



ORIGINAL PAPER

The Consequences of Economic Recession on the Quality of Life in Romania, between 2009 and 2013

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Abstract:

The economic crisis represents an ambivalent phenomenon inducing both negative, dysfunctional effects and consequences and also positive, functional ones. Of course, positive aspects are not that prominent and they mainly refer to the adoption of a more balanced behavior by economic agents and population, general decrease of prices, especially in the real-estate field (in certain cases, properties can be purchased at a third of the price required before the crisis). The negative effects or the general risks refer to the quality of the people's social-economic and cultural life at a national level, while, at the global level, the economic crisis affected the political and economic hierarchy of the world states. The article is analyzing the statistical data at European and national level, in order to confirm us that the economic crisis from 2007-2008 was characterized by the increase of unemployment, which had led to an increase of severe pauperization rate and a severe deterioration of quality of life.

Keywords: *economic recession; quality of life; unemployment; income; poverty*

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Introduction

Throughout time, the concept of quality of life (QOL) has enriched its meaning, being viewed as a target or a set of specific characteristics of some individuals, groups or communities (Milton, 2013). Starting with World War II, the policies of industrialized countries have oriented towards the development of socio-economic aspects of society, as well as improving the social security system. After the war, the term has been used in American literature to outline a new perspective on life, a life of quality being described from other perspectives as well, not just the material one. Even the president of the United States during 1963-1969, Lyndon Baines Johnson, said that the economic potential is one of the factors to influence the quality of life, and therefore cannot describe it as good or bad (Henning, Krägeloh and Wong-Toi, 2015: 29).

Since 1970, the term has also acquired a subjective aspect, given its focus on the individual. Therefore, besides the measuring social indicators of the concept there were also introduced those aiming social and psychological needs of man (Henning, Krägeloh and Wong-Toi, 2015). In the health research, the term was widespread, being associated to some fields of study such as sociology, medicine, economics, geography, philosophy, etc.

Quality of life: definitions and conceptual meanings

The concept of quality of life had different interpretations, being used to describe both the well-being of individuals as well as societies. The term has been used since ancient times, in the writings of philosophers, who discussed issues aiming for the meaning of life, knowledge, man endowed with the ability to choose what is best for him and others. For example, Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “recognizes the multiple relationships between happiness, well-being, eudemonia and quality of life” (Panagiotakos and Yfantopoulos, 2011: 517).

The early Christians were the ones who first promoted the idea of beautiful and meaningful life lived in order to get divine benevolence. This spiritual fulfillment acquired by obeying religious teachings was later promoted by other religions.

In time, the term acquired meanings according to the mood of that period, social organization and the author’s ideas, “representing various schools and trends of world outlook” (Wohl, 1977: 35).

At the end of the 18th century and early 19th century, in the works of French utopian thinkers there was found the quality of life as a social category. In their thinking, a fulfilled society is built on the correspondence between aspirations and lifestyle. Therefore, they have militated in favor of new conditions of life “a different shape of human needs ad human behavior and satisfaction, derived from life” (Wohl, 1977: 35). Later, Marx’s approach was based on the analysis of real facts, which offers assessment to the quality of life. Through man’s ability to shape nature, bringing it close to his needs, man becomes a creative force, but with the development of the production process production there also appeared the alienation of man who, at work, can no longer explore his creative share and thus satisfy his own needs. In fact, the issue of quality of life was raised due to the dangers and frequently threats brought on by “the world wars and the accumulation of means of mass annihilation” (Wohl, 1977: 35). In this state, dominated by fear, people began to question the sense of moral and social order.

In general, the quality of life is defined as the assessment that the individual does on his/her own life, reported to the “culture and

value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.).

Therefore, the quality of life describes the material conditions and psychological environment of a community. Quality of life can also be described as wellbeing of the community, “a function of the actual conditions, or what an individual or community make of those conditions” (Michalos and Robinson, 2012: 23). These conditions derive from how they are perceived by the community and individuals, that is how they are understood and how they are acting in accordance with them.

According to Hass, the quality of life refers to subjective wellbeing, with the physical, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. That is a multidimensional measurement of the contemporary living circumstances of the people, in the cultural-value context of which they belong (Hass, 1999).

Although the definitions on the quality of life are numerous and diverse, there can be identified attributes common between them, like the subjective and multidimensional nature of the concept, the individual’s feeling of satisfaction towards his own life, individual placed in a certain socio-cultural context (Poradzisz & Florczak, 2013: 117).

The most important factors determining the quality of life are physical, psychological and social welfare state. To enhance the quality of life, new tools for measurement and intervention have been developed, which imposed increasing broad meanings of the term. Therefore, these new conceptual dimensions have led to other variables indicating the quality of life such as personal beliefs, lifestyle, happiness and social relations (Salehi, Harris, Coyne and Sebar, 2014: 1).

