

SOCIAL ECONOMY AND THE SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE YOUTH: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFICIENCY OF EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN FACILITATING THE TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT: *The socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth represents a major challenge for contemporary labour markets, particularly in the context of persistent social inequalities and the increasing demand for adaptable skills. This study examines the contribution of social economy organizations and educational partnerships to facilitating the transition of vulnerable young people from education to employment. The research explores the mechanisms through which cooperation between educational institutions, local authorities, employers, and social enterprises can enhance employability, reduce the risk of social exclusion, and improve labour market integration outcomes.*

The methodological approach combines a review of the relevant literature with an analysis of institutional practices and partnership models implemented within the Romanian context. The findings suggest that educational partnerships contribute to the development of professional competencies, work experience, and social capital, thereby increasing the employment prospects of vulnerable youth. Furthermore, social enterprises provide inclusive employment opportunities and supportive environments that facilitate gradual labour market integration. The analysis indicates that effective cooperation between educational institutions, local authorities and social economy organisations can improve employment opportunities for vulnerable youth and facilitate their transition to the labour market. In the Romanian context, such partnerships appear to represent a practical mechanism for reducing social exclusion and supporting inclusive regional development.

Keywords: *Social Economy; Vulnerable Youth; Socio-Professional Integration; Educational Partnerships; Labour Market Transition; Social Inclusion*

JEL Classification: *L31, J24, J64, I38, O15*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transition from education to employment represents a critical stage in the socio-professional development of young people and constitutes an important determinant of long-term labour market participation, social inclusion and economic well-being. Despite the economic progress recorded in recent decades, labour market integration remains particularly challenging for vulnerable youth, who are frequently exposed to higher risks of unemployment, inactivity, precarious employment and social exclusion [1,2].

In response to these challenges, increasing attention has been directed towards the identification of innovative mechanisms capable of facilitating the transition from education to employment and improving labour market outcomes among vulnerable groups. Within this context, social economy organisations and educational partnerships have emerged as important instruments for promoting employability, developing professional skills and supporting labour market integration. Social economy organisations contribute to job creation and social inclusion through activities that combine economic objectives with social missions, while educational partnerships facilitate cooperation between educational institutions, employers, public authorities and civil society organisations in order to improve the relevance of skills and competencies acquired by young people [3–5].

The growing importance of these mechanisms is reflected in European and national policy frameworks that increasingly promote integrated approaches to labour market inclusion. Social economy entities are recognised for their contribution to employment creation, community development and the integration of vulnerable groups, while educational partnerships are considered essential for reducing the mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market requirements [4,6]. For this reason, both mechanisms have become central components of strategies aimed at supporting inclusive growth and sustainable regional development.

Romania offers an interesting case for analysis because regional labour market disparities remain among the highest within the European Union. Although significant progress has been recorded in terms of economic development and labour market performance, substantial regional disparities continue to characterise employment opportunities, educational attainment and socio-economic conditions. The eight Romanian development regions display important differences regarding economic competitiveness, human capital accumulation and labour market integration, generating unequal opportunities for young people entering the labour market [7,8].

Additionally, the adoption of Law No. 219/2015 on the social economy strengthened the institutional framework supporting social enterprises and work integration social enterprises, recognising their contribution to employment creation and the socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable groups [9]. In parallel, various educational and vocational initiatives have encouraged the development of partnerships between educational institutions, employers and local stakeholders in order to improve the transition from education to employment and enhance youth employability [5,10].

Despite the growing recognition of social economy organisations and educational partnerships as instruments of labour market integration, empirical evidence regarding their combined contribution to youth employment remains limited, especially at regional level in Romania. Existing studies tend to analyse these mechanisms separately, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how their interaction may influence employment outcomes among vulnerable young people.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relationship between social economy participation, educational partnerships and youth employment across the eight

Romanian development regions during the period 2017–2024. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between social economy organisations and educational partnerships, as well as to the influence of regional economic development and educational attainment on youth labour market outcomes. By employing a regional comparative statistical analysis, the study aims to provide empirical evidence regarding the determinants of socio-professional integration among vulnerable youth and to contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive employment policies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the social economy has received increasing attention from researchers and policy makers as a mechanism capable of addressing labour market inequalities and supporting social inclusion. By combining economic activities with explicit social objectives, social economy organisations create opportunities for groups that often encounter difficulties in accessing conventional employment and training pathways [11,12].

