

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF NGOS IN ROMANIA: PERCEPTIONS AND TRENDS

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Abstract

This article provides information about the social responsibility of 10 NGOs operating in Bucharest, Romania. The article begins with a theoretical background section related to NGO social responsibility followed by the methodology research and lastly by results and discussions as well as conclusions. The research is built on a survey of 10 respondents belonging to 10 NGOs. The results revealed that all the NGOs under study are concerned about the community where they operate well as about the human resources involved in their activities.

Keywords: personal and professional development, stakeholders' interest, social involvement, transparency, communication

1. INTRODUCTION

When analyzing the international literature, it is noticed there is no consensus on the terminology used to describe all NGO private sector organizations. Therefore, there are various phrases for defining the organizations of this sector according to the different cultures allowing their development (Păceșilă, 2016).

According to Lester Salamon and Helmut Anheier (1996), nongovernmental organizations meet the following criteria:

- They are institutionalized entities: they are registered, have a well-defined legal status and an organizational structure.
- They comply with the nonprofit distribution criteria: they can generate revenue from their activities but the income cannot be distributed to members and it is used to meet the organization's goals.
- From a legal perspective they are private organizations: they are different from public institutions as well as from private companies.
- They are self-governed: they are independent as regards the decisions about their activities or relations with other institutions, and the management is not dominated by the public authorities.
- They are based on voluntary activities in the management process or in their actions (which does not exclude the possibility of hiring personnel); they are set up voluntarily and are not imposed by anybody.
- They do not pursue religious objectives or *promote particular religious views* as the church does, but they may be aimed at religious education.
- They do not engage in political competition, in exercising political power.

According to the authors mentioned above, the first five criteria are mandatory regardless of country while the last two are formulated as recommendations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The field of social responsibility of NGOs has enjoyed an increase in the number of scientific articles in recent years. However, compared to those papers addressing corporate social responsibility, their number is small (Păceșilă and Colesca, 2020).

The first paper addressing the field of social responsibility of NGOs belongs to Gil-Estallo et al. (2006). According to these authors, the social responsibility should be the key element in developing the strategy of these organizations. Other authors (Weidenbaum, 2009) focus on the NGO obligations towards the communities where they operate because a social responsible behavior has beneficial effects on their image and reputation (Puentes et al., 2012).

In fact, the analysis of the literature highlights two different opinions on the social responsibility of NGOs. On one hand, according to Widenbaum (2009) and Gálvez la el. (2012) NGO social vocation and the purpose behind their establishment, namely maintaining social balances, are not sufficient to regard them as socially responsible entities. On the other hand, other authors (Ott, 2009; Łoś-Tomiak and Dalecka, 2013; Andreini et al, 2014; Lin-hi et al., 2015; Gazzola et al., 2017) consider that these organizations are truly dedicated to public benefit, therefore the concept of social responsibility is not relevant for them.

An interesting model on the social responsibility of NGOs is proposed by Vidal et al. (2005), containing 7 key elements that a socially responsible NGO should focus on: human resources, stakeholders, mission and values, transparency, environmental management, communication, social involvement.

Some of these key elements are found in the papers of several authors as follows: transparency and especially the delivery of information to the public about the organization's projects and management activities (Gálvez et al., 2012; Gazzola et al., 2017), social involvement through campaigns to support vulnerable groups (Łoś-Tomiak and Dalecka, 2013), communication necessary to create and maintain relationships with funders, beneficiaries, volunteers and citizens in the area where it operates (Prasad and Tata, 2015), human resources motivation (Waqas et al., 2016; Flórez-Donado et al., 2017).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to analyze 10 nongovernmental organizations from the perspective of 7 key elements identified by Vidal et al. (2005) which should be taken into account by a socially responsible NGO.

The research hypotheses are the following:

- At least half of the NGOs under study focus on compliance with the key elements identified by Vidal et al. (2005) regarding the social responsibility of nongovernmental entities;
- More than half of the NGOs under study (> 6) are concerned with the personal and professional development of their human resources;
- More than 4 NGOs post online news about their activities.

