

THE ROLE OF NGOs LEADERSHIP FOR BETTER SUPPORTING A SUSTAINABLE, INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Today society has to face complex crises. COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted global vulnerabilities, inequalities and their interconnections with the whole human society, in terms of health, education, social, legal regulations, infrastructure and economic issues. We consider viable, sustainable and resilient alternative solutions had to be identify in order to support socio-economic development by supporting cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity. Crisis might be seen as a wake-up call to the whole world suggesting the need to reconsider globalization. Local communities welcome collaboration, co-working, co-creation such as to better support mostly vulnerable people. There is a high demand to involve more and more NGOs in rebuilding sustainable, smart, inclusive, competitive and resilient socio-economic development. The paper aims to highlight some of the new visions that support the need to involved more local communities, organisations and NGOs. From a methodological point of view the paper focus on qualitative research, namely telephone interviews with NGO leaders. Interviews were carried out in order to identify what efforts leaders are willing and able to make such as to support a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development. The leaders suggested solutions that promote mainly innovation, digital transformation, online transactions, and other, human oriented decision-maker alternatives. NGO leaders are aware that they might have an important role in promoting socio-economic development by implementing sustainable practices in non-profit organizations. Our research highlights as main results some of the challenges and barriers NGOs have to face. One of the key factors refers to identify some viable financial alternative solutions.

Keywords: Sustainable leadership, NGOs, Sustainable development

JEL classification: O10, O11, O15

1. Introduction

The current complex interconnected crises (such as COVID-19 pandemic, increasing oil prices, global warming, the wars in Ukraine and Israel) have led to one of the largest and deepest declines in economic activity in different parts of the world, including the European Union. In recent years, there has been an important increase of the number of NGOs and correspondingly of their diverse programmes all over the world. Some authors (Kuruvila, 2015) define NGOs as institutional entities, with different attributes as compared to governmental and commercial organisations. The most relevant attributes are: formal, non-governmental, non-profit, self-governance, voluntary and accountability (Kuruvila, 2015).

One of the economic sectors mostly affected by the current complex crisis is the NGO sector. NGOs act as an important bridge between civil society and institutions.

The interconnected more and more complex crises are pushing NGOs to become actively involved in rebuilding local communities such as to better support sustainable, inclusive, resilient, competitive socio-economic development.

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NGOs are advised to come up with viable and sustainable solutions. Sustainable development has three main dimensions: economic, social and environmental. NGO leaders have to promote a strategic thinking vision and attitudes and to identify viable alternative solutions to address and to prevent the complex and snow-balls propagated effects of interconnected crises.

The first question that arises is how NGOs might concretely and actively be involved and correspondingly what are the viable, effective and efficient solutions they might adopt in order to support a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development of the local communities. There are many and complex challenges. Leaders have to identify alternative solutions in order to transform challenges and crisis into opportunities. Local NGOs have to design and implement coherent sustainable strategies and policies that need to be smart, inclusive, ambitious, action and human-oriented and collaborative, by taking into account different regional, local, national and/or international circumstances. NGOs act as a catalyst between the public and private environment (promoting also PPP-public/private partnership). According to *quadruple helix principle* NGOs have also to be one of the strongest voices among citizens, by focusing on the economic, social, environment, education health issues. There is a high need that NGOs have to bring constantly on the public agenda both the main goals and correspondingly the resources needed in order to achieve these goals. It often happens that the necessary resources have to look only to the tangible financial one, but also to intangible assets that highlight the demand for a more human-oriented collective understanding of an NGO's approach. Technologies, mostly ITC, virtual, digital, augmented reality, industrial robots, artificial intelligence play a major role in connecting people according to the digital era requirements. Thus NGOs have to adopt and develop more flexible and effective models to highly contribute to a more and more accelerated and dynamic digital transformation. NGOs need to design their strategies and policies such as to re-establish their priorities by taking into account also *the Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). By applying qualitative-focus analyses (based on interviews) our paper briefly presents a part of the answers and correspondingly alternative solutions provided by NGO' leaders on their attempt to better face the current complex and interconnected crisis. According to some specific circumstances, mostly on the local level NGOs are called to replace insufficient or sometime even absent governmental services. In these kinds of circumstances, effective and efficient NGO leadership will support partnership and good collaborative models of action with local institutions such as to highly contribute to the local communities smart, inclusive, resilient and competitive development. This paper focus on NGO leaders' perspectives designed such as to support a sustainable, inclusive, resilient development on the regional/local level by highlighting also some possible viable solutions identified by NGOs by promoting a mutual understanding, mid and long-term development

