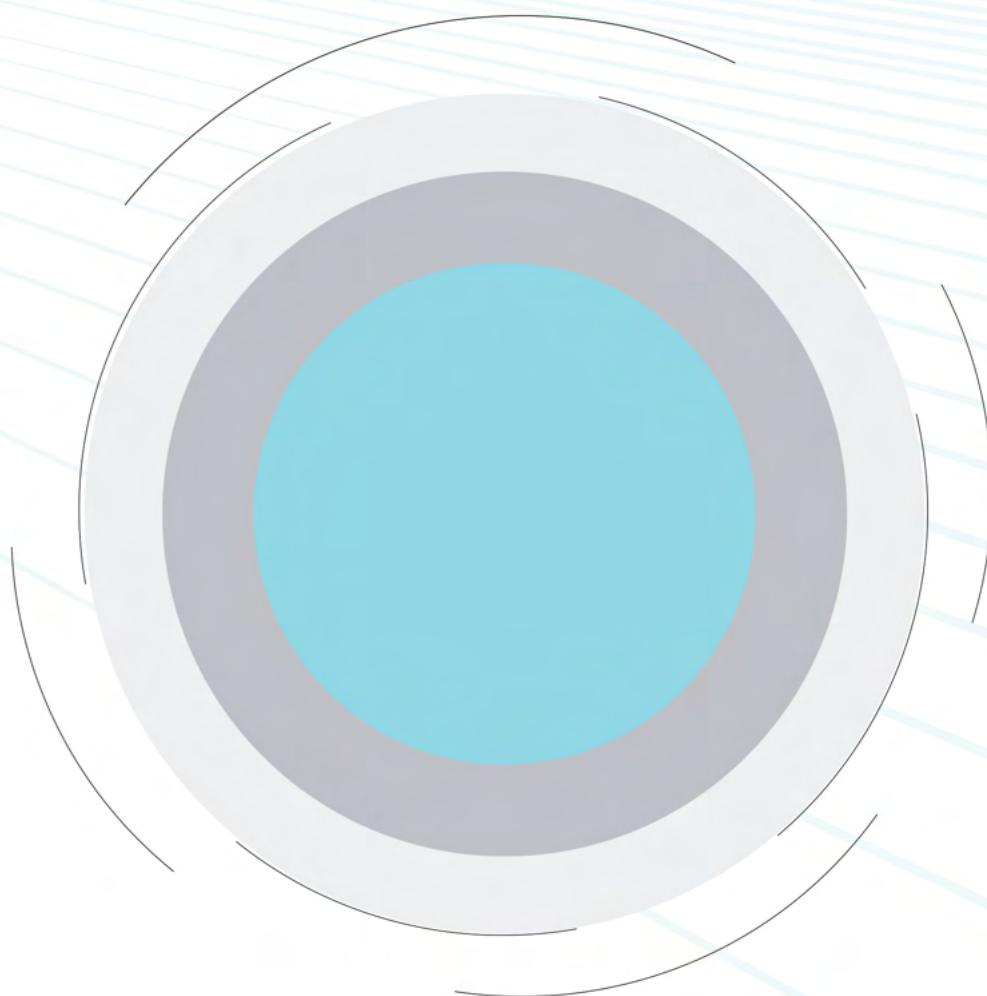


Romanian civil society: data, research, and professionalization needs





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This study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Democracy, within The Center for the Study of Civil Society program, funded by the Romanian American Foundation.

Responsibility for the content of the report rests solely with the authors.

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October, 2023

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Lev Fejes has over 7 years of experience in the non-profit sector, working in various capacities in the field of corporate social responsibility, corporate social investments, and philanthropic research. With a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice (Michigan State University) and an MA in non-profit organization management (Babeş-Bolyai University), Lev has expertise in both the development and management of quantitative and qualitative research, as well as in aspects related to the functioning of civil society organizations.

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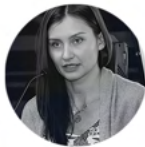
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2. Executive Summary

The results indicate the size and type of data and professionalization needs of CSOs but also outline areas and avenues for improvement.

We found that Romanian CSOs actively use data (although in a limited fashion) and that there are a number of sources for (some of) the data of interest. However, these sources are not well-known by CSOs, access is limited, and come with a series of challenges when it comes to actual use for analyses. In addition, even if the data were to be in a “ready-to-use” state, the majority of CSOs do not have the resources to analyze and use such data. Instead, they are forced to rely mostly on free third-party analyses. This indicates a number of needs to be filled:

- 1** developing easily accessible and practically relevant data and studies for the sector
- 2** developing training programs to build sector capacity in understanding, utilizing, and producing *data on the sector’s activity and other related topics*
- 3** advocating for the improvement of the government’s data collection practices.

There are significant, but differentiated research and professionalization needs in the sector based on the type, size, and level of maturity of the organizations.

This is well captured by the data, the results from the qualitative and the quantitative assessments telling not two sides of the same story, but rather highlighting the distinguished needs of different actors in the sector.

There is a need for both data about the sector (Civil society sector; Impact; Institutional funders and CSO functioning) and for the sector (Macro/contextual; Intervention-specific).

Accordingly, there is a segment in the sector that is looking ahead “upwards and onwards”. Being (relatively) free from the pressures of securing the next funding, such organizations can have a “what do we need/what does the sector need” approach. At the same time, there is a (larger) segment that is more constrained and thus more pragmatic when it comes to ‘luxuries’ such as data/analyses, and therefore is looking much more “inwards”, and has a “what do I need” approach. This has far-reaching consequences in terms of the types of studies and training that need to be designed as both segments’ needs have to be served.

