

Brain drain. Brain gain. The power of networking and the story of ARCADIA

The constant movement of skilled professionals and students from one from one country to another represents **brain gain** for the countries that reap their capacities and experience and **brain drain** for their home countries. Nevertheless, in a globalized world the **brain circulation** is becoming a reality and the debate about **brain regain** goes beyond bringing the experts back to their home-countries. **Leveraging the new online tools and the power of networks sending countries can reconnect with their experts without the need of having them in person.**

Especially, in the field of international development cooperation, professionals with a very diverse background (from finance to health and food security) thrive to put their skills and experience in the most disadvantaged regions in the world and address the causes of poverty in the world. It is a natural choice for development professionals to move abroad and travel in order to be where their work is needed most. They usually serve in international organizations, NGOs and consultancies and are ready to adapt in accordance to current development priorities. Romania has strengthened its engagement with the field of international development cooperation; and many Romanians work in this field across the globe.



In this context, [ARCADIA – The Romanian Association for International Cooperation and Development](#) – had the main objective to establish a network of Romanian professionals with transferable skills and plenty of experiences to share.

Through specific activities and working groups created around different topics we engage these experts and “bring back” their expertise fuelling the development of a specific community of practice at national level.

In order to find out more about this phenomenon, we are interviewing Mr **Ştefan Cibian**, the president of ARCADIA.

Alexandra: The gap between brain drain and brain gain has been approached by ARCADIA as an opportunity for exchanging experiences and setting new ways for project-based working. Ştefan, as a community builder, how would you describe the mission and motivation that create the network-like dynamics of ARCADIA?



Ştefan: ARCADIA naturally draws membership from around the world. Given the nature of the field, the professionals concerned with international development relocate, may times, to work in various areas of the world. In that context, ARCADIA’s mission is to enhance knowledge and professional expertise in international development, by providing a community space where professionals continue to learn, while sharing own insights and working in collaborative projects. Each practitioner, scholar, expert, policy-maker, journalist and student engaged in this field brings a wealth of knowledge and experience at the table. By providing learning and sharing spaces, ARCADIA aims to both build more capacity in this field and take the field further.

One important result from ARCADIA’s work is that the knowledge and experience arrived at in practice is shared with others.

In Romania's context, in a field where brain drain is implicit in the profession, such learning spaces provide the soft infrastructure necessary for brain regain. The brain regain is multiplied by the openness of the network to professionals from anywhere in the world and by the focus put on professionals based in Romania. As such, the brain regain is not merely the reverse of the brain-drain, but much more, tapping into the knowledge resources available currently at an international level and at the same time building connections to the broader international development community.

Alexandra: Network organizations are not very common in Romania. Nevertheless, the network approach as a deliberate strategy for the non-governmental sector may have a tremendous social impact enabling members to create/ join various projects and thus, put together different approaches, skills, and capacities. How can the example of ARCADIA benefit to the non-governmental sector in terms of strategy, partnerships, and expertise?

Ștefan: The main nuggets of knowledge come from struggles, challenges and outright failure. Therefore, to meaningfully address your question, it is important to be opened about the *lessons* ARCADIA learnt in the process of setting up the community of professionals. I see a bundle of challenges that interrelate. These are: **challenges related to the mission, challenges related to building adequate learning spaces and challenges related to sustainability.**

Being a professional association that aims to grow the field – a field that is re-emerging after decades of decay – offers ARCADIA a dual challenge: *first*, it emerges in a context where such type of organizations is uncommon or dysfunctional (except maybe the professional organizations set up through special laws); *second*, embarking to support a field that is only recently acknowledged nationally, adds a strong field-building mission to ARCADIA's work, making it important not only to build a community of professionals, but also to

contribute to the emergence of the field through its action.

The *lessons* learnt here are that we need more collective efforts to build stronger initiatives that create knowledge and capacity in various fields, that each field has a number of professionals that are strongly motivated and grow through engaging in professional networks and communities; and while not easy, building a professional community brings a lot of satisfaction from seeing the field, people and the community grow.

A second challenge relates to building adequate learning spaces, more broadly to building processes of all sorts (organizational, community, learning-related, etc). There is little capacity in general in the civil society and universities to design good processes and that leaves a mark in our context as well. The types of engagements that professionals take do not lead in the short to medium term to building well-designed learning processes. The lessons learned are that **we need to invest more in this area and pay additional attention to designing the interactions and learning spaces.**

The last category of challenges relates to the sustainability of both the community and the organization. In terms of financial sustainability, professional organizations are not on the radar for any of the main public and private donors in Romania. In terms of organizational sustainability, we find that success can only come from engaging proactively professionals for a longer period of time. The lessons-learnt here are that **we need to advocate more for investments in knowledge services and organizations working with knowledge across sectors – academic, implementation, policy, media and that we need to invest more in building sustainability models for professional and knowledge-focused organizations.**

Alexandra: Who are the Romanians in development or, in other words, who are the professionals that joined ARCADIA and have

supported its activities?

Ştefan: There is a wide range of professionals involved in ARCADIA and its activities. There are practitioners in development working in various parts of the world who contribute with input from wherever they are. There are also practitioners who have lived in developing countries and have returned back to Romania who continue to contribute to developing the field here. An important component of the membership relates to the academic environment – academics, researchers, and students. Also, media practitioners interested in development are present in the network.

Alexandra: As a network of experts and professionals in the field of international development and cooperation, ARCADIA enables members to focus on their cause in a very entrepreneurial way. How does the organization work?

Ştefan: The most important benefits that come from a network appear when members assume leadership on issues of interest. In ARCADIA we provide the necessary space for professionals and their organizations to propose initiatives and lead their implementation. The organization facilitates the activity of working-groups, the online review, conferences, workshops, training sessions, etc. and each of the members can use the space for proposing initiatives and contributing with content. In doing so they are supported by the organizational core to be able to setup the new projects and launch their first initiatives and activities.

Alexandra: The development of expertise (in any field of practice) requires coaches and trainers who are willing to share from their professional history, giving constructive feedback. If we consider ARCADIA as a learning community that is benefiting its members, how would you assess the learning opportunities provided by the association?

Ştefan: We have been concerned in the last years with the

number of people embarking on a career in this field and have tested several methods for enhancing the career opportunities for young practitioners and students. We put in place a mentorship program. We have organized training sessions for young practitioners and students and have built a network of academic advisors for the students doing research on development. Furthermore we offered, with the support of the MFA and UNDP Romania, [scholarships](#) for students carrying out research in partner countries. What we see as a key modality for enhancing learning among peers is the further development and consolidation of working groups as well as facilitating more events (both virtual and in person) where such sharing and learning is made possible.

Alexandra: *Considering the new dynamics of the post-2015 agenda, what are the directions that the organization is willing to embrace in the future?*



Ştefan: The major shift that comes with the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), in my view, is the universalization of the development targets. That implies erasing at some

conceptual level the distinction between developed and developing countries. Such move can have a positive or a negative impact – negative, if certain perspectives of the world continue to be prevalent and imposed. Positive, if this move enables more voices and approaches at the table and if it enables us to recognize the uniqueness of each developing context (be it in a formerly developing or developed environment). This change impacts ARCADIA, as the professionals in the network will become more open to Romania's experience with development and the value-added they can bring to the internal debates on development challenges.

Alexandra: *What message would you like to pass on to current and potential members interested in getting to know ARCADIA?*

Ştefan: To simply be creative in shaping learning experiences within and outside the ARCADIA community and also to take initiative and put that creativity in action.

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If you have any questions about ARCADIA, please do not hesitate to contact Ştefan at stefan.cibian@arcadianetwork.org