2. Brief literature review

In 2015, the United Nations members adopted an interconnected set of *17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* designed such as to contribute to a substantial reduction of poverty, but also to protect the planet and to ensure prosperity for all. SDGs are an important part of "*Agenda 2030*" (European Commission, 2023). In order to achieving SDGs there is a high demand to face the complex challenges (such as ageing populations, food waste, and sanitation, vulnerability to disasters, education, amplifying poverty and social inequalities). Alternative possible solutions to these local, national or global challenges often start at the local level (UNDP, 2021). *The 2030 Agenda* calls on organisations (both public and private) to use their creative and innovative potential in order to better face challenges (United Nations, 2015). NGOs protect universal values and the interests of the members of the civil society as a whole. Martin Ciupa, Information Systems Manager at *MindMaze Company*, mentions that nowadays, humanity needs to adapt, by keeping in line with ethical principles, so that robots are used for robotic activities and humans for human activities (EESC, 2018).

The economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are dramatically impacting economic, social and environmental development and well-being (UNTFSSSE, 2021). The international development communities recognize the need to rethink the development models (UNSSSE, 2023).

Thus we consider that a first step might be to better involve NGOs in finding sustainable solutions and supporting local communities. NGOs are important pillars for supporting a sustainable, smart, resilient and inclusive development on the local communities levels. NGOs, through their programmes, functions and roles, might support local communities to become self-resilient and to finally achieve a sustainable, inclusive, competitive and resilient development.

From a methodological point of view our qualitative research had been conducted among NGOs working in various fields of activity. Our main goal had been focus on the need to map some of the alternative/solutions that NGO' leaders might undertake in order to achieve a long-run sustainable, inclusive, resilient and competitive development. NGO programmes often have direct and correspondingly indirect consequences on the territorial local places where they are concretely implemented. For example, local NGOs might contribute to the emergence of a civil society that emphasises the need to promote of a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development. Mostly in the last decades people are manifesting their awareness of the amplified scarcity of limited Earth's resources; and their more complex interconnections with some major environmental challenges such as climate change. NGOs are some of the active players mostly on the local communities in raising awareness about the negative consequences of global warming and the biodiversity crisis. At the macro national level, NGOs may also influence national strategies and policies that might also influence the public opinion. At the local level, NGOs might highly contribute to reshape the regions and territories in which they concretely operate. In the long term, this shaping (resource mobilization, planning, evaluation, anticipation) might contribute to a sustainable, inclusive, resilient and competitive community development and to design accordingly alternative viable, effective and efficient solutions in order to solve certain local problems. Through their work, NGOs can also motivate the community to actively participate and involve within projects that might help the improvement of the life quality. Therefore, we consider that the role of leadership is particularly important in coordinating meetings, planning community activities and community initiatives. They might help communities to discover their strengths and build on their resources, with an emphasis on collaboration and sharing, as main principles of the collaborative economy. International research studies and best practices examples reveal that NGOs should provide better and viable opportunities for community members to actively participate within innovative projects. According to the need of collaborative economics to promote an important shift from sharing to carrying we consider that these creative and innovative projects should be more sensitive to the problems and needs of the members of the local community (Fitzpatrick & Molloy, 2014). NGOs are the ones trying to involve more local communities members to decide based on a constructive dialogue focusing on finding viable and effective alternative solutions to local community challenges and to design correspondingly some recovery plans and strategies by taking also into account the risks related to the current issues. Usually, the building capacities of the local authorities are relatively limited. This has been demonstrated in numerous complex and dynamic situations, when NGOs have managed to undertake various activities by involving more the community' members to build and preserve resilience. NGO leaders, through their diverse activities, might get actively involved by empowering people and the local communities, such as to achieve effective and efficient sustainable results. NGOs might have a significant impact within the community, and their leaders might be considered as community leaders. The diverse examples of good practices focusing on collaboration might act as an inspiring tool for the local communities. Some NGOs are remarkable successful (Fitzpatrick & Molloy, 2014) in achieving significant results with limited resources (including time limits). The ability to prevent, to find suitable sustainable solutions and/or to resolve conflicts might be metaphorically compared with gardening process where there is a high interaction between many factors, some of them involving the gardener, the plant, and others relevant environmental factors (Aall, 2019).