The research is explanatory because it addresses a topic already described in the literature and certain hypotheses are tested. The method of data collection is quantitative, namely the questionnaire-based survey. The reasons for choosing it are the following: limited time for collecting answers, limited resources available in conducting research, ease in collecting data because the questionnaires can be distributed in various ways, multitude of information that can be obtained in a short time, etc.

The tool used, the questionnaire, consists of 23 open and closed questions and it is divided according to the 7 key elements identified by Vidal et al. (2005) about socially responsible NGOs: human resources of the organization, stakeholders, mission and values of the organization, transparency, environmental management, communication and social involvement. The questions have either one or several answer options. For certain questions, 3- and 5-point Likert measurement scales were used. In addition to the questions related to the 7 key elements, other questions were included to provide information about the NGOs participating in the research.

The research sample consists of the people participating in the research, namely 10 respondents, each of them representing the NGO to which it belongs to. This type of sampling is non-probabilistic, the participants being selected according to their willingness to answer questions, as well as according to their openness to provide information, considered in some situations confidential.

As regards the research ethics, this paper ensures the protection of the information provided by the respondents. These are processed only statistically, without directly specifying the source. Thus, although the NGOs to which the participants belong to are mentioned, their responses are not analyzed in a personalized way.

The questionnaire was applied to the representatives of 10 non-governmental organizations operating in Bucharest. First, it was introduced on the platform isondaje and then the link was distributed online (facebook or e-mail). The data collection took about a week after the first distribution of the questionnaire.

Several methods were used to analyze the information obtained: individual data analysis for the open-ended questions; comparative analysis for different issues regarding the 10 NGOs. In order to prevent the occurrence of possible errors, the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the answers provided while the purpose of the research was communicated to them.

4. A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF NGOS UNDER ANALYSIS

Uniunea Studenților din România is an umbrella organization for 100 student and youth associations from 20 university centers. For 19 years, the statutory purpose of the Union has focused on representing, promoting and defending the students' rights in relation to relevant actors at national level (*Uniunea Studenților din România*, 2017).

Among the organization's area of interest are: social dimension, culture, volunteering, education and non-formal education, youth policies, youth employability, health education etc.

Asociația Studenților Economisti din România (ASER) is a nongovernmental organization in Bucharest focusing its attention, energy and resources on the students' personal and professional development. The organization is guided by the following values: responsibility, team spirit, self-improvement, enthusiasm, dedication (*ASER*, n.d.).

Asociația Studenților din Universitatea București (ASUB) is a student organization, legally constituted within the University of Bucharest, operating on a voluntary basis. The organization carries out professional activities aimed at satisfying the needs of students (*ASUB*, n.d.).

Forumul Tinerilor din România is a non-governmental, nonprofit and apolitical federation representing 155 youth organizations in Romania (of which 6 national and 149 local). It encourages, supports, involves and represents young people in Romania. The values promoted by this federation are: innovation, recognition, equality, non-discrimination, respect for diversity and minorities, participation (*Forumul Tinerilor din România*, n.d.)

Business Organization for Students România (BOS) is a nongovernmental organization focusing on the students' professional and personal development through volunteer actions. The BOS values are: initiative, responsibility, professionalism, team Spirit (*BOS*, n.d.).

Liga Studenților de la Geografie și Geologie (L.S.G.G.) is a nongovernmental, apolitical and nonprofit organization supporting and promoting the socio-professional interests of students within the Faculty of Geography and Geology from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași. The values promoted for its development are work, team spirit and communication (*L.S.G.G.*, n.d.).

Uniunea Studenților Academiei de Studii Economice din București (USASE) is a nongovernmental, apolitical and independent association made up of students from different faculties within the Bucharest University Economic Studies. It represents the interests of the students from the university mentioned above while it focuses on their personal and professional development. Values such as initiative, active involvement, volunteering, devotion, communication, integrity, professionalism, passion and solidarity are embraced by its members (*USASE*, n.d.).

Clubul de Turism și Ecologie ECOTUR is a nongovernmental organization aiming to form a responsible, conscious and proactive behavior among young people in the fields of tourism and ecology. Its values consist of teamwork, responsibility, respect, development, flexibility and perseverance (*ECOTUR*, n.d.).