The concept of social economy encompasses a broad range of organisational forms, including social enterprises, cooperatives, mutual aid associations, foundations and non-governmental organisations engaged in economic activities. Although these entities differ in their legal structures and operational models, they share common characteristics such as social purpose, democratic governance, community orientation and the reinvestment of resources in support of social objectives [13,14].

Table 1. Main Characteristics of Social Economy Organisations

Characteristic	Description	Expected Contribution to Youth Integration
Social mission	Priority given to social objectives over profit maximisation	Supports inclusion of vulnerable youth
Economic activity	Generation of goods and services through market-oriented activities	Creates employment opportunities
Community orientation	Focus on local needs and social cohesion	Facilitates local labour market integration
Reinvestment of surplus	Allocation of resources to social objectives and organisational development	Supports long-term employability initiatives
Inclusive governance	Participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes	Encourages social participation and empowerment

Source: Adapted from Defourny and Nyssens [13], European Commission [14] and OECD [15].

The growing importance of the social economy is associated with its capacity to address market failures and provide employment opportunities for individuals who encounter difficulties in accessing conventional labour markets. Previous studies indicate that social economy organisations frequently support groups exposed to social and economic disadvantages, including young people, persons with disabilities, long-term unemployed individuals and members of marginalised communities [15,16].

Among these groups, vulnerable youth represent a category facing particular challenges during the transition from education to employment. Limited professional experience, skills mismatches, restricted access to professional networks and unequal educational opportunities

often reduce the probability of successful labour market integration. In this context, social economy organisations can act as intermediary structures that facilitate access to employment, vocational training, work experience and community support services [17].

The Romanian context offers a relevant framework for analysing these relationships. The adoption of Law No. 219/2015 on the social economy established the legal framework governing social enterprises and work integration social enterprises, formally recognising their contribution to employment creation and social inclusion. The legislation defines the principles governing social economy entities and provides the institutional basis for their participation in local and regional development processes.

Recent evidence indicates a continuous expansion of the Romanian social economy sector. According to OECD assessments, Romania had 2,816 certified social enterprises registered at the end of 2022, including work integration social enterprises specifically oriented towards supporting vulnerable groups. These organisations operate across multiple sectors, including social services, education, community development and employment support activities.

At the same time, significant regional disparities continue to characterise the Romanian economy. Differences in employment opportunities, educational attainment, economic development and social inclusion generate unequal conditions for labour market participation across the eight development regions. Consequently, the contribution of social economy organisations to youth employment is likely to vary according to regional socio-economic characteristics and institutional capacities.

From this perspective, participation in the social economy can be regarded as a mechanism that supports the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth through employment creation, skills development and access to inclusive labour market opportunities. However, the effectiveness of these organisations often depends on their ability to cooperate with educational institutions, vocational training providers and other local stakeholders. Therefore, analysing the relationship between social economy participation and youth employment outcomes requires consideration of the broader institutional environment in which these organisations operate.

This observation highlights the importance of educational partnerships as complementary mechanisms capable of strengthening the employability of young people and facilitating the transition from education to employment. Thus, the next section examines the role of educational partnerships in supporting labour market integration and human capital development.

Educational partnerships have become an increasingly important component of contemporary labour market integration strategies, particularly in the context of facilitating the transition from education to employment among young people. These partnerships typically involve cooperation between educational institutions, employers, public authorities, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders seeking to improve the alignment between educational outcomes and labour market requirements [20,21].

The growing importance of educational partnerships is largely explained by the persistence of skills mismatches affecting many labour markets. Employers frequently report difficulties in recruiting individuals possessing the competencies required in rapidly changing economic environments, while educational institutions often face challenges in adapting curricula to evolving labour market demands [22]. Consequently, partnerships between education providers and labour market actors have emerged as mechanisms capable of reducing these gaps and improving the employability of graduates and young job seekers.

Educational partnerships contribute to employability through multiple channels. They facilitate access to vocational training programmes, work-based learning opportunities,

internships, apprenticeships and career guidance services. In addition, they promote the development of both technical competencies and transversal skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving and adaptability, which are increasingly valued by employers [23,24].

