

ROMANIAN NGOs' EFFORTS TO ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS AND PREVENT SOCIAL TURBULENCE

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Abstract

While Romania has undergone huge progress during the last 30 years, the situation of marginalized groups hasn't progressed as well as the country's rapid economic development. The plight of vulnerable groups such as unhoused people, persons with disabilities, and the LGBTQ community continues to be a source of social turbulence, as they are consistently facing exclusion. Authorities do not prioritize their integration within society and there is a lack of policies to deal with these issues, leading to the appearance of extremely polarizing movements such as the 2018 referendum initiative to ban same-sex unions. This paper aims to analyze three case studies where advocacy organizations championed the cause of the above-mentioned groups, in order to increase visibility, representation, and integration, and pinpoint best practices for organizations advocating on behalf of disadvantaged groups. The three main best practices we have learned regarding advocacy projects targeting public policy for marginalized groups are: a. always put a local group at the center of the project, b. bring outside partners or mentors who can bring advocacy skills to the project, c. look for other, supplemental, positive outcomes, that usually tend to come up in the work with marginalized groups.

Keywords: marginalized, groups public policy, advocacy, best practices, homeless, disabled, LGBTQ, NGO, Romania.

1. Improving public policy through advocacy for disadvantaged groups

Advocacy for better public policy outcomes coming from outside groups—policy advocacy, in short—has long been considered one of the best methods to ensure improved outcomes for disadvantaged people, whether we are talking about democratizing access to education (ProQuest (Firm) and Gatta, 2006), improving public health (Wade *et al.*, 2019), nutrition (Cullerton *et al.*, 2018), gender rights (Orr and Conner, 2020), refugee rights (Fehsenfeld *et al.*, 2019) and other issues.

That is not to say that public authorities are automatically neglectful of these groups, or do not necessarily care about their plight. But it has been proved time and again, that the definitions and policies that the public authorities use to determine how to allocate funds can result in a lack of equity and fewer benefits for disadvantaged groups (Rowangould *et al.*, 2016). This is why even when the public sector is already involved with a certain issue, research and policies championed by outside, independent groups on those issues, can greatly help with the design of public policy (Morris, 2015).

Using outside advocacy to change public policy in various fields can be done through various methods, both through advocacy from academic and research groups (Gur-Arie *et al.*, 2022) or advocacy made by representative groups, such as non-profits, for those communities affected by the policy. However, it is generally agreed that while ‘researchers can play a role in advocacy efforts, although [...] disadvantaged people, who have direct contact with or experience of hardship, can be particularly persuasive in advocacy efforts’ (Farrer *et al.*, 2015, p. 393). This is why non-profits and civic movements that serve various groups, including disadvantaged ones, often get involved in policy advocacy, which may greatly help constituencies that didn’t previously have a voice (MacIndoe, 2014).

Obviously, advocacy looking to influence public policy is not only performed by non-profits, as advocacy is also being done by the private sector. Various commercial interests (Irwin, 2014), such as the banking sector (Adel Abdel-Baki, 2014), or charities funded by various industries (Steele *et al.*, 2019) can be especially active. But non-profits and civic groups have in many countries a primacy over the idea of public policy advocacy, as they are a ‘location for collective action’ (Grønbjerg and Prakash, 2017, p. 880). As a non-profit, civic or independent group, these entities may pursue a large array of goals in relation to public policy and the public sector. They may be looking to ensure funding for their activities (Barr and Johnson, 2021) or for various groups that they are serving: as some researchers are calling it, ‘advocacy for social benefits versus organizational benefits’ (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2012, p. 80). Also, at times these organizations may have trouble deciding whether to focus more on service provision for their constituency, or on advocacy (Elsana, 2021). But the influence of non-profits on public policy is considered important enough that, in many countries, the public sector is looking not just to partner with these organizations, but also to find the most efficient way to fund this sector, not just for service delivery but also for advocacy (Onyx *et al.*, 2008).