Asociația Studenților în Contabilitate și Informatică de Gestiune (ASCIG) was established in 2002 in order to provide useful information for students regarding internships, jobs, scholarships or other opportunities. Its projects have a professional and socio-cultural character, are intended for all students within Bucharest University of Economic Studies and focus on non-formal education. Through its mission, vision and activities, ASCIG facilitates the transition from university education to the harsh business environment (ASCIG, n.d.).

Fundația Regală Margareta a României is an elite NGO founded by Her Majesty Margaret in 1990. It supports children, young people and the elderly through sustainable interventions. The foundation receives support from local authorities and institutions, schools, churches, business sector and civil society (FRMR, n.d.).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographic characteristics of responders to the survey are the following (*question no. 1*): 10 persons, of which 70% are female and 30% male from different NGOs, aged between 21 and 37.

Analyzing the answers to the questions according to the 7 elements of the model on the social responsibility of NGOs proposed by Vidal et al. (2005), the following are found:

- **Mission and values of the organization**

The second question of the questionnaire (figure 1) aims to identify the field of activity of the ten NGOs under analysis.

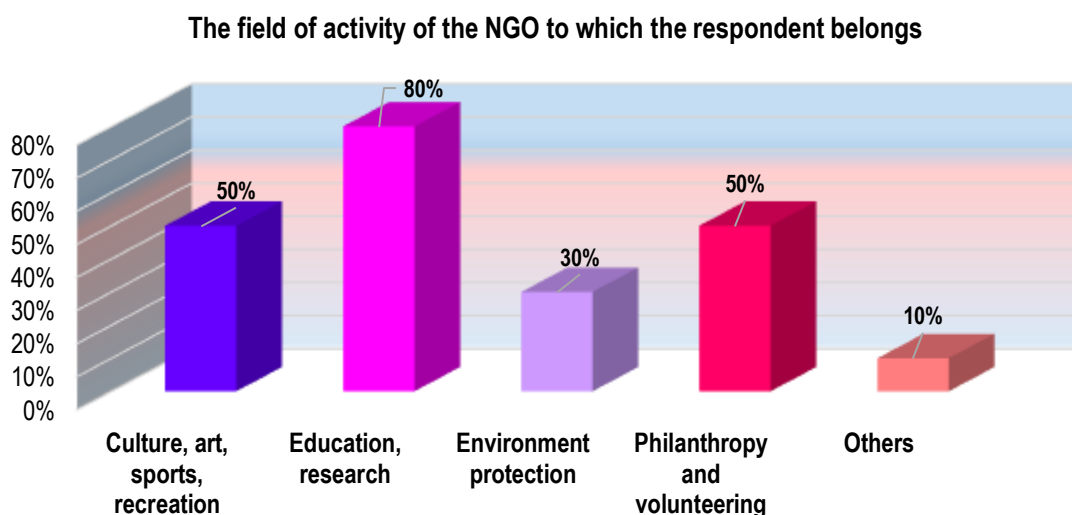


FIGURE 1 - THE FIELD OF ACTIVITY OF THE NGO TO WHICH THE RESPONDENT BELONGS

Most answers (80%) belong to the category *Education, research*, followed by *Culture, art, sports, recreation* (50%), respectively *Philanthropy and volunteering* (50%). Therefore, most of the NGOs under analysis focus both on developing the society and on helping and supporting people. One respondent ticked the category *Other*, because his organization is involved in activities related to tourism and ecology.

Question 3 refers to the values promoted by each of the 10 NGOs. Analyzing the answers, the following findings were obtained: Involvement and Professionalism (8 answers); Trust and Creativity (7 answers), Collaboration (6 answers), Empathy and Sustainable Development (5 answers), Innovation and Responsibility (3 answers). In general, the values have been integrated within these entities since their establishment, and the NGOs should respect them and organize their activities according to them (Păceșilă & Colesca, 2020).

