

## **Social Construction of Organization. A New model in Organizational Development**

**Alexandra DAMASCHIN<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, UAIC University of Iasi, [alexandra.galbin@gmail.com](mailto:alexandra.galbin@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The paper brings into discussion the social construction of organization and proposes a new model in organizational development. The paper begins with a synthesis on the paradigm of social constructionism, emphasizing its utility in organizational studies. In times of uncertainty and rapid changes, a lot of organizations lose their missions and meanings, or have the capacity to reinvent and to thrive. The question is what makes the difference? In this line, the paper proposes a theoretical model, gathering the social constructionism, relational constructionism, and appreciative inquiry. Using the grounded theory strategy, in-depth interviews and focus groups were developed with employees and leaders from nongovernmental organizations, Iasi, and Bacau Counties. Data are analyzed through NVivo program and present multiple perspectives regarding their activity in social field. The theoretical model may be an inspiration for organizations that are interested in achieving new ideas, solutions, and results.

**Keywords:** *social constructionism; relational constructionism; appreciative inquiry; development; uncertainty;*

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## **Introduction**

In the last few years, the world is going through major transformations, transformations that weren't predictable in an area full of technology and information. Stability, uncertainty, and resilience had becoming widely discussed terms. The Covid-19 pandemic forced the organizations to rethink their activity, to face uncertainty, and to be able to survive. The conflict from Ukraine destabilizes security and human rights are severely violented. These events transform economy all over the world, and as Cooperrider and Fry (2020) sustain, in turbulent times very good practices can emerge, the best in system can flourish. The question is how can we create sustainable organizations to serve people and to on large scale to move toward a more inclusive and equitable system? In this line, the paper is designed as an invitation to organizations to reflect on their own relational practices, promoting collaboration, relationships, and an appreciative language.

The paper aims to open new areas of interpretation and meanings and it is addressed to organizations interested in developing new practices. It explores how members of organizations construct their social realities, addressing the next questions: What meaning do the members of organizations attribute to the activity they carry out? How language influences the organizational activity? How can new practices be developed in the organizational context? To this qualitative research 31 participants took part, participants that activate in nongovernmental organizations from Iasi and Bacau Municipalities. Data are collected in May-September 2016, conducting nine in-depth interviews and three focus groups with employees, and five in depth interviews with leaders. The interpretation of data is represented by NVivo diagrams, program that allowed to explore the relation between the emergent categories. The emerging categories from participants' perspectives suggest a holistic approach of organizations to develop new practices, proposing a theoretical model to explore the organization from three perspectives: social constructionism (Gergen, 2009; 2015), relational constructionism (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2004), and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

## **What is social constructionism?**

The social constructionism believes that the reality can't be known in itself and affirms the existence of multiple realities built as a result of the

interactions between individuals (Gergen, 2015). In the last decades, the social constructionism was adopted in different area of knowledge in the international literature, including the organizational context (Gergen, 1994; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Hosking & McNamee, 2006). For example, Gergen (2009) refers to Karl Weick's quote which suggests that the process of generating realities is as essential for organizations as well-being is for families (Gergen, 2009). We cannot speak about organization "without people working together and without them establishing what they are doing and especially why they are doing " (Gergen, 2009, p. 144). We are participating in many types of organization, starting with family, the workplace, schools, and the question is what types of groups are those (Gergen, 2015)? For constructionists, the organization is connected through the shared meanings. The members of the organization create together the meaning of the activity, who is responsible, the importance of the activities, the process being fluid and dynamic. Through negotiation, the participants can change the vision and the purpose, and through the attention on social processes, organizations can continue to develop according to social dynamics (Gergen, 2015). If organizations are created through co-action, what is the role of the leader, and how decisions are taken at organizational level? The social constructionism sustains that organization is a dynamic process, social constructed and reconstructed, which develops from multiple realities (Gergen, 2009) and through the interpretations given to them (Gergen, 2015; Burr, 2015). The people build their own reality while interacting with other members from organization in a cultural, social, and historically context (Hosking & McNamee, 2006). The invitation to this perspective is to understand how the stereotypes of some organizational aspects are socially constructed (Hosking, 2011), thus opening space to new ways of communication, dialogue, and perspectives. The vision of social construction believes that the organizations aren't objective entities, but a socially constructed phenomenon. To understand the organizations, we need to understand the meanings owned by the members of organizations, and the process through these meanings lead to joint actions (Gray et al., 1985).