Professionalization has its advantages, but it may lead to declining volunteerism and erosion of core civil society values, impacting citizen engagement and democracy's training ground. As such, it raises concerns about the role of regular citizens who freely associate to develop grassroots solutions and about their potential exclusion from decision-making in larger organizations. Furthermore, some authors have questioned whether these expert-led organizations truly understand and address issues at the grassroots level¹. Thus, there is a fragile balance between the need for professionalization and structure and between the free-associative nature of grassroots organizations.

¹Edwards, 2013

Professionalization and organizational development needs have to be fulfilled by training providers using a tailored approach as the “one size fits all” method is unlikely to yield the intended outcomes.

Beyond catering to the divergent training needs of funders, infrastructure/support organizations, and transversal organizations, versus those of smaller, less established organizations and foundations highlighted in this study, the process of professionalization must be a democratic one (i.e., not a mandatory requirement to access funding).

Academia, support organizations, funders, and the sector itself have a significant role to play in satisfying the data needs, as well as in the process of increasing the professionalization of the sector.

Data needs and data use are intrinsically linked with professionalization, as data collection, management, analysis, and use require a specific set of skills. While academia can and will supply relevant studies and training via a civil society research center, there is limited escape from building a minimum level of data literacy in the sector. This knowledge is required for CSOs to be able to commission research studies, to check the quality of the data, analyses, and inferences, and to utilize the results to the benefit of the organization or the sector. In addition, data on impact requires the sector to be ready to become a data producer. This too requires similar skills.

There is enough understanding of the value of data, and enough openness and maturity for the Romanian Civil society sector to become an empowered, organized, experienced, and responsible user and producer of data.

Academia, in collaboration with the existing network of support organizations, can help CSOs develop the required skill sets to enhance their understanding and use of data, can provide the sector with timely and practically relevant research insights in a more predictable fashion, and can support the research efforts of institutional funders or other CSOs.

3. Introduction

A vigorous civil society remains crucial to any democracy².

Almost two centuries after Tocqueville wrote about the "art of joining", civil society organizations (CSOs) as "schools of democracy" continue to play a key role in key for driving political, social, and economic outcomes³.

CSOs serve as intermediaries between citizens and the government, advocating for citizens' interests and giving voice to local and marginalized communities. CSOs can help ensure that democratic institutions function effectively, and that power is not concentrated in the hands of a few. They can shape public policies, hold governments accountable, uphold the rule of law and human rights, support the fight against corruption⁴, promote democratic values, and push for legal reforms that align with democratic principles.

CSOs also foster civic participation by mobilizing citizens to participate in democratic processes, including voting, attending public meetings, and engaging in community development. All of these have direct effects on the quality of democratic governance. In addition, CSOs can help fill gaps in government services, improving citizens' overall quality of life. By this, they help alleviate the growing dissatisfaction with democracy widespread across many countries and reduce the appeal of non-democratic alternatives. Yet, authoritarian leaders or regimes can use elements of civil society as tools to strengthen their positions and consolidate power. While civil society organizations typically serve as vital checks on government power in democracies, authoritarian regimes may manipulate or co-opt certain elements of civil society for their purposes. Recently, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Bjørn Berge, stated that countering this democratic backsliding requires "...reassembling the core building blocks of democracy⁵", including strengthening civil society.

A strong civil society can only be achieved if CSOs become empowered, organized, and experienced. A strong civil society can only be achieved if CSOs become empowered, organized, and experienced.

This requires promoting an enabling environment - including policy - and providing long-term core institutional support . What constitutes an enabling environment is context-dependent and such programming (i.e., civil society development) requires a thorough understanding of the context and the characteristics and needs of civil society. Up-to-date and reliable data regarding the composition, functioning, and funding of the sector, as well as the impact of civil society organizations are therefore of utmost importance.

Data is required to inform policy or civil society development programming and general practice in the sector.

An analysis by the ODI⁷ concluded that better outcomes stem from better policy and practice, which occur when rigorous, systematic evidence is used and CSOs that use evidence better will have a greater impact. However, data on civil society is hard to come by in consolidating democracies such as Romania.

In a recent analysis, Cibian⁸ summarized the data landscape on Romanian civil society, depicting the challenges of mapping the sector. He concluded quite bleakly that:

“Romanian institutions fail to collect much data on civil society-related indicators. Furthermore, they are circumspect in even sharing data they possess. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to have a good overview of the sector’s size, activity, and contribution.”

²Putnam, 1995

³Fukuyama, 1995; Barber, 1995

⁴Mlambo et al., 2020

⁵Civil Society Summit on Council of Europe: a vibrant civil society remains central to any democracy

⁶OECD, 2012

Efforts by civil society actors to develop landscape analyses are few and far between due to their high cost and time-consuming nature. The most recent landscape study dates back to 2017⁹, with an updated installment due to be published by the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society (FDSC) in 2024. As data from 2017 are severely outdated, stakeholders rely heavily on a handful of indices that periodically capture the evolution of the civil society sector or specific components. However, as these have a hefty dose of subjectivism and lack the granularity to effectively inform either policy or programming, the update is welcomed and much needed.

An overarching study mapping the existing governmental data sources pertinent to civil society published by FDSC paints a more nuanced picture. Findings indicated that there are a total of 32 *different databases* in which data are collected by various state institutions. This means that there is potentially a large amount of data, however, their use is prevented by

- 1** the lack of interoperability of the different datasets,
- 2** the lack of clear patterns of use , and
- 3** the CSO's lack of awareness of the existing data.

This results in a shortage of (usable) data, leaving ample room for guestimates about the true size and nature of the Romanian civil society sector, its activities, and its impact, hindering an overall understanding of the sector.