Table 2. Main Functions of Educational Partnerships in Supporting Youth Employability

Function	Description	Expected Labour Market Effect
Skills development	Acquisition of technical and professional competencies	Higher employability
Work-based learning	Internships, apprenticeships and practical training	Improved transition to employment
Career guidance	Information and counselling services	Better career decision-making
Employer engagement	Cooperation between education providers and employers	Reduced skills mismatch
Network creation	Development of professional and institutional connections	Increased access to employment opportunities

Source: Adapted from OECD [20], Cedefop [21] and European Commission [22].

A substantial body of literature suggests that educational partnerships positively influence labour market outcomes among young people. Participation in vocational education and training programmes, apprenticeships and employer-supported learning initiatives has been associated with higher employment probabilities, shorter school-to-work transitions and improved career prospects [23,25]. These effects are notably important for vulnerable youth, who often lack professional experience and access to labour market networks.

In Romania, educational partnerships have gained increasing relevance through initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation between schools, universities, vocational training providers and employers. European-funded programmes, apprenticeship schemes and dual education initiatives have sought to improve the responsiveness of educational systems to labour market needs and to facilitate the integration of young people into employment [26]. Nevertheless, important regional disparities continue to influence the availability and effectiveness of such partnerships, reflecting differences in economic development, institutional capacity and labour market structure across the eight development regions [27].

While educational partnerships contribute directly to human capital development and employability, their impact may be amplified when combined with the activities of social economy organisations. Social enterprises frequently cooperate with educational institutions and training providers in order to offer practical learning opportunities, vocational integration programmes and employment pathways for vulnerable groups. Therefore, the interaction between social economy participation and educational partnerships may generate effects that exceed the individual contribution of each mechanism considered separately.

This perspective suggests that analysing educational partnerships in isolation may provide only a partial understanding of youth labour market integration. Therefore, the next section examines the existing research gap and formulates the research propositions regarding the individual and combined role of social economy participation and educational partnerships in youth employment outcomes.

The literature reviewed in the previous sections highlights the growing importance of both social economy organisations and educational partnerships in supporting labour market

integration among vulnerable groups. Social economy entities contribute to employment creation, social inclusion and skills development, while educational partnerships facilitate the acquisition of competencies and improve the alignment between educational systems and labour market requirements [15,20]. Together, these mechanisms are increasingly recognised as important components of inclusive development strategies aimed at reducing labour market inequalities and supporting vulnerable populations. Despite the growing body of research in this field, several limitations remain evident. First, existing studies frequently examine the contribution of social economy organisations and educational partnerships as separate mechanisms, focusing either on employment creation through social enterprises or on the effects of education and training initiatives on employability [16,21]. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how these mechanisms interact and whether their combined effect generates additional benefits for labour market integration.

Second, much of the existing evidence is derived from national-level analyses or individual case studies, which often overlook regional disparities and territorial differences. This limitation is relevant in the Romanian context, where substantial differences persist across development regions regarding economic performance, educational attainment, labour market participation and social inclusion outcomes [7,19]. As a result, the effectiveness of social economy organisations and educational partnerships may vary considerably across regions depending on local institutional capacities and socio-economic conditions.

Third, relatively few studies have explored these relationships from a regional perspective using comparative empirical evidence. This represents an important gap in the literature, especially given the increasing policy emphasis placed on integrated interventions capable of combining social inclusion objectives with employment creation and human capital development [4,22].

Addressing these limitations, the present study examines the determinants of youth employment across the eight Romanian development regions during the period 2017–2024. Particular attention is devoted to the individual and combined effects of social economy participation and educational partnerships, while controlling for regional economic development and educational attainment. Based on the theoretical and empirical arguments discussed in the previous sections, the study explores the following research propositions:

P1: Regions characterised by a stronger presence of social economy organisations tend to record more favourable youth employment outcomes.

P2: Higher levels of participation in education and training are associated with improved youth employability and labour market integration.

P3: The coexistence of social economy organisations and educational initiatives may create favourable conditions for the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth.

Table 3 summarises the expected relationships between the main explanatory factors and youth employment identified in the reviewed literature.

Table 3. Expected Relationships between Explanatory Factors and Youth Employment

Explanatory Factor	Expected Effect on Youth Employment
Social economy participation (SE)	Positive (+)
Educational partnerships (PART)	Positive (+)
Interaction effect (SE × PART)	Positive (+)
GDP per capita (GDP)	Positive (+)
Educational attainment (EDU)	Positive (+)

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature.