As regards *question no. 4* (figure 2), most respondents (90%) stated that the reason for joining an NGO is to gain experience, while personal/professional development ranked 2nd. in their preferences (80%). Only 30% of respondents ticked "Support of a cause". Therefore, those working in NGOs under analysis are more interested in gaining personal benefits than supporting the causes of these organizations. As to the option

“Other”, there were two answers showing the interest of those surveyed towards the community problems in general: *"To develop myself and, later, to help other people to develop"*; *"The desire to do good to society."*

The reason for belonging to the NGO

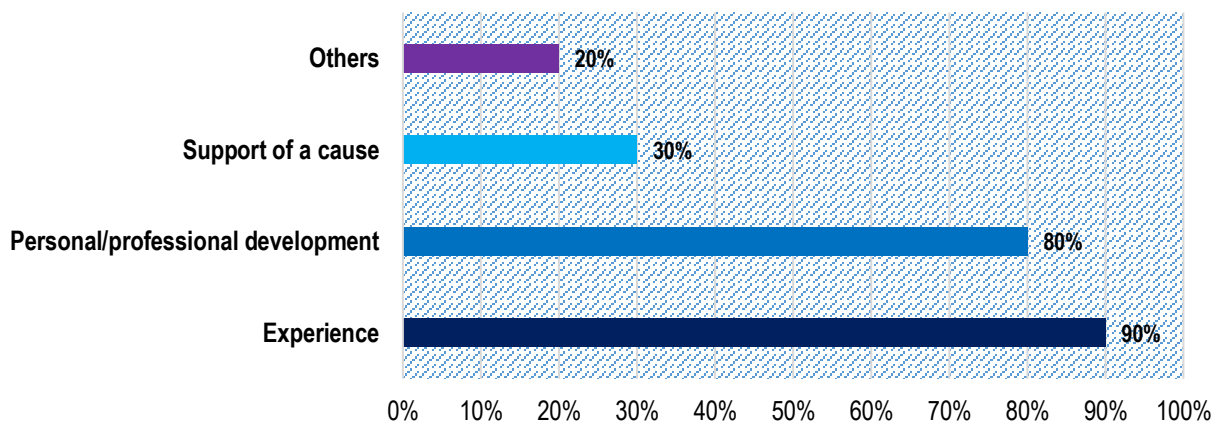


FIGURE 2 - THE REASON FOR BELONGING TO THE NGO

Question 5 considered the extent to which respondents are familiar with the notion of social responsibility. The answers provided were not surprising, because 9 out of 10 representatives of NGOs under analysis were familiar with the concept.

Closely related to the previous question, question 6 asked respondents to briefly define the concept of social responsibility. The following aspects could be found among the answers provided by them: *"The favorable impact we bring to society."*; *"Carrying out personal activities without affecting the community, but on the contrary, supporting it."* or even *"Bringing positive impact in the community, identifying and diminishing everything that harms the community"*.

• **Human resources of the organization**

Question 7 refers to the number and structure of human resources within the 10 NGOs analyzed (Figure 3).