⁷Overseas Development Institute

⁸Cibian, 2022

⁹FDSC, 2017

¹⁰CIVICUS Index on Civil Society; 2022 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Romania - IUPUI; USAID's Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index; Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators 2022

¹¹Voicu et al. 2021

The lack of understanding of who are the philanthropists, how much they contribute, how the funds are spent, by whom, and to what effect, not only affects our understanding of the sector but also fuels distrust toward philanthropic activity and stimulates the inclination of policymakers to overregulate.

On the other hand, CSOs should use data to fundament their decision-making process and to design their programming but they should also amass evidence of the change that they are producing. Thus, producing relevant data on the sector's activity is not only the responsibility of state institutions but also that of the sector itself. However, the USAID report (2021) notes that CSOs lack the capacity to systematically collect data (e.g., about their beneficiaries).

Given this context, it is paramount to understand whether Romanian civil society has the ability to access and analyze relevant data, and to use this data to develop its practices, substantiate advocacy efforts, measure, manage, and communicate its impact.

Using a mixed-method approach , the study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1** What type of data/analyses do Romanian CSOs need?
- 2** What type of data/analyses do Romanian CSOs use?
- 3** What do CSOs use the data/analyses for?
- 4** What are the sources of data/analyses currently used by CSOs?
- 5** What are the main obstacles Romanian CSOs in obtaining, producing, and using data?

The quantitative component was based on an online questionnaire applied to a non-probability sampling of active CSOs (n=301) developed using network nodes in the sector. Semi-structured interviews were applied to a purposive sample of institutional funders and transversal/support organizations (n=14) developed based on expert ecosystem knowledge.

By type	By size ¹³
Associations: 154	Small: 123
Foundations: 35	Medium: 26
Other status: 6	Large: 11
Undisclosed type: 3	Very large: 21
	Undisclosed size: 17

Quantitative analysis sample characteristics

¹²See Annex 1 - Methodology for a complete overview.

¹³Based on the number of employees: 1 to 10=small, 11 to 20=medium; 21 to 30=large; 31 or above=very large; throughout this section, large and very large organizations are merged into a single category

3.1 Overview of the Romanian civil society landscape

Over the past 30 years, Romanian civil society has evolved significantly, with thousands of organizations actively contributing to democracy and social and economic development¹⁴. During the 1990s, civil society focused chiefly on consolidating institutions to amplify citizens' voices and address crucial issues related to political transition, establishing a market economy, and acceding to NATO and the European Union.

Today, civil society's agenda has shifted towards addressing the failures of the state or the market, by focusing on issues like good governance, reforms in the educational system, effective public administration, a functional healthcare system, and sustainable economic development, but also acting as a watchdog over government actions.

In 2022, Romania's associative sector boasted a substantial number of registered organizations, totaling 121,314 CSOs, including 99,878 associations and 19,168 foundations. However, estimates indicate that around half of the active organizations are active compared to the registered ones¹⁵.

Romanian civil society has proven to be resilient and increasingly proactive during recent crises such as the Colectiv nightclub tragedy, the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁶, and more recently, the Ukrainian refugee crisis¹⁷. This resilience is attributed to the strengthening of the CSOs, creating a well-articulated web, able to have an effective response in such situations.

However, the sector still faces vulnerabilities.



USAID CSO Sustainability Index Time

¹⁴Lambru, 2017; Ioan et al., 2019

¹⁵FDSC, 2021

¹⁶Fierascu et al., 2022

¹⁷Cibian & Fejes, 2022

As shown by the USAID [Civil Society Sustainability Index](#), CSOs face the biggest challenges in terms of financial viability -, the legal environment, and organizational capacity. While the legal environment is not the worst in the region, the legal framework lacks transparency, and CSOs are subjected to similar taxes as for-profit companies despite their different resources¹⁸.

Financial challenges are augmented by the lack of systemic revenue sources and the small amount of endowed organizations. While some organizations rely on volunteers and keep their costs minimal, others seek funding from various sources. The main funding sources of CSOs include individual donations, company donations, European funding, external funding from international foundations and organizations, Romanian foundations, SEE funding, local and national public authorities, and economic activities¹⁹. There is a recognized need for improvement in fundraising, partnership development, resource management, capacity building, organizational culture, public image, and reporting among CSOs²⁰.

Organizational capacity is severely affected by the limited amount of funding available for capacity building, the restricted amount of flexible, multi-year, or general-purpose funding, as well as challenges at the level of human resources.²¹ The personnel crisis within CSOs, due to inadequate funding, changes in laws regarding employee contributions, and difficulties in attracting and retaining talent pose significant challenges.

Together these aspects impact CSOs' ability to carry out long-term projects and implement development strategies. Efforts to address these challenges, along with improving the public image and awareness of CSOs and the continued support from national and international sources, will be crucial for the continued growth and impact of civil society organizations in Romania.

¹⁸Ioan, 2019

¹⁹FDSC, 2021; World Bank, 2020

²⁰World Bank, 2020

²¹Cibian, 2022

4. Data and Research Needs of the Romanian Civil Society Sector

Key findings:



An overall accentuated need for data and research, coupled with a shortage of staff with data skills.



This need is localized mainly at the level of institutional funders, support, and transversal organizations, medium and large organizations.



Organizations use data and research to substantiate decisions, planning, strategies, and interventions.



The level of data literacy (the ability to understand and use data) varies widely: some organizations have developed a strategy for collecting and using data, while others take an ad hoc approach to data and studies.



Lack of resource centers/support specialized in data development and analysis.



The lack of data on the sector's activity fuels distrust and a tendency to overregulate.

