

## VOLUNTEERING AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN YOUTH CAREER ORIENTATION: THE CASE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM ARAD COUNTY

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**Abstract:** *Volunteering has become an increasingly visible dimension of educational and community life in Romania, especially in regions where schools have established partnerships with local organizations. This paper explores volunteering as a form of social capital that supports the career orientation of high school students in Arad County. Through the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, the study highlights how voluntary engagement contributes to the development of professional identity, civic competence, and relational networks that facilitate career decision-making. Volunteering is understood as both an educational and sociological process—one that links the school environment to the broader community and the labor market.*

**Keywords:** *volunteering; career; highschool.*

### Education, society, and the role of volunteering in youth development

Education, according to Durkheim (1956), represents the organized transmission of values, norms, and collective knowledge essential for social integration. In this sense, schools in Arad County function not only as spaces of instruction but also as environments for civic and moral formation. In recent years, volunteering activities have become integral to this process, connecting students to their communities through local NGOs, churches, youth centers, and cultural institutions. For many adolescents in Arad, volunteering is their first structured experience of social participation. Programs such as Săptămâna Verde, Școala Altfel, or collaborations with associations like Centrul de Voluntariat Arad and Crucea Roșie Filiala Arad expose students to teamwork, leadership, and civic responsibility. These engagements exemplify what Giddens (1984) called the “duality of structure”: young people internalize social norms while actively reshaping them through participation.

In rural areas such as Ineu, Gurahonț, or Sebiș, the social value of volunteering becomes even more evident—it offers opportunities for social inclusion and personal development beyond the limits of the formal school curriculum. Volunteering thus becomes a non-formal educational bridge between school knowledge and life experience. The concept of social capital offers a valuable framework for understanding how volunteering affects youth development and career orientation. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the sum of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of mutual recognition. Coleman (1988) emphasized its role in facilitating cooperation and the transmission of norms within communities. Putnam (2000) later extended the idea to the civic sphere, arguing that participation in associations strengthens democracy and social trust.

Applied to the educational environment, these theories explain how volunteering builds bridging capital—connections across social groups—and bonding capital—strong ties within groups of peers. Among high school students in Arad, these forms of capital manifest through collaborative projects, peer mentoring, and partnerships with institutions such as libraries, museums, or NGOs. The trust and solidarity developed in these contexts support not only social integration but also professional exploration. Moreover, according to Becker's (1993) theory of human capital, voluntary activities increase employability by enhancing transversal competencies such as communication, organization, and adaptability. In the Arad context, many schools integrate volunteering into career counseling modules, turning it into a structured step in vocational guidance.

### **Volunteering as a Space for Career Socialization**

Career orientation among high school students is a multidimensional process involving both personal aspiration and social influence. Super's (1990) life-span, life-space theory views career development as a lifelong evolution of the self-concept through experiences. Volunteering provides the experiential field where this self-concept is tested and refined. For instance, students from Colegiul „Mihai Viteazul” Ineu involved in local environmental or cultural projects often report greater clarity about their professional goals—whether in social work, education, or public administration. Through interaction with adults, mentors, and institutional partners, they acquire career self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997)—the confidence to plan and pursue their professional paths. Mead's (1934) idea of the “generalized other” helps explain this process: by acting in roles that serve the community, youth internalize the expectations of society and translate them into professional aspirations. Volunteering, therefore, acts as a transitional

field between adolescence and adulthood, between education and employment.