### **Social constructionism in organizational studies**

Organizational life is dynamic, and it is submitted to many challenges. The limited resources, the rapid changes, the uncertainty can influence the way organization works. People can be fired, organizations are at risk of closing their activity, and the salary doesn't always reflect the work

done, new requests quickly appear (Gergen, 2015). Traditional, these challenges were treated like problems that need to be solve. In this context, the social constructionism agrees that these situations are problems if we call them problems, hence any situation can be defined as being problematic or not (Gergen, 2009). In these times of rapid changes, the organizations need innovative practices to survive (Marshak & Grant, 2008). The social constructionism may be a valuable approach because it is focused on concepts as dialogue, imagination, creation that can be used by leaders, consultants, employers as essential resources for organizational development (Gergen, et al., 2004). Dialogue from social constructionism refers to an interactive process that take place though conversations, and the attention is on the multiple realities that can be shared (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). Dialogue as a resource creates spaces for conversations which allow the participants to express their opinions. It isn't oriented only to find the best solutions, but the dialogue center the attention on how people can feel connected and available to be connected. Through dialogue people can share different perspectives to generate new ways of acting (Gergen, et al., 2001). The dialogues in organizations should be seen in this line, as a process full of imagination that have the power to transforms ways of thinking, to construct new meanings, new practices and could generate the feeling of belonging and responsibility between all the participants involved (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). The collective imagination can have multiple resources that can be used (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Along with dialogue, imagination, the creation becomes a fundamental part of the organization (Ramaswamy, 2009), that underlines the fact that people are in a continuous process of relating (Gergen, 2009). To enhance the co-creation in practice, open questions are requested to create differences, to inspire and to generate new possibilities to understand, new meanings. These resources mentioned play an important role in the organizational development, deconstructing old intervention models, create new meanings and open new possibilities to transform the organization.

An example where all these resources can bring together is appreciative inquiry which addresses the organizations as human constructions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, et al., 2008). Appreciative inquiry concentrates on what goes well within the organizations and may be an alternative intervention which aims how people construct their reality, how they act, communicate, and react, without empathizing the problems (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). Based on social constructionism assumptions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), appreciative inquiry is frequently used for organizational development (Burke, 2011; Cooperrider & Whitney,

2001). The appreciative vision is proactive, and it is the results of a collective construction based on negotiation and consensus (Powley, et al, 2004). Divided in four phases (*Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny*), the appreciative inquiry emphasizes the fact that the things organization focuses on become realities. Thus, the appreciative inquiry is becoming a relational process, embracing the fact that there are multiple ways to achieve a purpose, to understand the fact that the world is about relationships and connections, and the language used has a significant impact, since the language is a form an action, therefore creates realities (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The assumptions of the appreciative inquiry are closely related to the social constructionism, and each process evolves, or it changes depending on how members of the organization direct their attention. In this way, appreciative inquiry and the assumptions of social constructionism can facilitate the critical processes, where being critical means to be sensitive to the multiple realities. The process of appreciative inquiry is collaborative, providing the opportunity for many employees to participate and to construct the organization within they are activating. Here it is very important to listen all the voices, and the differences, the conflicts to be understood as a full potential that can lead to a better understating of the organization (Gergen, 2013).

