

# **Social innovations implemented by non-governmental organizations on the example of the Podkarpackie Province**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The activity of non-governmental organizations seems to be very important due to the role to be played by these entities in accordance with the provisions of the Act of April 24, 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work. They also implement social innovations to a limited extent (most often in the category of new or unusual products or services), becoming, next to the entities of the first and second socio-economic sector, an important link in introducing changes and new solutions (especially in the field of social policy). Their role became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic and the armed conflict in Ukraine. The aim of the article is to indicate the types of social innovations implemented in the Podkarpackie Province by non-governmental organization, to present the scale of this phenomenon and to develop recommendations in this regard. The author particularly focused his attention on innovative product and marketing activities, as it seems that they should most often be implemented by NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province.*

**KEYWORDS:** *NGOs, social innovations, civil society, Podkarpackie Province.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Social innovations are considered innovative activities aimed at improving the quality of life of individuals and collectivities. In order to implement them, it is necessary to have certain resources (e.g. financial or material), as well as the occurrence of new ideas, products, services or models proposed by certain entities, such as social policies (Tucker 2014). Their implementation in society creates the possibility of meeting human needs more efficiently. Thus, social innovations can refer to new products or services designed to meet the needs of, for example, a particular local community. Their implementation enables the creation of cohesive, more sustainable and inclusive societies and local communities (Mulgan 2006).

When it comes to the implementation of social innovation by NGOs, it is important not only to produce new services and products, but also to implement new ideas that make it possible to achieve social goals (Mulgan et al. 2007).

Social innovation is considered a very popular concept that is gaining a growing audience, both among theorists and social practitioners (Jessop, et al. 2014). Despite some differences in defining the term, numerous authors emphasize the positive impact of innovative ideas on diverse spheres of an individual's life (Nicholls et al. 2015). As Bettina Bock (2016) states, for some researchers and theorists, social innovations have even become a panacea for all the problems currently afflicting humanity. In particular, they are supposed to remedy the phenomena of exclusion and social inequality. This seems to fit into the current of the so-called democratic paradigm of social innovation, which emphasizes the empowerment of individuals on the margins of social life (Zajda 2017). NGOs play a special role in this process. In Poland, NGOs are associations (including volunteer fire brigades and rural housewives' associations) and foundations that undertake activities in various spheres of public life e.g. sports, tourism, recreation and hobbies, culture and art, education and upbringing, social assistance, health care, local development, civil rescue, etc. (Zajda and Mazurek 2022; Charycka et al. 2022).

A key subject for consideration of social innovations is the purpose of their introduction by NGOs. In addition to improving the quality of life of a specific collective, they are also aimed at solving social problems, activating the community to develop social relations, self-help and better use of available resources. Therefore, social innovations should solve problems that have arisen in the community and lead to the empowerment of those affected (Krisztina and Géza 2024; Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, et al. 2023; van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016, Rüede and Lurtz 2012). Thus, not only members of the association's board, foundation staff or volunteers are to be activated, but also their beneficiaries and community representatives. Mobilization of members of the public is thus considered one of the most important factors in the implementation of social innovation by NGOs (Anheier et al. 2019; Caulier-Grice et al. 2012).

Joanna Machnik-Slomka distinguishes four categories of social innovation:

- 1) product, related to the introduction of a service or product that is new;
- 2) process, the essence of which is the implementation of a new or improved method of manufacturing a product or service;
- 3) marketing, involving the use of a marketing method that is unprecedented in other entities, which significantly changes the product design, distribution, promotion or pricing strategy;
- 4) organizational, related to the introduction of a new method of management in the entity (the changes concern the principles of operation of the institution, the management of the workplace, the creation of desirable relations with the environment) (Machnik-Słomka 2014).

Bond (2016) also uses a similar classification. Bond "is the UK network for organizations working in international development".

The analysis of the implementation of social innovations by NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province specifically considered two types of innovative solutions declared by the surveyed NGOs. They are product innovations (introduction of new or unusual social services, unprecedented forms of activity) and marketing innovations (in the aspect of innovative or rarely used forms of promoting their activity in society or the local community). In a publication entitled Guide to social innovation (issued by the European Commission in 2013), social innovation is defined as "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet needs (...) and create new social relationships and cooperation." This concept is a kind of aggregate of the aforementioned two types of innovative activities, as it includes both the aspect of producing new services and products, as well as promoting the activities of third sector organizations in order to construct networks and cooperation in a broad sense, e.g. with potential beneficiaries, volunteers, public institutions or private enterprises (European Union 2013).

