

Exploring Meaningful Criteria for Engaging in Community Projects in the Retail Sector. Case Study of Lidl in Romania

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to explore the reason behind the employment of retail companies in community engagement initiatives, as well as the criteria considered when companies select projects in which they decide to engage. Based on the case study of retail discounter Lidl in Romania, the paper illustrates the selected community engagement initiatives and cause-related marketing projects that Lidl Romania supported between 2019 and 2023. The research was conducted to identify the most relevant factors that led Lidl to select these activities to connect with the customers, employees and to positively impact the communities they activate in. Different action fields such as health, education, social development, and environment that the community-based initiatives focus on are aligned with the sustainability strategies and mission of the business partners supporting the community engagement initiative. The analyzed data show that non-governmental organizations play a substantial role in identifying social and community issues, as well as in structuring and promoting projects supporting community engagement initiatives. Further findings of the research show that most frequent successful community projects identify and combine more than just one action field in an attempt to address a wider range of community issues. This way, projects can continue to exist through related subprojects and partnerships with further stakeholders, enhancing the positive impact of implementing community engagement projects.*

Keywords: community engagement, retail, CSR, sustainability, NGO.

Introduction

Companies, especially retail business models, exist in a dynamic symbiosis with the environments in which they operate, wherein mutual influences shape their tendency to grow. Consequently, local development and collaboration with the communities in which businesses are embedded play a significant role in fostering trust and sustainable progress. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer published in 2022, the business field, including the retail sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have emerged as the two primary entities that support social cohesion, acting as a unifying force in society. Arising as a significant force, these stakeholders possess the know-how and capacity to address and resolve pressing societal challenges. (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p.5-9)

Concerning the community's well-being, collaborative partnership seems to be the key. As mentioned by the Polish NGO One More Tree in the introduction of the article about collaborative partnership in sustainability, "Now more than ever, the imperative to address pressing environmental and social challenges requires collective action from businesses, non-profit organizations (NGOs) and government entities. Together, these stakeholders can leverage their strengths and resources to drive meaningful change and pave the way for a more sustainable and resilient world." (one-more-tree.org, 2024) Having earned the trust and confidence of the customers, the retail sector plays a leading role in promoting and supporting community initiatives. This trust is the foundation upon which retailers like Lidl in Romania can develop sustainability efforts, grow community engagement projects, and motivate stakeholders to be part of societal welfare initiatives.

DOI: 10.2478/picbe-2025-0286

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Therefore, this inductive study aims to answer the following questions while complying with the rigors of qualitative methodology and applying Gioia methodology (Gioia, 2013) "*Why do retail companies select specific community engagement projects (CEPs)?*" and "*What are the selection requirements for CEP?*" and "*How do CEPs align with retail strategy?*". Answering the above questions will allow stakeholders and initiators of CEPs to understand how to build efficient strategies and how to conduct the implementation of CEPs and long-term collaboration with representatives of the business environment. As the study focuses on the retail sector, it brings insight into how CEPs help communities to benefit from the support and know-how of companies and NGOs and why CEPs addressing different community needs have a greater possibility of being selected by retailers. Following the case study of the retailer Lidl in Romania, the research shows that implementation of CEPs not only enhances community well-being but can also elevate business, contribute to an increase of value, increase brand awareness and loyalty, and lead to achieving sustainability goals.

Theoretical background

The systematic examination of the relevant literature offers important insights into the importance and relevance (Lee, C., & Hammant, 2023) of CEP as well as into the main criteria and factors that business representatives follow when selecting community engagement projects. Community engagement has been defined by a variety of entities but the United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace defined community engagement in 2020 as "a strategic process to directly involve local populations in all aspects of decision-making and implementation to strengthen local capacities, community structures and local ownership as well as to improve transparency, accountability and optimal resource allocations across diverse settings." (United Nations Community Engagement guidelines on Peacebuilding, 2020). From a business point of view, community engagement projects are tools for implementing and supporting identified community issues as part of the CSR strategy of the company. As CSR was defined "CSR (and its synonyms) empirically consists of clearly articulated and communicated policies and practices of corporations which reflect business responsibility for some of the wider societal good". (Matten & Moon, 2008, p.3) The companies often balance with criteria like alignment with brand value and the relevance of the addressed cause for the retailer's target audience. The impact of projects upon the local community, as well as sustainability topics, employee and community member engagement can boost morale or increase loyalty towards the company and the values that it stands for.