That doesn’t mean that relationships between public authorities and organizations that advocate on behalf of various groups are not without their challenges. Governments have

to become more ‘adaptive’ since they face more uncertainty and change than ever (Țiclău, Hînțea and Andrianu, 2020, p. 175). This and various other issues always come up to increase complexity for these organizations and their advocacy, such as austerity or budget cuts, which can greatly limit progress on social issues (Whitacre, 2020). Also, organizations need to take great care in choosing advocating strategies, in order to ensure the best outcomes in relation to the public authority they are looking to influence. This means that advocate organizations and leaders will need to choose between a range of ‘softer’ (that is more institutional forms of advocacy), rather than more openly challenging forms of activism (Onyx *et al.*, 2010, p. 41), while showing resilience in the face of bigger than ever financial pressures and ever more complex government regulation (Țiclău, Hînțea and Trofin, 2021).

2. Defining success when it comes to advocating for improved public policy

Coming up with a clear definition of what makes a successful advocacy campaign can be a complex endeavor. Based on the type of organization, success may mean different things: for some, it is about capacity building and positive program outcomes, for others, it may be about more funding or more services delivered (Strang, 2018).

In order to understand which are the core items that are strongly linked to advocacy success, we need to look at those organizations for which advocacy and policy change are core values, as opposed to focusing purely on delivering services (Silverman and Patterson, 2011). When looking at those items that are considered strong success indicators in advocacy campaigns for marginalized groups, three such indicators regularly come up:

1. The level of change in legislation and public policy outlook, whether on the short or long term. This indicator is the most predictable since advocacy in itself is about influencing the public sector and public policy in order to obtain the best outcomes for a certain group. That being said, linking advocacy success only to the level of policy change is wrong, as ‘social change advocacy outcomes are difficult to predict because of the complexity of political and social systems’ (Klugman and Jassat, 2016, p. 9).
2. Raising the level of mobilization, empowerment and involvement in policy matters of the marginalized group that the organization is advocating for. Making sure that their constituents’ voice is being heard is time and again mentioned by organizations as the main positive outcome for various advocacy campaigns on behalf of disadvantaged persons (Brown *et al.*, 2013; Dillard *et al.*, 2018). Since, in most cases, they occupy marginal spaces in society, these people are struggling for recognition and to be heard (Ridley *et al.*, 2018). Thus, mobilization is a huge indicator of progress for these groups. Also, building capacity is much easier when the community is mobilized and feeling empowered (Sharpe *et al.*, 2015).
3. Changing beliefs and perceptions of the particular group that organizations are advocating for. This is especially important since the public sector may be designing policies or acting towards certain groups based on outdated or flat-out wrong ideas of that group, so changing them is very important (Unerman and O’Dwyer, 2006).

Obviously, not every group assigns the same level of importance to each of these indicators. While most advocacy groups may place legislation change at the forefront of their efforts, many times they may focus more on mobilization or changing perceptions. LGBT groups have a very strong focus on changing perceptions of their community (Lipka, 2011), most likely because all disadvantaged groups face huge amounts of very public stigma in daily life (Thaker *et al.*, 2018). Instead, since the main barriers people with disabilities have to face are caused by legislation and public policy (Holness and Rule, 2014), their focus first and foremost is on policy change. The same focus on policy change can be found in the case of non-profits who are advocating on behalf of unhoused persons (Pekkanen *et al.*, 2014).

Since advocacy organizations and the groups they are representing are hugely varied, other success indicators are also used, such as the well-being of people with disabilities (Tilley *et al.*, 2020), or spurring people into ‘early action’ (Wightman, 2013, p. 30), but these are not nearly as often used as those mentioned above.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this article, we have selected three case studies, based on campaigns led by advocacy groups and organizations on behalf of marginalized groups in Romania. All of these took place in urban areas, and they all meet the outlined success indicators for advocacy projects on behalf of the marginalized. They all determined either legislation and policy changes, or a change in the policy outlook, managed to mobilize their constituents, and also focused on changing perceptions about these groups.

The first of these projects is called ‘Homeless Citizens’ Voice’, a project that started in Bucharest in 2021, and is focused on bringing the problem of homeless citizens in Bucharest on the agenda of the local authorities through advocacy.