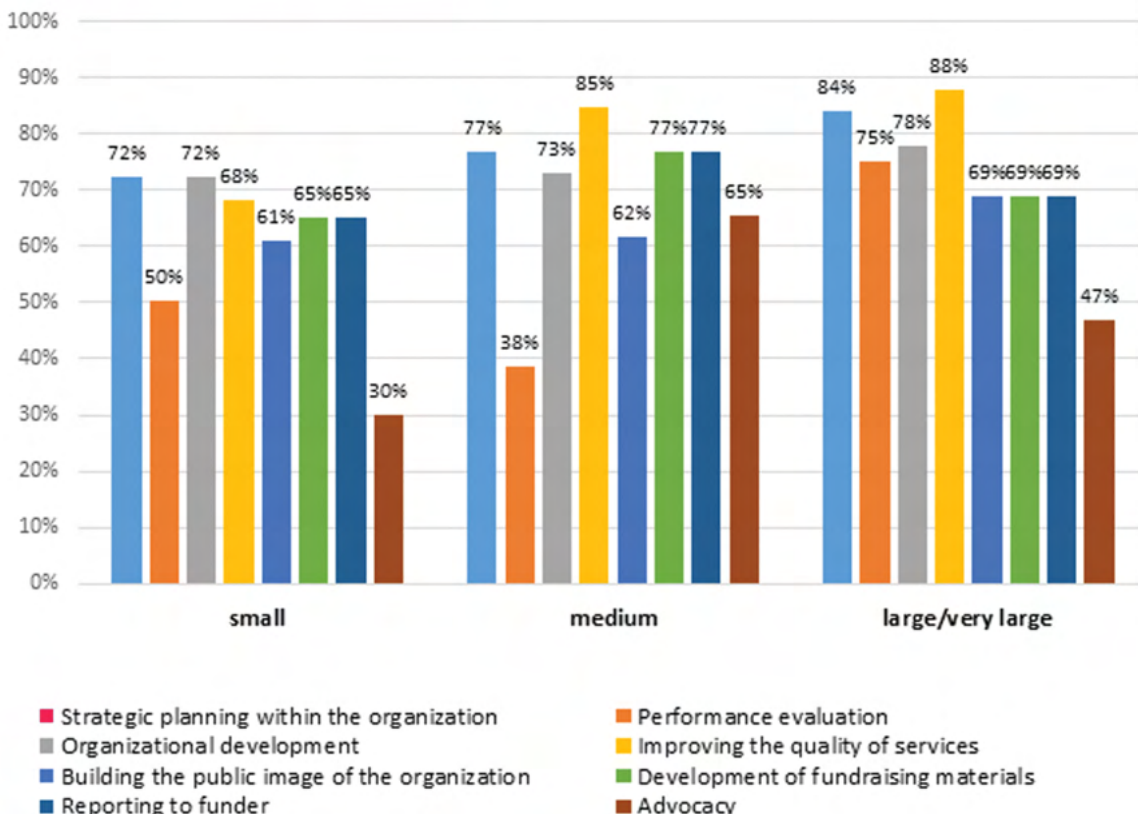
4.1. Extent of data needs

There is a significant need in the sector for data and research in general, but this is mainly localized at the level of institutional funders, support, or transversal organizations, as well as medium or large CSOs with a certain level of professionalization.

Both survey respondents and interviewees see data and research as essential for the proper functioning and development of the sector. While needs are predominantly localized at the level of institutional funders, support, or transversal organizations, medium or large CSOs with a certain level of professionalization, it is important to note that funders use and require data from their partners/grantees to substantiate their work. This means that smaller organizations also have a need for data, albeit (as visible in the graph below), use data less than larger organizations.

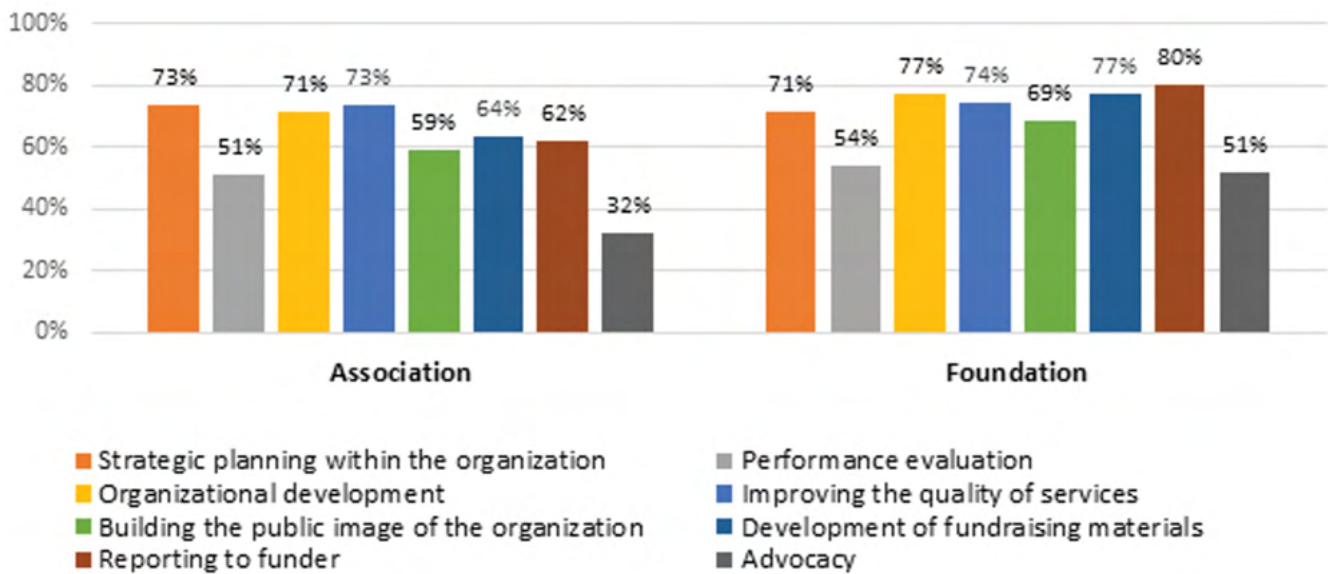
4.2. Current data use

Organizations use data and research to inform their decision-making, to substantiate their strategic planning processes, their fundraising or funding strategies, as well as their interventions.



