Sport Activities in Romania – A Tool for Social Innovation

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Abstract: Social innovation has been depicted as a distinct domain of practical experience and scientific research since the early 20th century. In the beginning, this topic was associated with social and cultural anthropology but in recent years it was associated with the Western sociology. European statistics reveal that Romania has a modest position with regard to social innovation, whose main directions are social inclusion, health and education. To surpass this situation, physical activities could play an important role. This paper presents a synthesis of the current research studies that indicate how sport innovation could be a valuable tool in addressing modern society challenges such as social exclusion or health disparities. Nowadays sport is acknowledged as an educational medium, able to contribute to solving different social issues. In this respect policies and strategies aim to promote physical activities as a tool for social innovation: in the educational process (methods and means), in the educational activities (types of lessons/activities, competitions), in services (adapted or/and unified), or products (adapted equipment for people with motor impairments). However, in Romania, there are less represented aspects of social innovation (ICT in sport, sport as a leisure time activity). This analysis shows that social innovation in sport activities has a positive trend within the general social innovation phenomenon in Romania. The paper also presents the main categories of social innovators (individuals or organizations) in the field of sports, and a series of suggestions about means to develop social initiatives in this area.

Keywords: *physical activities; social innovation; education.*

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Introduction

Social innovation is defined by certain authors (Mulgan, 2009; Tidd & Bessant, 2017: 3 - 46) as a concept associated with implementing new approaches and ideas in view to address social challenges such as the aging population, economic and financial crisis, the quality of education or stimulate economically and socially underdeveloped regions or countries.

During the last decades, the “innovation” concept gained momentum in social area. Therefore, the social innovation concept keeps the general idea of situation improvement by a newly structural distribution of the available resources. “If in other domains, the products obtained by innovation are easier to quantify, in the case of social innovation the outcomes are more diffuse, contributing to the social policy scope, by increasing the life quality or social issue settlement” (Stănescu, 2009). By means of creativity one can find and apply various solutions for enhancing the individual and social wellbeing. Thus, the outcome of these new ideas is creating social value, along with the corresponding processes that generated them.

Recent literature refers to three generating mechanisms, which are shaping nowadays social innovation: the exchange of ideas and values, shifts in roles and relationships, integration of private capital with public and philanthropic support (Laaksonen, 2012). Studies argument on social innovation, arising from the aim to meet the requirements of the society and to contribute to the achievement of social goals.

Therefore, this type of innovation helps addressing local, national and global issues such as inequality, poverty, climate change, racism, unemployment, suicide, mass migration, integration, loneliness, or malnutrition by a joint effort on micro- and macro-social scale (Bourbonniere & Mann, 2018).

Social innovation is strongly linked to social development and more concrete, to the implementation of some new models, relationships, ideas, and solutions able to timely meet the social needs. In this context, a structured social development design encompasses some mandatory stages: identification and diagnosis of social issues, determination of priorities and adherence to the development goals, identification of alternative solutions and selection of the strategy.

According to Zamfir (2009), the social innovation components include the unsolved issue, the new solution, the assimilation of such a solution in the collective practice and the change triggered by the innovation

assimilation. Reviewing those stages, in terms of social innovation, we can state that social innovation occurs mainly during the stage of identification of alternative solutions and selection of strategy.

On a broad scale, social innovation is favoured by a background opened to novelty, knowledge exchange, ongoing communication and consultation across relevant stakeholders in the process of improving the social actions.

In a more business-oriented approach, Tidd & Bessant (2017) summarized the main changes that occur in a large social context as drivers for innovation, as follows: rapid knowledge development, market expansion and virtualization, the boost of technological infrastructure and the users' number. Also, the mentioned authors identify four dimensions of innovation space:

- Product innovation – optimizing products and services offered by different organizations;
- Process innovation – optimizing the way products and services become available;
- Position innovation - changing the social background for introducing innovative products and services;
- Paradigm innovation - changing the mental models that underpin the organizations.

Although public services like healthcare, education and social security may not generate profit, they definitely influence the quality of life for a whole range of population (Tidd & Bessant, 2017). The same kind of influence is generated by physical education and sports, as a complex bio-psycho-social process.