The second project, run by the local civic group Dizabil.eu in the Moldavian city of Focșani, was centered on drawing the ‘Accessibility map of Focșani’ in order to involve local authorities towards increasing the accessibility of the city and public institutions through infrastructure for people with disabilities.

The third of these is linked to the successful organization of the first Pride March in the city of Iași in 2021, only the third city in Romania to host a Pride March.

We will analyze these projects that advocate for three types of marginalized groups in order to extract the necessary lessons and highlight the best practices to be followed when advocating for their rights. Overall, this may help not only to better integrate these groups but also to prevent the social turbulence that inherently appears when discrimination happens on a large scale.

Going further, we will first present the current situation for each of these disadvantaged groups. Then, we will analyze the three projects in more detail. We believe that the good practices that we can glean from these projects are applicable not just in Romania but in a majority of other countries that are facing similar issues. Better services, hosting capacity, and recognition of the needs unhoused people have, which are covered in the

‘Homeless Citizens Voice’ are also very commonly being addressed as important issues in Western countries. The problems of proper spaces and infrastructure for people with disabilities, covered in the Disabil.eu project, are a target of public policies in the West, and so is the issue of ensuring less stigma and more participation for the LGBT community.

However, developing countries are now going through the stages of social and economic development that Romania has also traversed quite recently. Thus, they can also put to good use these best practices regarding advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups, as their evolution is probably quite similar to Romania’s.

4. Post-communism upheaval and its effects on marginalized groups

The transition from communism to a democratic regime has been, without a doubt, one of the biggest transitions in Romania’s short but tumultuous history as a modern state. The country went through a lot of turmoil in its evolution from communist to a newly democratic state, and then to a European Union member (Papadimitriou and Phinnemore, 2008). While that evolution has largely been positive and beneficial, with Romania recently becoming a high-income economy, it has also left a lot of people behind which has become a huge source of social turbulence.

One of the deciding factors for this turmoil was economic upheaval, as Romania transitioned from a centrally planned, communist economy to a free market, which in turn led to the loss of jobs and poverty for the more vulnerable groups (Pasti, 1997) and a decline in social welfare, public health and standards of living for many people (Wolchik and Curry, 2015), directly increasing problems for marginalized groups.

What also didn’t help was that the structural reforms that were supposed to go together with all these changes happened very slowly, leading foreign observers to say that in Romania ‘political reform [...] seems more posturing than process’ (Carothers, 1996, p. v), as reform only really happened when local and central institutions were actually convinced of its urgency and need or were being pushed by foreign donors. It is true that the pace was accelerated during the 2000s, as accession talks into the European Union became a huge objective, so Romania was under a lot of pressure to implement European policies and standards (Vadasan and Parean, 2013). Thus, slowly, but surely, as living standards started to improve, many people became less vulnerable. The economic progress the country has gone through during the last decades is undeniable. Yet the improvement in the lives of marginalized groups hasn’t managed to stay on the same level as Romania’s rapid economic development (Ruegg *et al.*, 2006).

In the following chapters we will cover in more detail the situation of some of Romania’s most significant marginalized groups.

5. Homelessness—a post-communist problem

Post-1989, one of Romania’s biggest social challenges was that of homeless people. ‘Housing for everybody’ had been a big priority of the communist regime, which meant

most citizens had a rather secure housing situation until 1990. The transition to a market-based economy and the recessionary cycles that followed changed that situation radically. The previous safety net that existed during communism all but collapsed, which for more vulnerable groups meant a loss of income, status, and many times, a loss of housing.

A starting point for the homelessness problem is considered by many to be the appearance of Bucharest's first 'ghettos', where certain areas started attracting poorer people affected by low income and education, which excluded them 'from social participation and from getting access to urban zones with good habitations' (Mionel and Neguț, 2011, p. 197). This was further exacerbated by the fact that many people who were displaced by the 1990s economic turmoil moved to Bucharest, looking for economic opportunity. However, a lot of them ended up unhoused and extremely vulnerable.