Use of internally collected data, by organization size

Medium-sized and large/very large organizations have in common the focus on improving their services with the help of data they collect internally (85% and 88% respectively).



Use of internally collected data, by organization type

Quantitative data indicates slight differences in data use based on type (associations vs. foundations). While associations use data mainly for strategic planning, improving service quality, and organizational development, foundations use data to a larger extent and for more varied purposes.

Limitations in data use are linked to a shortage of staff with data skills/research expertise. 76% of associations reported that “lack of sufficient staff limits the organization's ability to optimally use the potential of internally collected data”; among foundations, 71% face this difficulty. In terms of organization size, challenges related to staff are quite evenly spread with 78% of small organizations, 69% of medium-size organizations, and 75% of large/very large organizations facing this challenge. This is no surprise, as CSOs suffer from a general staff shortage, as discussed at length in the professionalization section.

4.3. Types of data needed

CSOs need five (5) distinct types of data and research: Civil society sector data, impact data, macro/contextual data, intervention-specific data, and analyses on and for the better functioning of institutional funders and CSOs.

Data needs of the sector, ordered from the most mentioned to least mentioned, consist of:

- 1** Civil society sector data: number, type, and other basic characteristics of CSOs as well as their areas of activity, the number of employees and volunteers, number and types of interventions, type and size of funding, and so on;
- 2** Impact data: at the level of interventions/programs, at the level of individual organizations, and as aggregated change produced by the sector;
- 3** Macro/contextual data (national, regional, or local) to inform and contextualize interventions (e.g., socio-economic context);
- 4** Intervention-specific data: sectorial/area of intervention data, for example on school drop-out rates for educational interventions/programs, the number of patients with a particular type of cancer, etc., data at the intersection of two areas (e.g., health and education), and studies/analyses on such topics;
- 5** Analyses on and for the better functioning of institutional funders and CSOs: e.g., decision-making processes; grant-making decisions, what constitutes acceptable service costs, cost standards for home care of the elderly, etc.

Survey data revealed a much more prosaic approach to data and analyses. Responding organizations (mostly small-sized associations), focused more heavily on the 3rd type (macro and contextual data), in particular on the availability of sponsorships among private companies (97%), citizens' willingness to make individual donations (93%), and citizens' willingness to volunteer (92%), but also public perception/media portrayal of the sector (88/89%). This indicates...

...a discrepancy in focus between more established, financially stable organizations and what could well be the majority of the sector. Focusing exclusively on high-level data would leave organizations without the more practical data and analyses that inform their (fundraising) practice.

This difference in focus between organizations is closely linked to the vulnerabilities of the sector, more specifically its financial sustainability, and it is in line with findings by the likes of FDSC, the World Bank, and Cibian.

The findings also revealed significant blind spots when it comes to data needs and use of the sector. These include topics such as philanthropic research topics beyond individual or institutional giving, organization management practices, and grantmaking practices.

However, it is important to note that these areas may be deemed less important given more urgent/pressing needs and the lack of adequate funding for research.

4.4. Challenges in utilizing and developing relevant data

Findings indicate significant gaps in the ability of institutional funders and civil society organizations to search, locate, access, analyze, and interpret data and research findings.

When CSOs need to search for data and analyses, organizations have similar approaches, regardless of their type or size. They tend to use the same sources for accessing them. Analyses by experts, researchers, or universities are almost twice as unlikely to be used irrespective of CSO size or type.

The most commonly used sources are processed sources produced by other organizations in the sector or those that are freely available. Those developed by academia are much less widely used, and at the other end of the spectrum are raw data and data or analyses that can be accessed only after paying a fee.

The limited data and research literacy of CSO staff, the jargon specific to academic research and publications, and the lack of resources that can be allocated to these activities are also major stumbling blocks. These aspects also hinder the use of research findings in informing interventions/programs and shaping strategies and decision-making practices.

²²Interviewees indicated that not only the lack of funding for research or data development, but also the nature of the project funding (typically a year) make it almost impossible to implement a rigorous research project and, based on the results, implement the intervention.

Challenges related to the nature of the data collected and supplied by state institutions include lack of interoperability and the fragmented nature of the data (also indicated by previous research; FDSC, 2021), as well as the quality and format of data provided by state institutions.

Source	By type (source rank in parentheses)		By size (source rank in parentheses)		
	Associations	Foundations	S	M	L/XL
Analyses developed by specialized organizations	74% (i)	89% (i)	77% (i)	85% (i)	72% (ii)
Public (free) databases	71% (ii)	66% (ii)	68% (ii)	65% (ii)	78% (i)
Analyses by experts/researchers/universities	39% (iii)	46% (iii)	39% (iii)	54% (iii)	44% (iii)

Sources of data and analyses by organization type and size

4.5. ‘Unintended’ side effects of the lack of data

Lack of trust, as identified by several high-profile interviewees, is one of the key issues curtailing collaboration among different key stakeholders, within and between sectors. Accurate data and credible research are seen as a means to generate transparency and increase trust in philanthropic giving and the sector’s activity.

