijs, Lucas C. (2020): Can Civil Society Be Inclusive? Strategies for Endowed Foundations. *The Foundation Review*, 12., (4.). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1539>.
- Dolghi, Dorin (2013): *A Security Assessment of the Enlarged European Union, Eurolimes*, 15., pp. 13–25.
- Edwards, Michael (2019): *Civil Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Euro-Lex (2024): *Organizație a societății civile [Civil society organisation]*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/RO/legal-content/glossary/civil-society-organisation.html> (Accessed: January 17. 2024).
- European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in The Republic of Moldova 2021–2027 (2021): *Microsoft Word – EU roadmap for engagement with CSOs_final (europa.eu)*, https://euneighbourseast.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2022/01/eu_roadmap_for_engagement_with_csos.pdf (Accessed January 20, 2024).
- Fală, Alexandru (2022): *Inflația în Republica Moldova: cauze, grupurile vulnerabile și recomandări de politici [Inflation in the Republic of Moldova: causes, vulnerable groups and policy recommendations]*. Chișinău: Fundația Soros Moldova, Expert-Grup, Institutul pentru inițiative strategice.
- Freedom House (2021): *Nations in Transit 2021*. NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf (freedomhouse.org) (Accessed: January 20. 2024).
- Fundația Est-Europeană Moldova (2024): *Societatea civilă contribuie la dezvoltarea economică și socială [Civil society contributing to economic and social development]* <https://eef.md/ro/societatea-civila-contribuie-la-dezvoltarea-economica-si-sociala/348> (Accessed: January 17. 2024).
- Government of Republic of Moldova (2024); *The Civil Society Organisations Development Programme 2024–2027*. subiect-18-nu-843-cs-2023.pdf (gov.md).

- Herța, Laura-Maria (2023a): Does social learning lead to reconciliation in Serbian–Kosovar relations? The role of civil society in Serbia. *Civil Szemle*, XX., (2.), pp. 53–68.
- Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2023): *Vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups / INEE* (Accessed: December 30, 2023).
- Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies (2024): *Johns Hopkins Comparative Non profit Sector Project*. <https://ccss.jhu.edu/research-projects/comparative-nonprofit-sector-project/> (Accessed: January 18, 2024).
- Keystone Moldova (2023): *Organizațiile societății civile acționează pentru servicii sociale mai bune [Civil Society Organisations Acting for Better Social Services]*. <https://www.keystonemoldova.md/ro/projects/civil-society-organizations-acting-for-better-social-services/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024).
- Keystone Moldova (2024): *Promovarea OSC-urilor în calitate de parteneri în dezvoltarea serviciilor sociale reziliante. [Promoting CSOs as partners in the development of resilient social services]*. <https://www.keystonemoldova.md/ro/projects/promoting-csos-as-partners-in-building-resilient-social-services/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024).
- Komm, Tomas–Zamejc, Anna–Terzi, Elena (2021): Under the Spotlight: A Close Look into the Established and Emerging Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus. *People in Need*. https://www.peopleinneed.net/media/publications/1710/file/civil_society_report_pin_2021_md_south_cauc.pdf (Accessed: January 25, 2024).
- Linz, Juan J.–Stepan, Alfred C. (1996): *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Marian, Mihai–Darabaneanu, Dragoș–Chirodea, Florentina–Toca, Constantin (2022): Analysis of Social Support as an Argument for the Sustainable Construction of the European Community Space. *Sustainability*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14127448>
- Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (2024): *Mai multe servicii sociale vor fi dezvoltate cu suportul granturilor pentru organizațiile societății civile, finanțate de Uniunea Europeană. [More social services will be developed with the support of grants for civil society organizations, financed by the European Union]*. Ministerul Muncii și Protecției Sociale (gov.md) (Accessed: January 25, 2024).
- Moldopress (2023): *Societatea civilă contribuie la dezvoltarea economică incluzivă și durabilă în R. Moldova. [Civil society contributes to inclusive and sustainable economic development in Moldova]*. MOLDPRES News Agency – Societatea civilă contribuie la dezvoltarea economică incluzivă și durabilă în R. Moldova (Accessed: January 20, 2024).
- Mureșan, Paula (2023): Russia–Ukraine War: Celebrities Involvement in Conflict Resolution. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (2.), pp. 151–168.
- National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2022): *Accesul populației la serviciile de sănătate. [The access of the population to health services]*. Chișinău: Accesul populației la serviciile de sănătate (gov.md) (Accessed: January 22, 2024).
- National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2023a): *Aspects of the standard of living of population of the Republic of Moldova: Results of the Household Budget Survey*. Chișinău. Publicatia_CBGC_editia_2023.pdf (gov.md) (Accessed: January 22, 2024).
- National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2023b): *Analiza sărăciei monetare și a bunăstării gospodăriilor cu copii în anul 2022 (Rezultatele Cercetării Bugetelor Gospodăriilor Casnice). Raport analitic. [Analysis of monetary poverty and well-being of households with children in 2022] (Results of the Household Budget Survey). Analytical report]*. Chișinău. (Accessed: January 22, 2024).