The relationships presented above provide the conceptual framework for the empirical investigation conducted in this study. The analysis relies on a regional comparative statistical approach covering the eight Romanian development regions over the period 2017–2024, with the aim of examining patterns of youth employment, social economy development and educational participation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research adopts a quantitative approach aimed at examining the relationship between social economy development, educational partnerships and the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth in Romania. The study is grounded in the assumption that social economy organisations and educational initiatives represent complementary mechanisms capable of facilitating labour market integration and supporting inclusive regional development. This perspective is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the contribution of social enterprises to employment creation, social inclusion and human capital development, particularly among vulnerable population groups [14,15,20].

The empirical analysis is based on a regional database covering the eight Romanian development regions over the period 2017–2024. The selected time horizon reflects the consolidation of the Romanian social economy ecosystem following the implementation of the legislative framework governing social economy organisations and the increasing importance of social entrepreneurship initiatives within regional development strategies [12,13]. The final database comprises 64 observations and combines information obtained from Eurostat regional statistics, the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE) and the Register of Social Enterprises (RUEIS), administered by the National Employment Agency.

The analytical framework was designed to capture the main dimensions associated with youth employability and labour market integration. Particular attention was devoted to indicators reflecting employment outcomes, educational participation, human capital development, regional economic performance and the development of the social economy sector. Table 4 presents the variables included in the statistical analysis together with their measurement units and data sources.

Table 4. Variables Included in the Statistical Analysis

Variable	Description	Measurement Unit	Source
YEMP	Youth employment rate	%	Eurostat / INSSE
SE	Number of active social enterprises	Number	RUEIS
PART	Participation in education and training	%	Eurostat
GDP	GDP per capita	Euro per inhabitant	Eurostat
EDU	Tertiary educational attainment	%	Eurostat

Source: Author's compilation based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS databases.

The youth employment rate (YEMP) was selected as the central indicator of socio-professional integration, as it reflects the ability of regional labour markets to absorb young people entering economic activity. The number of active social enterprises (SE) was used to measure the development of the social economy sector and its potential contribution to employment creation and social inclusion. Participation in education and training (PART) was included as a proxy for educational partnerships and lifelong learning opportunities, while tertiary educational attainment (EDU) reflects the level of human capital available within each

region. Regional GDP per capita (GDP) was incorporated in order to capture differences in economic development and labour market capacity across Romanian regions [5,20,22].

The selection of these variables was guided by the theoretical and empirical evidence reviewed in the previous chapter. Existing studies consistently suggest that stronger educational participation, higher levels of educational attainment and a more developed social economy ecosystem are generally associated with improved labour market outcomes among young people [15,20,21,23]. Based on these theoretical considerations, the expected relationships between the analysed variables and youth employment are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Definition and Expected Relationships between Variables

Variable	Definition	Expected Relationship with Youth Employment
SE	Development of the social economy sector	Positive
PART	Participation in education and training	Positive
GDP	Regional economic development	Positive
EDU	Tertiary educational attainment	Positive

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature [14,15,20–24].

The statistical analysis was conducted through a combination of descriptive and comparative methods. Initially, descriptive statistics were calculated in order to identify the central tendencies and variability of the selected indicators. Measures such as mean values, standard deviations, minimum values and maximum values were used to characterise the distribution of the variables and to provide an overview of regional disparities [8]. Subsequently, a comparative regional analysis was performed in order to identify differences in youth employment, educational attainment and social economy development across the eight development regions. The analysis was complemented by graphical representations illustrating temporal trends and territorial distributions, allowing for a clearer interpretation of the relationships between the analysed indicators.

The interpretation of the results was carried out in relation to the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. Particular attention was devoted to the contribution of social economy organisations to labour market integration, the role of educational partnerships in supporting employability and the influence of regional socio-economic conditions on youth employment outcomes. This approach makes it possible to assess not only the statistical characteristics of the analysed indicators but also the mechanisms through which they may influence the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth.

The findings also provide useful insights for public policy development. Understanding the relationship between social economy development, educational participation and youth employment may support the design of more effective interventions aimed at reducing labour market inequalities, strengthening employability and promoting inclusive regional development [15,20,21].

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The analysis relies on secondary data obtained from administrative and statistical sources, which may not fully capture the qualitative dimensions of educational partnerships or the social impact generated by individual social enterprises. Furthermore, regional statistics provide an aggregated perspective and may conceal local-level differences in labour market conditions and social economy development. Despite these limitations, the selected methodological framework offers a solid basis for examining regional patterns of youth employment and for assessing the

potential contribution of social economy organisations and educational partnerships to the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth in Romania.

4. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The statistical analysis was conducted using a regional dataset covering the eight Romanian development regions over the period 2017–2024. The database integrates information regarding youth employment, social economy organisations, educational participation, educational attainment and regional economic development. The objective of the analysis is to assess the extent to which the development of the social economy and the strengthening of educational partnerships may contribute to the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth and facilitate their transition from education to the labour market.

The final dataset comprises 64 observations corresponding to eight development regions observed over eight consecutive years. The selected indicators allow both a temporal and territorial perspective on the evolution of youth employment and the socio-economic factors associated with labour market integration [7,8].

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables (2017–2024)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Youth Employment Rate (YEMP, %)	38.93	6.84	29.00	53.80
Social Enterprises (SE, number)	807.25	431.62	208	1,708
Participation in Education and Training (PART, %)	9.44	3.62	4.10	17.80
GDP per capita (GDP, euro/inhabitant)	13,845	5,721	7,200	31,400
Tertiary Educational Attainment (EDU, %)	22.61	8.43	11.80	48.90

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS data.

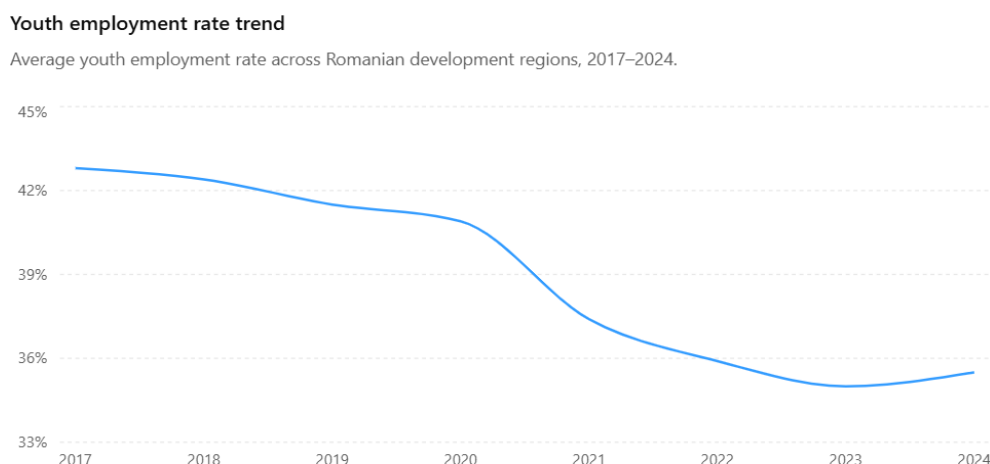
The descriptive statistics reveal substantial territorial disparities across Romanian development regions. Youth employment recorded an average value of 38.93%, with a difference of almost 25 percentage points between the lowest and highest observed values. Such variation confirms the persistence of regional inequalities in labour market opportunities and reflects differences in economic structure, educational attainment and institutional capacity [4,7].

The social economy sector also displays considerable heterogeneity. The average number of social enterprises exceeded 800 organisations per region during the analysed period, although the observed values ranged from 208 to 1,708 organisations. This dispersion suggests that the social economy ecosystem has developed unevenly across Romanian regions and that local institutional frameworks continue to influence the expansion of social entrepreneurship [14,15].

Educational participation averaged 9.44%, while tertiary educational attainment reached approximately 22.6%. The relatively large standard deviations observed for both indicators indicate notable regional differences in access to educational opportunities and human capital accumulation. Previous studies have emphasised that such disparities may significantly influence labour market outcomes and employability among young people [20,21].

The economic development indicator, measured through regional GDP per capita, also highlights pronounced territorial differences. The gap between less developed regions and the Bucharest-Ilfov region remains substantial, confirming findings reported by Eurostat and OECD regarding the unequal distribution of economic opportunities across Romania [5,22].

Figure 1. Evolution of the Average Youth Employment Rate in Romania (2017–2024)



Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS data.