E. Pol and S. Ville (2009) argue that for a social innovation to be considered innovative, there must be an improvement in the quality of life or an increase in key quantitative indicators that are part of human existence. An improvement in human existence, as understood by the aforementioned authors, is not only a change in the fate of an individual, but of the entire local community. Social innovations in their conception do not have to be fully original or unique. However, they should contain an element of novelty in relative and real terms.

Civil society is considered a special space where social innovations are created and developed. An important role in it is played by NGOs, which create or replicate innovative activities. This is because NGOs are closest to ordinary citizens, which allows them to respond more effectively to the needs of the local community by offering relevant products, services or ideas. The described phenomenon does not apply only to countries with a strong tradition of civil society and a high rate of social capital such as, for example, the United States (Tocqueville 2012; Sawhill 2020), Germany (Offe and Fuchs 2002), Australia, New Zealand (Lyons and Nowland-Foreman 2010), but also to countries with a low level of social capital such as, for example, Poland (A. Bienkuńska et al. 2020; Grabowska-Powaga 2020). Simon Tucker (2014) points out that civil society actors tend to focus on the early stages of social innovation. This phenomenon is most often caused by a lack of or insufficient resources (e.g., financial). This problem is particularly evident among Polish NGOs. The results of research conducted by the Klon/Jawor association indicate that the average annual budget of Polish NGOs is about 26,000 PLN (about \$6,500) (Charycka et al. 2022). Thus, these are funds that are often insufficient to implement product or service innovations. Despite the difficulties cited, Polish NGOs are trying to implement social innovations as part of their activities. The author was particularly interested in the implementation of social innovations in southeastern Poland, where the Podkarpackie Province - one of the sixteen administrative divisions, the highest level in the country, is located.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The analysis of the implementation of social innovations by non-governmental organizations concerned entities located in southeastern Poland, more specifically in the Podkarpackie Province. A triangulation of research methods was applied using two techniques: Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and Individual In-Depth Interview (IDI).

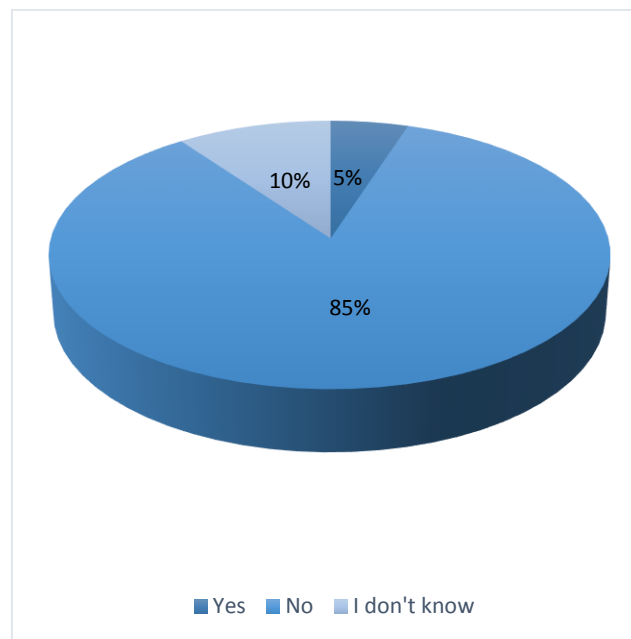
Computer-assisted telephone interviewing is a technique used in survey research and involves collecting data using telephone calls. The CATI technique can be used both for the analysis of large communities with a selected research sample and small communities, where such surveys can cover the entire population. Due to the easy availability of contact numbers for the headquarters of non-governmental organizations in the Podkarpackie region (this information is usually included, for example, in the substantive reports of public benefit organizations) and the suggestions of the surveyed leaders of non-profit entities themselves (included in the pilot study), it was decided to use a computer-assisted telephone interview.