Information presented by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development places the retail supply chain among the economic sectors with one of the highest carbon emissions globally, responsible for 25% of greenhouse gas emissions globally (Gadou, 2022). Deloitte takes a further step in pointing out that this increased percentage of greenhouse gas emissions attributed to the supply chain is compelling evidence, demonstrating the urgency and necessity for retail companies to embed sustainable initiatives in their operations. (Deloitte, 2023).

As shown in the article "How do differing community engagement strategies affect consumer responses to a retailer?" published in 2016 by Briggs et al., the impact and value of retail companies' participating in community engagement initiatives are preferred tools that increase the customer's loyalty towards the retailers' brand. At the same time it can lead to an increasing of buying frequency or value. The key findings of the research concentrated on two concepts that retailers implement to increase the impact of community engagement initiatives. On the one hand,

enterprises turn to partnership strategy, representing the decision of companies to collaborate with local stakeholders such as community members or local organizations, leading to increased customer connection and alignment with the company values and mission. The study also shows that on the other hand, companies may apply a philanthropy strategy in the form of sponsorships or donations. By applying this strategy, retail companies bring financial support to selected causes but limit the investment of other resources, focusing on founding community engagement projects. Because of this strategy, customers show improved purchase satisfaction and have a positive feeling as they participate in their purchase to the community engagement project, associating the purchase with philanthropy acts. (Briggs, 2016)

Similar findings have also been published by Arnold et al. (2013), suggesting a connection between the engagement of retail companies in community projects and the loyalty shown by customers towards the company brand, as well as an increased value of purchase. (Arnold, Todd, Briggs, Landry & Suter, 2013)

As the previous research shows, the involvement of retail enterprises in community engagement projects brings significant advantages to all shareholders and stakeholders participating. It leads to finding solutions to pressing social challenges, it often promotes collaboration between the business sector, NGOs, and governmental entities, allows community members to participate in activities that lead to the well-being of different social groups (Loza, 2004). While addressing social needs, CEP also allows retail companies to benefit from their positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes, offering new business and development opportunities conducted by the contribution to community well-being.

The retail business sector, especially food retailers, has reacted promptly to societal needs and local natural calamities such as earthquakes, fires, and floods. This has been once more proven to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic when retail companies have been on the front line, among other vital services. Retailers have collaborated with different organizations focusing on the health and well-being of local communities, supporting hospitals, doctors' communities (Lee, C., & Hammant, 2023) and eliminating the previous barriers to collaboration and information sharing, and contributing with available assets and resources to community causes.

Methodology

This paper concentrates on Lidl's efforts to engage in community projects and support community development projects. Being a relevant retailer in the Romanian market, Lidl's explanatory case study can construct a theoretical model of the decision factors and mechanism companies from the retail sector take into consideration when engaging and investing in community projects.

The study was conducted between November 2024 – February 2025 and the data collected referred to the period between 01.03.2019 – 31.12.2023. After identifying and selecting Lidl Romania as the relevant case study, the researcher reviewed the sustainability reports published by Lidl RO via the company's website. This stage of the research gave an insight into the sustainability strategy that Lidl conducted during the research period and allowed more data to be accessed concerning community engagement initiatives that Lidl decided to be part of in Romania.

To address the research question regarding the motivations driving retailers to engage in specific community projects and the key criteria they consider when selecting community engagement projects (CEPs) for investment, an inductive approach was employed. This analysis focused on Lidl's published sustainability reports, examining the projects undertaken by Lidl, the leading retailer in the Romanian market, between 2019 and 2023. The case selection was based on

identifying the market leader within the Romanian retail sector, recognizing Lidl as a representative industry player with significant relevance in both the Romanian and European markets.

