

**THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT DOES:
HOW ONE NGO REFOCUSED ATTENTION TO
THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN MOLDOVA**

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**THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT DOES:
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MOLDOVA**

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ABSTRACT: Our paper centers on exploring the long-term activities of the Clipa Siderala organization, a self-sustaining NGO serving children, particularly orphans, in the Republic of Moldova. Clipa Siderala is a Moldovan organization that is largely self-sustaining. In a sea of externally initiated programs, Clipa Siderala is unique in that it is organized by local Moldovans and raises the bulk of its financial support from within Moldova. Additionally, the organization builds awareness and advocacy for the plight of disadvantaged Moldovan children by providing services that engage middle-class and well-to-do Moldovans in activities that directly support the needs of children living in poverty, including arranging holiday visits to children's homes and orphanages throughout the country. The case of Clipa Siderala is a most instructive one for developing localized components that can lead to long-term and sustainable solutions.

I. The Moldovan Dilemma

Moldova is the poorest nation on the European continent with per-capita GDP estimated at between \$615¹ and \$1,800 U.S. in 2003.² As a small republic of the former Soviet Union, Moldova has had a particularly difficult transition away from the old system. It was victim to a bloody civil war in 1992 that led to the creation of an unrecognized secessionist state along its border with Ukraine. The development of a distinctive Moldovan national identity has been overshadowed by language and ethnic ties that encourage citizens to have stronger connections

¹ UN Data accessed on 10/1/2006 from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/default.htm>

² <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/md.html> accessed on 7 August 2006.

with external states rather than the Republic of Moldova. Further, actual corruption and the perception of corruption in government have meant that Moldovans lack trust in governmental institutions, and social concerns are often overlooked. With intense poverty and the lack of a unifying identity, Moldova has evolved into a state where the general plight of children has been tragically ignored.

Most studies on Moldova focus on the language divide between Romanian and Russian speakers.³ These linguistic groups come from a complicated but typical history of domination by one or another powers of the region. In recent history, most of the territory in what is today the Republic of Moldova was a province of the Russian Empire until the 1910s, at which point it became independent and voluntarily joined



Romania.⁴ Later, Moldova was under Nazi control during part of WWII, and finally was invaded and annexed to the Soviet Union. The annexation as one of the 15 republics of the former USSR led to Russification in most public institutions, including schools and government. For all intents and purposes, Russian was the official language, though Romanian was allowed to be spoken, and for practical purposes it remained the common language for

³ Charles King does a particularly good job explaining ethnicity and the political implications for creating a general Moldovan identity in his 1999 work, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* published by the Hoover Institution Press.

⁴ A comprehensive treatment of the creation of the Moldovan state and its integration into the greater Romania and subsequent absorption into the Soviet Union is Marcel Mitrasca's 2002 publication of *Moldova: A Romanian Province Under Russian Rule, Diplomatic History from the Archives of the Great Powers* published by Algora Publishing.

most citizens of the Republic. Even so, under directives from Moscow, the written Romanian language was converted into Cyrillic script and there was an attempt, though largely unsuccessful, to convince residents of Moldova that they spoke a distinct language known as “Moldovan” and not, in fact, “Romanian”.⁵ There are other primary languages spoken including Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Gagauzian (a dialect of old Turkish). In 1989, during the Gorbachev *perestroika* era, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet made the bold move to end the writing of Romanian/Moldovan language in Cyrillic, restoring the Latin alphabet. This was overwhelmingly popular among the ethnic Romanian/Romanian speaking population (roughly 65% of Moldovans). At the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was widespread and strong sentiment that the country should declare Romanian as the official national language. Movements geared to see the reunification of Moldova with Romania took root, and indeed retain strong support today.

This led to a short but bloody civil war in 1992 and the rise of an independent government in Transnistria, a sliver of territory along the Eastern border with Ukraine (labeled as the Dnestr region on the map above). The government of Transnistria continues to function as if it were still in the Soviet era. At the time of the conflict, Moldovan reunification with Romanian and the eradication of the Russian language were prominent in the propaganda used by the separatists. For official purposes, Romanian written in the breakaway republic continues to be written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Russian military troops remain in the region, ostensibly to watch over weapon reserves left after the general withdrawal of the Soviet (later Russian) Red Army in 1994. The Dniester River continues to be patrolled by military forces and a quasi-border has been set up.