Reshaping physical education and sport area from a traditional educational and competitive approach, towards an innovative and entrepreneurial vision, represents a new and challenging task for specialists in quest of ways to increase its social and economic impact.

Different strategies for sport innovation entirely rethink the way we play, view and manage sport phenomenon. Although sport innovation is crucial for the improvement of athletic performance, new paradigms extend its role, assuming meaningful social outcomes and generating added values on a much larger scale than the sports arenas.

By analyzing current studies, it is obvious that sport innovation develops into a precious tool to tackle the challenges in contemporary society, including social exclusion. Therefore, in the area of special populations, “innovation and strategic management needs specific attention within the sport science.” (Tjønndal, 2016).

Given its magnitude, sport could be shaped as a useful social policy tool aimed to solve different types of social challenges (Ratten, 2011), such as improving health, lowering criminality, generating economic growth and strengthening educational measures. Thus, sport proves to be an effective way to connect communities and build active citizens, by using private or public entities, at national and international levels (Grix, 2010; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011).

The novelty of this study lies in its addressing for the first time, in Romania, the topic of sport social innovation, in an international conceptual framework bringing national features and needs into discussion in order to bridge the knowledge gaps in this area.

Paper aim

This paper aims to present the main trends of Romanian social innovation in the area of sports activities and also to highlight the vision of the main actors in this area. In the same time, the paper emphasizes some trends in European innovative sports actions, and creates perspectives for developing this trend in the main areas of interest.

Social Innovation in Romania

Implementing the Lisbon Strategy, comprising the European Union goal of becoming the most competitive economy until 2010, highlighted and boosted the innovation-related topics.

On March, 28, 2008, the European Commission adopted the statement draft, declaring the year 2009 as the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. This was a project mainly aiming to promote creative and innovating initiatives in sectors such as education and culture, and also in other social domains like research, media, social entrepreneurship, and rural development.

Statistics performed during 2008-2013 regarding the capacity of the European countries to innovate show important differences among them and evidence proves that also at present the ranking of this capability has not changed.

In this context, during 2004-2008, Romania tried to catch up in terms of innovation, yet maintaining its "modest innovator" status. Furthermore, the gap between Romania and the EU average innovation indices enhanced, because of the innovation performance that lowered from almost 50% of the EU average in 2009, to 43% in 2013.

Trying to synthesize the data related to this area, some researches map more than 900 Romanian social innovators and their supporters, indicating that the major interest of the civic society is triggered by the education and social inclusion domains. In fact, in a country with important disparities and non-performing educational system, wherein almost 40% of the Romanian people are exposed to poverty and social non-inclusion risks, it is critical to identify some systemic solutions for these issues at least in those two domains mentioned above (Matei, Săvulescu & Antonovici, 2015).

Feeling this gap requires political will to engage in a common effort in order to surpass this delay. Given the EU statement according to which innovation increases competitiveness, Romania's goal for 2020 is to spend 2% of GDP on R&D (Dachin & Postoiu, 2015).

Considering the poor position of Romania in the European ranking of the innovation production, assimilation and dissemination levels, as measured by the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS), approaching this area based on the existing expertise within the academic environments gets a major importance. There is clear evidence that Romanian social innovation faces significant cultural and supportive competitiveness gaps, as well as poor regulatory, organizing and political mechanisms in respect thereof (Zamfir, 2006).

Taking into consideration the increase of social innovation interest, Zamfir (2009) stated that a crystallization of a paradigm change started to occur, namely the transfer from the "natural" and "organic" social development, to the "forecast social development".

In Romania, social issues represented a significant component of innovation: the social and economic conditions of the Roma population, the poverty, the abandoned/neglected children, the social structure and building the middle class.

Other topics of interest for the social innovation domain in Romania can be identified:

- governance system of the public sector, support ecologic education in corporations; social entrepreneurship and social innovation in local communities (Matei & Drumasu, 2014);
- the public system flexibility; its entities should be more open, collaborative and adaptable in the relationship with the citizens and businesses, as the model of innovation is based on certain factors acting at this level represented by the potential to manage innovation, create knowledge, and integrate different aspects in a relational system (Matei, Săvulescu & Antonovici, 2015);

- identifying the needs of the Romanians, understanding the decent standard living factors, deprivation, social inclusion and participation. Survey studies regarding the material needs of the Romanian population identified two categories of needs: primary ones (as food, shelter, clothing, etc.) and secondary ones (as education, healthcare, etc.) (Dumitru & Stănescu, 2014);
- the micro-enterprises sustaining innovation and job creation; measures have been implemented in order to avoid economic collapse and promote IT system modernization (Popescu, 2014).