Academic rigor and high qualitative standards were followed throughout the study to ensure a robust examination of the research question. An inductive research approach was employed, looking at Lidl's case study as a means of illustrating broader theoretical concepts. The study specifically investigates Lidl's motivation in selecting community projects, employing the Gioia methodology to systematically transition from Lidl's specific empirical example to a more abstract theoretical framework (Gioia, 2013). A number of 28 different CEPs supported by Lidl, representing relevant data for the study, were collected from official sources, identifying the strategy and methods applied by Lidl during the research period. The main sources for collecting examples were the sustainability reports published by Lidl and public information available from different sources such as internet pages, media documentation, specific journals, and other specialized literature sources.

During the first-order analysis, 28 practical examples of community engagement initiatives supported by Lidl were extracted from the sustainability reports published between 2019 and 2023 and systematically compiled in *Appendix 1*. The analysis of the collected data facilitated the mapping and labeling of CEPs, forming the basis for the second-order theoretical level of themes. This process facilitated the identification of Lidl's main fields of interest, leading to the emergence of new themes and conceptual insights. Furthermore, it provided a deeper understanding of the concepts of complexity of CEPs preferred by retail companies, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 3.

As research progressed, further data collected from Lidl's CSR manager enriched the reviewed information. They gave new insights to understand the company's CSR strategy and objectives, as well as why specific community projects were selected.

Results and discussions

Lidl is a German retail company, part of the Schwarz group, and is located in 32 countries in Europe, the United States, and Asia, continuing to expand in further countries during the next years. According to information available on the company website, Lidl currently operates over 12.000 stores and over 220 distribution and logistics centers and is a relevant employer in the retail market with over 370.000 employees. (info.lidl/en, 2024)

Lidl became active in the Romanian retail market in 2011 by purchasing the actives of Pludi Market (Conciliul Concurentei, 2020), known as Plus Discount, another German retail chain part of the Tengelmann. The transaction was investigated and authorized by the Romanian Competition Council in 2010 (Conciliul Concurentei, 2020) and the official launch of the first Lidl discount store model was in September 2011. By that time other important international retailers like Carrefour, Kaufland, Auchan, Penny, Delhaize – Mega Image were already settled and accepted by the customers, yet the retail market was not mature, as the growth of the Lidl market share showed in the following years.

The further expansion policy of the company, the price and product assortment strategy helped the company increase its market share and lead the Romanian subsidiary of the Schwarz group to become the market leader by 2020 (Table 1), being there for a relevant case study for the research of community engagement on an impactful retail company in Romania.

Table 1. Evolution of turnover for the main retailers on the Romanian market during 2019-2023

year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
retailer	turnover (billion RON/year)				
Lidl	9,76	12,86	14,87	18,5	21,76
Kaufland	11,87	12,83	13,97	16,01	18,34
Carrefour	8,16	9,01	13,1	10,39	11,35
Profi	7,26	8,83	9,52	11,66	12,92
Metro Cash& Carry	5,82	6,12	7,28	9,34	10,51
Mega Image	6,65	7,22	7,47	8,71	9,88

Source: Authors' research and data collected from www.revista-piata.ro.

Lidl Romania started publishing CSR reports voluntarily in 2017 for the financial period 2016 and continued to do so annually, according to the company's web page. CSR reports comprehensively document actions and projects that enterprises engage in and allow them to summarize and evaluate both for internal and external use their ethical, environmental, community, philanthropic, and economic impact. Prior studies have shown that against their purpose, CSR reports only succeed in "measuring CSR activities rather than impacts and focusing on benefits to specific stakeholders rather than to wider society." (Barnett, Henriques & Husted, 2020, p.2) Yet Lidl repeatedly published information reflecting the impact that the conducted initiatives had on specific indicators. The development of KPIs was reflected in the reports like the number of local fruits and vegetables producers supported and trained by or with the help of Lidl that succeeded in growing their business with the help of mutual collaboration, weight of waste collected from different areas of Romania and recycled, percentage of green energy used by Lidl operations in Romania, number of children that benefited on the educational projects, etc.

The content and the structure of the sustainability report were revised each year to ensure alignment with the company's strategic objectives and to address the evolving demands of the market. Therefore, the research started with a focus on the first-order analysis and reviewing the published sustainability reports. During the analysis, 28 CEPs that Lidl engaged in during the 5-year research period were identified and listed in *Appendix 1*. All mentioned CEPs were extracted from the sustainability reports and listed to identify what CSR components they belong to.