⁵ Stephen Henigan explains much about the linguistic issues, Sovietification, and their impact on social fiber of Moldova using a single family as a case study in his 2002 book, *Lost Province: Adventures in a Moldovan Family* published by Prospect Books.

Recently, during the summer of 2006, two explosions of undetermined origin rocked Tiraspol, the self-proclaimed capital of the Transnistrian Republic, increasing suspicion among people living on either side of the Dniester. The now fifteen year-old situation in Transnistria has led to deep political divisions and further enhanced suspicions among language groups. It also has international ramifications—with both Romania and Russia exercising influence on the policies of Moldova. The lessons of Transnistria played into the acceptance of Gagauzia as an autonomous, non-contiguous republic inside the southwest corner of Moldova the following year. In March 2006, the Russian Federation placed a ban on Moldovan wine. Russia is the largest importer of Moldovan goods (representing 70% of Moldovan exports). Wine makes up 80% of these exports, so such a boycott has far-reaching implications for Moldova. At the same time, Russian-speakers felt hostile pressure from a series of statements made by the president of Romania, advocating Moldovan accession to the European Union and what was perceived to be coded language advocating reunification with Romania. These events have not served to focus the civic will toward a national identity; rather, Moldovans are continually under pressure to see their identity residing outside the borders of the nation. It becomes difficult to raise political and social awareness to causes that can be seen as benefiting one side or another.

Yet another compounding effect of the poverty, economic hardship, and the breakdown of traditional culture including national identity has been the exodus of approximately one-third of the working aged population who have gone abroad to find employment. These individuals, generally aged between 25 and 55, leave family behind to find jobs in Western Europe, frequently on the illegal labor market. The emigrants are of child-bearing age and often come from rural parts of the country. They leave behind young children, sometimes with aging grandparents, or other relatives, and sometimes in institutions. In Chisinau, it is not uncommon

to meet adolescents and teens living with a slightly older sibling or even independently. It is worth noting that more than 80%⁶ of children in institutions (orphanages and boarding schools) in Moldova are over the age of ten. Many have family members in the country that are just unable to financially support them or have been left behind when one or both parents went to find work outside the country. While in most instance remittances sent from a parent living abroad can more than support a multi-generational family left behind, it is not always the case when a parent working abroad either fails to find employment or begins a new life sometimes even beginning a new family. Since so many Moldovans go to work abroad illegally, returning home for visits is difficult. If a parent living abroad abandons a child to a grandparent or other relative that is living on pension, the circumstance is even direr as the average Moldovan pensioner receives approximately \$35 US per month. But parents leaving the country to work abroad are not the only reason that children in Moldova are being reared in poverty. Internal wages are low, impacting the ability of a family to support itself. Additionally, given the relative severity of winter, additional family members require more clothing and fuel to stay warm.

A very tragic outcome from compounding of these factors can be seen in the human trafficking issue. Some estimates are that 50% of all prostitutes in Europe come from Moldova. Chisinau newspapers regularly have ads placed in them asking young, attractive women to take careers abroad as “dancers.” The pathway most often leads to prostitution where young women find themselves exported without any documentation and forced to sell themselves. Particularly vulnerable are young women from impoverished backgrounds (including those from orphanages) who have heard glorious tales of wealth out of the country. For young men, organized crime can become an alternative, as is unregulated labor. There are not many reports of males being

⁶ *Lista Institutiiilor de tip Internats subordonate Ministerului Educatiei*, Anul de studii 2004-05 official document of the Republic of Moldova.

trafficked. The nature of the Transnistrian situation allows for a portal for trafficking just along the eastern frontier of the country (in addition to human trafficking, all sorts of other contraband moves through Tiraspol).

A 2002 Survey by Transparency International indicated that Moldovan households on average perceived that they paid 10-20% in bribes to government officials (an average of \$111 per year).⁷ Table 1 offers a brief exploration of Moldova as it is ranked by several agencies.