### **Research methodology**

Social constructionism can be methodological used, starting from the importance of the epistemic subject in the social construction of the truth, truth that has to do with a fact or with an experience accepted as it is (Sandu, 2012). Holstein & Gubrium (2008) consider that social constructionism treats the best what people construct and how this social process takes place. In this line, the paper purpose is to explore how members from nongovernmental context construct their realities. The paper focuses on the process, being interested by relationships, experiences, influences, reactions, and attitudes in organizational context. Thus, the research aims to answer to the following questions: What meaning do the members of organizations attribute to the activity they carry out? How language influences the organizational activity? How new practices can be developed in the organizational context? To answer to the research questions, the paper used the grounded theory strategy, a naturalistic field strategy that seeks to build inductive theories based on participants' lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Collecting data.** A number of 31 subjects participated to this research, 22 female gender, 9 masculine gender, with an age between 24 and 49 years, having university degree in humanities and social sciences. The subjects activate in nongovernmental organizations from Iasi and Bacau Municipalities, Romania, organizations that are implementing interventions programs in social field. In selecting the participants, the following criteria were taken into consideration: employee or leader of nongovernmental organization, the availability, and the desire of participants to take part, the proximity of the researcher to organizations. For selecting the participants, 36 nongovernmental organizations were invited to participate, and only 12 organizations accepted to participate. The interviews and the focus groups took place during 2016, in neutral places and in organizational context. There were recorded nine in-depth interviews with employees and five in-depth interviews with leaders. Also, three focus groups were moderated, with five – seven participants, with a length between 60 and 90 minutes. The participants actives in 12 nongovernmental organizations which provide social services and interventions program in the northeast of Romania, nine of them active in Iasi Municipality and three of them in Bacau Municipality. As main objectives, the organizations have the mission to protect children's rights, provide integrated services, social, medical, and educational services, they are focused on community development, social economy, helping beneficiaries (children with disabilities, children with parents working abroad, children at risk of family abandonment, poor families, and elders) to live a better life. The organizations that took part in this research have their own culture, principles, values, and vision. There are small organization, with five number of employees, but also medium organizations with employees until twenty-five. Although the main goal is to help people, the practices and how activities are implemented vary a lot. The organizations have different directions, the results reflecting how the members of organizations relate about the challenges met, and the things they focus on become their realities.

**Processing and analyzing data through NVivo.** In processing and analyzing data, a constructionist approach of grounded theory strategy was applied. The constructionist approach of grounded theory means more than observing how participants see their situations, it acknowledges the fact that the resulting theory is an interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). The theory promotes the reflexivity about the interpretations of the researcher, as well of the research participants. Realities are multiples in constructionist approach and thus multiple perspectives exist. The reflexivity and the relativity encourage the researchers to analyze how participants construct

their world (Charmaz, 2006). Considering these aspects, in processing and analyzing data the following steps were used: initial coding, focused coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, saturation and sorting. The software NVivo 11 Pro allowed to compare data, to group and short the codes. Also, the NVivo software allowed the extraction of the most relevant diagrams to achieve the purpose of the research. The categories and the subcategories are summarized below.

**Table 1.** Categories and subcategories

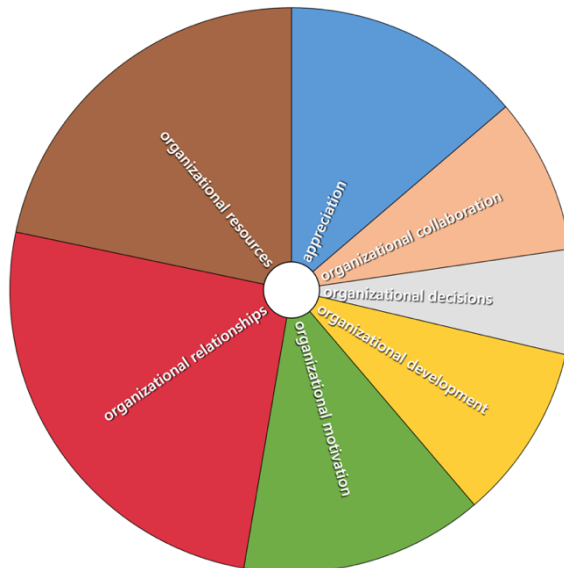
Organizational relationships	Organizational resources	Appreciation	Organizational motivation	Organizational development	Organizational collaboration	Organizational decisions
Values and organizational missions	Stagnation	Traditional leader	Flexibility and diversity of activities	Organizational team	Relationships with local authorities	Participation of all to decisions
Organizational communication	Attitude towards change	Relational leader	Organizational climate	Contexts of interactions	Lack of connection between key actors	Contradictions
Organizational meetings	Strategies to attract new resources	Language	Feedback	Creativity and imagination	Community gratitude	Listening
		Multiple perspectives	Organizational opportunities	New possibilities to act		Multiple perspectives