The identified similarities and differences among the different initiatives supported by Lidl and organized the CEP into categories corresponding to the theme addressed by the CEP. The number of labels was limited so that clear categories could be formed, leading to 4 components of the CSR strategy. CEP addressing communities with reduced access to education, population groups that represent the education field, or communities that intend to conduct further research that allows education to progress, transparency towards product quality and social responsibility of the company were labeled to the *education* category. Initiatives providing solutions fighting greenhouse gas emissions, solutions for conserving water, reducing waste and recycling waste materials, and circular economy topics, were included in the *environment* section. Projects contributing to social sustainability, fostering the growth, building production capacity of local suppliers, promoting equity, and human rights, helping communities preserve heritage as well as supporting communities to adapt to changes, and implementing projects addressing food waste reduction were grouped under the label *social development*. Further analyses of the community

engagement initiative supported by Lidl during the research period show a present interest in projects related to the Romanian sanitary system and health, facilitating access to necessary resources and training for medical teams build the 4th category named *health*. While establishing the 4 has proven to be beneficial for the following stages of the research, helping to describe and understand what the CEP focuses on, the necessity of introducing a 5th group, labeled *mix*, seems to emerge. This step arises as multiple CEPs, 48% out of the total 28, address a combination of topics that exceed the above-mentioned segments, reflecting thereby the complexity of community initiatives.

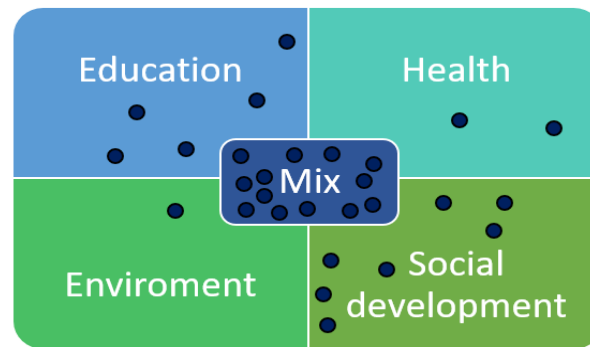


Figure 1. Mapping of CEPs according to the identified labels describing the project's focus.

Source: Author's research.

The sustainability report revealed that the majority of the CEP mentioned by Lidl was initiatives implemented by Romanian or international NGOs. The number of NGOs and CSR projects financed by Lidl, including CEP increased in just 1 year, between 2019 and 2020, from 30 NGOs to over 90, and the value of financing appreciated from 22,5 billion RON during 2019 up to 35 billion RON two years later, as mentioned in the sustainability report by Lidl representatives.

This trend reflects both the increased interest of Lidl in sustainability and in supporting the communities where they activate, as well as a maturation of NGOs and social projects in Romania. The sustainability report included several references to specific CEPs and NGOs, as well as a brief description of their mission, outlining their scope, core objectives, and potential impact within the community. In the following stages of the research, Lidl company members confirmed that NGOs play a pivotal role as they are at the forefront of identifying the specific social issues that community members confront and understanding each community's distinct context. The importance of NGOs being part of community initiatives is underlined by Lidl repeatedly, as the NGOs have the capacity and resources to address and collect information about the genuine needs of local communities. Furthermore, they can mobilize their members and they can encourage a wider collaboration between stakeholders.

Each of the five analyzed sustainability reports include reference to stakeholders involved in developing the sustainability strategy and the company's decision to invest in communities. (Lidl Sustainability Report, 2019) According to the information provided by the Lidl representative, the company constantly evaluates the social, economic and political context deciding if changes in its partnership and collaboration with the selected NGOs is needed. So, understanding that willingness of the company to actively engage in CEP is influenced by a complex combination of factors, the case study on Lidl Romania revealed 2 categories of influence factors, external and internal, as shown in *Figure 2*.



Figure 2. Factors influencing the willingness of retail companies to support CEP.

Source: Author's research.

The *internal factors* influencing the decision of companies to engage in CEP might include the company values, mission, and long-term vision upon they build their company sustainability strategy, company policy towards addressing social priorities, and the financial status of the company represented by the designated budget allocation.