The evolution of youth employment reveals a declining trend throughout most of the analysed period. The average employment rate decreased from approximately 42.8% in 2017 to 35.5% in 2024. The most pronounced decline occurred after 2020, reflecting the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, labour market restructuring and increasing challenges associated with the school-to-work transition. Although a slight recovery can be observed in 2024, the indicator remains below its pre-pandemic level. These results suggest that labour market integration remains a significant challenge for young people, notably for those exposed to social vulnerabilities. Similar trends have been identified in previous European studies highlighting the growing difficulties encountered by young people during the transition from education to employment [19,20].

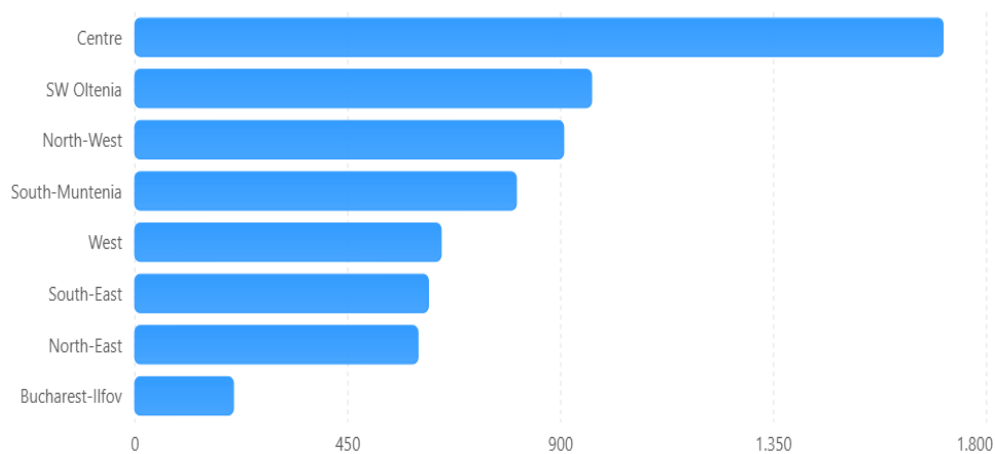
Table 7. Regional Distribution of Social Enterprises

Development Region	Social Enterprises	Share (%)
Centre	1,708	26.4
South-West Oltenia	965	14.9
North-West	906	14.0
South-Muntenia	806	12.5
West	647	10.0
South-East	620	9.6
North-East	598	9.3
Bucharest-Ilfov	208	3.2

Source: Author's calculations based on RUEIS.

Figure 2. Distribution of Social Enterprises by Development Region**Social enterprises by region**

Regional distribution of social enterprises.



Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS data.

The territorial distribution of social enterprises demonstrates that social economy development is not concentrated in the most economically advanced regions. The Centre Region records the highest number of organisations, accounting for more than one quarter of all social enterprises identified in the database. South-West Oltenia and North-West also present strong social economy ecosystems, while Bucharest-Ilfov records the lowest number of registered organisations.

This finding is particularly interesting because it suggests that social enterprises tend to emerge in regions characterised by stronger social needs and greater development challenges. Rather than being driven exclusively by economic prosperity, the expansion of the social economy appears to be associated with local efforts to address social exclusion, unemployment and community development needs [12,14].

Table 8. Average Youth Employment and Educational Attainment by Region

Region	YEMP (%)	EDU (%)
Bucharest-Ilfov	47.70	48.90
North-East	44.71	18.50
North-West	41.29	24.30
South-Muntenia	40.10	19.40
Centre	39.60	23.80
West	38.90	25.70
South-East	35.80	17.20
South-West Oltenia	33.40	15.60

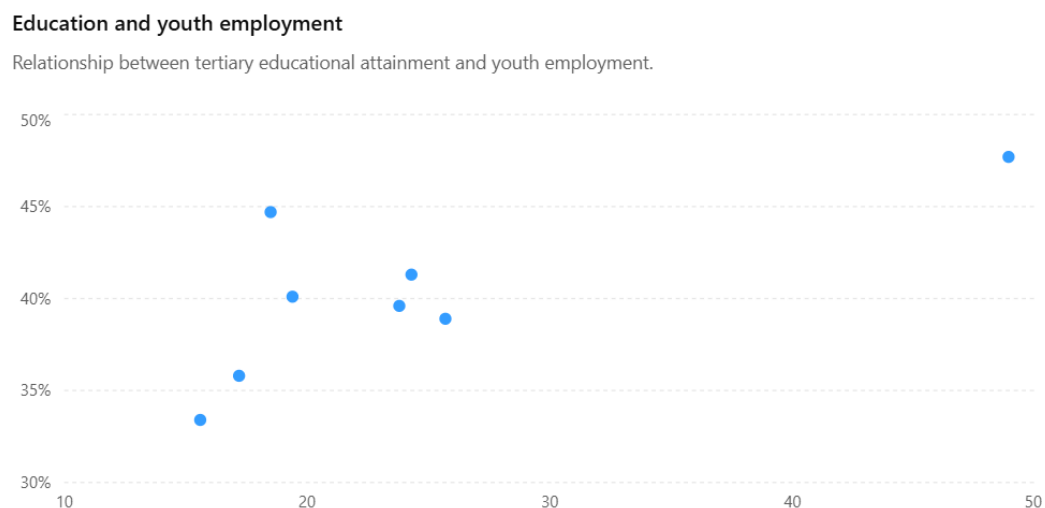
Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat data.