The same is valuable for the NGO that needs a synergic interaction between basic tools, such as effective leadership, strategic and critical thinking, people actively involved within the implementation process expected to lead to a sustainable, inclusive, resilient development.

However, external factors might also act on the community level, factors that might help or, according to different circumstances block the impact of the local communities actions. On the other hand, we may also identify actions that support a resilient long-run development. The business environment views resilience as the ability to overcome challenges such as to preserve productivity increase (Aall, 2019). Regarding the resilient activities of NGOs, their leaders have to build resilience based on long-term planning, and facilitating a gradual change in community attitudes, perception and practices. Continuing the metaphoric comparative analyse mentioned before NGOs have to prepare well before implementing their resilience plans as the gardeners prepare the soil before starting planting. Although the concept of sustainability and resilience is widely used among crisis mitigation strategies, we consider that one problem that remains yet unsolved in many local communities is that people are not properly guided by leaders such as to better face the complex and interconnected crises. We consider especially important the active involvement of NGOs in the development and support of local communities. For example, a community is considered to be resilient when it is able to rebuild *as Phoenix bird from ashes* after a natural disaster. This reconstruction is based on empowering and encouraging partnership, relationships, co-creation and co-operation. Strengthening resilience might contribute to better build social cohesion, which is particularly important for NGO's to develop its relationship with the community. An important challenge for NGO involvement within local development is the need to strengthen regional partnerships, dialogue and interaction between different actors from the community (Pereiara & Nagao, 2021).

The active and constant involvement of NGOs in the sustainable and resilient development of local communities has multiple policy implications that arise from supporting and collaborating with local institutions. This involves the design of a coherent mix of proper and interconnected activities, by promoting inclusive policies and by implicitly recognising the role that legitimacy plays in promoting resilience and sustainable development. The researches reveal that, mostly in the case of certain areas of activities (such as health, education and disaster relief), there had been already developed a solid collaboration between international NGOs and governmental institutions (George et. all, 2015). In order to achieving the 17 SDGs we suggest to promote PPP (public - private partnership) by taking into account the specific characteristics of the local communities where these operate (UNDP, 2021).

NGOs often offer support in order to develop projects and sustainable development plans that are functional under the umbrella of a strategic governmental macro policy (Nikkhah & Bin Redzuan, 2017). A sustainable and resilient community development is also process-oriented. It requires a broader active community participation and it relies on the development of special dedicated networks in order to facilitate the complex process of sharing resources, knowledge and expertise. Our research, focus on the need to identify viable alternative sustainable solutions and to actively involve NGO leaders, mostly in the process of establishing new directions and taking sustainable actions. These kinds of actions might facilitate the dissemination of the voices and messages of NGO leaders such as to be better and more easily understood by the local community members. During mid-term and mostly long-term more people might become more confident in NGOs, and thus a good collaboration between institutions and thus contribute to achieve the expected goals and results. Anheier (2005) mentions that NGOs might benefit and enjoy a higher recognition level as a major social and economic force better manifesting on the local, regional and national levels. NGOs also have the ability to promote *learning by doing procedures*, fact that might empower and enable people from the local communities to be able to integrate quickly into the local environment and to better cope with change. This ability to learn by doing is specific to NGO leaders who are actively involved and who are able to prove to have the necessary know-how, knowledge, core-competences and skills such as to lead to effective and efficient results.