Data about the sector’s activity is also necessary beyond the practical aspects enumerated above. The lack of transparency and aggregated data on the sector’s activity generates a “black box, where anything can happen” and this in turn generates a lack of trust towards philanthropy and the sector. As trust in CSOs is one of the main motivations for giving by individuals, and CSOs are (and rightly so) concerned with the topic of trust and media portrayal, this aspect is particularly important and should provide CSOs with the necessary impetus to develop their data/research strategies and abilities.

²³Individual Giving in Romania study 2023 (forthcoming).

5. Professionalization needs of the sector

Key findings:

- 1 Professionalization is an exception rather than the norm in Romanian CSOs.
- 2 76% of respondents expressed a need in at least one area.
- 3 The majority expressed needs in several areas simultaneously.
- 4 General areas for improvement include staff recruitment, retention, and remuneration.
- 5 Significant differences in the professionalization needs expressed by interviewees (more established support/transversal organizations and institutional funders) and the quantitative sample (large majority small associations).
- 6 Top skill/professionalization areas in need of improvement:
 - institutional funders and support organizations management, project management, impact measurement, and management, and sustainability;
 - small organizations fundraising, donor identification and management, and communication with the donors.

In long-established democratic countries, civil society organizations there is a tendency for voluntary associations to transform into professionalized organizations, which are trying to gain more power, funding, and policy influence. The shift in civil society, from citizen involvement to a more professionalized approach, is driven by increased competition for funding and political pressure on accountability²⁴.

Professionalization has positive effects on organizations, leading to a better ability to attract funds, and develop and implement interventions/projects, but also increased accountability, organizational rationalization, and better strategic planning.

Data collected through surveys and interviews reveal a number of needs and challenges that hinder the professionalization of the CS sector in Romania, with negative consequences for the long-term sustainability and impact of organizations.

²⁴Hwang & Powell, 2009

5.1. Skills that need to be acquired/improved in organizations

Professionalization needs of funders, infrastructure/support organizations, and transversal organizations focus on organization management, project management, impact measurement and management, and sustainability.

From the perspective of the interviewees (institutional funders, infrastructure/support organizations, transversal organizations), CSOs need to gain/improve their capabilities concerning financial management, fundraising, project management, impact measurement, human resources management, communication, data/research skills, financial abilities, entrepreneurial thinking, and personnel training (in broad terms). Other areas (mentioned sporadically, yet explicitly) where CSOs need to improve their current capabilities are related to advocacy, collaboration, data privacy-GDPR, leadership, team management, human resources evaluation, active listening, IT, investment-oriented thinking, market-oriented thinking, future-oriented thinking, and holistic perspectives.

Conversely, quantitative data indicated that...

...smaller, less established organizations and foundations tend to focus on funding aspects such as fundraising, donor identification and management, and communication with the donors.

This divergence creates different types of needs that have to be fulfilled by training providers, as the “one size fits all” approach is unlikely to yield the intended outcomes. In addition, this highlights the need for a thorough understanding of the sector in terms of size, type, and even organizational development stage/maturity, as this allows not only for a better “tailoring” of the training agenda and curricula, but also for deploying (the limited amount) of organizational development funding in a way that is “more cost-conscious and more focused on outcomes.

²⁹The ordering reflects the frequency of their occurrence in the interviews; therefore it can be read as a list of priorities

5.2. Staff-related challenges of CSOs

The biggest challenge faced by CSOs with regard to human resources is their ability to attract, retain, and properly remunerate/incentivize their personnel.

Accordingly, organizations have difficulty with their recruitment process, particularly when it comes to skilled professionals who already possess the necessary abilities. A key challenge in this regard is the public perception of a career in the NGO sector: for many – particularly young people – this prospect is far from being an attractive professional choice.

Type of human resources challenge faced by organizations	By type		By size		
	Associations	Foundations	S	M	L/XL
Attracting personnel with relevant experience for the organization's intervention area	63%	77%	66%	65%	78%
Attracting staff with fundraising skills	83%	84%	79%	92%	94%
Attracting personnel with financial skills	61%	55%	57%	67%	69%
Development of the professional skills of the staff	55%	44%	57%	48%	50%
Retention of qualified personnel in the organization	58%	43%	62%	40%	48%
Cultivating a high level of motivation among the staff	57%	54%	61%	28%	59%

Human resources challenge faced by organizations by type and size

Moreover, the remuneration aspect can become problematic, as salaries are generally not attractive enough and there are instances where organizations struggle with ensuring the continuity of staff payments (mainly due to project-based funding). In addition, the lack of staff can lead to NGO staff being generalists, often working as 'jack-of-all-trades' but masters of none. This can lead to task overload, which in turn can lead to burnout. This overload or burnout, in itself, or coupled with inadequate salaries, might prompt people to leave the organizations and choose a different professional path.

Staff training is another issue that plagues nonprofits.

Training staff on the job can be a lengthy and demanding process, without the guarantee that newcomers will stay with the organization. Which in turn leads to resource drain, but can also contribute to the burnout of trainers. In addition, personnel training outside the organization generates specific challenges.

As project-based funding models are inadequate or insufficient to fund organizational development costs, covering training costs can be difficult for organizations. Another aspect mentioned by interviewees, namely the increasing number of training providers (e.g. for management courses), makes it difficult for CSOs to identify quality training programs. Finally, as training needs to be strongly connected to practice, pieces of training that cover theoretical aspects are insufficient to prepare professionals.

