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FROM WASTE TO WORTH: BUILDING A SOCIAL CIRCULAR ENTERPRISE THROUGH ECOSYSTEM COLLABORATION - THE CASE OF OILRIGHT

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Abstract: This paper examines the development of OilRight, a Romanian social enterprise active in environmental sustainability and social inclusion. Using a qualitative case study methodology, the research explores how ecosystem support (accelerators, crowdfunding, mentorship, and strategic partnerships) enabled OilRight to adapt and replicate a Slovenian model in Romania. The study highlights how ecosystem-oriented strategies improve the resilience and scalability of social enterprises in Central and Eastern Europe. The findings illustrate OilRight's experience on how ecosystem-oriented strategies contribute to the scalability and sustainability of social enterprises and the study adds to the literature on social circular models in a Romanian context, providing practical and theoretical insights into building inclusive and sustainable ventures.

Key words: social enterprise, circular economy, social innovation, ecosystem support, sustainable development, case study, sustainable management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises are increasingly recognized as important actors in addressing complex social and environmental challenges by combining entrepreneurial practices with social missions. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, research on social enterprises remains limited, and their development faces significant institutional and socio-economic barriers such as insufficient policy support, low levels of public awareness, and fragile financial ecosystems [1-3]. In Romania, the 2015 Social Economy Law created a legal framework for social enterprises, but empirical research on their evolution, especially in the circular economy, remains scarce [4]. This creates a research gap in understanding how social enterprises in these contexts can grow, scale, and replicate their models while remaining sustainable.

As this paper focuses on an enterprise that simultaneously addresses waste management and inclusive employment, its field of application is both social economy and circular economy. Researchers identified two causes

motivating this study: first, the urgent need for innovative waste management and circular economy practices, given Romania's low recycling rates [5]; second, the need to improve social inclusion, as a limited number of persons with disabilities is employed [6]. Previous studies have examined social enterprises in Western Europe, where ecosystems are stronger and institutional frameworks more supportive [7-9]. In contrast, few empirical case studies explore models from post-communist countries, where structural obstacles often hinder replication and growth [10].

This paper investigates the case of OilRight, a Romanian social enterprise that transforms used cooking oil into environmentally friendly candles and raw material for biodiesel, while employing persons with disabilities. The research was conducted in several stages: (1) problem identification and literature review, (2) field research including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and (3) synthesis of findings in relation to existing theories on social enterprise ecosystems. The methods used were qualitative, with emphasis

on case study analysis and triangulation of primary and secondary data.

The results show that OilRight's development illustrates how ecosystem support (such as participation in accelerators, crowdfunding campaigns, mentorship, and partnerships) can enhance its impact, despite weak institutional frameworks. The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating how a social enterprise successfully adapted and replicated a model from Slovenia in the Romanian context, thereby adding one new example in both practice and literature on scaling social circular models in Central and Eastern Europe [11].

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it advances the academic understanding of social enterprises in fragile ecosystems, where contextual constraints require adaptive strategies. Second, it provides practical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and ecosystem builders on how targeted support mechanisms can foster inclusive and environmentally sustainable enterprises in emerging economies [12].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic attention to social enterprises has grown in recent years. However, few case studies address such models in Central and Eastern Europe, where institutional and socio-economic contexts often put barriers to scaling or replication [13, 14]. OilRight's story contributes to this gap by showcasing how cross-border replication, local adaptation, and community-based approach can create a working model for social enterprises. It also illustrates how diverse support (financial, strategic, and operational) contributes to sustainability and inclusion.

Social enterprises function at the intersection of the private, public, and non-profit sectors, often functioning under resource and regulatory limitations while trying to maximize impact [15]. A 2012 study [16] explores how hybrid organizations manage institutional tensions by integrating business know-how with social impact. These models challenge the traditional distinctions between the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Entrepreneurial ecosystems are defined by their interconnected relationships

among funders, mentors, authorities, and civil society [17]. Santos [18] says that social entrepreneurs create value by eliminating institutional barriers. Dattée, Alexy, and Autio [19] name this processes as "ecosystem orchestration," in which ecosystem actors align strategies and resources to promote innovation. Social enterprises grow when they receive structured support from accelerators, crowdfunding platforms, and mentorship networks [20].

