

## BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY FOR CHILDREN THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT AND EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

Nicoleta Golai Vînătoru and Anemari Helen Nițu

**Abstract:** In Romania in 2024, 33.9% of children faced poverty and social exclusion, the third highest rate in the EU. Despite the European Child Guarantee's initiatives<sup>1</sup>, public resources remain insufficient to meet the needs of vulnerable children. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as our own CONCORDIA Humanitarian Organization, play a crucial role in addressing these gaps through multidisciplinary interventions. CONCORDIA's Day Center model offers essential services to improve school retention and reduce family abandonment, including educational support, social assistance, and medical care. Recognizing the need for systemic impact, CONCORDIA launched CentreZi RO, a national network of Day Centers, to foster collaboration among service providers and advocate for policy improvements. However, the existing 860 centers are far from sufficient, with an estimated 3,000 more required nationwide. To sustainably expand its reach, CONCORDIA has introduced a social franchise model, enabling the structured replication of its intervention strategy while maintaining service quality. This model prioritizes child participation, family engagement, and community empowerment, aligning with the Lundy Model of Child Participation. Strengthening public-private partnerships and increasing investment in social services are essential for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Through integrated social and educational interventions, CONCORDIA demonstrates a scalable solution for reducing child poverty and fostering long-term systemic change.

**Keywords:** child poverty, daycare centers, social inclusion, education, Romania, social franchising

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<sup>1</sup> The European Child Guarantee is an EU initiative to ensure that all children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have access to essential services like health care, education, housing, and nutrition. Romania adopted its National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee in 2023, aiming to reduce the number of vulnerable children by at least 500,000 by 2030.

In Europe, children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have long been a matter of concern. They are exposed to severe material and social deprivation, experience significant gender disparities, and face barriers to quality educational and extracurricular activities. Their plight is the subject of significant action plans at the European level.

The most important step is ensuring that every child in Europe who is at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like health care and education. This step was taken in 2019 by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen who launched, in her Political Guidelines, the European Child Guarantee, and led, in June 2021, to the European Council adopting the proposed Recommendation with an invitation for all member states to prepare national plans for the period until 2030 (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, n.d.). In 2023, the Romanian Government adopted the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee, committing to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 500,000 by 2030 (UNICEF, 2024), contributing significantly to the European Union's general objective of helping five million children. The vulnerable groups this plan refers to are: children affected by poverty and social exclusion, children from rural areas, children with disabilities, children of Roma ethnicity, children from migrant families, teenage mothers, and other vulnerable children, including those who are homeless or victims of abuse (UNICEF, 2024).

Despite notable progress over the past years, Romania continues to grapple with significant poverty and inequality (Eurostat, 2025), marked by pronounced disparities among various population groups and regions. While the overall share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) has declined since 2015, it remained at a high level (27.9%) in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025a). In the same year, the situation was even more severe for children, with 33.9% at risk of poverty or social exclusion — the third highest rate in the European Union (Eurostat, 2025b).

Given the significant disparities in Romanian society and the limited budget allocated for social and educational interventions, it is obvious that the government's current approach in 2025 — focusing on ensuring school access for children but not providing support services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025) — is insufficient to achieve the objectives outlined in the Romanian National Action Plan. For instance, access to education is often hindered in segregated<sup>2</sup> or remote areas where there is no adequate transportation infrastructure. While the state provides school transport in some cases, it remains inconsistent and insufficient (OECD, 2024), failing to address the broader systemic barriers. This is why the involvement of Romanian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), authorized social service

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<sup>2</sup> In Romania, many Roma communities live in segregated areas on the outskirts of cities and villages, often characterized by poor housing conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to education, health care, and social services (UNICEF, 2024).

providers, and their collaboration with public authorized providers is so important in addressing the multifaceted needs of vulnerable children.

### ***CONCORDIA Day Center Model***

One NGO, the CONCORDIA Humanitarian Organization, has been active in Romania since 1991, aiding and supporting over 10,000 children, young people, and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. CONCORDIA has implemented more than 24 impactful projects across communities, with ongoing initiatives in Bucharest, Ploiești, and Odobești (a commune of six villages in Dâmbovița County). Annually, over 2,000 people receive support through its programs (Concordia Proiecte Sociale, n.d.-a).