The way urban spaces were designed in post-communist Bucharest heavily encouraged class separation, with high-rise towers and new buildings becoming a symbol of the elite and middle-class, to be kept as far away from marginalized groups as possible (O'Neill, 2022). This newly marginalized group found itself continuously pushed towards the periphery, out of the central districts that usually command more resources (Teodorescu, 2019). Another problem was that of stigma; with studies showing that in the 2000s stigma levels regarding homeless people in cities such as Bucharest, Kiev or Zagreb were much higher than in Western European capitals, making their resettlement much harder (Brandon *et al.*, 2000).

Homeless people face problems that range from basic ones such as food poverty (Ionita, 2018) to more complex ones such as health issues, especially for diseases that require constant, uninterrupted treatment, such as tuberculosis (Popescu-Hagen *et al.*, 2016). At this juncture, the homeless are among the vulnerable groups in Romania with the lowest degree of coverage from social services.

Actually, it is the lack of involvement in local decision-making, whether it is about housing or about more general issues, that is the other problem that the unhoused face, besides the lack of decent living standards. People from vulnerable groups, including those with housing issues face exclusion from local policymaking that is the result of the authorities' actions (Teodorescu, 2019) but also self-exclusion, as they don't feel like they have the right to participate in decision-making. This is usually the result of years of policing interventions from the authorities that are more focused on 'control and regimentation' rather than on harm reduction and recognizing the alternative spaces that at times these people build for themselves (Lancione, 2019, p. 548).

6. People with disability, a category Romania is still slow to integrate

While the images coming out in the 1990s from 'Ceausescu's orphanages' have been relegated to the distant past, the situation of disabled people in Romania is still very complex.

This has brought growing concern about the way Romania is integrating people with disabilities, with EU publication Euractiv recently stating that 'out of the 100,000 hand-

icapped children and children with special needs (the two categories are different), only 8,000 are currently integrated across Romanian schools' (Ribout, 2020). According to a report from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, estimates regarding the number of people with disabilities vary between 850,000 people with disabilities (national data) and 326,000 people (European data), with employment at 14.9%, compared to the national average of 64.6% (Ergon Associates, 2020).

Time and again, research shows that while Romania is a European Union member fully committed to upholding standards regarding this group, there is a huge gap between state policies and the reality. These are caused by: 1. a medicalized approach, 2. cultural lag, and 3. downright opposition to implementing EU laws and directives in this field (Fylling *et al.*, 2020). Seeing disability almost exclusively through medical lenses further justifies patriarchal attitudes towards this group, and also a poor adaptation of Romanian practices to international ones (Baciu and Lazar, 2017). Many times, doctors label disabled people as 'social cases', a medical designation meant to protect them but that at many times further hinders their integration prospects. This happens so much that certain researchers have taken to calling 'social cases' the 'New Poor' of post-communist Romania (Friedman, 2009, p. 375).

This is compounded by a lack of options for caregivers (e.g. parents of children with disabilities). They are, in many cases, left without a feasible roadmap for their child's future, mainly because there are very few disability services, as a result of a lack of policies in that field (Ion and Lightfoot, 2023). A study regarding mothers' experience when being told by doctors that their child had a disability, retained two main terms they used to describe their experience: 'uncertainty' and 'disempowering bureaucracy' (Collins and Coughlan, 2016).

To be fair, Romania has legislation promoting the hiring of disabled persons, with most workplaces having an obligation to hire a certain number of disabled persons and to offer certain benefits. Also, many 'social enterprises' that offer opportunities to disabled workers have been set up and become a success, which offers a lot of hope for the future of this group in terms of employment (Geta, 2022).

However, disabled people, even when employed, have to deal with infrastructure badly adapted for their needs, and also social stigma (Birau *et al.*, 2019). Since, traditionally, most spaces, public or private, are not built to take into account their needs, disabled people permanently live in 'spaces [that] are currently organized to keep disabled people 'in their place' and 'written' to convey to disabled people that they are 'out of place' (Kitchin, 1998, p. 343). People with disability live in 'distorted spaces', that do not welcome them in any sense, which only supports the view that 'disability is a form of oppression which is socio-spatially produced rather than naturally given' (Gleeson, 1996, p. 387). In the case of the disabled, the space itself is the most powerful exclusionary element, which makes them one of the most marginalized social categories.