The structure of human resources within the NGO

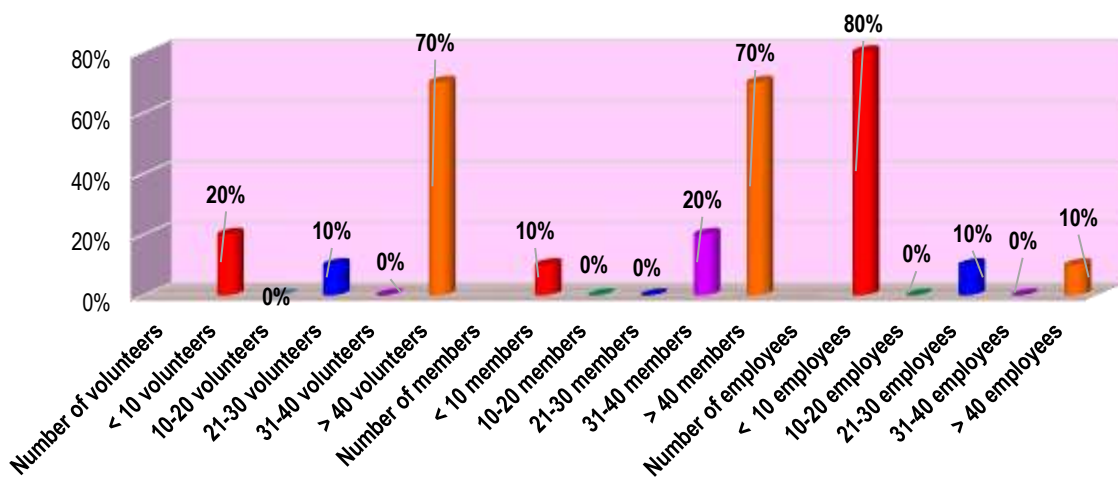


FIGURE 3 - THE NUMBER OF HUMAN RESOURCES WITHIN THE NGO

Therefore, 7 of the 10 NGOs have over 40 members, respectively over 40 volunteers while 8 of them have less than 10 employees. Only 2 NGOs have less than 10 volunteers, but instead they have a large number of members. Only one respondent mentioned that the NGO he represents has between 20-30 volunteers, but

less than 10 members. A surprising aspect regarding the employee category is that only one respondent indicated that there are over 40 employees within the NGO he belongs to. Although this situation is rare in NGOs, it is important to consider that it depends on their size, field of activity and reputation.

Question 8, which is closed, includes 6 issues regarding the 10 NGOs on which the respondents were asked for their opinion. The possible answers to these aspects were formulated using the Likert scale.

a. Encouraging its members to take initiatives

All respondents stated that their members are encouraged either to a very large extent or to a large extent to propose and involve in various activities related to the NGO field of interest.

b. Contributing to the personal development of members and volunteers

The answer obtained to this category was also positive. Therefore, the NGOs analyzed have an important role in their human resources development who are constantly informed, trained and encouraged to participate and carry out various activities in order to acquire the desired skills.

c. Consulting members in the decision making process

Almost all respondents (9) stated that NGO leaders encouraged free expression and presentation of different opinions in the decision-making process in order to identify the right solution to the problems encountered by the organization. Only one respondent ticked the option *to a small extent* because members are occasionally asked to tell what they think.

d. Keeping human resources motivated by achieving their objectives and individual satisfaction

8 out of 10 respondents ticked the option to a large extent. Therefore, if individuals of the organization are motivated, supported, periodically encouraged and valued, then their motivation increases and the goals are successfully met. In fact, the individuals' satisfaction starts from encouragement and motivation (Băjenaru and Tomescu, 2018).

e. Organizing trainings for human resources development

7 out of 10 respondents ticked the option to a large extent, which indicates that most NGOs under study focus on human resources and encourage their development, collaboration, teamwork, knowledge as well as introduction of the new members/volunteers in their environment and field of activity.

f. Planning team building activities in order to facilitate teamwork

The respondents ticked either the option to a very large extent or to a large extent. Consequently, the NGOs studied organize such meetings periodically or as often as necessary to support members of the organization and facilitate the process of communication, exchange of experience, knowledge and personal development.

As regards *question 9*, the respondents were asked to mention, on a scale from 1 (very unmotivated) to 5 (very motivated) how motivated the human resources of their organizations are. The average of the 10 answers is 4.6, representing a high level of motivation. The result obtained is not surprising because, as emerging from previous questions, the members/volunteers of the NGOs under analysis are included in different projects, participate in trainings and teambuilding activities as well as in the decision-making process.

Question 10, an open-ended question, refers to issues that need to be improved within the 10 NGOs, especially the relationship between management and members/volunteers/employees. The answers provided were simple, to the point and diverse:

- 2 respondents mentioned that no improvement was needed;
- 2 respondents specified that there was not much time to develop the relationship with the NGO leadership;
- the remaining 6 respondents argued that more communication, openness and sincerity or even a change in organizational culture are needed. These answers raise a question mark because they are in opposition to those given by the respondents to previous questions.

● Stakeholders (beneficiaries, members/volunteers, partners, sponsors etc.)