What sets CONCORDIA apart is its multidisciplinary intervention strategy, which adopts a case management approach to place the child at the center of support efforts that prioritize education. By integrating essential services — such as social support, medical assistance, and psychological counselling — this approach not only ensures school retention and prevents child abandonment, but also extends its impact to the family and community. The holistic intervention is structured within Day Centers for school-aged children, providing a professional and organized framework where individualized support plans are developed and monitored to address each child's specific needs effectively.

The multidisciplinary strategy begins with a comprehensive assessment of each child, identifying both immediate and long-term needs. This includes access to nutrition, hygiene, educational materials, and targeted academic support, with a particular emphasis on remedial education to help bridge learning gaps. By addressing these fundamental needs, the intervention ensures a solid foundation for the child's educational progress and overall well-being. Once these needs are met, a series of psychological, medical, and social assessments are conducted to identify and address underlying challenges, such as vision or hearing impairments and learning difficulties. Beyond these individual interventions, an in-depth evaluation of the family context follows. Many vulnerable children live in informal housing without basic utilities, in households where parents face illiteracy, unemployment, and dependence on social aid. Additionally, children often take on significant household responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings.

Given these circumstances, parental engagement is crucial not only for fostering a supportive learning environment but also for ensuring the child's overall safety and well-being. Regular meetings between parents and Day Center staff address key topics such as nutrition, hygiene, the importance of education in breaking the cycle of poverty, and strategies for creating a safe and nurturing home environment. A strong emphasis is placed on preventing domestic violence, promoting positive parenting, and empowering parents to recognize their role in decision-making regarding their children's futures. Experts are frequently invited to discuss special educational needs, learning difficulties, and effective intervention strategies, both in the home and in educational settings. Furthermore, the sociospatial context of vulnerable children often compounds their challenges. These children typically reside in marginalized, isolated communities that lack

essential infrastructure. Their enrolment in nearby schools often leads to de facto segregation. Consequently, collaboration with school authorities, including principals, counselors, and school inspectorates, is essential for ensuring effective educational inclusion. Additionally, partnerships with local authorities and other private entities are necessary to improve living conditions.

Empowering these vulnerable communities is a fundamental objective of the Day Center model. Empowerment entails equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to improve their circumstances and actively contribute to societal development. Sustainable empowerment is contingent on tangible and measurable improvements in living conditions. Measures essential to empowerment include access to fundamental services such as water, sanitation, energy, health care, and education.

Similarly, children should not be regarded merely as recipients of social services but as active participants in their own development. Their involvement in decision-making processes has a significant impact at three levels:

1. Personal development: As active participants, children acquire skills in information processing, self-expression, communication, and advocacy. They become aware of their roles, their rights, and their potential influence within their community and broader society.
2. Organizational development: Child participation ensures that the activities of organizations are better tailored to their needs, thereby enhancing the relevance and sustainability of interventions.
3. Community and societal development: Through CONCORDIA's programs, children gain participatory skills that they apply in multiple societal roles, including as students, community members, volunteers, and future voters.