7. LGBTQ—a community still fighting for visibility and equality

Another legacy of discrimination that the new democracy had to inherit from the communist regime was the complete criminalization of homosexual activities. It took Romania more than 10 years to finally decriminalize homosexual acts, in 2001, under intense pressure to meet the standards of the European Union it was hoping to become a member of. It is notable that it took Romania much more to reach that point than other post-communist countries, and that it was more about respecting European principles than about acceptance of the idea of equal rights standards (Weyembergh and Cârstocea, 2006). This is why, though the law marked a very important moment, negative discourse that saw the LGBTQ community as a ‘negative import from occidental societies’ (Nimu, 2015, p. 77) remained pervasive in Romanian society.

This culminated in the infamous 2018 referendum that sought to change the definition of marriage in Romania’s Constitution to where it could only take place between a man and a woman, rather than between two individuals as the initial text stated. The referendum gathered over 3 million signatures and was considered by many ‘a battleground in the transatlantic backlash against LGBTQ rights’ because of the involvement of various US religious organizations in its financing and running (Norris, 2017a). In the end, it was defeated through a general boycott (Cojocariu, 2017), but it is highly debatable whether Romanians boycotted the referendum in order to truly support the LGBTQ community, or whether it was a reaction against the interest groups (politicians, religious organizations) that pushed for the initiative (Voiculescu and Groza, 2021).

It is also clear that one of the ‘engines’ that propelled initiatives such as the 2018 referendum was that the public at large still wasn’t very positive towards LGBTQ rights. At the beginning of the 2010s, 46% of Romanians thought that homosexuals should not be ‘free to live life as they wish’, although people with better education, living in urban areas, and who have experienced ‘nonconformist family arrangements’ were more positive towards socially accepting same-sex couples (Andreescu, 2011, p. 209). That LGBTQ rights lack recognition at the general population’s level was also shown by opinion polls that took place before the 2018 referendum. Although more respondents were favorable regarding a LGBTQ person’s right to adopt a child than to marriage between two same-sex persons, over half of them were against any sort of rights for this group (Fulga, 2017). Once again, visibility in the eyes of the general population is a huge problem, with a majority of respondents having never seen LGBTQ couples in public.

Faced with these issues, the LGBTQ organizations’ main strategy was to increase visibility, both in order to combat the above-mentioned issues, but also to show solidarity and to increase the community’s sense of self-worth (Norris, 2017b). One of the main strategies in order to gain visibility was the organizing of marches for gay rights, or gay parades as they are more commonly known. The first one ever in Romanian history took place in 2005 in Bucharest, under the name GayFest, and kept taking place every year, in spite of active opposition from conservative groups. Since 2014, the march has been taking name under the Bucharest Pride moniker. In 2017, Cluj Pride started taking place yearly in Cluj, while in 2021 the city of Iași started hosting the Iași Pride.

8. 'Homeless Citizens' Voice'

'Homeless Citizens' Voice' is an ongoing project that started in Bucharest in 2021. Homelessness has always been a focus for Carusel Association (www.carusel.org), one of the most active local organizations and service providers for marginalized communities in the capital. Among other projects, Carusel runs four community centers (including in Ferentari, one of the poorest areas in the city), and various social assistance initiatives aimed at providing food and health services for people in need.

One of the problems that the organization kept bumping into was the lack of focus from local authorities on providing housing and social services for the homeless. Thus, Carusel started a project in partnership with the Resource Center for Public Participation (www.CeRe.org), advocating for homeless people, for a better understanding of their needs, for more involvement of this vulnerable group in the decision-making, and for their voice to be heard. A very important output of the project was the report named 'Voice of Citizens without Shelter. A diagnosis of the services offered by the municipality to homeless people' (CeRe, Carusel, 2021).