**Organization as a social construct of realities. A relational appreciative approach**

Social constructionism sustains that organization is a dynamic process, social constructed and reconstructed which develops from multiple realities and from the interpretations attributed to them (Gergen, 2015; Burr, 2015). To understand organizations, first at all we need to understand the meanings and the process through these meanings lead to common actions (Gray et al., 1985). Understanding the different meanings lead to appreciating the multiple realities (McNamee & Moscheta, 2015; Cooperrider & Fry, 2020). It is emphasized the relational process, and not the independent reality. This relational approach underlines the relationships between leaders and employees, and it emphasized the leader as a relational manager. Thus, the invitation of this paper is to understand the process of relationships, the construction of reality, opening thus space to new ways of communication, dialogue, and perspectives. Regarding the emerging

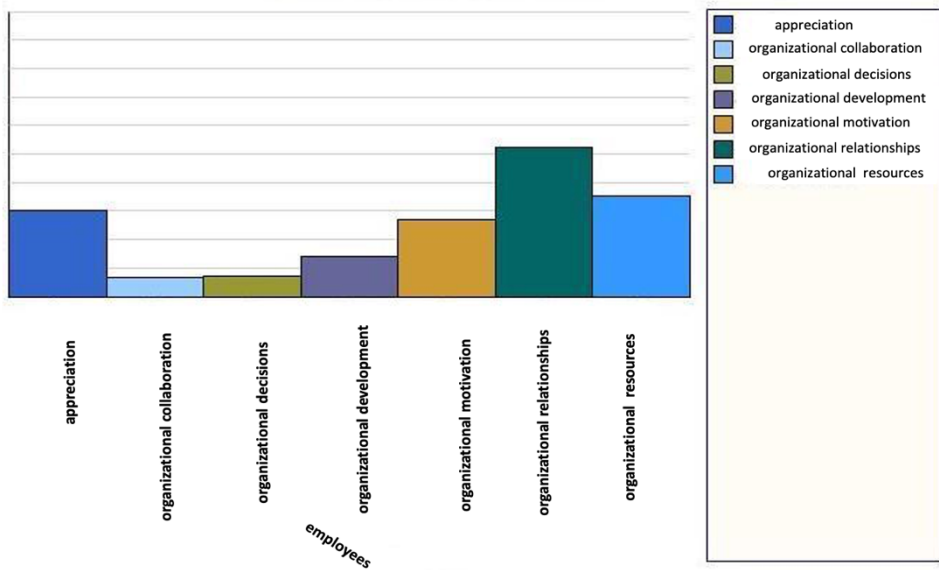
categories through data processing and analysis, we observe that an important role is representing by the relationships within organizational context, the organizational resources, the motivation to work and the appreciation. These categories are followed by organizational development, organizational collaboration, and organizational decisions. The categories are exemplified in the image below which aims to highlight the focus of the research participants.

**Figure 1.** Research categories (NVivo analysis).



There are significant differences between the perspectives of the employees and the perspectives of the leaders. The employees focus more on the relationships unfolding in organizational context, on the appreciation of their activity and on the financial resources of the organization. The diagram below represents what is important for the employees and what gives meaning to their activity.