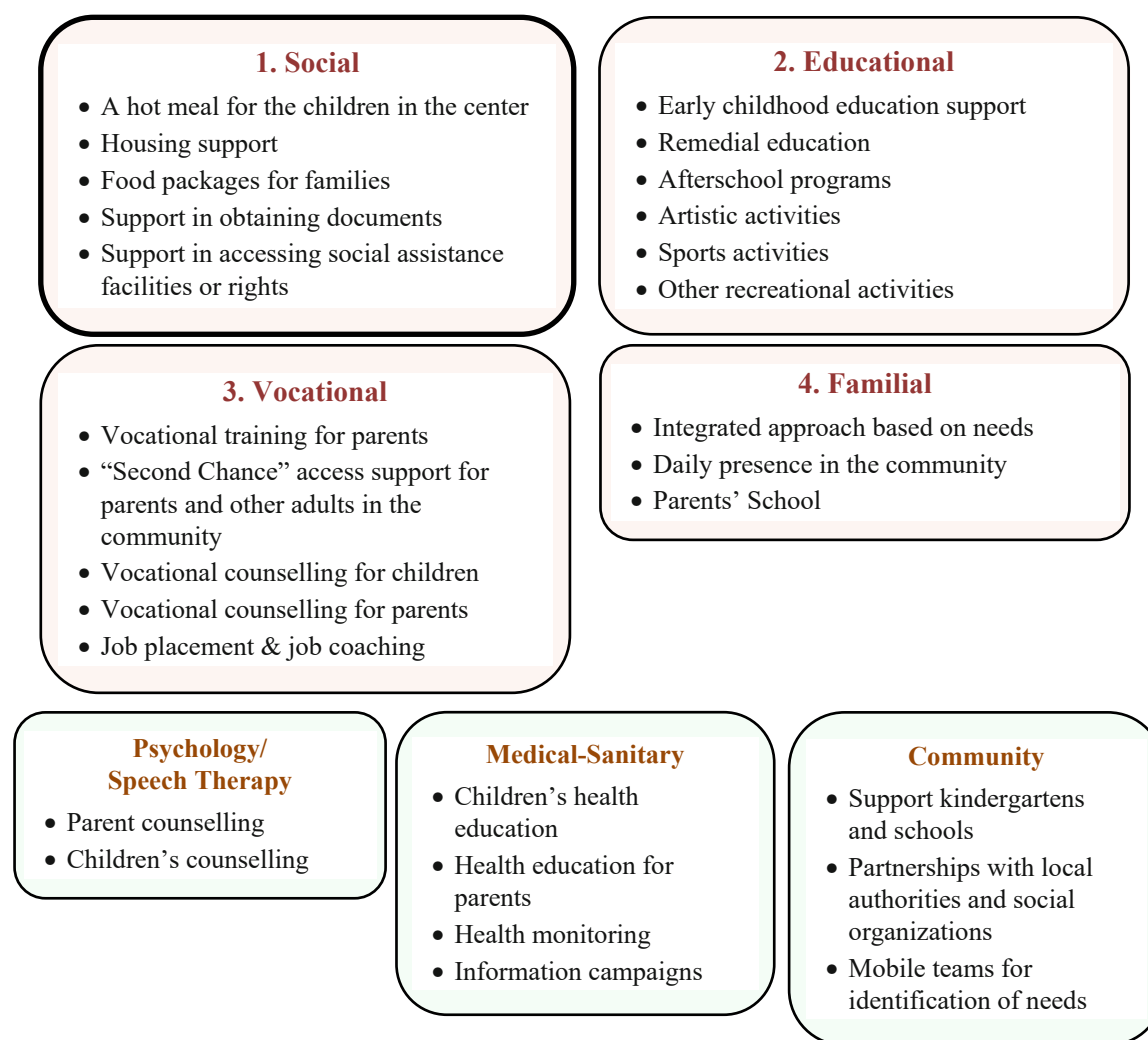
To make child participation an integral part of the Day Center model, CONCORDIA adheres to the Lundy Model of Child Participation, developed by Professor Laura Lundy in 2007 and endorsed by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission (EU Children's Participation Platform, n.d.). This model operationalizes Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in four key dimensions:

- Space: Providing children with opportunities to express their views in a safe and supportive environment.
- Voice: Ensuring that children are informed and encouraged to articulate their perspectives.
- Audience: Guaranteeing that children's views are acknowledged by decision-makers.
- Influence: Ensuring that children's perspectives are taken into account in decision-making processes.

A child who is given a voice, listened to, and acknowledged becomes empowered, transitioning from vulnerability to being an informed and confident student with future aspirations.

CONCORDIA established its first Romanian Day Center in Ploiești, Prahova County, in 2013, followed by a second center there in 2015. These centers cater to school-aged children from high-risk neighborhoods, offering supervision, educational programs, health care, psychological counseling, personal development, vocational guidance, and recreational activities. Interventions within CONCORDIA’s Day Centers are characterized by an integrated and personalized approach, which addresses children’s educational, social, health, and housing needs holistically. They are multilevel, targeting not just individual children, but also their families and their communities: the child is positioned as an agent of change. Interventions are also flexible, adapting to evolving needs and emerging opportunities.

Figure 1. The Intervention Model of CONCORDIA Day Centers for Children and Families in Difficulty



*Note.* Adapted from “The Intervention Model of the CONCORDIA Day-Centres for children and families in difficulty” in *Impact Assessment of CONCORDIA’s Day-Care Centers in Romania* (Voicu, Petrescu, Neguț, & Glăvan, 2021, p. 7).