Other researchers [15] differentiate between scaling impact via growth and via replication. The latter requires contextual awareness and adaptation to local realities. OilRight's replication of the Bolje model in Romania illustrates this adaptive approach. Bhatt and Altinay [21] emphasize the importance of community ownership and localized innovation in the success of such replications.

Kerlin [22] examined regional variations in social enterprise development, highlighting that post-communist countries often lack institutional infrastructure, making ecosystem-level support particularly important. Romanian researchers [13] also point to the policy-practice gap in fostering inclusive employment, emphasizing the importance of case studies that offer specific models. Recent literature has increasingly recognized the importance of community engagement and grassroots approaches in social enterprise success. Raworth's "doughnut economics" [23] framework, while macroeconomic in its nature, corresponds with the localized sustainability efforts of enterprises like OilRight.

The main findings of the reviewed articles show that the combination of social and commercial objectives remains a central theme, that successful collaboration with stakeholders is crucial for the success of social enterprises, and that supportive policies and institutional frameworks are seen as key factors influencing the social enterprise sustainability and scalability.

The complex nature of social enterprises and the diverse contexts in which they operate give room for more research on the topic, with current studies providing valuable insights into the mechanisms of social entrepreneurship, setting

the stage for further exploration and innovation in the field.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper used a qualitative case study approach, appropriate for capturing the social enterprise processes and their ecosystems. The case was selected based on its relevant nature - OilRight exemplifies a rarely documented social enterprise replication in Eastern Europe, addressing both environmental and employment-related challenges. OilRight's story contributes to the gap because it exemplifies how a social enterprise in Romania managed to adapt a Slovenian circular model to a different socio-economic and institutional context. This adaptation required balancing environmental goals with inclusive employment practices, while leveraging ecosystem support mechanisms (accelerators, crowdfunding, mentorship). Unlike many Western European cases, OilRight demonstrates how fragile contexts can still foster scalable and sustainable models when supported by collaborative ecosystems.

The author's dual role as co-founder of OilRight and PhD student and researcher presents advantages and challenges. It offered access to key information, historical documents, and organizational dynamics. However, to reduce the possibility of bias, data triangulation was employed, and the findings were validated through peer debriefing and checking with external collaborators. This approach enhances the credibility of the study while recognizing its elements of potential subjectivity.

3.1 Data collection

We obtained the data by analyzing organizational reports and funding documentation; semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including co-founders, employees with and without disabilities, partners; public communications, like crowdfunding and social media campaigns, and press coverage, to assess how involved the public was. Using these sources made sure that the data was correct and helped us understand how the organization changed over time, how the community

responded, and how the ecosystem worked together. A lot of thought went into finding the links between the support mechanisms and the outcomes. For example, the crowdfunding effort led to more community involvement, and the quality mentoring helped people make strategic decisions.

3.2 Limitations

As with most single-case papers, the possibility to draw general conclusions is limited. However, this research aims to deliver an analytical overview, providing insights that may be applicable to similar circumstances rather than being statistically representative.

4. CASE PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Origin and mission. Business model

OilRight was founded in Romania, end of 2020, because of the collaboration between Romanian and Slovenian stakeholders seeking to address both environmental and labor market exclusions. Its core activity (transforming waste cooking oil into candles) represents a Circular Economy innovation with both ecological and social benefits.

In Romania, recycling is still at its early stages, with only 12% of the municipal waste being recycled [5], ranking the country as the last in Europe. One of the most neglected categories of waste is used cooking oil. It is often thrown away randomly, which leads to serious problems: water and soil pollution, blockage of sanitary installations (clogged pipes cause backflows and require additional repair costs), attract pests – like rats and insects, which generates major discomfort in urban settings.

Furthermore, Romania faces a low degree of professional integration of people with disabilities. Less than 10% of people with disabilities are employed, well below the European average of 50% (absolute employment numbers in Romania are presented in Fig. 1). This gap represents a huge loss of human potential and a barrier to social inclusion. OilRight aims to change this, by employing and training people with disabilities, providing them with opportunities to actively contribute to the

community, to demonstrate their skills and to have a dignified life.