The survey population consisted of five hundred and eighty-three NGOs based in the Podkarpackie Province. A total of three hundred and sixty-eight survey questionnaires were obtained, which should be considered a high response rate.

IDI was used to describe in practical terms the issue of the use of social innovation by NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province. An important issue related to the presented research technique was to allow non-governmental organizations leaders to speak freely by the moderator. The use of IDI made it possible to guarantee the respondents the opportunity to speak freely. A total of ten individual in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs from the Podkarpackie Province who were implementing social innovations in their associations and foundations. Surveys using CATI and IDI techniques were conducted between September 2022 and May 2023.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As part of the survey of NGOs' activities in Podkarpackie Province, the conduct of innovative projects or implementation of out-of-the-box solutions by these entities was analyzed. Figure 1 presents the answer to the question of whether the surveyed NGOs use innovative solutions as part of their activities.



**Figure 1: The use of innovative solutions or solutions not found in other NGOs by the surveyed public benefit organizations (N=368).**

Source: Own elaboration

The vast majority of NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province do not conduct innovative activities (85%). Only 5% of respondents declared their use. The value of the indicator is significantly lower than in the case of research conducted in Hungary in the Abaúji region (researchers declared the use of social innovation by about 26% of NGOs), however a broader understanding of social innovation (e.g. in the form of idea implementation, unconventional partnerships) was taken into account (Krisztina and Géza 2024).

Polish respondents indicated more than a dozen responses related to the implementation of innovative solutions, but almost half of these statements cannot be categorized as social innovations. Examples of respondents' answers included daring to take a group on trips, organizing sports competitions, conducting activities in a day care center with a small group of children, Santa Claus parties, promoting large families and conducting a holiday English school. In principle, such activities are also used by other entities. It is likely that respondents did not understand the question or have the belief that what they are doing is unusual, unique, although in reality these efforts cannot be considered innovative.

Thus, social innovation is implemented by only about 2.5% of NGOs from the Podkarpackie Province. Similar research results were achieved by Katarzyna Zajda, analyzing the use of innovative activities by rural NGOs in the Lublin Province. Implementation of social innovation was declared by 2.8% of NGO's leaders (Zajda 2022).

Among the most common innovative activities undertaken by the NGOs surveyed are public collections in the nature of "fields of hope," running a "second-hand" store, weekly supervisions of the therapy

team, establishing a children's fire team, world championships in rapid and lightning chess, European championships for transplant and dialysis patients, housing training for the terminally ill, creating graffiti and murals in urban spaces, and providing alternative communication apps.

"Fields of Hope" as a social innovation was indicated twice, in the other cases there was one answer each.

• *RESPONDENT 1: "Our organization uses a rather unusual form of support for the needy, which is the field of hope."*

• *MODERATOR: "Could you give an overview of what the field of hope is?"*

• *RESPONDENT 1: "It is a no... let's say such a fundraising campaign for hospices combined with planting and selling daffodils. I think the idea was implemented in Poland... right... somehow in 1998, and I think it was Krakow."*

"Fields of Hope" is an innovative way to raise money for the activities of NGOs. This method was first used in the UK. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned social innovation was implemented from outside and is effectively used by a small number of NGOs in the Podkarpackie region. The novelty of this method lies in the fact that NGOs do not just collect money, but provide a specific product in return, as well as care for the local environment (by planting daffodils in places designated for this purpose). It is thus a combination of fundraising activities undertaken for the benefit of hospice beneficiaries and ecology.

Another respondent during the implementation of the IDI pointed to operating a second-hand store.

• *RESPONDENT 2: "I don't know if this is an innovation or not, but we run a second-hand store. Do you know what it is?"*

• *MODERATOR: "Yes, I know."*

• *RESPONDENT 2: "Well, that's what's great. We sell clothes and that's how we make money, which we can then use to support our male and female beneficiaries. In fact, I haven't heard of anyone in Podkarpackie Province doing this yet as an NGO."*

Running a second-hand store is a form of business that contributes to raising additional revenue that can be used for NGOs' statutory activities. This source of revenue is not often declared, as few NGOs conduct business, especially in this form. Running a second-hand store can therefore be considered a social innovation. Similar activities are carried out by Association HUMANITAS in Slovenia (Social Innovators 2019).