The success of the Ploiești model led to the opening of a third Day Center in Odobesti, Dâmbovița County, in 2021 (Voicu et al., 2021). CONCORDIA's approach is scalable and possesses the potential to serve as a model at both the local and the national level. Expanding the number of Day Centers is a logical step toward enhancing service coverage and meeting the increasing demand for such interventions in Romania. However, a single service provider cannot achieve this alone — the development of a national network of Day Centers is essential. Such a platform would facilitate interaction among service providers, allow mapping of service coverage, and enable real-time impact assessments. Key objectives of this initiative include:

- Developing an interactive map of Day Centers and evaluating their impact in real time.
- Adapting service standards to accommodate the needs of vulnerable and isolated communities.
- Raising awareness at the central and local levels about extreme poverty, school dropout risks, and the benefits of Day Centers.

Promoting alleviation of extreme poverty as a priority on the public agenda, conducting awareness campaigns, and emphasizing the preventive role of social services are imperative steps. Day Centers play a crucial role in preventing school dropout, supporting disadvantaged children, and strengthening family and community cohesion. The implementation of a national platform would provide a coordinated and strategic response to these challenges, ensuring sustainable and impactful social change.

### ***From Model to Network***

Recognizing the insufficient public funding allocated to preventing child–family separation and school dropout, in 2021 CONCORDIA undertook the responsibility of amplifying the collective voice of Day Centers by establishing the National Network of Day Centers for children living in poverty — CentreZi RO (Concordia Proiecte Sociale, 2021). This informal entity seeks to enhance and promote social services provided by Day Centers in Romania to reduce child poverty. The network's objectives include:

- Increasing public funding and improving the legislative framework for financial support.
- Enhancing regulations governing the operation of Day Centers to ensure higher service standards.
- Raising awareness among the public, local communities, and institutions about the necessity for and impact of Day Centers.
- Bringing the issue of extreme child poverty and the role of Day Centers to the forefront of public discourse as a viable solution for poverty eradication.
- Expanding the number of Day Centers to broaden service coverage, strengthen collaboration within the network, and enhance institutional capacity.



- Improving the professionalization of services for children at risk of poverty and exclusion by upskilling professionals working in Day Centers.
- Standardizing educational interventions to ensure consistency and effectiveness.

This initiative is designed to prevent family separation and school dropout while fostering the development of processes and services within the national network of centers dedicated to supporting disadvantaged children. Furthermore, the project provides vital assistance to NGOs and local administrative units (UATs), particularly in small urban and rural areas. Beyond facilitating the construction and expansion of Day Centers, CentreZi RO serves as a key resource and expertise hub for accessing financial support through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and European funding programs for the 2021–2027 period.

The network also establishes a platform for dialogue among Day Center representatives, with the aim of enhancing the quality of social services, improving staff training, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of these essential services. The following types of centers are found in the network:

- Day Centers for children at risk of separation from their parents (8891CZ-C-II)
- Day Centers for children with disabilities (8891CZ-C III)
- Day Centers for preparing and supporting the integration or reintegration of the child into the family (8891CZ-C-IV)
- Day Centers for the development of skills for independent living (8891CZ-C-VI)
- Day Centers for counselling and support for parents and children (8899CZ-F-I)

Many families are unable to provide their children with adequate food, supervision, or assistance with homework. The network directly contributes to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty by supporting integrated interventions, and investing in the prevention of family separation and educational abandonment, as well as stimulating systemic changes in a strong national network that works for the well-being of the most disadvantaged children. The need for these services to cover the entire country is increasingly evident in the success of these institutions. Many destinies have been changed because Day Centers have contributed to the training and development of children, offering, in addition to food, complete educational services and social and psychological counseling.

The CentreZi RO project builds on the results of previously funded CONCORDIA projects such as:

- Day Centers for children and families working in poor neighborhoods in the city of Ploiești and in the rural area of Odobesti, Dâmbovița;
- Social franchising for Day Centers, as a potential future direction for the expansion of the CONCORDIA model in Romania and outside Romania and the Impact Study developed by CONCORDIA on its own Day Centers (Voicu et al., 2021);

- Theory of Change for child and family Day Centers (Voicu et al., 2021);
- CONCORDIA Academia with professional training programs for managers and practitioners (Concordia Proiecte Sociale, n.d.-b).

Today there are 860 Day Centers in Romania: of these, 25% are located in rural areas and 74% in urban areas; 416 centers are run by public authorities and 444 by private providers. As well, 164 Day Centers from 26 counties are part of CentreZi RO — The National Network of Day Centers, and are located in underserved urban and rural areas (Concordia Proiecte Sociale, n.d.-c).