- National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2023c): *Tinerii NEET în Republica Moldova în trimestrul I 2023. [NEET youth in the Republic of Moldova in the first quarter of 2023]*. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/tinerii-neet-in-republica-moldova-in-trimestrul-i-2023-9430_60458.html (Accessed: January 22. 2024).
- Petrila, Laurențiu-Țepelea, Marius (2022): The Church as a civil society. *Civil Szemle*, 19., Special Issue (3.), pp. 61–75.
- Polgar, Istvan Jozsef (2023): The role of Civil Society Organisations in Migration Management. Cooperation between Public Authorities and Civil Society Actors at the EU's South Eastern Borders. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (4.), pp. 27–40.
- Popescu, Felix-Angel-Petrila, Laurențiu (2022): The Effect of Democratic Instruments Between Civil Society Expectations and Political Intentions: Referendums in Romania after 1989. *Civil Szemle*, 19., Special Issue (3.), pp. 195–204.
- Putină, Natalia-Brie, Mircea (2023): Civil Society Development and Democratization in Republic of Moldova. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (4.), pp. 79–108.
- Racu, Serghei-Cebotaru, Nina (2018): *Social Inclusion of People with Dissabilities Through Sports Activities. Proceedings of the 4th International Conference of the Universitaria-Consortium (ICU) – The Impact of Sport and Physical Education Science on Today's Society*. pp. 299–302.
- Social Protection & Human Rights (2015): *Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups – Social Protection and Human Rights (socialprotection-humanrights.org)*. (Accessed: December 30. 2023).
- Stoica, Alina (2013): Participative Democracy and the Fostering of EU's Neighbour Constructive Relations. *Eurolimes*, Suppl. pp. 140–155.
- Șipoș, Sorin-Patca, Cosmin-Blajec, Ioana-Bârza, Manuela (2023): Active citizenship in the new rural Slovakian space in Bihor and Sălaj counties (Romania). Threats and opportunities. *Civil Szemle*, 20., (4.), pp. 5–25.
- UNICEF (2020): *Opt organizații ale societății civile au primit suport din partea Uniunii Europene pentru promovarea egalității de gen și combaterea violenței împotriva femeilor și copiilor în raioanele Cahul și Ungheni). [Eight CSOs received support from the European Union to promote gender equality and combat violence against women and children in Cahul and Ungheni districts]*. <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/comunicate-de-pres%C4%83/opt-organiza%C8%9Bii-ale-societ%C4%83%C8%9Bii-civile-au-primit-suport-din-partea-uniunii> (Accessed: January 22. 2024).
- USAID–Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance–Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (2020): *2019 Civil society organisation sustainability index*. Moldova. <https://management.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSO-Sustainability-Index-2019>. (Accessed: January 22. 2024).
- Vulnerable Populations: Who Are They? (2006). *The American Journal of Managed Care*, 12., (13.), pp. 348–352. Vulnerable Populations: Who Are They? (ajmc.com) (Accessed: December 8, 2023).
- World Bank eLibrary (2024): *What Do We Mean by Social Inclusion?*. https://elibrary.world-bank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/978-1-4648-0010-8_ch1 (Accessed: January 15. 2024).



Notes

¹ We refer to the number of organizations and not to the number of people involved in these organizations.

² We refer to the number of organizations and not to the number of people involved in these organizations.

³ The project is ongoing until spring 2025.

⁴ Other projects of *Keystone Moldova Foundation* can be found on <https://www.keystone-moldova.md/ro/projects/>.