The relationship between educational attainment and youth employment appears visible across most regions. Bucharest-Ilfov combines the highest level of tertiary educational

attainment with the highest youth employment rate. Similar patterns can be observed in North-West and West regions, where higher educational attainment corresponds to comparatively stronger labour market outcomes.

By contrast, South-West Oltenia and South-East regions record both lower educational attainment and lower youth employment rates. These findings support previous research suggesting that human capital remains a key determinant of employability and labour market integration among young people [20,23].

Figure 3. Youth Employment and Educational Attainment by Region



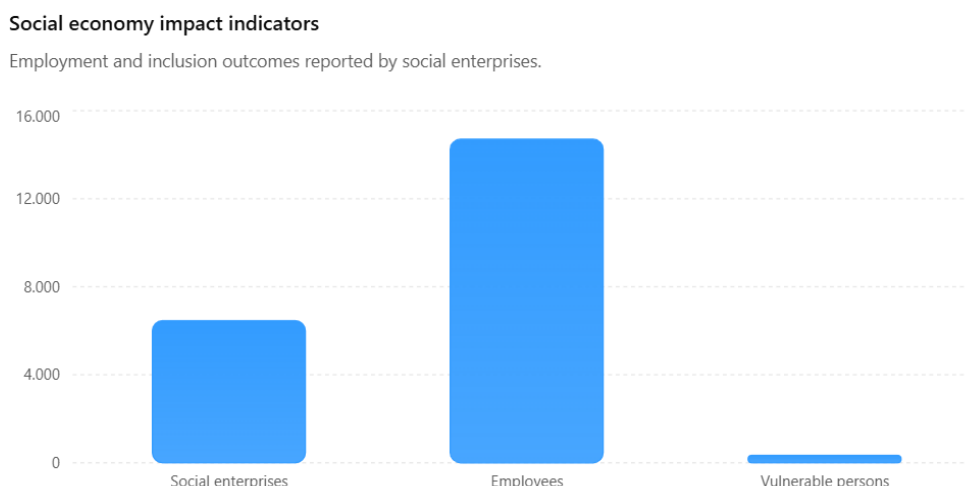
Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS data.

The graphical representation confirms a generally positive association between educational attainment and youth employment. Although the relationship is not perfectly linear, regions with stronger educational outcomes tend to exhibit higher employment levels among young people. This finding reinforces the importance of educational policies and partnerships aimed at improving skills acquisition and facilitating labour market integration [21,24].

Table 9. Social Impact Indicators of the Social Economy Sector

Indicator	Value
Social enterprises identified	6,458
Employees reported	14,707
Vulnerable persons integrated	337

Source: Author's calculations based on RUEIS.

Figure 4. Social Economy Impact Indicators

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS data.

The social impact indicators demonstrate the tangible contribution of social economy organisations to employment creation and social inclusion. More than 14,700 employees were reported across the analysed organisations, while 337 vulnerable persons were directly integrated through employment or dedicated support programmes. Although the number of vulnerable persons formally reported remains modest compared with total employment, these figures reflect only the direct outcomes captured in administrative records and do not fully encompass the broader social impact generated through training, counselling and community support services [13,15].

Table 10. Synthesis of Main Findings

Area of Analysis	Main Finding
Youth employment	Declining trend between 2017 and 2024
Social economy	Strong regional disparities in organisational density
Education	Positive association with youth employment
Vulnerable groups	Direct contribution to socio-professional integration
Regional development	Persistent territorial inequalities

Source: Author's synthesis based on the statistical analysis conducted using Eurostat, INSSE and RUEIS databases.