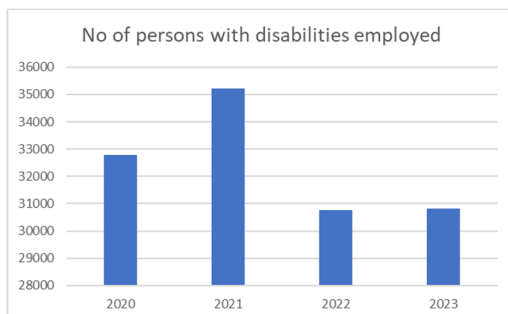


Fig. 1. Number of persons with disabilities employed in Romania, National Agency for Fiscal Administration

The mission of the social enterprise is to protect the environment and promote social inclusion by creatively recycling used cooking oil and creating opportunities for people with disabilities, while using a mixed revenue model:

i. Product sales: upcycled, eco-friendly products sold online, in eco-stores, and to corporate clients.

ii. B2B partnerships: hotels, restaurants as clients for used oil collection, and sustainable brands and corporations for purchases of eco candles, do it yourself kits and other personalized items.

iii. Service sales: workshops on sustainability and social inclusion.

iv. Grants, awards: funding from crowdfunding platforms, organizations supporting social enterprises and Circular Economy initiatives.

4.2 Start-up support mechanism

OilRight's early development was influenced by its participation in the "Accelerator of Social Enterprises", a program implemented by the "Alături de Voi" (ADV) Foundation in partnership with Structural Consulting Group. This initiative was co-financed by the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014–2020. The Accelerator aimed to promote and develop social entrepreneurship across Romania by providing financial and non-financial support to start-up social enterprises. Participants benefited from a structured program that included specialized training in social entrepreneurship, operational support, and a financial start-up

grant, enabling start-ups to secure the necessary capital for their operations.

For OilRight, this support was key in developing from an idea to a functioning Romanian enterprise. OilRight is an example of regional replication of an existing social enterprise model, and of an authentic local partnership. OilRight Slovenia, founded in 2014, had from the very beginning the vision of scaling within Central and Eastern Europe, and the idea of replicating it in Romania was well received. At the same time, not related, one of the co-founders of OilRight created, in 2015, a Timisoara based awareness raising initiative, aiming to communicate the negative environmental impact of the inappropriate discarding of used cooking oil – Borcanul cu Ulei (The Jar with Oil). This local experience with home collection systems and a group of "ambassadors", combined with the enthusiasm of the founding team were the starting point in adapting the Slovenian model to the reality of the Romanian local market.

The vision of a small group of people from Romania and Slovenia became reality thanks to the financial resources gained via the business planning competition within the SE Accelerator. The 100.000 Euro grant facilitated the establishment of operational infrastructure, procurement of necessary equipment, and initial staffing. Moreover, the technical assistance covered, besides the EU programs specific requirements, strategic guidance, helping to refine the business model and align it with both social and environmental objectives.

The Accelerator also underlined the importance of building a community of peers, by connecting all the participants with each other (a connection that still exists, five years in) and with the broader ecosystem. The program fostered collaborations that extended beyond the initial support period (18 months), helping OilRight establish partnerships and gain visibility.

4.3 Crowdfunding and public engagement via Consolid8

In its pursuit of additional funding for raw materials, equipment, digitization, and promotional activities, OilRight launched a reward-based crowdfunding campaign on

Consolid8, Romania's first crowdfunding platform dedicated to social entrepreneurs and the creative industries.

The campaign surpassed its goal, attracting 192 supporters and achieving 111% of its funding goal. Beyond the financial support, the campaign significantly increased OilRight's national visibility and community engagement. Collaborations with other social businesses and artists enriched the campaign's offerings and expanded its appeal, proving that partnership can happen if missions are aligned. Rovinhud is a wine show and social initiative based in Timisoara, Romania.

Organized by volunteers with and without disabilities, it brings together wine enthusiasts, producers, and experts to celebrate and promote quality wines. The financial proceedings of initiative support charitable activities, such as funding therapies for children with disabilities.

ONE.shirt is a social enterprise focused on sustainable fashion and social inclusion. It operates a zero-waste workshop that transforms unwanted textiles into unique, handmade products, employing vulnerable individuals.