Methods to measure the quality of life

The wide range of indicators to measure quality of life facilitated the development level of societies. In 2005, the Economist Intelligence Unit, created an index of quality of life assessment, which included both subjective and objective results. The index was calculated on a sample of 111 countries and includes new evaluation factors: material well-being (measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person), health (measured by life expectancy at birth), political stability and security (measured by evaluating these indices), family life (measured by the divorce rate); community life (measured by attendance at church and affiliation to a trade union), climate and geography (latitude measuring temperature differences between countries); job security (measured by the unemployment rate); political freedom (measured by average rating indices of political and civil freedom), gender equality (measured by comparing the average incomes between sexes) (The Economist, 2010: 1-2).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed two instruments for measuring the objective and subjective approaches of quality of life, WHOQOL-100 and WHOQOL-BREF. Both have an inter-cultural approach and can be applied in many cultural contexts.

The *WHOQOL-100 instrument* seeks to build a subjective evaluation of people’s lives, reporting their goals and concerns to cultural and value context (WHO, 1998: 3).

The 6 specific domains (physical capacity, psychological ability, level of independence, social relationships, environment, spirituality/religion/personal beliefs) as well as 24 sub-domains associated with them are measured through a questionnaire constructed of 100 questions, translated into 29 languages. This instrument becomes an evaluation concept which includes “the individual’s perception of health status, psychosocial status and other aspects of life” (WHO, 1998: 3).

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The *WHOQOL-BREF* indicator was recently developed in order to make an accurate, practical assessment and in a shorter time. The 26 items enrolled in the 4 domains (physical, psychological, social relationships and environment) build profiles of the domains assessing the quality of life. Therefore, the WHOQOL-100 indicator is an alternative rapid assessment of profile areas, although it is not considering individual facets (Poradzisz & Florczak, 2013).

In the European Union, Eurostat measures the quality of life through nine dimensions, eight aiming the possibilities that citizens should have at their disposal in order to “effectively pursue their self-defined well-being, according to their own values and priorities” (Eurostat, 2015a), and the last dimension aims for the general experience of life.

The eight indicators represent individual dimensions, through which one can identify the level of development of societies as well as the welfare of the population, are (Eurostat, 2015a): *material living conditions* consider the analysis of incomes, consumption and material conditions (material shortcomings and housing); *productive or main activity* is evaluated quantitatively by available jobs, duration of working program and establishing the relationship between hours spent at work and outside it, but also qualitatively by professional ethics and the protection of the individual in the workplace; *health condition* is measured based on five sub-dimensions: life expectancy, infant mortality, number of years of healthy life, perception of one’s own state of health, but also access to healthcare; *education* is examined through the educational level of the population, the number of people who quit school at an early age and participation in lifelong learning; *use of free time and social interactions* is based on indicators measuring the time spent by individuals from diverse cultural and sporting events, performed volunteer activities, frequency of social interaction and access possibilities of social aid; *economic and physical safety* is measured by the individual’s protection and economic security; *governance and basic rights* include the participation of citizens in public and political life, the people’s level of confidence in the country’s institutions, satisfaction regarding public services and non-discrimination; *natural and life environment* is assessed through objective and subjective indicators aiming at protecting the environment, meaning their own perception and degree of atmospheric pollution.

The last dimension, general satisfaction of life, is a way of integration the “diversity of the experiences, choices, priorities and values of an individual” (Eurostat, 2015b). In general, the assessment of the quality of life is done through three general frameworks (Porio, 2015): *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs)– proposes eight universal goals, which aim to help eradicate hunger and poverty, ensuring universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and shaping a global partnership for development (Porio, 2015: 246). Although they do not consider aspects regarding urban sustainability and social unit, the indicators allow, by their ease, the development of objectives through a better fit of the assembly of circumstances and their application in specific geographic areas; *United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD)*– contains a set of 96 indicators (of which 50 are basic), grouped into four important dimensions: social, economic, environmental and institutional one. The indicators are built by the thematic framework that was adopted in 2001, namely: governance; health; education; demographics; natural disasters; atmosphere; land; oceans; seas and coasts; freshwater; biodiversity; economic development; global economic partnerships; consumption and

production patterns (United Nations, 2007: 9); *Livable Cities Indicators (LCIs)* – indicators used to assess the quality of life of people in a community, describing their needs, from the most basic to the most complex ones and „how the activities and choices of these individuals will impact on the lives of future generations” (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, n.d.: 22).