Social Innovation in Romanian Sport

Nowadays sport is acknowledged as an educational medium able to contribute to solving some of the social issues encountered in different settings (Stănescu, 2014; Bota, Urzeala, 2018; Bota, Stoica, 2018). The benefits of sport as a social inclusion means, as a way to understand, respect and tolerate the other, as a catalyst for local communities' cohesion, integration of the refugees, are to be discussed in this work.

Below, we present some of the main best practices in sports area, connected to social innovation.

- "Terre des hommes Romania" Organization is a remarkable contributor to the development of social and economic **integration of the migrants**, emphasizing a good practice model project „Move together – Sport as social integration and inclusion tool for refugees”. The main directions of its programs are: “strengthening the child protection system to prevent abuse and exploitation; supporting children in situations of trafficking and migration; inclusion of Roma communities and other minorities”.

- The “International Roma Integration through Sport (IRIS)” project implemented in Suceava by the “Sportul pentru Toți” Suceava County Association focuses on Roma population and especially **Roma children integration through sport**, the target-groups being Roma and non-Roma children, fighting against social stereotypes, racial attitudes included.

- Promoting mini-football as a social development, integration and equal opportunities tool was the aim of a partnership between the Romanian Mini-football Federation and the Street Football Association, the target group projected being the **National homeless mini-football team**, who won the first European title in the 2019 Championships.

- The Sport Therapy Center for **Disabled Persons**, launched in 2013 by Climb Again Association, is an example of civic involvement and manner in which a social business can change communities. Climb Again

Association provides free therapy sessions comprising climbing, physical therapy and psychological counseling for hearing/neuromotor/visually-impaired and autistic youngsters.

- Motivation Romania provides programs focusing on **social, educational and occupational integration of wheelchair users**. The services cover a wide range of needs of the disabled adults and children, from equipment adapted to different types of motor disabilities, to training for an independent life, physical rehabilitation, all offered by interdisciplinary teams of specialists. This foundation also provides accessibility support programs, employment services, leisure sport activities and cultural events.

- Developing specific sport-based methodologies and strategies to increase **social inclusion and fight exclusion for young people at risk (because of their disability or economic status)** represents the main goal of the project *Strategies for the Future, Strategies for the Youth*, carried out by UNEFS Bucharest, with the financial support of EEA Grants, managed by the Romanian Social Development Fund.

- **Adapted sport – unified sport** aims to promote physical exercises in the form of inclusion models so that individuals with and without abilities can participate in different sports events. Socio-historical and sociological research on these practices, argument that gaining awareness and visibility for the disabled people were also achieved through “disability sport”, due to divisioning system of athletes classification and the infusion of technology which supports the impaired athlete’s body. In sport field, “athletes with impairments” are seen as people with “abilities” and not as disabled subjects (Marcellini, 2018).

Two examples of inclusive sport activities within local or international partnerships - *Urban Dance Camp* (financed by the Bucharest City Hall, implemented by the Association for Culture and Tango, Romania) and *The Unified Dance - as an Inclusive Strategy for Young People with limited Abilities - UNIDANS* (an Erasmus Plus Project, implemented by the School of Coaches “Ioan Kunst Ghermănescu” Association) provide remarkable models to follow for children and youth, parents, volunteers, coaches and PE teachers in special and mainstream schools.

Introducing Special Olympics (SO) programs into physical education and sport and physical therapy faculties’ curricula represents an important step in the process of training the future physical education teachers, coaches and therapists for providing equal opportunities to socially integrate the persons with disabilities, by multiplying interactions with the communities and by rendering available quality education and health services for this type of population.

In this regard, Special Olympics International and Special Olympics Romania have developed an extensive framework of programs, among which those related to health issues and social cohesion are of particular importance (Bota, Stoica, 2018). Promoting the practice of sports in unified system- football, dancing, gymnastics, as well as adapted activities - athletics, skiing, bocce, swimming, table tennis, basketball, are valuable activities to reach the Special Olympics Romania aims.