Muma Pădurii (The Mother of the Forest) is an environmental initiative inspired by Romanian folklore, aiming to raise awareness about forest conservation and ecological issues via selling handmade bracelets (realized by persons with disabilities). Becoming Eli is a graphic novel project from Timișoara that narrates the life of Eli, co-founder of OilRight, a woman who escaped institutional care to living independently. The novel highlight's themes of social inclusion and personal growth, aiming to foster understanding and empathy towards individuals with institutionalized backgrounds. Dan Ungureanu is a Romanian illustrator renowned for his work in children's literature. His illustrations are characterized by their expressive style and storytelling ability, contributing to various projects on cultural and social themes.

This crowdfunding initiative exemplifies participatory funding where community involvement spreads beyond monetary support to active engagement. It provided not only financial resources but also it developed a sense of belonging among stakeholders, strengthened

OilRight's community ties and validated its mission, demonstrating the multiple benefits of participatory funding models in the social enterprise sector.

4.4 Mentorship and awards from ecosystem actors

Mentorship and public recognition influenced OilRight's development, providing guidance, validation, and opportunities for growth. Nicole Etchart, co-founder and former CEO of NESsT, played a significant role in mentoring OilRight's leadership. With over 25 years of experience in venture philanthropy and social enterprise development, her insights helped shape OilRight's strategic direction, emphasizing sustainable impact and scalability.

OilRight's efforts have been recognized through various awards and memberships, the most relevant ones being mentioned below.

Startarium 4GOOD: organized by Impact Hub Bucharest, offered OilRight access to financial resources, mentorship, and a network of social entrepreneurs, enhancing its capacity for impact.

She's Next: in 2024, OilRight's co-founder (and the author of the paper), Roxana Damaschin-Tecu, was one of the three winners of the She's Next program, receiving a grant. This initiative, launched by ING Bank Romania and Visa in partnership with Impact Hub Bucharest, supports women entrepreneurs.

Social Firms Europe, an European award for best practices in the inclusion of people from marginalized communities.

Membership in RISE Romania, the social economy network. As a member of RISE, OilRight is part of a network that promotes the integration of people in difficulty into the labor market through social enterprises.

Investor in AFIN: OilRight's involvement with AFIN, Romania's first non-bank financial institution dedicated to the social economy sector, reflects its commitment to supporting impactful initiatives.

Membership in the National Committee for Social Economy, a consultative body alongside the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Beyond financial support, the mentorship and recognition received over time significantly

impacted OilRight's growth. Guidance from experienced mentors provided strategic insights, while awards offered validation and visibility, impacting OilRight's credibility and expanding its network.

4.5 Strategic partnerships and local connection

OilRight's evolution from Slovenia to Romania shows the power of strategic partnerships and community engagement in developing sustainable social innovation. The OilRight model originated with the Slovenian social enterprise Bolje, which began transforming used cooking oil into eco-friendly candles in 2014 and employing persons from vulnerable groups, mainly individuals with long-term mental health challenges. Recognizing the model's potential, OilRight Romania collaborated with Bolje to replicate this initiative in Timișoara, adapting it to local contexts and needs. This cross-border partnership facilitated knowledge transfer, operational guidance and resources (financial and time) savings, thanks to a shared understanding of social entrepreneurship.

OilRight's team believe that sustainable change is built collectively, with allies sharing the same vision: a cleaner environment, a more united community and opportunities for all. Partners are important to OilRight, as they contribute with expertise, resources or logistical support, proving the power of togetherness and diversity. From private companies to NGOs, local authorities or international networks, they bring different perspectives and innovative solutions. To sum up, OilRight's existence in Romania depends on strong collaborations with other organizations, like:

Ambasada: a creative hub in Timișoara, provided OilRight with a physical space for its operations and community engagement.

Asociația Ceva de Spus (Something to Say Association): an advocacy group for individuals with disabilities, it collaborates with OilRight to promote social inclusion and raise awareness about the capabilities of people with disabilities.

Fundația de Abilitare Speranța (Abilitation Foundation Hope): with a history of supporting individuals with disabilities, it provides support to OilRight's employees with disabilities (social

services, accompaniment, counselling). OilRight donates its financial profits to support the social programs.

Regional Development Agency West, responsible for EU funding and policy implementation in Western Romania, supports OilRight with access to networks and funding.