Respondent number three, on the other hand, declared organizing weekly supervisions of the therapy team.

• *RESPONDENT 3: "The organization of which I am president is in the specific business of supporting people with various problems, most often drug or alcohol addictions. We decided that this is.... yyyy... on the one hand a big mental burden for employees, on the other .... well ... I think it's worth talking about who we work with, with what problem, to share experiences among our team. Our colleagues praise this solution very much."*

Weekly supervision of the therapeutic team is also an activity that is not often undertaken in public and non-governmental organizations, despite its recognition as a systemically planned and important type of support in any social welfare unit (Kadushin and Harkness 2014). In many institutions (e.g., crisis intervention centers, social welfare centers), such activities are conducted occasionally or at long intervals, such as once a year as part of an annual supervision plan. In this situation, weekly supervision should be considered an innovative activity that can contribute to more effective cooperation between therapist and patient.

A representative of an NGO declared to run a children's firefighting team at the volunteer fire brigades.

• *RESPONDENT 4: "I'll tell you this: in our volunteer fire brigades there are not only adults and young people, but we have, as it were ... yyyy... say... Well, we have youngsters."*

• *MODERATOR: "So, if I understand correctly, they are children?"*

• *RESPONDENT 4: "That's right!"*

• *MODERATOR: "And what age are the children?"*

• *RESPONDENT 4: "Well we have so from 6 years old to 12."*

• *MODERATOR: "And what tasks do you set for the youngsters?"* • *RESPONDENT 4: "Well to fires or accidents they don't go! But we teach them, you know... how to extinguish, how to help, for example, if someone has an accident, gets hurt, crashes... We also teach the safe use of electrical appliances, prepare for school competitions, sometimes some competition in one municipality or another comes along. That's what we go, but a lot of competition we don't have, almost none."*

Running a children's volunteer group is declared by few volunteer fire brigades in Poland, all the more so such a team in the Podkarpackie Province is a unique case and can also be considered a social innovation.

Other respondents reported that their NGOs organized world championships in rapid and lightning chess and European championships in thirteen sports for transplant and dialysis patients.

• *RESPONDENT 5: "We are the ones who can boast of hosting the world championships in rapid and lightning chess. And I am proud to say that in this case we are the elite of chess organizations that can boast of this."*

• *RESPONDENT 6: "Well, and also we have another Facebook. Such an international one. Er... and when we organized the European championship for transplant and dialysis patients in Krakow some years ago.... and this Facebook of ours had more of those likes and audiences than the European federation."*

Undoubtedly, the organization of an event of the rank of world or European championships is practically unheard of in non-governmental organizations not only in the Podkarpackie region, but also in Poland. Representatives of such entities, which should be further emphasized, must have highly developed organizational skills and the ability to communicate fluently in selected foreign languages (such as English or German). The organization of championships of European and world rank can be considered a very important social innovation on a global scale.

Respondent seven also declared housing training for the terminally ill.

• *RESPONDENT 7: "I, for one, believe that our form of social innovation is sheltered housing, actually housing training. It is a form of adapting terminally ill people to live independently. We have specialists who even please you monitor these people 24/7 and are available to them. So, it gives a certain substitute for a chance for these people to live a normal life."*

Housing training is a form of support for beneficiaries conducted outside of a supportive institution, in a residential unit that is designed for this form of individual training. Such a dwelling can become the target residence of an individual, who can also count on 24-hour support from assisting specialists. This form of activity is implemented by a small collective of NGOs in Poland. Moreover, it is also not a common type of support offered, for example, by social welfare units (Stenka 2011). A similar activity is implemented in Slovenia by The Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired Nova Gorica (Social Innovators 2019).

Another NGOs leader is conducting innovative art activities.