**Figure 2.** Matrix Coding Query – The perspectives of employees (NVivo)

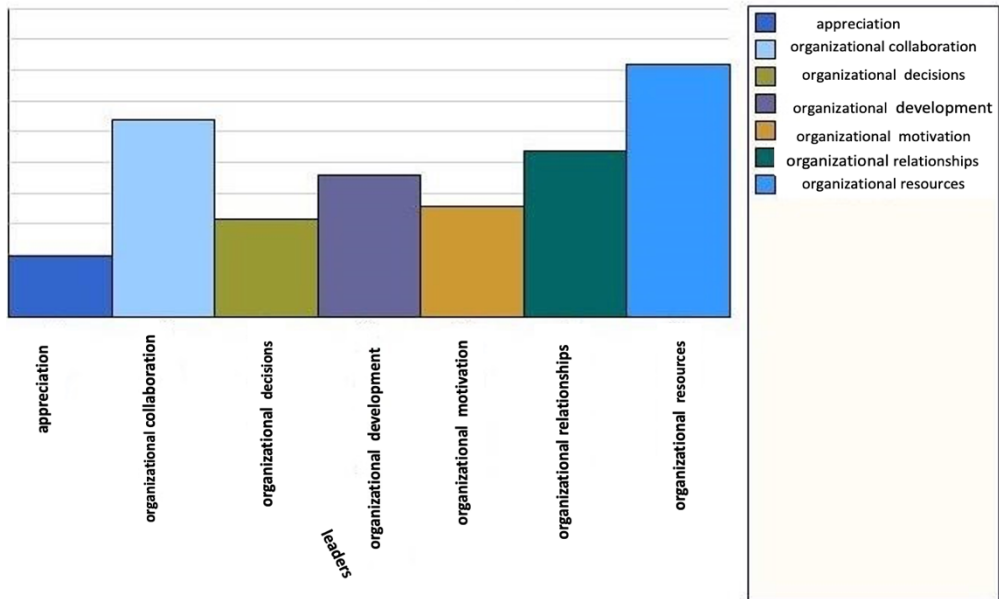


The employees direct their attention on interpersonal interactions, and the appreciation of their leader and colleagues have a major role in terms on how they refer to the organization they belong to. The employees consider the fact that a good communication help the relationships to grow (*“it’s a good communication between us, we are establishing together the objectives, the activities don’t work without interactions between us, without connection. We are trying to understand each other and to support each other”*, S6, grant manager, 26 years, female, Iasi). Also, the appreciation plays an important role. Through appreciation the members of organization can have healthy relationships, they feel that their activities have a meaning. The participants relate that appreciation is a way of growing as a professional (*“I appreciate my colleagues, because they are working, they are responsible, your work defines you, and without appreciating the others work, we can’t evolve as a professional, we remain superficial with your own conceptions, through appreciation you can also embrace the change, which is inevitable these days”*, S8, social worker, 37 years, male, Iasi). In organizational context, the linguistic abilities are abilities who can own the good performance of activities. In this line, the persuasive dimension of the language can be seen as a key ability of the leader (Musson & Cohen, 1999). The language used in the organization, acquires an important value in organization directing the activity of

members. The appreciative language of the leader has the ability to motivate people to get involve in new activities, leaving the comfort zone (*"The way my leader relates to me makes me feel important, she gives me courage to try new things, she always knows how to choose appropriate words, to get people out of comfort zone and to motivate them, she uses words as gratitude, thanks..."*, S2, social worker, 25 years, female, Iasi). Also, the participants relate that the impact on community life gives meanings to their activity and maintain the motivation, especially in difficult situations (*"The impact on beneficiaries' life gives us a meaning, a purpose, and motivate us to move forward especially when we have hard times..."* S1, social worker, 28 years, female, Iasi).

Working in nongovernmental organization is a beautiful experience for the most of employees, but also a concern because there is no secure source of income. The employees related that the financial resources could represent a motivation to work, but also a stressor factor, due the fact all the projects have a short time (*"our organization is like our society, to resist you have to reinvent the work all the time, you have to search for resources, to convince sponsors that people need real help and your intervention can make a difference. But for all of these you need resource"*, Focus group 1, Iasi). This constantly concern can also demotivate some people, and from their perspective it can limit a long-term thinking (*"We haven't nothing certain, in each year we start over again, we make plans, we develop strategies for fundraising. This fact limits us to think on long term...for most of us is a factor that sometimes demotivate us" ...Focus group 2, Bacau*). Also, the leaders are interested in financial resources but even more than employees. The main concern for leaders is how to ensure the financial resources for sustainable activities. Some clarity on this aspect would make room to invest energy, to open space for creativity (*"We as an organization are dependent, we pay rent, we don't have our own place. Things are different when you invest in a place that belongs to the organization, and I am not referring to equipment, furniture, but to creativity and energy. The organization is quite fragile, often we invested our own resources, some of them we recovered, but this way isn't sustainable"*, S14, leader, 34 years, female, Iasi). The financial vulnerability also affects the team of the organization. There is a staff flow, and the short time spend together doesn't allowed the members of organizations know each other better, to concretize certain ideas (*"we don't succeed to known each other better, we have a dynamic team due the financial issues, a constantly team leads to a long-term action"*, S14, leader, 34 years, female, Iasi). The diagrams below summarize the realities that leaders focus on.