Aquatim, the regional water utility supporting sustainability and environmental education initiatives, is aligned with OilRight's ecological mission and gets involved in joint communication and awareness raising campaigns.

CRIS – the Resource Centre for Ethical and Solidary Initiatives, an NGO promoting ethical and solidarity-based economy practices in Romania, advocates, together with OilRight, for social public procurement and community-based models.

Oil2Wax, the patented candle production technology used by OilRight to transform used oil into eco-friendly products.

Dumbrăvița, Timisoara and Sacalaz town halls: local authorities supporting the household collection process of used cooking oil.

These partnerships are mutual beneficial, as each organization brings unique strengths, complementing each other: community outreach, advocacy, expertise in disability services. Collectively, these strategic partnerships and local activities highlight the significance of community involvement and cross-sector collaboration in scaling social enterprises. OilRight's journey illustrates how localized adaptations of other models, supported by strong community ties, can lead to social innovations.

4.6 Impact

One of the most vulnerable groups on the labor market in Romania is the one of adults with psycho-social disabilities with an institutional past or at risk of institutionalization. Currently, almost 16,000 adults with disabilities are institutionalized, according to the Ministry of Labor statistics, with no support in education, counselling, or employment. OilRight employs people with this background, helping them gain a first formal work experience and become contributors in the community. One of the first employees of OilRight, discovered here, after 43

Table 1

years of her life spent in segregated institutional settings, an environment where she is supported to develop, is heard and can express herself, and where she can share her own life story, which has the power to inspire and generate a change in mentality.

OilRight combines environmental sustainability with inclusive employment, having impact in three main domains:

1. Environmental sustainability: used cooking oil recycling, transforming it into eco-friendly candles using the patented Oil2Wax process and into raw material for biodiesel, significantly reducing waste, pollution and CO2 emissions; circular economy advocacy: by collecting oil through community points and encouraging responsible disposal, it educates citizens on sustainable habits; consumer behavior change: through DIY kits and public awareness campaigns, it promotes a culture of conscious consumption and ecological mindsets.
2. Social inclusion: employment for marginalized groups: it provides regular jobs and training for people with disabilities, particularly those from institutional or at-risk backgrounds; empowerment through work, gaining stability, skills, and visibility, moving away from dependency to contribution, with broader effects on communities.
3. Community engagement and innovation: significant crowdfunding supporters, not just raising funds, but building a community of advocates; educational partnerships: collaborations with NGOs, schools, companies and cultural hubs have enabled environmental education and inclusion workshops across Timisoara and beyond; recognition and policy influence: as an awards winner and a contributor to the national social economy committee, OilRight contributes Romania's policies in the field.

The impact of OilRight can be showcased also through the lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, as illustrated in Table 1.

SDG's based impact levels.

| SDG | Impact |
|---|---|
| SDG 1 – No Poverty | Created dignified jobs for disadvantaged individuals. Redirects profits to UnLoc, supporting independent living for people with disabilities. |
| SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth | Inclusive employment for people with disabilities. Sustainable circular economy business model. |
| SDG 10 – Reduce inequalities | Professional integration of marginalized groups. Promotes equal opportunity across all sectors. |
| SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities | Community-level oil recycling reduces pollution. Oilboxes are placed in urban areas for collection and education. |
| SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production | Short supply chains and recycled products. DIY kits foster sustainable habits. Cleaner alternative to paraffin/palm-based candles. |
| SDG 13 – Climate Action | Converts used oil into biodiesel and eco-candles. Reduces CO2 emissions and pollution. 1L biodiesel saves 3kg of CO2. |
| SDG 17 – Partnerships to achieve the goals | Collaborates across sectors to amplify impact. Active in national and international social economy networks. |

5. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The case of OilRight illustrates that, surviving in the social enterprise space, especially in post-communist economies, depends not on any single factor, but on the collaboration of multiple support mechanisms, like the following:

- i. Start-up support (accelerators like ADV Romania) laid the foundation with early-stage funding and capacity building, ensuring strategic support and operational readiness.
- ii. Crowdfunding that not only filled financial gaps but acted as a credibility-building mechanism.
- iii. Mentorship and awards increased the enterprise's visibility and strategic vision.

iv. Strategic partnerships, both international and local, ensured meaningful replication of the business model.