Question 11 sought to find out to whom the activities of each NGO are addressed, who are the beneficiaries of the services provided by these organizations. Analyzing the answers received, it was found that all 10 NGOs focus their activities on students. However, one of the respondents ticked, in addition to the previously mentioned category, that of the elderly/pensioners. Taking into account that most of the NGOs analyzed are student-based organizations, the result is not surprising.

Question 12 refers to the needs that should be improved regarding the relationship between NGOs and stakeholders as well as to the measures that should be taken by NGOs to meet the stakeholders' requirements. The answers obtained were various: focusing more on personal and professional development, facilitating access to various learning systems, encouraging public speaking and improving interpersonal relationships, providing career guidance, counseling and education.

Question 13 contains four elements regarding the NGO-stakeholder relationship. The Likert scale was used to identify possible response options for each of the four elements mentioned above. Therefore, the NGO:

a. Fulfills its mission while promoting the stakeholders' interests

9 out of 10 respondents ticked either the option to a large extent (6 people) or the option to a large extent (3 people). Therefore, their responsibility towards the stakeholders is fulfilled. Only one respondent ticked the option neutral.

b. Provides solutions for improving the quality of life for the beneficiaries

As in the previous question, 9 out of 10 respondents gave a positive answer, while one of them ticked the option neutral, either because the organization he belongs to is not involved in such activities or because he does not have knowledge about these aspects.

c. Is loyal to the sponsors and partners who offer support in fulfilling its mission

This category received positive answers indicating that the NGOs analyzed are serious, sincere, open, involved. Therefore, the help provided is mutual, the support comes from both sides.

d. Respects human rights in all activities carried out

All representatives of the 10 NGOs studied answered in the affirmative to this question. In fact, an NGO could not survive if it violated these rights, non-compliance with these rights would mean that the NGO's activity is not legal.

Question 14 sought to identify the sector of activity of the 10 NGOs' partners and sponsors. 7 out respondents mentioned that the partners and sponsors of the NGOs they belong to come from both the public and private sectors while the other 3 indicated that the organizations they represent collaborate only with private sector partners.

● Transparency

According to *question 15*, taking into account that an essential element in the relationship with stakeholders is transparency, respondents were asked to list 2 ways in which the activities/ projects initiated are visible to the target groups. All respondents stated that they use social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, to make their activities visible to those interested. Moreover, half of the NGOs use other ways of promoting and informing people interested of their activities, such as distributing posters and setting up exhibition stands in faculties for direct contact with students. Furthermore, two NGOs prepare reports on the NGO's information activities and the results obtained.

Question 16 (Figure 4) refers to the frequency of distributing information on the activities of NGOs.

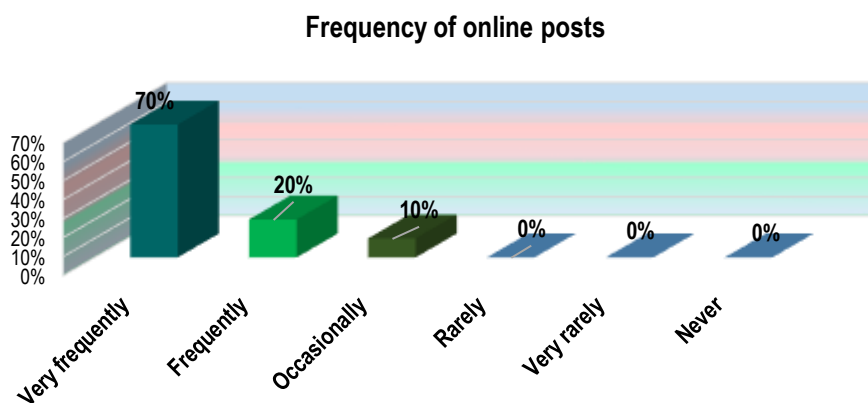


FIGURE 4 - FREQUENCY OF ONLINE POST

9 of them post online details about each initiative started often and very often. At the opposite pole, on NGO is not concerned with this issue, only sometimes posting information online. Therefore, we can conclude that the frequency of informing the public is relatively high in most of the NGOs analyzed.

The last *question* regarding the transparency of the NGOs studied, *no 17*, refers to the ways used by NGOs to gain the trust of sponsors/partners.