TABLE 1: MOLDOVA IN THE RANKINGS

Year/Source	Figure	Rank ⁸	Next Above/Next Below ⁸
Economics:			
Per capita GDP (03) <i>CIA Factbook</i> ⁹	\$1,800	179	Mongolia/Solomon Islands
Per capita GDP (03) <i>Atlas Method</i>	\$880	153	Nicaragua/Bhutan
Per Capita GDP (06) <i>UN</i> ¹⁰	\$615		
Purchasing Power Parity (06) <i>World Bank</i> ¹¹	\$2,150	163	Cameroon/Bangladesh
Ease of Doing Business (06) <i>World Bank</i>	n/a	83	Ghana/Kyrgyz Republic
% living in Poverty Line (01) <i>CIA Factbook</i>	80%		
Politics:			
Corruption Perception (05) <i>Transparency Int'l</i>	2.9	88	Dominican Republic/Malawi
Health Factors:			
Infant Mortality Rate (06) <i>CIA Factbook</i>	.038%		
Life Expectancy (06) <i>CIA Factbook</i>	65.65 years		
Literacy Rate (06) <i>CIA Factbook</i>	99.1%		
Population Growth (06) <i>UN</i>	-0.33		
Children:			
% below age 15 (06) <i>UN</i>	18%		
Others:			
Urban/Rural Distribution (06) <i>UN</i>	49.7/53.3		

Table 1 also offers a relative comparison, if results are available, of the Republic of Moldova to other nations. By these rankings, Moldova resembles a developing nation far more than a developed nation. It is regularly contended that Moldova is the poorest country on the European Continent.

In 1998, it was estimated that fully 1% of the nation's children were residents of orphanages or other institutions. Many of these children were abandoned because their parents

⁷ http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/bpi accessed 7 August 2006.

⁸ If available.

⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/md.html> accessed on 7 August 2006.

¹⁰ UN Data accessed on 10/1/2006 from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/default.htm>

¹¹ World Bank Data accessed on 9/12/2006 from <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES>

had left the country to find work in other nations. The long-range implication of the orphan problem in Moldova is that children leave institutions without basic life skills that make them capable of participating in the broader society. They leave without a clear sense of identity or purpose and are left more vulnerable to the societal ills that come from poverty such as human trafficking and other illicit activities. According to the Ministry of Education of Moldova¹², in 2005 there were 65 institutions hosting orphan or abandoned children, majority 7-12 years old. 80% of the buildings the children lived in have been built in the Soviet times (1950s-1970s) and showed signs of decay – leaking roofs, rusty pipes, no running water or heating, old furniture and equipment. The basic essentials, such as toilet supplies, bed sheets, underwear and shoes, were surprisingly rare. During the last five years, donations from Moldovan businesses (actively promoted by the President himself) and from the private foreign sources have been used to somewhat improve the living conditions in the orphanages. However, some of the institutions located in the far away corners of the country were still neglected.

In 1999, Moldova was described as holding “...the unenviable record of having suffered the most devastating peacetime decline in economic performance and living standards of any country in modern times.¹³” Some estimates are that between 1992 and 1999, Moldovans on average saw their standard of living reduced by 66% and that in the seven years since 1999, growth, largely from foreign remittance, has only had the effect of restoring the average standard of living to 50% of what it was before the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ In Orlova and Ronnas’ work (1999) evidence is presented that Moldova had seen significant declines in expenditures for education, healthcare, and pensions, while simultaneously seeing prices incline for food,

¹² “Moldovan Children”, Department of Statistics, 2005.

¹³ Quoted from Nina Orlova and Per Ronnas 1999 article in *Post Communist Economies* entitled “The Crippling Cost of an Incomplete Transformation: The Case of Moldova.” Sep 1999 11:3, p. 373.

¹⁴ Chart accessed on 9/28/2006 from http://www.culiuc.com/archives/2006/01/gdp_dynamics.phtml based on data from the Economist Intelligence Unit Data Service.

housing, and fuel. The authors document that Moldova is particularly prone to feeling the effects of Russian economic setbacks and that as the Russian economy experienced setbacks in the 1990s, when Moldova would experience rapid economic declines coupled with declining foreign investment and contractions in the labor market. In more recent times, there do not appear to be corresponding benefits in the Moldovan economy when conditions improve in Russia. Whether this is due to politics or true shifts in economic rationality, the risks placed on a fragile societal arrangement are great. When faced with dramatic declines in the standard of living, the needs of others, even children, are less likely to receive attention.