All the above acted as complementary pillars, together enabling OilRight to operate at the intersection of social justice, environmental responsibility, and economic viability.

The case study also has theoretical implications, highlighting the role of the whole ecosystem. The paper proves that social enterprises require multi-actor support, not just market-driven models, especially in still emerging economies. Also, the transition from the Slovenian Bolje model to OilRight in Romania supports the theory of adaptive replication, developing deep local connections to ensure alignment, leveraging existing support programs, to build resilience, using crowdfunding and DIY products to connect with the consumers emotionally. Limited in scope, this paper sets the stage for new types of studies: comparative, to compare OilRight's replication model with other social enterprise replications in CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) in order to identify common enabling conditions and barriers; longitudinal impact analysis: study the long-term effects of OilRight's employment model on the socio-economic outcomes of people with disabilities; crowdfunding and social legitimacy: analyze how community-driven funding mechanisms influence stakeholder trust, market entry, and post-campaign business stability in social enterprises; ecosystem mapping in emerging economies: understand how to model effective ecosystem-building strategies for social entrepreneurship.

6. CONCLUSION

The OilRight case study demonstrates that social innovation happens at the intersection of a clear mission, relevant ecosystemic support, and community belonging. This paper reinforces the value of holistic, adaptive models and suggests that future efforts should focus on strengthening the infrastructural and relational ecosystems that support social enterprises. It offers a real-world example of how ecosystem support can sustain one work integration social enterprise. It provides practical insights into the relevance of accessing funding, mentorship, and

partnerships to reach impact — a valuable resource for researchers, academic and practitioners aiming to build community-based social businesses.

There are some lessons to be drawn from the paper for different stakeholders, as follows:

For funders, the early-stage funding must be combined with capacity development and mentorship to increase effectiveness; and funding mechanisms should prioritize ecosystem connectivity, not just provide financial support.

For policymakers, the social enterprise regulations and procurement policies should reward inclusive employment and sustainable production models; the replication grants and accelerator platforms should encourage cross-border learning within the EU and CEE.

For social entrepreneurs: strategic partnerships can amplify both the mission and the operational resilience; hybrid models that embrace both profit and purpose are more likely to attract diversified funding and credibility; adaptation, not only replication, is the key to scaling social impact in varied cultural and institutional landscapes.

This case study, practitioner-led research, also offers several valuable takeaways for academic and PhD researchers in entrepreneurship and innovation. Firstly, ecosystem support is crucial for social enterprise success: OilRight developed not in isolation but through a complex ecosystem involving funding, mentorship, community partnerships, and cross-border collaboration. Secondly, replication models require flexibility and local adaptation: the Slovenian model was successfully replicated in Romania by respecting cultural, legal, and market differences. Thirdly, crowdfunding can be used as a tool for engagement and legitimacy: it not only raises funds but creates a strong base of community supporters. Finally, mentorship and awards provide more than resources, they are validation mechanisms, helping OilRight refine its model and scale its visibility and impact.

Ethics declaration

This research did not require ethical clearance, as it did not involve any procedures requiring ethical approval.

AI declaration

AI tools were used to help with the clarity of the language, to improve clarity and consistency, and with the identification of the key academic articles already written on similar topics.

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De la deșeuri la valoare: construirea unei întreprinderi sociale circulare prin colaborare ecosistemică – cazul OilRight

Această lucrare examinează dezvoltarea OilRight, o întreprindere socială românească activă în sustenabilitatea mediului și incluziunea socială. Folosind o metodologie calitativă de studiu de caz, cercetarea explorează modul în care sprijinul eco-sistemic – acceleratoare, crowdfunding, mentorat și parteneriate strategice – a permis OilRight să adapteze și să reproducă un model sloven în România. Studiul evidențiază modul în care strategiile orientate spre ecosistem îmbunătățesc reziliența și scalabilitatea întreprinderilor sociale din Europa Centrală și de Est. Constatările ilustrează experiența OilRight cu privire la modul în care strategiile orientate spre ecosistem contribuie la scalabilitatea și sustenabilitatea întreprinderilor sociale, iar studiul completează literatura de specialitate privind modelele circulare sociale în context românesc, oferind perspective practice și teoretice asupra construirii de afaceri incluzive și sustenabile.

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