The report identified a large number of issues that greatly and negatively impact homeless people's experience living in Bucharest. Amongst them are low shelter capacity, the lack of a residential component, no options for families, insufficient healthcare services, and a lack of information (see table 1).

Another big part of the project was a series of conversations with various people with housing issues, who use various community centers in Bucharest.

These discussions paint a picture of neglect on the part of the authorities, who make few efforts to both increase the capacity of the shelters and adapt their services to the needs of the unhoused. The answers also show that they deal with a striking lack of safety, with homeless people avoiding police for fear of getting a ticket instead of help. The report also offers an overall description and analysis of the types of services and shelters that are available in each of Bucharest's six sectors.

Initially, the report was meant to be used as a way to continue to advocate on behalf of the homeless with local authorities. However, another very positive externality of the project was that, since the report was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, it could well be used as a solution for the vaccination of people without IDs. Therefore, the organizers of the project reached out to authorities in charge of the vaccination, in order to propose a mobile vaccination campaign that would also include homeless people without ID documents. Both for this occasion and for the future, including homeless people in vaccination campaigns may be of great help, considering the many territorial disparities in COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in the country (Marin, 2023).

9. An effective accessibility map, in the service of people with disabilities

DizAbil.eu is a civic group that was set up 10 years ago in the city of Focșani, Romania. Initially organized as a group to help disabled people to meet, socialize, and have discussions about their rights, it quickly became more militant and started advocating for the

Table 1: General situation of accommodation capacity and funds for social services for the homeless, based on responses received to requests made on the basis of Law 544/2001 (May 2021)

Institutions	Accommodation capacity in overnight shelters for adult persons	Recorded homeless persons - year 2020	Estimated funds for social services for the homeless- year 2021	Funds allocated for 2020	Funds allocated for 2019	Funds allocated for 2018
City Hall- Sector 1	60	80	4.500.000	2.685.432	2.671.952	3.051.360
City Hall- Sector 2	48	199	600.000	537.000	542.000	337.000
City Hall- Sector 3	80*	261	2.300.000	7.850.000		
City Hall- Sector 4	50**	78	103.809	325.247		
City Hall- Sector 5	21	55	2.256.150	934.648	556.605	na
City Hall- Sector 6	60	109	928.000	927.678	689.405	495.319
Bucharest City Hall	247	1244	7.160.412	15.212.777	11.437.200	16.908.000
*44 residential, 36 overnight shelter **at the moment, the capacity is zero (the shelter has become a center for institutionalized quarantine)						

Source: Excerpt from the report 'Voice of Citizens without Shelter. A diagnosis of the services offered by the municipality to homeless people' (Resource Center for Public Participation, 2021)

accessibility of public spaces and institutions. Thus, it was no surprise when in 2021 they decided to run ‘Accessibility map of Focșani’, a project aimed at helping the authorities to increase accessibility for people with disabilities. The main tool created through this project, with the aid of volunteers, was an interactive map that contained both public outside spaces, such as parks, streets, and sidewalks, and spaces in public buildings, such as local administration offices, sports arenas, and theatres.

While the project was mainly financed through the StartONG program, the organization also benefited from mentoring from other organizations such as CIVICA Association and the Resource Center for Public Participation, through the ‘Civic steps for a strong community’ program. The mentoring covered especially advocacy training, regarding ways to position the organization in relation to local authorities, in order to be able to continue its efforts and build on past successes.

The launch event of the accessibility map, at the end of 2021, had a positive outcome, attracting the presence of the city’s mayor, its two vice mayors, and several managers of social services and educational institutions. What was even more surprising, especially considering Romanian authorities’ usual lack of prioritizing when it comes to accessibility infrastructure, was that the authorities had an immediate reaction to the identified problems, complied with the group’s requirements, and made most of the pinpointed areas accessible very quickly.

This made it possible for the civic group to continue asking for accessibility improvements for such important city buildings as the National Theatre in Focșani, and its multipurpose Sports Arena. While the National Theatre got a rolling wheelchair to help disabled people have easy access, the Arena also got several temporary fixes, with discussions ongoing regarding full accessibility.