• *RESPONDENT 8: "The innovation in our organization is the search for young talent, on the street, in schools, sometimes in Youth Education Centers. These are young people who have mastered well! Sometimes to perfection the art of graffiti. And instead of, for example, on blocks of flats, we provide them with a space to paint, to develop their talent. We organize competitions, we also sometimes search for nationwide events and send our charges there under the supervision of a mentor from us."*

One NGO leader declared the creation of murals and graffiti in urban spaces as part of his entity's operation. This contemporary form of urban art is most often practiced by talented young people and is a form of communicating diverse content. It is also increasingly common to see murals and graffiti as a form of advertising placed in urban space (Parikh 2011). The aforementioned activities are rare among NGOs from the Podkarpackie Province. The specific tasks undertaken by the studied NGO in the sphere of art and in the field of supporting children and youth can be considered a social innovation.

Respondent nine declared the use of a social franchise that provided an alternative communication application.

• *RESPONDENT 9: "Social franchising is a long-term, permanent agreement between independent entrepreneurs, during the course of which the franchisor provides the franchisee with knowledge related to the operation of the business and lends him/her its brand. The social dimension of this franchise is based on the lack of financial gain from licensing. This is a quote from our project documentation so that the Lord has an overview of what we do. And we are providing an alternative communication application as part of this franchise."*

Alternative communication (AAC) is a method of communication using non-verbal means of exchanging information. ACC uses gestures, pictograms and graphic signs. Alternative communication applications, using a speech synthesizer, read the installed symbols to create full statements (Communication Matters 2015). The ACC method is recommended especially for people with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy and after strokes. Providing such an application by an NGO using a social franchise can undoubtedly be considered the implementation of a social innovation. Similar innovative activities are being implemented by NGOs located in Bulgaria (e.g. Zaslushei Se Foundation) (Social Innovators 2019).

During the implementation of the research using the IDI technique, one NGO representative reported on the idea of implementing this type of activity in her organization.

• *RESPONDENT 10: "We have plans to enter; for example, such a tactile kindergarten. I don't know if you have heard of such a TEX communication system?"*

• *MODERATOR: "No, can you explain to me what TEX is?"*

• *RESPONDENT 10: "This is such a pictorial system for communicating with autistic, non-speaking children and we would like, for example, to do something along the lines of this taxing kindergarten in Poznan, which is such a certified first institution in Poland. We would be maybe the first, maybe the second such institution in the Podkarpackie Province."*

The operation of such a kind of kindergarten by an association would undoubtedly provide great support for many families in the region. In addition, as can be noted, there are few such educational institutions in Poland, according to the respondent, which confirms the legitimacy of implementing activities that can be considered a social innovation in the future. However, as the researchers of this problem point out, many NGOs are focused on maintaining established systems, and even when they are able to generate new (including innovative) ideas, they very often have problems implementing them (Dover and Lawrence 2012). Therefore, it is not known whether, despite the declarations of the person surveyed, the measures will be introduced in the Podkarpackie Province.

Perhaps surprisingly, only one NGO during the individual in-depth interviews indicated the use of social media other than Facebook for outreach and promotion.

• *RESPONDENT 8: "We're still developing YouTube because we're still figuring out how to reformat it a little bit. (...). There are also posts, photos or videos. Er... relationships too, both on Facebook and Instagram we do."* Using a profile on Instagram in one's activities can be considered a sign of marketing innovation. Few NGOs in Poland have a profile on this platform, however, as it seems, this is a serious omission on the part of nonprofit entities. Increasingly, especially young people are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by Instagram. Research conducted in 2024 indicates that Instagram is used by 62.7% of Poles. In the case of social media use in Poland, the number of users has been increasing since 2021 (Kemp 2021; Kemp 2024). This is a significant percentage of the Polish population, which may indicate that NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province is not keeping up with the changes in the world of social media. Therefore, having an account on Instagram by NGOs can be considered a marketing innovation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province usually implement product innovation. Occasionally, it also happens that NGOs also use marketing innovation in their activities. An example of such activities is the implementation of actions such as "fields of hope" or the promotion of their activities through a profile on Instagram, as declared by one of the Rzeszów NGO, which is very rare to encounter on the scale of the Podkarpackie Province (Machnik-Słomka 2014). The fact that these are not very common cases is also evidenced by Polish and international analyses (Dorenda-Zaborowicz 2014; Bond 2016).

There are social innovations in the Podkarpackie Province that could be recommended for implementation in other countries. For example, it is worth considering the introduction of children's and youth firefighting teams in other countries. They could become a place that would prepare the younger generation for the role of a professional firefighter (as is the case in Poland). In addition, those participating in children's and youth fire teams could gain knowledge of fire safety.