In Romania, The Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV), a research network of the Romanian Academy, aims to contribute to the development of Romanian society by researching the quality of life, social policies and the problems facing Romanian society, as well as developing intervention strategies. The study on the quality of life is one of the directions of research for the ICCV. The research program examines specific components of the indicator (health, employment, education, housing conditions, public and social services, subjective welfare), diagnoses the components diagnose and assesses the level of social change (The Research Institute for Quality of Life [ICCV], n.d.).

Poverty and unemployment in Romania during and after the economic recession

The economic recession from 2007-2010 has had a multitude of influences and negative consequences at social level, among which we can mention: reduction of jobs and of secure incomes; the increase of debtors’ rate and forced executions; pauperization of large social categories and extension of poverty; visible deterioration of life quality and chances of future evolution of human communities etc.

In Romania, within the economic crisis, population’s income has severely decreased, because of the fact that unemployment rate was increasing. Also, public and private sectors encountered severe pay cuts and also a severe decrease of job vacancies. “Companies, as well as population, have become vulnerable to the emerging changes, many of them being subject to insolvency proceedings” (Mărcuță, Mărcuță and Angelescu, 2013: 95).

For our present analysis we have chosen to analyse what was the impact of the global economic on the quality of life in Romania, taking into account the following parts: economic background; poverty and social exclusion; employment and unemployment.

As for the *economic background* we may see that a sharp down-turn during the 2008-2009 period and, as international markets became more conservative in their lending, inflows of capital fell and concern grew about Romania’s budget deficit (5.7% in 2008). In the summer of 2013 Romania was completing the implementation of the second economic adjustment programme with the EU and IMF (and some other lenders, for example the WHO) which had been requested in 2009 (European Commission, 2013).

At the beginning of the economic recession, the bank market was characterized by a severe instability because of the fact that, during 2006-2008 most of the banks have been sold “toxic” financial products (as, for example, loans with high interests and bank commissions). And when the crisis started, people who have contracted those kinds of loans and were facing unemployment problem, could not pay them back and, thus, they faced social crises. In the same time, the real estate market was severely affected, because of the “loss of assets acquired from bank loans or leasing companies, etc.” (Otovescu, Frăsie, Motoi and Otovescu, 2011: 102).

In 2012 our national economy was starting to recovery from the economic crisis, although it was a modest recovery (by 0,7%) “which continued to rise, reaching at the end of 2015 at 1,6%” (European Commission, 2013). As for the *employment and*

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unemployment, we cannot take into consideration the definitions that tell us that, while “employment is an essential condition for ensuring economic, social and political stability in any society” (Cojocaru, Popp, 2010: 645), unemployment represents a problem that has various economic, social, political and psychosocial consequences.

The economic crisis from 2008 was considered to be the “the worst recession since the Second World War” (Ilie, 2014: 92), a phenomenon which affected especially the European economic system and labour market.

Certain categories of the population, such as women, immigrant workers and young people, were more affected by the economic crisis than other population categories. Being considered a vulnerable population in an economic recession, women represent a priority of European policies aimed at increasing the employment rate and, implicitly, fighting unemployment.

One reason why women are more exposed to the financial crisis would be the fact that the global labor market is still segmented (there are only female or male-dominated occupational fields) because many women undertake atypical work (part-time, and because history showed us that their rights are being neglected during periods of economic crisis (e.g. the right to equality).

The economic crisis unsettled the labour market in Romania and led to “the increase of the unemployment rate to 8.1% (first trimester of 2010)”. (Otovescu, et.al, 2011: 140), this percentage being above the national average, during times of economic stability (6,3%). At the beginning of 2010 “there were 700,000 unemployed people in Romania” (Otovescu, et.al, 2011: 140), but their number was supposed to increase till the end of 2010, taking into considerations the fact that, besides the officially unemployed persons, there were also people who were not officially registered as unemployed (for example, the NEET’s category).

According to the European Commission, in 2012, Romania had one of the lowest employments on the previous year (when it was at 63.8% (amongst those aged 20-64 years), though 62.8%) (European Commission, 2013). Basically, even if during 2006-2008 Romania was characterized by economic growth, starting with 2008, the national economy has become vulnerable “and could not keep away from the harmful influences of the recession (Fleşer, Criveanu, 2012: 137).

Another negative consequence we cannot fail to consider is the growth of the youth unemployment rate, which in 2012 was very high, 22.8%. Furthermore, according to a European Commission Report, in 2012 Romania had a high share of NEETs (young people neither in employment nor in education or training), which represented 16.8% of the EU population aged 15-24 (European Commission, 2013: 40).

Furthermore, other authors find that unemployment has negative effects, both on individuals and on society and “because this phenomenon has considerable social and economic costs” (Ilie, 2014: 96).

During 2010 and 2015, the strategies and the measures in order to reduce the youth unemployment seem to be successful. Thus, one of the positive effect was the decrease of the youth’s unemployment (to 22%). But, in the same time, as for the young NEETS’s, for example, “Romania is above the EU average with 5%, averaging 12%” (Niță, 2017: 96).