Statements about the current training offer for CSOs	By type		By size		
	Associations	Foundations	S	M	L/XL
The information about training opportunities for CSOs is easy to access	45%	50%	46%	54%	42%
The diversity of the training offer covers CSOs' training needs	41%	29%	40%	35%	32%
Most training opportunities are in the capital, placing organizations outside Bucharest at a disadvantage	73%	86%	77%	73%	77%
The quality of the training offer meets CSOs' training needs	41%	63%	45%	58%	45%
The availability of online courses has improved organizations' access to training opportunities	78%	86%	84%	69%	77%
The quality of online/hybrid training is similar to that of face-to-face courses	49%	31%	46%	46%	42%

CSO's view on the current training offer (sum of 'completely agree' and 'rather agree')

²⁹The ordering reflects the frequency of their occurrence in the interviews; therefore it can be read as a list of priorities

The tendency to have “generalist” staff, while viewed by some interviewees as being beneficial, is considered a major impediment when it comes to specialized knowledge or staff wellbeing. This aspect of staffing shortage also translates directly to challenges faced by CSOs concerning data and analyses. More than 3 quarters of the respondents consider that the lack of sufficient staff limits the organization's ability to optimally use the potential of internally collected data, while only 12% of the associations and 9% of the foundations in our survey sample consider that their organization benefits from sufficient staff with analytical skills so that optimal utilization of the collected data is not a problem.

Other issues (with unique occurrences) outlined in the interviews refer to **organization-level practices** that could foster professionalization. Some of them are closely connected to the staff challenges listed above, such as the increased focus on personal development (vs. organizational goals), increased focus on well-being, and staff motivation. Additional mentions (with unique occurrence) refer to **organizational attributes** relevant to professionalization: financial sustainability, stability, and the ability of CSOs to conduct research.

5.3. Sector-level needs and challenges concerning professionalization

An important challenge is related to CSOs' public image, which is perceived by the respondents as being rather negative, with important consequences for the ability of organizations to recruit their personnel.

Concerning the relationship with funders, interviewees considered that CSOs need to become more assertive, more vocal, and more aware of the worth of the contribution that they bring to the table. In their turn, funders should practice a solid and long-term commitment toward organizations, an approach that would greatly improve CSOs' sustainability and organizational strength. The power-imbalance relations between funders and CSOs are common and greatly discourage organizations from having a bolder approach when requesting funds, for overhead/staff costs included.

Improvements are also needed at the level of intra-sectoral communication, as organizations are often in a state of competition for resources, but also lack dialogue and interchange. This in turn hinders collaborations not only between funders, but also between implementers.

A further aim regards better communication with the general public. In this respect, a general observation from interviews was that CSOs should develop their ability to convey clear messages to external audiences. Additional aspects refer to CSOs' specialization, also highlighted among the pressing needs. The overall need for professionalization is hardly questioned, however, if it undermines flexibility, professionalization should be less of an aim for grassroots organizations.

To sum up, the following needs and challenges have been referred to:

- 1** negative public image
- 2** CSOs need to become more assertive (in relations with funders)
- 3** funders' commitment
- 4** intra-sectoral communication/collaboration
- 5** funder-CSO power imbalance
- 6** CSOs need to specialize
- 7** CSOs need better communication with the public
- 8** balancing professionalization vs. flexibility.

5.4. Sector-level attributes related to professionalization

The interviewees highlighted several obstacles that might hinder the professionalization of the sector. These are linked to the limited willingness/availability/time of staff to learn (despite learning opportunities being accessible), the occasional inadequate use of funds for capacity building as well as the inertia of the sector. They also consider that professionalization alone would not suffice unless supplemented by a sector-level change in the sense of increased maturity.

Professionalization is seen as an exception and not as a key attribute of the Romanian CSO sector, now or in the past. Some organizations managed to carry on, mature, and secure for themselves a reputable position/image in the sector. However, there is too little knowledge about the sector as a whole and about the skills and expertise of people who work in organizations.

Other requirements related to CSOs' professionalization (one-time occurrences): external pressure for professionalization (i.e., funders), improvement needed to increase impact, there is a need for specialized and capable CSO resource centers, as well as more visibility, scaling-up, transparency, and intra-sectoral collaboration.

5.5. Who should do what for professionalization?

The actors relevant for professionalization have specific contributions and weights in the professionalization of the CSO sector.

Funders can have a key role in this regard, and they should be an important source of pressure and guide for professionalization in the sector.

The mechanisms they have available for doing so include resource investment and setting priorities whereby they finance capacity building or research activities. However, at the moment, few institutional funders operating in Romania have a real input in professionalization.

The state's role in professionalization is rather limited, but not entirely absent. The state lacks the necessary expertise to prepare CSO practitioners and has an incomplete understanding of the sector's needs for professionalization. It can, however, stay relevant through financing and incentives for university specializations that can provide the necessary professional skills. It can also create the framework and standards for training provision. While the state is criticized and criticizable in many aspects (including its data collection practice), for many organizations the funding received from the state remains crucial for their survival. A specific area where public institutions should improve their current approach has to do with their understanding of the sector's specificity.

The sector itself is important for professionalization, by becoming a source of expertise, while support organizations have an important role beyond training and learning opportunities, especially through events that facilitate exchanges between CSOs.

The sector has a number of seasoned professionals whose experience and expertise should be harnessed to train current and future staff. At the same time, while support organizations can serve as key advisers and have an important guiding role, the lack of resources is an obstacle to their more active/wider involvement. They also have a deficit when it comes to understanding adult learning, designing curricula and formal training, the number of qualified trainers being unknown, but estimated to be too low.

Community foundations and academia are other actors with high relevance for professionalization, yet both need to be more active and provide more support. The role of academia is particularly seen as being useful (see table below for the areas of contribution), but the lack of collaboration hinders the development of practically relevant programs and training.