Here too, besides the immediate (successful) objective of rendering key areas in the city more accessible, another positive externality was the opening of a communication channel with the representatives of public authorities. This allowed DizAbil.eu to take its accessibility efforts to the next level, by being able to communicate with the authorities quicker, and get quicker results.

10. The first Pride March in Iași, an amazing opportunity for LGBTQ advocacy

RiseOut is an NGO, formerly a civic group set up in 2016, with the purpose of offering support to the LGBTQ community in Iași. As such, it has continuously fought for equality and recognition of same-sex rights, in an environment not exactly conducive to tolerance. The capital of Romania has had a gay rights march since 2005, and Cluj, a university city comparable to Iași, had its first Gay Pride in 2017. But in Iași, the opposition of local authorities meant that organizers of any LGBTQ public event had problems finding a location, and obtaining the proper approvals became very hard.

That was also the problem when in 2021, RiseOut set out to organize the first Iași Pride Festival. In this case also, the organization wasn’t on its own, as it was being mentored on

advocacy issues through the ‘Civic steps for a strong community’ program, while also having the support of ACCEPT, an LGBTQ organization with a national reach. The cultural events within the festival all took place in private locations. All requests for events to take place in locations that were under the authority of Iași City Hall were eventually denied. However, the organizers didn’t give up and managed to attract funds in order to hold the events.

Having the support and the benefit of ACCEPT’s experience, which had organized The Bucharest March Pride, RiseOut decided to ask the local authorities for the necessary permits and approvals in order to hold the first event. While the first round of requests was denied, a second round of talks produced better results, with the necessary permits from the Local Council being released, although the Iași mayor Mihai Chirica kept affirming his opposition to the project (Drăgan, 2021).

Thus, despite a last-minute request from the mayor to cancel the march, the first Gay Pride took place in Iași on October 1st 2021. The event was a success, with no unpleasant incidents, good collaboration with the police, and excellent coverage in both local and national mass media.

The organization reached its primary objective—to offer much-needed visibility to the LGBTQ community in Iași, by finally managing to convince the authorities to allow gay marches to happen. After this success, in 2022 the Iași Gay Pride took place without a hitch and received the proper authorizations not only from the Local Council but this time also from the mayor—a huge advocacy success, as it was an important moment of recognition of the LGBTQ community’s right to freedom of assembly.

But it also offered other positive outcomes. First, a newfound relationship with local authorities, which changed their attitude towards the organization and its initiatives, but also renewed interest from financing organizations, for whom the Gay Pride was proof of RiseOut’s grassroots capabilities.

11. Conclusions

When looking at these three case studies, obviously the biggest contributor to their success is the amazing work of the volunteers who, against the indifference and sometimes downright opposition of authorities, have managed to advance the situation of marginalized groups.

However, there are a few fundamental characteristics that we can see in each of these projects and seem to contribute heavily to their success. These are:

A. Local groups. Literature on local NGOs already shows that they can help enormously by bringing usually overlooked aspects to the attention of the public, from marginalized groups to issues such as the environmental impact of various projects (Gavriliadis *et al.*, 2022). The activities and positive influence, especially in terms of social services and the impact that local NGOs can have in their area have been documented all over Romania (Ateșoae, 2018). Local actors are very important when it comes to forming social networks, by bringing together the relevant partners in the area, for interventions meant

to deliver services and bring about change (Lam *et al.*, 2020). Even when efforts are led by a public sector entity, it is important that local NGOs are involved, in order to both understand and analyze problems on the ground and then deploy services and solutions through a range of local partners, rather than just through public sector workers (Vrabie and Dudian, 2021).

There is no denying that their impact, especially on the marginalized groups that are neglected by the state, is immense (Heemeryck, 2018). Research has shown time and again that the best way for the public sector to deliver social assistance services in a holistic manner is to partner with organizations from the private and non-governmental sectors (Androniceanu and Tvaronavičienė, 2019). Beyond services, local organizations, as part of civil society, can provide counterpoints to the official authority position in a given field (since authorities will tend to claim that everything is OK in their area), in a word provide ‘counter-accounts’ to the official position on a matter they are dealing with, such as the situation of marginalized groups (Apostol, 2015).