TABLE 1 - ANSWERS OF THE 10 RESPONDENTS TO QUESTION 17

NGO	The answers of the NGO representatives under analysis: ways used to gain the trust of sponsors/partners
NGO 1	Promoting the sponsor's brand
NGO 2	In order to gain the trust of the sponsors/partners we provide them help when needed either through human resources or through advertising
NGO 3	Maintaining a relationship of friendship and collaboration outside of projects carried out together
NGO 4	Our sincerity and experience are the main ways
NGO 5	Presenting the projects already started
NGO 6	Always respecting the decisions taken and assumed
NGO 7	Providing a report of what we have done till now
NGO 8	Presenting the benefits
NGO 9	Transparency
NGO 10	I do not know

The answers to this question largely reflect how transparency facilitates relationships with stakeholders. In fact, the more the information about the activities carried out expands, the more the trust and willingness of the partners to collaborate increases. Apart from the last respondent, who did not provide an answer, the other 9 NGOs had different ways of achieving this transparency: 2 of them explicitly mentioned they provided details on the initiatives already started while 5 of them maintained a very good relationship with sponsors and partners, offering them promotion and support, presenting them voluntarily or upon request the benefits arising from the collaboration.

• **Communication**

Communication within the organization is essential for maintaining a very good relationship with its human resources, leading to increasing their involvement in the NGO activities.

Question 18 (Figure 5) addresses the issue of communication within organizations.

Means of communication used by NGO

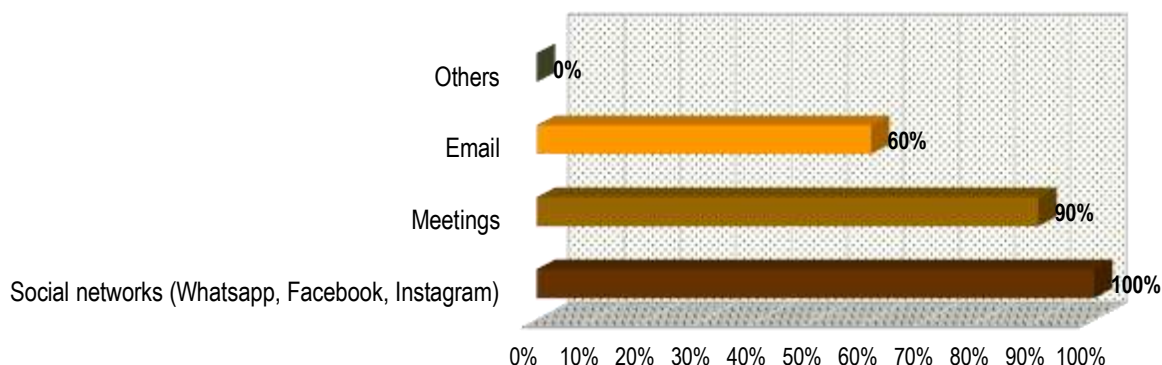


FIGURE 5 - MEANS OF COMMUNICATION USED BY NGO

The means of communication used by them could be found in the figure below. All respondents stated that the NGOs they represent use social networks for communication, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. 9 of them use meetings as a way of organizational communication while 6 use e-mail communication.

● **Social involvement**

The dimension of social involvement is analyzed through questions no. 19 and no. 20.

As regards *question 19* on the organization's contribution to society, the answers are different depending on the NGO field of activity: 4 of them provide support for students' learning and development, 1 NGO is concerned with improving the quality of the environment while the other provides support to disadvantaged people, 3 of them consider they are a source of inspiration for society. Only one of the 10 people did not provide an answer to this question.

The next *question, no 20*, completes the previous one asking the respondents to specify the effects of the projects/activities carried out on the beneficiaries.