International research and studies reveal the fact that many NGOs might influence and support the development of local communities, acting as a "*connective tissue*" that facilitates the synergy of collective effort (Ghere, 2013).

Thus, it is advisable for NGO leaders to do their best to accumulate and develop the main leadership core-skills and competences such as to incorporate an orientation towards sustainable and resilient development according to the principle of the culture of excellence in the case of NGOs and to act in this line with this strategic orientation. Through their activities and programmes NGOs might highly contribute to the implementation and promoting sustainable local communities development (Nikkhah & Bin Redzuan, 2017).

Another important issue describing the active NGO involvement and support for sustainable local communities development is that of *Partnership Programmes*. The main benefits of partnership are considered to be: *Innovation, Information Sharing, Identity, Influence, and Impact* (Ghere, 2013). Partnership and Collaboration can often lead to *innovative solutions*; and, ideas generated together with local partners tend to better meet local needs and in addition, to gather together the core-competences and skills and resources of the local communities. Thus, all the actors actively involved within the partnership will learn together, from each other such as together to co-create, co-generate new solutions and ideas. The more the members of the groups co-work/collaborate, the more they assert their identity, legitimacy, and capabilities in their chosen role. The NGO might manifest and prove a better capability to integrate and to be an important part of the local communities such as the local community will more easily assimilate new ideas, new projects in terms of sustainable development.

Influence: when resources and efforts are better pooled, their influence is transformed into credibility and authority. Thus, people are more open to creating new relationships and to share information and know-how. When partners share information and knowledge transparently, their ability to influence decision-makers and stakeholders increases.

Impact: by working together effectively and usefully, the impact of the results of the changes will be the one expected. In the case of our study, the actions will be to support the sustainable development of the community. In a well-established community, problems and implicitly finding alternative solutions for them can be addressed jointly and resources made available from all partners.

We consider that all the five elements of the partnership can contribute considerably to strengthening the roles and capacities of partners and to creating networks of collaboration and sharing.

3. Methodology and main Results

The research methodology includes three main stages.

Step 1: Literature review based on identifying the most relevant and recent studies and research dedicated to our topic

Step 2. Research in Romanian NGOs research based on *a qualitative analysis* consisting of telephone interviews (done in the first part of 2023). During these telephone interviews, NGO leaders answered questions about the main solutions they would address in the context of sustainable development.

Step 3: Mapping of sustainable solutions found by NGOs in managing current interconnected crises.

The target group: In order to identify NGO leaders for the interview study, we chose from the NGOs with which we have already collaborated in other projects. Twenty interviews were carried out. Some of the most interesting answers are mentioned in this paper. After completion of the telephone interviews, the answers were gathered together. There were also some NGOs that did not mention specific activities in terms of sustainable development.

In order to find out the concrete efforts NGOs will have to make for identifying alternative sustainable solutions and actively engaging in rebuilding a sustainable socio-economic system, we conducted several telephone interviews with some NGO leaders. In the interviews, starting from the importance of sustainable development and a better future for all, we chose a free communication style based on dialogue and constructive discussions in which NGO leaders expressed their own opinions.

In Romania, the response and efforts of NGOs regarding sustainable, inclusive development and supporting local communities is very different, depending on the specifics of each NGO.