But nowhere are all the advantages brought by local NGOs’ activities more visible than in these case studies, highlighting how important the ‘localness’ of the organizations that organized the aforementioned projects is. They are all local organizations that started as civic groups, fully immersed in the local community and exclusively dedicated to the problems of a particular marginalized group. While RiseOut was set up 7 years ago, Carusel and Dizabil.eu have over 10 years of continuous activity with vulnerable groups. This is essential to the success of each of these projects, as they bring a wealth of experience, understanding of their beneficiary’s needs, and relationship with authorities and various stakeholders.

These are not just NGOs that are looking to move on to the next project. Thus, it is very clear that putting local civic groups and organizations at the center of advocacy efforts for marginalized groups is essential for the success and long-term resilience of these efforts.

B. Bringing in outside NGO partners or mentors who can bring advocacy skills to the project. While these local organizations have excellent knowledge of the on-the-ground situation, they may not always be able to handle the complexity that arises from advocacy activities. Advocacy is about conducting research, crafting the messages, and designing the communication materials that will help a certain campaign break through the clutter and get the message to its intended recipients, about organizing events that will attract rather than keep away various stakeholders and get them to collaborate with the organization in question. This adds a lot of complexity.

That’s why it is meaningful that the organizations who did the projects in our case studies all had as either partners or mentors other NGOs with a lot of experience in advocacy. Carusel went into the project regarding homeless people as a full partnership with the Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe), an organization with a storied 17-year experience in projects dealing with public participation, making public institutions more transparent and involving citizens in community projects. CeRe also runs a six-week advocacy exchange program in the USA.

It is understandable why this project was best approached as a partnership between the two NGOs, since it is quite large. Analyzing the resources, budgets, and policies of six different sectoral city halls in Bucharest, writing and communicating with social services in each sector, and communicating based on the findings, were just a few of the advocacy tasks in this project.

Our other two case studies opted for mentorships from organizations well-versed in advocacy, and using that sort of expertise was very important for the outcome of the project. Both projects took place for shorter periods of time, but they were no less important, dealing with entrenched views in the local administration about how to manage the marginalized groups these two NGOs represented, and sometimes with downright opposition. But working with organizations that had already fought some of these battles, as was the case with ACCEPT consulting on the Gay Pride in Iași, brought a lot of understanding regarding how to talk to the authorities, tone of voice, the legal documents that were needed, and many other elements regarding communication with local and state institutions.

In both cases, extensive communication and negotiation were needed in order to reach a positive outcome. This is where advice from mentors and outside help, either as a partnership or in other forms, can help greatly. For future efforts where local organizations deal with advocacy efforts on behalf of marginalized groups, mentorships and partnerships with organizations with advocacy experience can greatly improve the efforts to promote the cause of marginalized groups.

C. Besides each project's main objective, the organizers must look for, and recognize opportunities for other positive outcomes, that usually tend to come up in the work with marginalized groups. As each of these three case studies shows us, working with marginalized groups can offer positive externalities that organizers may not have foreseen.

This becomes very clear when we are looking at the fact that, although the 'Homeless Citizens' Voice' project was first and foremost focused on improving representation and advocating for unhoused people, it could also be used as a solution for the vaccination of people without ID. Thus, a project aimed at a vulnerable group can come up with multiple positive outputs, even though they weren't planned for. It is the same with the other two projects; beyond their stated objectives, which they accomplished, they also managed to open communication lines with the administration, attract new financing, and re-energize their own organizations. Making these groups more visible in the eyes of authorities and the general public unlocks a lot of that potential, bringing with it other unexpected but very positive outcomes.

It is for this reason that the work of advocacy organizations with marginalized groups is so important and needs to be encouraged. Increasing the visibility and representation of these groups in relation to the authorities and the public will not only make things better for these groups but also open up new, sometimes unexpected avenues for future development and prevent social turbulence.

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