- Yuppi Camp Association, in the frame of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program, organized **camps for children with several chronic diseases** (430 participants). The sports activities foreseen for the participants were: archery, rowing, equestrian, climbing.

- **Developing a healthy lifestyle for different categories of population** represents another way to innovate sports activities. SOCIAL GYM is the first non-profit fitness and aerobic club in Romania providing for its members customized fitness programs according to the age, physical training level, goals and motivation of each member; also, investment for/in the development of disadvantaged persons is foreseen, in order to integrate them on the labor market; high-quality programs are implemented, as well as opportunities for spending time in social programs and community involvement. The profit gained is reinvested in the sustainability of the club, but also in other social programs of the Resource Center for Active Citizenship.

- The project *We are the young generation!*, delivered by The Prais Foundation aims to **promote the wellbeing of adolescents, based on a balanced lifestyle** (nutrition, physical activity, etc.), stressing the importance of knowledge and education in shaping their future, moral values, good relationships with others, social inclusion, acceptance of diversity and capitalization of one's abilities/talent.

One of the greatest football clubs in the world made a statement regarding **sports contribution to the school performance of children**. Real Madrid Social Sport School from Bucharest delivers a program preventing the school drop-out through sport, with the support of Real Madrid Foundation in partnership with "FDP – Education Promoters" Association. This initiative is addressed to 6 – 14 years old children coming from risk-exposed families in terms of extreme poverty or single-parent composition.

- **Using sports to prevent professional diseases** represents another innovative approach, supported by Corporate Games Romania, part of the Corporate Games Worldwide sports contest, gathering in a unique sport event participants from Romanian-based companies, without any

discrimination (type of organization, number of employees, etc.) The main concept is "Open to all for the benefit of all!", expressing the inclusion of all social categories (including people with disabilities), without any discrimination regarding gender, religion etc.

- Sport is also considered to be an ambassador for promoting National **cultural values** and **dissemination of traditional sports**. Preserving our identity through sports as well is the main goal of the Romanian Association of Traditional Games and Sports.

- **Promoting gender equity through and in sport** is based on the idea that sport delivers social interactions for young and elderly people, for women and men, for rich and poor, all in the quest of physical and mental health. Sport can also stimulate education, communication, negotiation and leadership skills, which are essential for the emancipation of women. *Increasing the professional level of coaches in women's football (ProCall)*, the Erasmus Plus Project (implemented by the National University of Physical Education and Sports Bucharest) represents a model of good practice to promote football for women.

- The importance of acquiring a professional qualification for current and former athletes is recognized at national level through the implementation of numerous **dual-career** projects, supported by state authorities (Romanian Sports and Olympic Committee, National Institute for Sports Research), as well as through European funded projects.

Future of Social Innovation in Sport

At present, innovation represents an important drive for sport evolution, reflected by the development of both new concepts and paradigms and sport marketing strategies based on entrepreneurial, proactiveness and risk taking approaches (Ratten, 2011). From these perspectives, the specialists try:

- to link industry trends, customer needs, organizational practices, and the way innovation embraces the global sport industry;
- to imagine innovative solutions to real life problems, currently experienced in sport businesses, so that competitive advantage is gained when applying for certain positions in this area;
- to understand the impact of sport business on social levels, when economic and technological change is envisioned.

Future developments in sports innovation also include areas like:

Sport and medicine. The area of sports medicine is subject to change depending on the outcomes- competitive or recreational. With this challenge

in mind, International Federation of Sports Medicine (FIMS) has an important role to play as the umbrella organization of national and continental sports medicine association. The reputation of FIMS has been greatly enhanced in recent years due to its efforts to disseminate the principles of health, motivation and training adaptations for all those engaged in physical activity/sports.

Digital innovation for sport. ICT brings important benefits to athletes in achieving top results: mobile health applications (apps); online exercise and fitness sites - increased data collection and athlete information thanks to intelligence products (the Babolat devices, example); programs helping athletes to avoid injuries (First Vision, Wearable Electronics Pioneers).