TABLE 2 - ANSWERS OF THE 10 RESPONDENTS TO QUESTION 21

NGO	The answers of the NGO representatives under analysis: improvements obtained through activities/projects carried out
NGO 1	The students discovered new passions for fields unknown until then
NGO 2	Training as many students as possible through non-formal activities and promoting culture among them through different events
NGO 3	More involved young people, better prepared young people: increasing the percentage of young people going to the polls
NGO 4	People became more open and were very excited about the projects we started
NGO 5	Hiring students, receiving positive feedback
NGO 6	Behavior change; beneficiaries are more responsible for the environment
NGO 7	Many students have found jobs due to the workshop organized by us
NGO 8	Students who have found internships
NGO 9	Improving the living conditions of children, elderly, young people and disadvantaged families
NGO 10	Visible improvements for students to a large extent

As can be seen in table 2, all the NGOs under study improved the lives of their beneficiaries: 3 NGOs claimed that they helped students to find a job or an internship, thus producing important changes in their lives; development and change of behavior of the target groups were mentioned by 5 NGOs; 1 NGO improved of the beneficiaries living conditions while another mentioned that certain improvements had been observed among the students, without providing details.

● **Environmental management**

Question 21 refers to the observance of environmental protection rules by NGOs when carrying out their own activities. Possible responses are formulated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 - to a very small extent and 5 - to a very large extent). The average response in this case is 4.5, indicating that almost all organizations have a positive attitude towards the environment.

As regards *question 22* (Figure 6), 60% of NGOs include environmental protection among their activities, while the other 40% provided a negative response. Although only one of the 10 NGOs participating in this study aims to protect the environment, however, more than half of them are also concerned with issues related to environmental protection and management.

Including environmental protection among the NGO field of interests

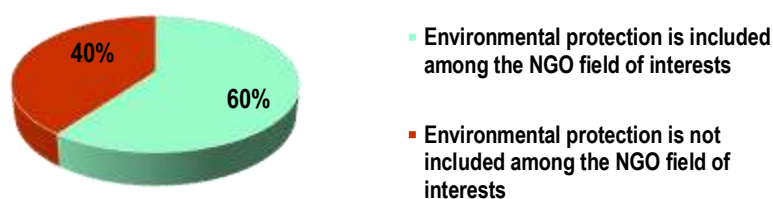


FIGURE 6 - INCLUDING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AMONG THE NGO FIELD OF INTERESTS

The last question, no. 23, is strictly correlated with the previous one, while the respondents were asked to mention several types of activities related to environmental protection. This question is valid only for the respondents who answered in the affirmative to the previous question. Although 6 respondents previously stated that they included environmental protection among the activities carried out, only 4 of them provided an answer to this question. Examples of such activities are: greening, tree planting and recycling.

As regards the validity or invalidity of the three hypotheses, the following results were obtained:

- Hypothesis 1: *At least half of the NGOs under study focus on compliance with the key elements identified by Vidal et al. (2005) regarding the social responsibility of nongovernmental entities* was confirmed, all 10 NGOs analyzed providing a positive response in most situations.
- Hypothesis 2: *More than half of the NGOs under study (> 6) are concerned with the personal and professional development of their human resources* was confirmed, all NGOs being concerned with their members and volunteers' evolution.
- Hypothesis 3: *More than 4 NGOs post online news about their activities* was confirmed because all NGOs under study are interested in making their activities known in the online environment.

The information provided by the respondents through the questionnaire validated all hypotheses. Therefore, the purpose of this study, the analysis of the social responsibility of NGOs by taking into account the elements mentioned in the literature has been achieved. The result is positive because it has been shown that the NGOs under study have concerns in this area.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The topic of social responsibility of NGOs is a complex one while a research in this field could be approached from different perspectives depending on the organizations' field of activity, their size and human resources. This research focused on identifying the ways in which non-governmental organizations are socially responsible not only towards the society in which they operate, but also towards their human resources.

The issue of social responsibility is extremely important and should not be neglected by any organization aiming

at sustainable growth and making considerable long-term changes, both within it and in the community allowing its development. As previously stated, the purpose of the research was achieved and all 3 hypotheses were confirmed after examining the collected data.

As regards the research limitations, the present study has a low representativeness while the results obtained are strictly related to the 10 NGOs mentioned above. Therefore, in order to obtain responses as close as possible to reality, it is necessary to carry out a research project among a nationally representative sample.

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