**Figure 3.** *Matrix Coding Query – The perspectives of leaders (NVivo)*

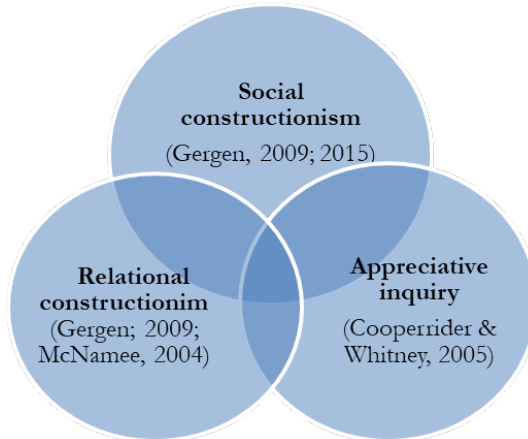


The perspectives of the leaders direct their attention on the organizational collaboration, on constructing relationships with other organizations, institutions, relationships that significantly influence the entire organization. The perspectives of leaders affirm that to develop social services in community request first at all to collaborate with local authorities, process that isn't so easy to manage (*"the relationships with local authorities consume a lot of time, we aren't supported by public funds, although we think we have good results in order to influence the public agenda, to bring in front the importance of creating social services for community. In this area, the things are quite opaque, there isn't an institutional dialogue, and from my perspective this isn't a good framework to build a healthy society, S12, leader, 38 years, male, Bacau*). The leaders criticize the lack of reaction of some public institutions, and they consider that is essential to create dialogues between the social actors, to find solutions and to implement project that meet the needs of the communities (*"Is like a social autism, I am telling what I feel and what I believes, and the social actors bear what they are believing and feeling. I mean we are characterized by a social autism, with the most serious consequences for our community, each person in his own world, with his own truths, and with the impossibility of connecting to the truths of others. It a totally lack of connection between the social actors, S11, leader, female, Bacau*). The prejudices and

the lack of knowledge negatively influence the community to evolve. The leaders underline the need for dialogue, for interactions context where each member of community can express his own opinion. The focus of the leaders is more on collaboration with external actors, which sometimes give the feeling for employees that their opinions doesn't count too much (*"when you coordinate entire activity, you always have right, you know what the best for organization is. Even our opinions are appreciated, always the opinion of manager counts more"*, S9, social worker, 45 years, male, Iasi). Putting together the perspectives of employees and leaders can lead to a better connection. To create connections at each level, the focus should be on collaboration processes, on dialogue, and on horizontal decisions.