Taken together, the results suggest that youth employment outcomes differ substantially across Romanian regions and are associated with variations in educational attainment, economic development and the presence of social economy organisations. The analysis highlights the importance of social economy organisations as complementary mechanisms supporting labour market integration and social inclusion. Meanwhile, the analysis confirms the relevance of educational attainment and educational partnerships in strengthening employability and facilitating the transition from education to employment. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasising the need for integrated approaches combining education, social innovation and regional development policies in order to improve employment opportunities for vulnerable youth [15,20,21,24].

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the relationship between social economy development, educational partnerships and the socio-professional integration of vulnerable youth across the eight Romanian development regions during the period 2017–2024. By combining data from Eurostat, INSSE and the Register of Social Enterprises (RUEIS), the research provided a comprehensive overview of regional disparities in youth employment, educational attainment and social economy development, while highlighting the potential contribution of social enterprises to labour market integration.

The statistical analysis revealed significant territorial differences regarding youth employment outcomes. Although some regions, specifically Bucharest–Ilfov, North-West and Centre, recorded comparatively favourable labour market indicators, other regions continued to face substantial challenges related to youth employment and social inclusion. These disparities suggest that socio-professional integration is influenced not only by individual educational characteristics but also by broader regional socio-economic conditions and institutional capacities [7,8].

The findings also indicate that the social economy sector has become an increasingly important component of regional development. The presence of more than 6,400 social enterprises and over 14,700 employees demonstrates the growing relevance of social entrepreneurship in Romania. Beyond their economic contribution, social enterprises play an important social role by supporting vulnerable groups through employment opportunities, vocational training, counselling services and community-based initiatives [14,15]. The analysis confirms that the social economy represents a complementary mechanism capable of addressing labour market vulnerabilities and promoting social inclusion.

Educational participation and educational attainment were found to be positively associated with youth employment outcomes. Regions characterised by higher levels of tertiary educational attainment generally reported stronger labour market performance among young people. These results support previous research emphasizing the importance of human capital development and lifelong learning in facilitating the transition from education to employment [20,21]. Moreover, the persistence of regional employment disparities suggests that educational interventions alone may not be sufficient to ensure successful labour market integration. Therefore, educational partnerships should be accompanied by complementary measures supporting job creation, entrepreneurship and social innovation.

In several Romanian regions, these mechanisms appear to compensate for structural labour market weaknesses and limited employment opportunities for young people. They should therefore be understood as part of a broader ecosystem supporting employability, social inclusion and regional development. Their effectiveness depends on the existence of institutional cooperation, local development strategies and sustained investment in human capital. From this perspective, the social economy can be regarded as an important contributor to the achievement of inclusive and sustainable development objectives while supporting the integration of vulnerable youth into the labour market [15,22].

The results point to several directions that may strengthen the contribution of social economy organisations and educational partnerships to youth employability. Continued support for the expansion of social enterprises appears particularly important in regions characterised by lower youth employment rates and higher levels of socio-economic vulnerability. Financial incentives, technical assistance programmes and simplified administrative procedures may contribute to strengthening the sustainability and long-term impact of social economy organisations. At the same time, stronger cooperation between schools, universities, employers, local authorities and social enterprises could improve the

alignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs. Regional development strategies would also benefit from a greater emphasis on integrated interventions combining education, vocational training, entrepreneurship support and social inclusion measures. In addition, more systematic monitoring and evaluation of social enterprises could provide a clearer understanding of their contribution to employment creation, community development and the socio-professional integration of vulnerable groups.

The results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The analysis relies on secondary data obtained from administrative and statistical sources, which provide only a partial perspective on the functioning of educational partnerships and social economy organisations. In addition, the regional indicators used in the study may mask important local differences in labour market conditions, institutional capacity and social inclusion outcomes. The available data also describe the scale of social economy activity rather than the effectiveness of individual programmes or interventions.

Future research could complement the statistical evidence presented in this study with qualitative information collected directly from vulnerable young people, social enterprises and educational institutions. Such an approach would allow a better understanding of the practical barriers encountered during the transition from education to employment and of the ways in which social economy initiatives support labour market integration. Additional studies could also examine whether participation in these programmes generates long-term effects on employment stability, career development and social inclusion.

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