Academia's potential contribution	By type		By size		
	Associations	Foundations	S	M	L/XL
Research consultancy &/or training	41%	50%	44%	46%	50%
Consultancy and/or training on the use of data collected by organizations	39%	55%	43%	40%	59%
Consultancy and/or training on identification and use of relevant data from sources outside organizations	41%	61%	43%	46%	63%
Consultancy and/or training on data analysis and interpretation	46%	53%	44%	62%	66%
Analyses of the scope and impact of the non-profit sector's activity in specific areas of intervention	52%	70%	55%	56%	66%
Analyses of the dynamics of legislation	50%	50%	48%	58%	63%
Facilitation of CSOs' access to specialty literature	44%	56%	40%	54%	66%
Facilitation of dialogue between CSOs and public authorities	58%	56%	58%	58%	63%

How Academia could contribute to professionalization (% of 'very useful')

6. Way forward

Beyond the benefits of having timely and accurate data discussed in the introductory section, our study is based on the assertion that attention to empirical facts and scientific thinking enhances the positive role of civil society in democratic development and increases its resilience against illiberal alternatives. There are several reasons for this argument.

First, access to data and know-how about using it tends to increase the effectiveness of the CSO's projects and advocacy work. Second, civil society groups can provide contexts where members learn fact-checking and scientific reasoning. Third, CSOs can encourage the producers of scientific knowledge, academics, and researchers to pay attention to the needs of the nonprofit sector and society. Finally, CSOs that use data can increase the quality of public debates.

However, the data landscape is filled with challenges, from access to interoperability to the lack of skills in the sector. Nevertheless, in the absence of research institutes or university centers able to develop and implement methodologically rigorous studies, non-governmental support organizations and funders have taken on the task of performing studies on philanthropic behavior and civil society development. These studies have an increased utility for nonprofit and business sector practitioners, as well as for academia, but they suffer from a lack of predictability in recurrence and are often limited in scope due to the lack of funding and the expertise needed for more complex analyses.

The lack of research institutes, and university centers, and the limited number of university programs that have as their focus philanthropy or civil society also translated into a minimal interest on behalf of academics in the topic. This is visible especially compared to research work in the field performed in other European countries, which is not particularly surprising in the context of the general chronic underfunding of research activity in Romania²⁶.

Significant gaps in understanding Romanian philanthropic organizations and civil society remain, and academia has a role to play in addressing these

To overcome these research gaps, as well as the gaps in the data/research and professionalization needs of the sector, interviewees expressed the need for a ‘reference point’ in the form of a reputable/trusted institution, to whom they can turn for services or advice regarding:

- 1** analyses/research services and research-related support;
- 2** timely and actionable insights, which have reliable quality and practical relevance, but are also formulated in clear, accessible, and actionable language;
- 3** widely accessible, searchable/editable databases (e.g., relevant literature/studies; clean, analyzable data from previous studies; institutional funder’s funding areas & support size);
- 4** data/research training or other training not offered or insufficiently covered by the market (e.g., impact measurement and management);
- 5** off-the-shelf (digested) data and research tools that can be easily used by practitioners.

²⁶A recent report of EUROSTAT shows that Romania spends as little as 0,48% of the GDP, the lowest proportion among the EU countries, more than four times less than the corresponding proportion at the EU level (Source dataset: rd_e_gerdtot).

A research Center on Philanthropy and Civil society linked to a higher education institution can serve civil society with practically relevant data and studies. It can, in conjunction with practitioners, develop training programs that blend theory with practice. It can facilitate access to practically relevant scientific results as well as the knowledge transfer from research and international networks into professional practice. Finally, it can play the role of connector between civil society, business, and (the rest of) academia.

Based on data from the qualitative and the quantitative assessment, this institution should also fulfill other functions, including:

- 1 acting as an advocate for the sector towards students to attract talent to the sector,
- 2 acting as an advocate for open and transparent government data that is collected, curated, funded, and made available by state institutions, in areas such as CS sector characteristics, macro/context (e.g., socio-economic), and intervention-specific areas (e.g., education),
- 3 acting as a thought leader in the civil society sector concerning knowledge and data development, filling the gaps identified.

Academia has to take an active role in role in building a strong civil society by supporting civil society practice in key areas across the spectrum of funders, supporters, and implementers, providing research training and research services, and performing outreach activities.

However, at the same time, institutional funders and the CSO sector at large have to take responsibility for not only producing data on the sector but also for using it to develop the sector, advocate for, and communicate about the sector. After all, data that is not put to good use, is just a bunch of numbers.

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8. Annex 1 - Methodology

The mixed-method study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research questions. Data was collected between March and May 2023.

The quantitative component was based on an online questionnaire applied to a non-probability sampling of active CSOs (n=301) developed using network nodes in the sector. The 25-item questionnaire was administered using Survey Monkey and was completed by 301 respondents, out of which 198 were usable for the analysis. The exported data was cleaned and analyzed using Excel and SPSS.

The qualitative component utilized a semi-structured interview, which we applied to a purposive sample of institutional funders and transversal/support organizations (n=14) developed based on expert ecosystem knowledge. Data from the interviews is meant to complement information collected through the survey, as well as add depth and context to the quantitative data.

Interviews were manually coded using both inductive and deductive coding²⁷ performed in two waves by two separate coders in order to check for inter-rater reliability. A second round of coding meant to refine codes assigned in the first round was also performed. Codes were then organized into categories based on their similarity or relevance to specific topics or concepts. These categories were further refined by rearranging the codes to identify meaningful connections and patterns relevant to our analysis, which then were consolidated into narratives on specific aspects relating to the research questions.

²⁷Creswell & Poth, 2017



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