Thus, interviews were conducted with NGO leaders working in the fields of: *history, culture, theatre, education and teaching, special education, religious*. An important aspect of our research is the discussion with the leader who developed a *platform of support and collaboration* that brings together more than 100 NGOs (medical, social, educational, etc.), volunteers, companies and individual donors. The telephone interviews took place in the first part of 2023.

The first discussion took place with the leader of an NGO that has research and history promotion activities. In the field of *historical research*, the new challenges of sustainable development include Digital Innovation, changing the way of disseminating research work in history, opting for documentation sources transmitted in digital format. The nature of this activity does not lend itself to remote work, so all members of the association are recommended to choose alternative transport. The NGO's projects are educational projects, which require the organization of camps and summer schools. During these meetings, the focus was on protecting the environment, reducing waste, using recycled paper. Regarding *some future expected solutions*, the leader of this NGO is quite optimistic about the potential to find sustainable solutions to support the communities in which they operate.

Another important discussion was with the leader of a *beautiful organization* that helps a community steeped in history from a disadvantaged area of the country. This NGO develops as a space that revives, preserves, and passes on Romanian and universal manufacturing traditions. This NGO started with handmade paper, bookbinding, and manual printing. Since 2016 they have added seven more traditional crafts. The approach of the leader of the organization focus on a sustainable approach to pass on certain crafts dedicated mostly to future generations. They are old crafts, which helped the local community a lot to find a purpose, to assert its identity. It is a place where the members of the community, together, cook for the people with special needs, process paper, and do other manual things to help them assert themselves, to carry on the traditions. The leader of the NGO puts a lot of emphasis on the search for a space in which collaboration would better manifest as a brotherhood, where everyone may benefit from working and interacting not only during good times but also during less favourable times. The NGO's model to get involved in the development of the community is a specific model that is focusing and promoting *unconditional love*, and last but not least, a *human-oriented spirit*.

Another NGO specialized in the *environment protection*, mentions that the sustainable development and support of local communities have to look for broader objectives such as the protection of the environment, the eradication of poverty, the improvement of the quality of life, the development and maintenance of a viable, effective and efficient local economy. These objectives can be achieved through collaboration between institutions and promoting the consumption of ecological products, energy saving, food waste. The population have to better understand that well-being of future generations highly depends on all the members of the local community taking into account that *the future of the future starts today*. In this sense, the NGO carries out various lessons dedicated to highlight the importance of environmental protection and to determine children registered on different education levels to be aware about environmental issues. The focus was on non-formal and informal educational programmes such as summer schools.

The following discussion took place with the manager of an NGO active in *the field of arts, focusing on the theatre*. The leader of the NGO, a very cheerful lady, emphasized the importance of teaching young people to think more and to be more aware about sustainably.

The solutions that this leader presented to us are from the manufacture of props using recycled materials, the introduction of topics about the importance of protecting the environment in the texts of the theatre spectacles, such as to better promote the use of less polluting means of transport.

The leader of this NGO mentioned the importance of special educational programmes (with a focus on informal and non-formal types) that might determine young people to think more about sustainably.

Thus they have to manifest an attitude that implies respect for those around them, and respect for a coherent and sustainable system of values. The involvement of the NGO in the reconstruction of the sustainable socio-cultural systems implies precisely the desire to implement the idea of a strategic and sustainable way of thinking that is specific to a human-oriented leadership.

The longest phone conversation was with the leader who developed a *support and collaboration platform* that brings together over a hundred NGOs. The leader maintained the importance of cooperation and collaboration between NGOs and between NGOs and local authorities for promoting a sustainable and inclusive reconstruction. For example, environmental NGOs have the necessary expertise to provide technical expertise that might help a successful integration of special dedicated measures and actions to better face the climate change challenges according to *the 2030 Agenda*. To effectively respond to the challenge of climate change and the avalanche of effects of the complex crises, in Romania, NGOs need to collaborate with local actors in order to find together sustainable solutions, which involve the implementation of strategies and policies to protect the environment, by reducing pollution. It is important to actively involve young people who have more skills and core-competences according to the requirements of digital transformation