Lidl's vision on sustainability was repeatedly formulated on their corporate website as: "For us, assuming responsibility means working on today's questions so that we're ready for tomorrow's solutions." This refers to addressing pressing social issues on topics like climate protection, respecting biodiversity, conserving resources, promoting health, acting fairly, and engaging in dialog under the motto "Good for our planet, good for our people" (Lidl Corporate Web Site, 2024). Lidl explains this motto in the sustainability report by showing that wherever their actions impact people (employee, customers, business partners or community members) and the environment (climate, resources, business fields) or where they can influence the well-being of people and planet they will actively participate.

Lidl translates this motto through the sustainability strategy in yearly reports by showing that wherever their actions impact people (employees, customers, business partners, or community members) and the environment (climate, resources, business fields) or where they can influence the well-being of people and planet they will actively take participate.

At Lidl, the process of selecting an NGO is documented and regulated as per an internal procedure. This allows the company to make sure that the selected initiatives are implemented by NGOs capable of identifying the pressing needs of communities, developing a feasible plan, engaging members, and implementing the initiative for the greater good of the community.

The analysis of the collected data and the case study data as shown in Appendix 1, confirm that community engagement initiatives have been recognized by Lidl as an important CSR tool for contributing to societal well-being. They have been integrated into the company's CSR strategy throughout the complete research period, even if for a few CEPs the collaboration did not extend for the complete research period.

Looking at the *external factors*, Lidl CSR team members confirm that changes in political systems, legal requirements, and fiscal frameworks, identified social priorities, global economic

trends as well as ability of organizations managing community initiatives to communicate and promote their projects may influence a company's strategy when deciding to support CEP.

Social context often brings strong motivation for companies to collaborate and unite forces to deal with causes affecting the well-being of communities. Recent examples during the COVID pandemic, burns of hospital buildings, or floods have been causes for which Lidl and NGOs have partnered and supported the affected local communities.

While independently initiating CEP has been experienced by the company allowing customization of the project and alignment with the company's objectives, the number of CEPs supported financially by Lidl but implemented by NGOs indicates that Lidl acknowledged this to be the most effective strategy. Collaborating with NGOs allows companies to benefit from the expertise, networks, and resources of the NGOs, conducting efficient implementation of the projects and greater impact on communities.

Reputational checks are included in Lidl's procedure when deciding to collaborate with NGOs, they research the organizations to ensure that they possess the required resources, reputation, and experience to develop and implement the initiatives. Collaborating with NGOs having a compromised reputation or with NGOs that do not have similar values as the company may affect not only the chances of successfully implementing the CEP, failing to achieve the objectives but may also affect the company's image.

The legal framework offering fiscal deduction gives another external incentive for the business sector to actively involve in community projects and to financially support NGOs. Although Romanian fiscal policy has been repeatedly modified during the research period, companies like Lidl sponsoring NGOs benefit from fiscal deduction according to the sponsoring law no. 32/1994, with subsequent amendments and completions.

As illustrated in *Figure 2*, both internal and external factors will affect a company's decision to support Continuing Education Programs (CEPs). Once this decision is made, the next logical step is to determine which specific CEP the company should invest its resources in.

Further findings of the sustainability report show that Lidl has combined rigorous procedural criteria as well as adaptable conditions. The company mentions that NGOs passing the compliance and reputational verifications will hand their proposal to the Lidl CSR team, including CEP description, information regarding the needed budget, objectives, measures, beneficiaries, and other relevant performance indicators. Summarizing the mentioned selection criteria, the retailer prioritized CEP that reflected the *retailer's values* to maintain consistency and authenticity in their community involvement. The initiatives that drew the most attention, as shown in *Appendix 1*, were aligned with the company's strategic sustainability focus areas: health and education, environment protection and resources conservation, community development, and civil society partnership. As previously mentioned, and resulting from in *Figure 1*, the relevance of a CEP increases as the project addresses a larger number of focus areas of the retail company and is sustainable bringing long-term benefits and extending the scope of the CEP according to the development of the community and their needs. According to Lidl statement, community initiatives seeking the retailers' support should address a wide pool of community members as the company aims to have a *relevant impact* on the community they support. Even though Lidl stores are present in most of the big and middle urbanized locations in Romania, CEP must not necessarily apply to communities where Lidl stores are available, but they must resonate with the retailer's customer base, addressing causes or concerns that are *relevant* to their community.