As we have mentioned above, during periods of economic crisis, certain social groups experience a particular impact on their economic and social situation, especially, youths, children and migrant workers. So, another consequence of the global economic crisis was *the increase of the global (national) poverty and so, of the social exclusion of*

vulnerable groups. In 2011, 40.3% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion and this increased in 2012 to 41.7% (Eurostat, 2013).

In Europe, there were two determinants that played a major role in the impact of the crisis on poverty. The first is the rise in unemployment, especially the long-term unemployment rate, while work remains the best protection against poverty throughout the European Union.

In 2010, the European Council adopted the New Europe 2020 Strategy for “employment and a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy”, which aims to reduce by 20 million, out of 114 million (less 16%), the number of European citizens confronted poverty and social exclusion (Marlier, Natali and Van Dam, 2010). The indicator that serves as the basis for the European objective includes all those concerned by at least one of the following three dimensions: relative income poverty (at the 60% threshold of the median standard of living); severe material deprivation (on the threshold of four material deprivations from a list of nine items); the very low intensity of work in the household (at the threshold of 20% annual work).

Because of the economic crisis, the Lisbon Strategy was considered to be failed, so, in 2014 was established the net European Strategy 2014-2020, which was focused on three main priorities “1. Smart growth; 2. Sustainable growth; 3. Favourably inclusive growth” (Goga, 2014: 197).

There are also economists and sociologists who affirm that in Romania, poverty is caused especially by three elements: the labour market; family structures; migrations. It is therefore not complicated to answer the question. The significant increase in poverty since 2008 is a consequence of the crisis and the increase in unemployment. During periods of economic recession, children, youth, female, unemployed persons and “single persons with dependent children, those self-employed in agriculture and low educated people” (UNICEF, 2014) are the most vulnerable persons to the negative effects.

According to Eurostat, in Romania, almost 5 million people were exposed to the risk of poverty “our country having second highest risk-of-poverty rate in the EU28 after Greece (and closely followed by Spain)” (Eurostat, 2013).

According to the UNICEF Report - *Les enfants de la récession Impact de la crise économique sur le bien-être des enfants dans les pays riche*, in 2012, almost half of severely disadvantaged children (44%) lived in three countries: Italy (16%), Romania (14%), and the United Kingdom (14%) (UNICEF, 2014).

As a measure to diminish the effects of the economic crisis in 2011, Romania reformed its family support system in 2011, replacing two means-tested family allowances with a single benefit and adopting new provisions for single parents. However, the new benefit is less generous for families with one child. It is more generous for families with three or more children and the income ceiling has been lowered.

During the crisis, Romanians experienced a constant deterioration in the situation of families, mainly due to job losses, underemployment and cuts in public services. The median income of households with children decreased in almost half of the countries for which data are available. The number of families indicating that their situation is “very difficult” has increased in most countries.

The presence of one or more children in a household increased the risk of “worker poverty”, and this situation lasted for almost 4 years. By consequent, in 2012, “25,2% of Romanian families could not afford new clothes for their children” (Caritas Romania, 2013). In the same time, the low living standards are exposed by a lot of statistical data which showed us, for example in 2012, that “23.8% of Romanian children cannot afford

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to eat fresh fruit and vegetables once per day” (Idem). As a conclusion we can say that poverty is sent to poor people through 5 dimensions: “employment; prices; public and private transfers; assets; and access to goods and services” (Overseas Development Institute, 2009: 151).

And one of those services which are affected during economic recession, are the educational services. Statistics have shown us that during recession, the participation in education is decreasing, because of the facts that families cannot afford to send their children to school. Also, because of the fact that the unemployment rate is high “there is a risk that parents and young people may no longer see the usefulness of investment in education” (Ilie, 2013: 480).

Poverty is a factor affecting the quality of education, obstructing the formation of the youth's learning abilities. These abilities can be severely impaired if the youth is undernourished or the household's living standard is very low. Poverty is affecting the quality of education (because of the low participation rate, the decrease of financing educational systems etc.). Moreover, if we speak about a low quality of education, this involves also the people's perception of the usefulness of education. This negative perception on education's usefulness is influencing a lot of parents' decision (especially in the rural areas) “to keep their children at school and on the decision of young people to attend a form of education or other” (Otovescu et al., 2011: 146).

In fact, these decisions, whether to attend or not school, together with the negative perception of the usefulness of education are influencing the economic growth of a community or society, and on long-term, they are favoring the persistence of the poverty for the vulnerable categories of population. This is the main argument for which some states, even if they were facing economic recession, have been made huge investments in educational system, which it is a positive measure for economic growth (even if its results are seen in short term).

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