The results of *the online collaboration platform* are amazing; each NGO posts what it needed, and what it had in excess, creating strong and useful links for all. Collaboration, sharing and solidarity are the key factors considered to better support a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development. NGO leaders see collaboration as an effective approach for achieving a successful way of solving complex public problems and to fulfil their missions. The need for better results as a reason for collaboration has been clearly and repeatedly expressed. In this context, NGO leaders focus on the need to support a new approach, especially regarding digitalization and the complex issues and challenges local communities have to face. An important function of collaboration is represented by the need to better manage the effective and efficient use of resources (such as time, human and financial resources) but also intangible assets such as knowledge by applying specific tools of KM (Knowledge management).

Leaders of NGOs, expressed some alternative solutions to support a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development (Table 1). The main conclusion is that cooperation and collaboration are key factors of success in the reconstruction of sustainable socio-economic systems. Online environment, innovation, digitization, and all alternative solutions might be used.

Table 1: Suggested alternative solutions to support a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development

No.	Suggested alternative solutions
1	Innovation and digital transformations
2	Online transactions
3	Promoting a strategic and sustainable way of thinking
4	Identify viable alternative financial solutions (such as fundraising and crowd funding)
5	Provide documentation in digital format
6	Choose alternative viable transport methods
7	Reduce waste, mostly by using recycled materials
8	To think according to the sustainable, inclusive and resilient development model
9	Cooperation & collaboration based on promoting PPP (Public –Private-Partnership
10	Support an active involvement in order to promote and implement environmentally friendly practices
11	Stimulate constructive dialogue and cooperation
12	Promote a human-oriented leadership able to design viable, effective and efficient solutions

Source: designed by authors based on the target group NGO' leadership opinions

The idea of supporting local communities in terms of sustainable and resilient development is presented by most NGO leaders in a few key words such as: *Collaboration, Cooperation, Awareness Raising*. For NGOs' leaders, sustainable, inclusive and resilient development is considered to be a priority and thus they continuously adapt and find solutions to support this kind of development.

Human-oriented leaders have to adopt a more compassionate and people-centred approach to how they lead and how they act. We consider that a more effective leadership culture is positively correlated with a more successful organization. Focusing on the nature of the missions of the NGOs analysed, which are diverse the leaders are responsible for identifying more and better opportunities and framing them according to the local community-specific development goals.

We consider that, in order that an NGOs missions is better functioning, human-oriented leaders have to focus on better managing to know their local partners, by taking into account their values, professional aspirations, and the local community' development needs.

4. Conclusions

Effective NGO leaders are leaders who can find balance despite pressure that might manifest from different stakeholders. This balance does not have to compromise the identity, authenticity and values promoted by the NGO. Sustainable leadership development programs should focus on both the values and identity of leaders while helping leaders to understand and pro-actively respond to their rapidly changing and sometime quite turbulent external environment.

We consider that there is a high need to build the capacity of NGOs to develop sustainably and to support the communities in which they operate. The human-oriented leadership of NGOs have to properly examine what are the triggers of the big challenges, looking next to find the appropriate sustainable solutions, and last but not least, starting from the mission of the NGO itself, as a key factor in supporting the sustainable, inclusive and resilient development.

NGOs' respondents/leaders included into our target group consider collaborative and sharing relationships to be particularly important.

Current challenges and complex crisis, such as pandemic, geopolitical events have a major impact on the decisions made by NGO leaders. The new development opportunities (digitalization, communication) invite leaders to find viable, effective and efficient solutions that respect the principles of a sustainable, inclusive and resilient development.

The implementations of certain sustainable projects, which support the development of communities, are considered as priorities among the human-oriented leaders. The research reveals the fact that there are no unique solutions in terms of supporting local communities. All aspects relate to the need of collaboration and establishing partnerships with local actors. There are challenges in terms of supporting local communities.

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