### **Sociological Insights: Volunteering as a Mechanism of Social Integration in Arad**

In the sociological context of Arad County, volunteering also responds to the broader need for social cohesion and community participation. The presence of diverse socio-economic environments—from urban Arad city to rural settlements—creates disparities in access to information, guidance, and cultural capital. Volunteering can compensate for some of these inequalities by offering symbolic and relational resources to students who might otherwise remain socially or professionally marginalized. Empirical studies across Europe confirm that volunteering enhances not only employability but also civic engagement and trust (Dávila & Mora, 2007; European Commission, 2022). Locally, teachers and school counselors observe that students who participate in voluntary actions develop better teamwork abilities, stronger motivation, and a greater sense of belonging. These findings align with Putnam's (2000) idea that active participation in associative life strengthens democracy and the social fabric. Furthermore, partnerships between schools and local institutions in Arad—such as Primăria Ineu, Consiliul Județean Arad, or Centrul Cultural Județean—create a framework for institutional social capital, connecting educational initiatives with civic and professional spheres. In the Romanian educational landscape, volunteering has gained institutional recognition through national strategies and curricular integration. The Law on Volunteering (Legea nr. 78/2014) and the National Youth Strategy (2022–2027) emphasize the formative and civic dimensions of voluntary engagement. At the local level, the Inspectoratul Școlar Județean Arad promotes partnerships between schools and non-governmental organizations, supporting projects focused on citizenship, ecology, and professional orientation. Schools such as Colegiul Național „Elena Ghiba Birta” and Liceul Teoretic „Adam Muller Guttenbrunn” have developed long-term collaborations with NGOs and social service institutions, integrating volunteering into school development plans. This institutional support transforms volunteering from an optional activity into a structured pedagogical tool, aligning it with objectives from the national curriculum, particularly in counseling and educational development areas. Universities in Arad—particularly the Aurel Vlaicu University—also contribute by encouraging pre-service teachers to integrate volunteer projects into pedagogical practice, linking higher education with pre-university engagement. The result is a coherent educational ecosystem

in which volunteering contributes to the sustainability of local communities and the employability of young people. Despite its benefits, youth volunteering in Arad County faces a series of structural and cultural challenges. Sociologically, these challenges reflect broader dynamics within Romanian society—limited civic participation, low institutional trust, and persistent social inequality (Field, 2008). Some students perceive volunteering as peripheral to academic achievement, while others encounter logistical barriers such as lack of transportation or limited community infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

Moreover, the instrumentalization of volunteering—when students participate solely for CV enrichment—risks undermining its civic and educational value (Handy et al., 2010). Overcoming these tendencies requires a cultural shift from voluntarism motivated by obligation to one grounded in authentic social engagement. Teachers and school counselors play a key role in mediating this transformation, by linking volunteering with reflection, self-awareness, and community learning. From a sociological viewpoint, the sustainability of volunteering depends on the balance between institutional capital (school structures, partnerships, resources) and cultural capital (values, norms, collective expectations). Strengthening both ensures that volunteering continues to generate genuine social capital—trust, cooperation, and civic maturity.

### **Volunteering, Social Capital, and Professional Aspiration: A Sociological Interpretation of Youth in Arad County**

The sociological interpretation of volunteering in Arad County reveals the dynamic relationship between social capital and professional aspiration. Young people construct their career expectations not in isolation but within the frameworks of family, school, and community relations. Volunteering, as a structured form of participation, mediates these relationships by providing access to networks of trust, recognition, and mentorship (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). In Arad's educational environment, the "network effect" of volunteering is visible in the way students identify professional models. Many of them, after participating in volunteering projects organized by schools or NGOs, express a clear orientation toward professions with social impact—teaching, psychology, medicine, or community work. This reflects what Parsons (1951) described as the functional differentiation of roles: through volunteering, individuals internalize the value of social contribution and adapt to complex professional structures. At the same time, volunteering fosters a sense of belonging to a broader moral community (Durkheim, 1956). Students involved in long-term volunteering projects experience solidarity and purpose, developing

what Putnam (2000) called bonding capital—a moral fabric that sustains civic and professional identity. This process is particularly evident in semi-rural contexts such as Ineu or Păuliș, where volunteering initiatives often compensate for the scarcity of institutional resources. Through peer groups, students create micro-communities of practice that mirror professional collaboration.

In sociological terms, volunteering thus becomes both a space of symbolic accumulation and a field of identity negotiation. By engaging in social action, students accumulate symbolic resources—recognition, legitimacy, visibility—that later translate into vocational motivation and career direction. This confirms the assertion that social capital is not merely relational but also aspirational—a generator of personal and professional trajectories shaped by collective experience.

### Conclusions

Volunteering in Arad County exemplifies how social capital operates as a bridge between education and the world of work. It empowers students to acquire not only practical and interpersonal skills but also a sense of civic responsibility and professional direction. The local educational culture, marked by collaboration between schools and community organizations, offers fertile ground for transforming volunteering into a pedagogical and sociological instrument. Integrating volunteering systematically into educational and career counseling programs could further enhance its formative potential. For educators, it provides a tool for connecting theoretical learning with community experience; for students, it represents a path toward identity, purpose, and social participation.

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