Figure 2. *Map of Counties Where the National Network of Day Centers operates (in green)*



*Note.* From Rețeaua CentreZi RO [CentreZi RO Network]. Concordia Proiecte Sociale (2021).

### ***From Model to Social Franchise***

In the pursuit of sustainable and scalable solutions to address child poverty and social exclusion, social franchising has emerged as a viable mechanism for amplifying impact while maintaining quality standards. The CONCORDIA framework provides a case study. By leveraging tested methodologies and structured operational models, social franchising enables the systematic expansion of services that cater to vulnerable children and families. The process involves careful selection of partners, capacity-building, continuous monitoring, and strategic scaling, thus ensuring long-term sustainability.

Social franchising is an adaptation of commercial franchising principles to the social sector. It allows non-profit organizations to extend their successful programs through independent partners while maintaining core values, standards, and operational methodologies. The model provides a structured approach for service expansion without compromising quality or efficiency. In the context of Day Centers, social franchising facilitates the replication of a proven intervention aimed



at preventing family breakdown and enhancing child well-being within local communities. The core components of the social franchise model for Day Centers include:

- Standardized service delivery: Ensuring consistency in child welfare and family support interventions.
- Capacity-building: Providing ongoing training and professional development to franchisees.
- Sustainable financing: Diversifying funding sources through grants, social enterprise initiatives, and government partnerships.
- Monitoring and evaluation: Implementing data-driven approaches to assess impact and inform program improvements.

The transition from a single, successful Day Center model to a social franchise requires a structured, multistage approach. The CONCORDIA model outlines four key stages in this transition.

#### *Stage 1: Identifying Franchise Partners and Establishing Relationships*

The initial phase involves mapping out potential franchise partners, including local NGOs, municipalities, and community-based organizations that demonstrate a commitment to child welfare. Key steps include conducting feasibility studies to assess local needs, establishing a dialogue with stakeholders and potential partners, identifying suitable locations based on a demographic and socioeconomic analysis, and evaluating the financial and operational capacity of prospective franchisees. By establishing a robust pre-contractual engagement, CONCORDIA ensures alignment between franchise partners and the overarching mission of providing comprehensive child and family support services.

#### *Stage 2: Launching the Franchise and Orientation*

Once the franchise contract is formalized, the operationalization of the Day Center follows a clear road map: (a) developing an operational plan that includes recruiting personnel, setting up infrastructure, and establishing criteria for selecting beneficiaries; (b) conducting intensive training for new franchisees, focusing on child protection policies, program delivery, and community engagement strategies; (c) initiating the licensing process and securing financial sustainability mechanisms, such as public–private partnerships and impact-driven funding models; and (d) conducting strategic planning meetings at regular intervals to ensure smooth implementation and troubleshoot any emerging challenges.

#### *Stage 3: Capacity-Building for Franchisees*

Capacity-building is a cornerstone of the social franchise approach, one that will help ensure that franchisees maintain high service-delivery standards. CONCORDIA provides structured support through its Social Franchise Unit, reinforcing the operational and strategic capabilities of

each franchisee. Initial and periodic training programs tailored to specific roles within the franchise are conducted to facilitate ongoing professional development. Knowledge-sharing initiatives, such as peer learning exchanges and best practice workshops, and mentorship and supervision mechanisms help strengthen the professional competencies of franchise staff.

#### *Stage 4: Sustainable Growth and Franchise Consolidation*

Long-term success depends on continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of the franchise model. To ensure sustainable impact, regular performance assessments through data collection and impact evaluations are conducted, as well as strategic planning workshops to help franchisees refine service delivery approaches. To ensure financial viability, communication and fundraising strategies are supported and strengthened. A network of franchisees has been established to foster collaboration and advocacy for child welfare policies. By institutionalizing these practices, the franchise model evolves dynamically, responding to emerging challenges while preserving its core mission.

#### ***The Case for Social Franchising***

The transition from a single model to a social franchise presents several advantages:

- Scalability: Expands reach to a greater number of children and families.
- Standardization: Maintains quality assurance across different franchise units.
- Sustainability: Diversifies funding sources, reducing dependency on single funding streams.
- Local ownership: Strengthens community-based responses to social challenges.