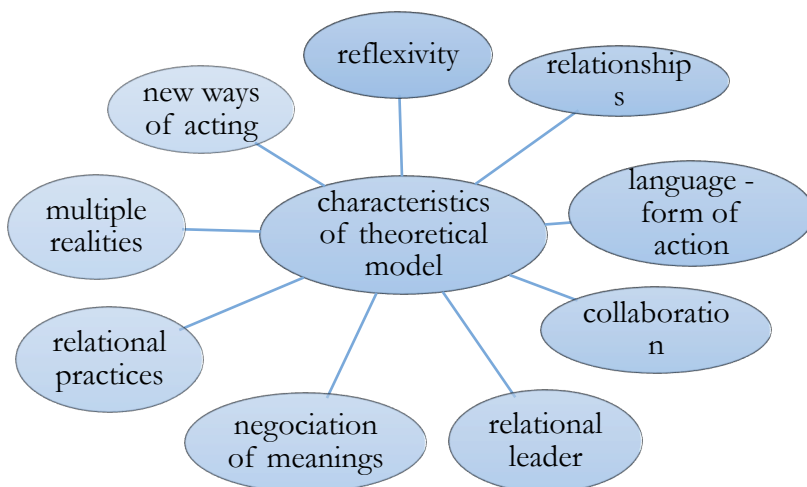
As we observed, the organizational life is full of challenges, but also opportunities. It requests creative solutions and dynamic relationships. Constructing dynamic relationships send us to the fact that organizational members are aware of their relationship potential. This observation expands the awareness that relationships are dynamic. The appreciative approach underlines that through relationships with positive intentions effective organization can be created (Stavros & Torres, 2005). Any action taken by one member of organization will bring changes on the other members of organization and it will influence the organization as a whole (Stavros & Torres 2005). The appreciative approach in this context centers on possibilities, inspires creativity and implies dialogues in identifying new solutions. Relating in an appreciative way offers to the participants resources to be connected with each other (Hosking & McNamee, 2006). Thus, the results of the research suggest a holistic approach of the organization for efficient practices and propose a theoretical model which explores the social construction of organization from three perspectives: social constructionism (Gergen, 2009; 2015), relational constructionism (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2004) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The emerging model from the data collection and analysis emphasizes the fact that the organization is the results of the interpretation of multiple realities, being a social construct. The model integrates these approaches and promotes collaboration to develop organizational activities, generating new ideas and to create interaction contexts.

**Figure 4.** Organization as a social construct of realities.  
A relational – appreciative approach



The relational – appreciative approach of the organization refers to the social construction (the construction of organizational realities through a continuous negotiation and interpretation), to the relational leadership (relating and interpersonal influences) and to the appreciative inquiry (the focus on the positive aspect of the organization). The common characteristics are summarized in the figure below:

**Figure 5.** Characteristics of theoretical model. Organization as a social construct



The paper opens new meanings and different interpretations in organizational context, and it is an invitation for nongovernmental organizations to reflect on their own relational practices. The model may be an inspirational source for organizations to project new practices, to generate ideas and solutions that can contribute to the organizational development.

### **Conclusions and further directions**

The paper followed to explore the activity meanings of the members of organization, how language influence the organizational activity, and how new practices can be developed to help organization to thrive. The activity developed within organizational context is very bounded to the source of the motivation and how relationships are constructed. The motivation of the employees is related to relationship constructed with the members of the organization, to their appreciation and leader's appreciation, and to the opportunity to change the community life. The leaders and the employees fell the need to create interaction contexts at all levels, and they sustain that only through interaction and relationship the situations can be done, new ideas may emerge. On the other hand, the leaders underline the necessity to develop collaborations, to have a constantly team, while the employees are focused more on relationships, they feel the need to connect with the other colleagues, to be encouraged and to develop dynamic activities. Thus, the meaning of the activity is permanently in relation with, being a result of the interpretation given to the realities that occurs. In the organizational context, it is very important to understand the construction of sensemaking, what gives sense and motivate people. Another important aspect is how language influences the organizational activity. In this process, language has an essential role, and it appears as a form of acting and not as representation. The employees underlying the leader's language that has a significant impact on their activities. They are feeling appreciated when the leader is using positive words as gratitude, respect, and encouragement. The perspectives of the leaders send more to the dialogue with the institutions, and they criticize the lack of interactions with them. Both leaders and members of organizations are aware about the importance of dialogue, and they suggest the need for specific contexts of interaction. Defining the meanings and understand the role of the language in constructing the realities can open possibilities to discover new practices which can contribute to organizational development. The financial vulnerability appears as a real challenge

mentioned by the participants. The concern is how to develop new practices to grow and to find solutions for difficult situations. As social constructionism invites to a “certain humility about one’s assumptions and ways of life, fosters curiosity about other’s perspective and values, and opens ways to replacing the contentious battles over who is right with mutual probing for possibilities” (Gergen, 2015, p. 27). The collaboration, relational appreciation and creativity are important weapons and have the power to reinvent the organization. Based on these assumptions, the paper proposes a relational appreciative approach of organization that may have a potential for creating sustainable organizations. Also, the paper has some limits. Including the perspectives of the beneficiaries and the perspectives of local authorities may be a plus for thinking new ways for organizational development.

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