Nowadays sports are not conceivable in the absence of technological innovation which helps pushing human limits further and further. A whole myriad of training-related aspects are managed in an objective, accurate manner: monitoring physical exercise in real time, data analytics leading to projecting sports preparation, virtual reality simulating real competition settings, etc.

Sport and leisure time. This trend is based on people embracing active lifestyle through promoting informal physical activities which are both health- and recreation-oriented. Creativity is almost limitless in terms of conceiving various types of exercise with different structures, various physiological impact, various equipment, for all types of population. In this perspective, new types of physical activity/sport have emerged, such as adventure/extreme sports, becoming increasingly popular, despite physical exertion, risk or uncontrollable variables. Obviously, the nature of sport gradually changed towards the development of outdoor activities, which requires targeted policies in order to substantiate on long term the positive outcomes of an active healthy lifestyle (Grix, 2010).

Sport - as an economic growth factor. Based on recent data collected within *The Study on the Contribution of Sport to Economic Growth and Employment in the EU* (2012), sport is acknowledged as a fast-growing and dynamic phenomenon illustrated by:

- contribution of 1.76% of the EU Gross Value Added (€173.86 bn), resulting from leisure, cultural and sport services, followed by educational and tourism sport-related services;

- enhancement of the 2.12% ratio of total employment in the EU, equivalent to 4.46 million employees. This figures clearly demonstrate that sport is a labor-intensive area (European Commission, 2012), absorbing important human resources.

Discussions and conclusion

Reviewing current international literature on the topic of sport social innovation, lead us to identifying references mainly focused on unidirectional analysis – economical-, educational-, socially- oriented, and less on an integrative approach combining theoretical framework and practical applications. Numerous financed projects over the years have been an important information resource, through their intellectual outputs transposed in scientific studies on the contributions of physical activities to social wellbeing of different populations.

Some of the references illustrate different intellectual outputs of numerous financed projects, which reflect specific contributions of physical activities to certain populations demands.

Another main source of data is represented by European statistics which show that Romania holds a modest position regarding social innovation. Generically, the main directions of innovation in our country are social inclusion, health and education, with no references to sport social innovation. Moreover, updated statistics on this topic are not always available.

At national level, comprehensive studies are scarce being focused primarily on disability sport and socially deprived children and youth.

Based on Tidd & Bessant approach (2017), this paper emphasizes the most significant contributions in Romanian sport social innovation, represented by advances in training methodologies (as a form of acceleration of knowledge production), in different types of physical exercises and sports activities provided by clubs, schools, leisure time entities (market expansion and rise of active users), adapted and unified sports activities for special population (as a growing tendency with sustainability potential).

This approach stands as an original contribution to the development of knowledge in sport field, by means of analyzing and applying the above-mentioned conceptual model to Romanian reality. This approach creates a valuable state-of-the art in Romanian sport social innovation, as a background for further developments according to both local and national challenges and international trends.

Therefore, in the field of sport, there are a number of policies and strategies for promoting sport as an educational means for different categories of population. Sport is considered to be an effective tool for solving social issues, such as integrating people with special needs, preventing social exclusion, reducing morbidity, increasing children school

success, creating a healthy lifestyle for children and maintaining an active lifestyle for adults.

In Romanian sports one can identify some types of social innovations within the educational process (methods and means), the educational services (types of lessons/activities, competitions), other services (adapted or/and unified), or products (adapted equipment for people with physical impairments).

Starting from this framework, specialists might join efforts to strengthen sport social innovation by designing training courses for sport professionals who are willing to work in the social protection sector, health services or to increase the interest of sport clubs in providing specific services to disadvantaged population.

In synthesis, we can assert that social innovation in Romanian sport presents similar trends with those found in general social innovation, but is still on its way to be fully conceptualized and acknowledged as an effective catalyst for changing attitudes, behaviors or the quality of life. Therefore, certain aspects of social innovation acknowledged at international level, which are less represented in our country (ICT in sport, ratio of sedentary population, lack of preventive medical screenings in elite athletes etc.), remain open to future studies and projects.

The main social innovators in Romanian sports are represented by NGOs, universities, national and local sports organisations. Theoretical and practical experience underline the importance of joint efforts involving public and private bodies, in the frame of sustainable partnerships reinforced at European level by different programs – Erasmus Plus, European Social Funds.

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