Figure 3. Selection requirements for CEP as resulted from case study.

Source: Author's research.

Lidl expects the CEP initiators to have documented *budget requirements* and have a realistic forecast of costs and financial support needed for each milestone of the project. The company will evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the CEP and engage in projects that deliver appropriate impact in the communities compared to the financial support required. Therefore, CEP initiators are expected to have a comprehensive communication plan, keeping the company informed about the progress of implementation and the impact on involved community members. Performance indicators and other measurables that can objectively reflect the outcomes of the CEPs are preferred and retail companies such as Lidl expect CEP initiators to identify indicators that address not only immediate impact but also long-term effects triggered by the supported project.

To conclude, it is the unique combination and dynamic interaction of the factors mentioned in *Figure 3* that contributes to the selection of CEPs, as it has crystallized from the presented practice of Lidl in Romania.

Conclusions and relevance

The findings of this research hold both theoretical relevance for the academic community studying corporate social responsibility, as well as practical relevance for stakeholders involved in its implementation. As stated before, the retail industry and organizations looking to engage in partnerships with retail companies can both understand how preparing for, structuring and communicating CEP can be mutually beneficial, fulfilling both social and business objectives.

The study concluded that retail companies are interested in supporting community engagement initiatives and the decision to engage in such projects is influenced by both external and internal factors, as shown in *Figure 2*. Complex CEPs, combining a multitude of interest points mentioned by the retailer in their CSR commitment or their strategy will increase the chances of corporations supporting the projects and developing a long-term relationship where the business sector and communities prosper. The relationship between retail CSR strategy and community engagement initiative has proven to be dynamic and adaptable, as both seek solutions to social challenges. While aligning with business objectives, fostering brand loyalty, and responding to

customer expectations, retail companies and CEPs can create strong ties that add value to both society and the corporate environment.

However, further studies could bring more insights into the methodology of evaluating the efficiency of CEPs. Developing new metrics and providing deeper insight into the above-mentioned frameworks, can enhance the understanding of the possible impact of CEPs for both the academic community and the business sector. Even though Lidl is the market leader in Romania and a visible, active company in supporting CEPs, research on other companies as well as other geographical regions or countries with different economic development might reflect distinct approaches and strategies when it comes to selecting CEPs.

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Appendix 1

List of CEPs supported by Lidl extracted from Sustainability reports 2019 to 2023

Project as named in the Sustainability report of Lidl	Field of interest of the CEP	YEAR				
		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Banca pentru alimente	Social development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sustinerea si dezvoltarea producatorilor locali	Social development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Punct de prim ajutor (SMURD)	Health	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eticheta curata	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Platforma #TreciPeProaspat	Social development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ambasada sustenabilitatii in Romania	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cu apele curate	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
ASAP	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Step by step	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Paine si Maine (World Vision)	MIX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Code for Romania	Social development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Verde la Educatie pentru Circulatie	Education	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Scoala de carte si meserii (Programul Duales Studium)	Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bucurestiul pregatit	Social development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pescuitul responsabil	Social development		✓	✓	✗	✗
Cultivat in Romania	MIX		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bucate ca la carte	Social development		✓	✓	✗	✗
Masuri ant-COVID	Health		✓	✓	✗	✗
Patrula zero plastic WWF	Enviroment		✓	✓	✓	✓
Proiect Federatia Fundatii Comunitare din Romania - Fondul pentru un viitor mai bun in comunitate	MIX		✓	✓	✓	✓
Edu Networks/ Program transformare educatie	MIX		✓	✓	✓	✓
Academia de Leadership si management scolar	MIX			✓	✓	✓
LEADERS- Ora de cariera	Education		✓	✓	✓	✓
Teach for Romaniam - cause related marketing	MIX			✓	✓	✓
World vision: sustinerea componentei digitale a programului Paine si maine -cause related marketing	MIX			✓	✓	✓
Zi de bine	MIX		✓	✓	✓	✓
Salvati copiii	Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
UNICEF	Education	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Legend:		✓	=	project was continued during tha		
		✗	=	project was stoped during that ye		