Another example of activities carried out by NGOs from the Podkarpackie Province is the organization of world championships in rapid and lightning chess and European championships in thirteen sports disciplines for people after transplantation and dialysis. The opportunity to test one's skills against representatives from other countries of the world, as well as to share one's passion and talk about common problems, provide a space for integration and building intercultural dialogue. The activities undertaken by the NGOs surveyed should therefore become a role model for NGOs from both Europe and other continents.

An interesting example of NGO activity from the Podkarpackie Province is also the organization of a space for creating street art. Young, talented people, instead of tagging the walls of buildings and factories, have the opportunity to express themselves creatively on specially organized walls. In addition, the best works are also sometimes rewarded. Thus, instead of disfiguring urban space, it is enriched in a harmonious and thoughtful way, thus allowing young people to express themselves creatively. This initiative should find an audience in various countries around the world.

However, as can be seen, there is a lack of implementation of process and organizational innovations among NGOs from the Podkarpackie Province. In addition, it would be worthwhile to take advantage of the opportunity to implement or expand product innovations by the surveyed entities by drawing good practices from NGOs operating in other countries (e.g. Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia).

It can be recommended to implement Bread Houses in the Podkarpackie Province, whose purpose is not only to bake bread, but also to create a space for intercultural dialogue and cooperation between different generations. While baking bread, there is an opportunity to showcase one's talents, e.g. recitation, music. This influences the maintenance of traditions, customs, local dialect (Social Innovators 2019). In addition, such bread could be sold, and the money earned in this way could be used, for example, to help the poor in the region. In the Podkarpackie Province, rural housewives' associations could implement such activities.

An interesting idea would be to implement the idea of KNIGOVISHTE. In Bulgaria, an initiative was created to make reading books more attractive. To achieve this goal, a special educational platform has been created, which acts as both a bookstore and an educational game related to the publications read. Combining classic reading with online games is an attempt to encourage Bulgarian children to reach for books (Social Innovators 2019). Poland also has a big problem with reading books among children and young people. So, it would be worthwhile for NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province to consider introducing this innovation.

An innovative initiative that would also support ecological activities in the Podkarpackie Province would be bike repair. Croatian activists and volunteers, together with the NGO Zelena Akcija, have created an action called Biciklopopravljajna (BicPop for short). In Zagreb, the NGOs headquarters offers free tools and

advice every Thursday to fix your bike yourself. In doing so, Zelena Akcija supports environmental efforts, and together with activists organized a collection of old bicycles that were repaired and donated to villagers in Slavonia affected by the 2015 floods. (Social Innovators 2019). Encouraging people to change their mode of transportation, creating spaces for bicycle maintenance, is a social innovation that NGOs from the larger cities of the Podkarpackie Province (e.g., Rzeszów, Mielec, Tarnobrzeg, Krosno, Przemyśl) should be particularly involved in.

Another interesting social innovation worth recommending is the creation of a homelessness magazine, which is created by homeless people in Croatia. Half of the income raised from its sales is donated to the homeless, and the other half is used to publish future issues of the magazine (Social Innovators 2019). The topics covered in it could undoubtedly be of interest to, for example, sociologists studying the phenomenon of homelessness, social workers or ordinary citizens. Such activities could be carried out by the St. Brother Albert's Aid Society of Rzeszów, which runs a shelter for the homeless and provides social assistance to these people.

Without a doubt, it should also be recommended to expand the use of social media in the activities of NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province. Facebook or Instagram can contribute to faster transmission of information to local community members, increase NGOs visibility, and perhaps even allow them to reach a wider range of sponsors. This is an important marketing innovation.

Despite the fact that few NGOs in the Podkarpackie Province use social innovation, these entities make a significant contribution to the public benefit spheres in which they operate. They are particularly important in the areas of: social assistance, activities for the benefit of people with disabilities, the arts, rescue and civil protection, support for physical culture, and counteracting addictions and social pathologies. In addition, for an activity to be considered innovative, it must be pioneering, rare and unusual, suggesting that only a small number of NGOs can carry it out (Bond 2016).

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