However, social franchising also entails challenges:

- Ensuring compliance: Maintaining adherence to franchise guidelines across diverse operational settings.
- Financial sustainability: Securing consistent funding for franchise expansion and maintenance.
- Cultural adaptation: Adjusting the model to meet local contextual variations while upholding core principles.

The shift from a single Day Center model to a social franchise represents an innovative approach to breaking the cycle of poverty for vulnerable children. By replicating a tested intervention through structured partnerships, social franchising amplifies impact while ensuring sustainability. The CONCORDIA framework illustrates how strategic planning, capacity-building, and continuous monitoring create a robust mechanism for scaling social innovation. As the model continues to evolve, ongoing research and adaptation will be crucial in optimizing its effectiveness and long-term viability.

As a scalable and sustainable approach to social franchising, the CONCORDIA model provides a blueprint for addressing global challenges related to child protection and family resilience. Its success underscores the transformative potential of structured social replication in fostering equity and well-being within marginalized communities. Leveraging multidisciplinary strategies, this model not only enhances child well-being but also strengthens familial and community structures, thereby addressing root causes of social vulnerability. The franchise demonstrates the scalability and sustainability of structured social replication in diverse socio-economic contexts.

### **Conclusion**

The multidisciplinary approach implemented by CONCORDIA through the Day Center model demonstrates the significant impact of integrated interventions in preventing poverty and social exclusion among vulnerable children in Romania. In a context marked by deep socioeconomic disparities and insufficient public resources, partnerships between NGOs, public institutions, and local communities play a crucial role in developing sustainable solutions.

Through the expansion of the national CentreZi RO network and the implementation of a social franchise model, CONCORDIA ensures not only the continuity and quality of social services but also the scalability of its interventions. This strategy facilitates access to educational, social assistance, and psychological counseling services for a greater number of children and families, ultimately reducing school dropout and intergenerational poverty. The national network of Day Centers acts as a strategic tool for service providers to coordinate efforts, exchange best practices, and advocate for policy improvements that address systemic challenges.

The importance of child participation in decision-making processes, as emphasized by the Lundy Model, is a fundamental aspect of CONCORDIA's approach. By providing children with a safe environment to express their opinions and actively engage in their own development, the organization fosters the formation of responsible citizens capable of claiming their rights and shaping a more stable future. The emphasis on empowerment not only enhances individual agency but also strengthens community resilience, ensuring that children transition from passive recipients of aid to active contributors to social development.

Despite the significant progress made, substantial challenges remain. The limited financial support allocated to child protection services and education in Romania is one of these: there is an urgent need for increased investment in social services. The expansion of the Day Center model requires not only financial resources but also a long-term strategic vision supported by coherent public policies and strong institutional commitment. Additionally, addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuate child poverty necessitates a more integrated approach, where social services are adapted to the specific needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities. This includes improving access to quality education, health care, and social support, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Another key factor in the success of the Day Center model is the ongoing professionalization of service providers. Capacity-building programs, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and continuous monitoring and evaluation are essential to maintaining service quality and ensuring that interventions remain responsive to the evolving needs of beneficiaries. The social franchise model adopted by CONCORDIA represents an innovative mechanism for scaling impact while maintaining consistency in service delivery. By leveraging structured partnerships, standardized intervention methodologies, and continuous oversight, the model ensures that the expansion of Day Centers does not compromise the quality or efficiency of services.

The long-term sustainability of this initiative depends on fostering stronger collaborations among NGOs, governmental institutions, and private sector stakeholders. Public–private partnerships, strategic funding mechanisms, and policy advocacy are essential to securing a stable financial foundation for these services. Additionally, raising public awareness about the role of Day Centers in reducing child poverty and supporting vulnerable families is crucial in mobilizing both political will and community engagement.

In conclusion, CONCORDIA’s experience underscores the fact that investments in integrated social and educational services are a viable approach to reducing child poverty. The development of a consolidated national framework for Day Centers, combined with the promotion of inclusive and sustainable public policies, has the potential to generate systemic change. By scaling successful intervention models, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and institutionalizing child participation, Romania can create a more equitable future for its most vulnerable populations. The CentreZi RO network and the social franchise model serve as blueprints for replicating effective social interventions at both the national and international level. Moving forward, the continued expansion and refinement of these models will be critical in breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that every child has access to the opportunities necessary for a brighter and more promising future.

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