This said, the challenge for Moldova is not only the issue of finding a means to directly counter the negative economic trends that have devastated its standard of living but also to build a culture that can allow its citizens to trust in the future and develop self-sustaining infrastructure that is capable of protecting its most vulnerable citizens. One factor that distinguishes Moldova from other impoverished nations is that, largely thanks to its Soviet legacy that defeats the nation in many other venues, the standard of education is high and the status of women is better than in most other countries. Two measures of this are a literacy rate over 99%¹⁵ and the overall status of women is better than in most other developing nations.¹⁶ Yet in Moldova, challenges have different issues and permutations than in nations where the status of children is most directly related to overall education and the status of women in the society. Diminished economic

¹⁵ www.cia.gov/cia/pulications/factbook/geos/md.html accessed on 8/5/2006. The literacy rate for males was 99.6% and 98.7% for females. It ought to be noted that there is growing concern internally that Moldovan literacy is declining with poor funding for education, the school infrastructure is weakening and teachers are also caught in the general exodus from low wages internally to higher wage jobs in other countries. The evidence at this point remains largely anecdotal.

¹⁶ Based on 2003 UN data accessed from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/wwpub.htm> on 9/29/2006, we find that Moldovan women make up a larger share of the labor market at 51% than the median rates in Europe (46%) or the world as a whole (41%). Women have a lower rate of unemployment than men (6% vs. 10%) and a higher rate of emigration 119 per 100 Moldovan men. While these statistics are promising and the number of women in professions ranks among the highest in the world, the reality is that few women are in high paying jobs in a nation where medical doctors are paid monthly wages of \$100 US and teachers, nurses, and university professors often less.

conditions, divided families, and fractured ethnic identification make social consciousness difficult to achieve. Finding a means to refocus energy is no easy task and while external aid has greatly aided the small nation in its acute need to provide basic services to its most needy citizens, it is the authors' contention that long-term solutions will be organic in nature, coming from social awareness and pro-action and not dependency. Clipa Siderala represents one organization that has begun to accomplish this task. It is neither a perfect organization nor the only organization that is making a difference in the perception of need among Moldova's disadvantaged children, but it does represent one of the first organic solutions to the issues surrounding the awareness and improvement of the lives of Moldovan children, most particularly orphans. Further, the means that are used by this particular NGO have had the effect of refocusing attention and concern of others in the society to the unmet needs of children.

II. Introducing Clipa Siderala

It is rare that a professional work offers personal narrative but the authors would like to start with two, one from Irina and one from Chris. They are stories of introduction are meant to help the reader understand the authors involvement and understanding of Clipa Siderala. We hope that these introductions will allow the reader the opportunity to understand how this organization makes a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children, builds social capacity, and is forging solutions to problems that once seemed insurmountable.

Irina returned from a U.S. State Department funded Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program to begin university in Chisinau and wanted to make a difference in her country. As a 17-year-old exchange student in Oregon, she lived with an amazing host family and learned first-hand about the challenges and rewards of foster care and adoption, loving and being loved by choice. Upon returning to the home country, she wanted to explore in-depth the impact of

Moldovan social institutions on children, families and communities. These social institutions had different names - orphanages, boarding schools, specialized homes - but they did host 11,000 children abandoned by everyone, sometimes abused by their teachers, neglected, sorrowful and vulnerable. Clipa Siderala for these kids was a haven and a heaven - it brought food to fill their stomachs and presents to warm their heart, it invited them to far away lands (Chisinau and Crimea), it allowed them to run around, play, have fun, meet other people and truly live. Live as if they were like everybody else, as if they had a family, as if the attention they needed was granted. She felt that Clipa Siderala was making a difference and she wanted to contribute. Irina uses the anonymous quote, "A hundred years from now it will not matter what our bank account was, the sort of house we lived in, or the kind of car we drove... but the world may be different because we were important in the life of a child" to sum her involvement in Clipa Siderala.

Chris' first meeting at Clipa Siderala headquarters came one snowy evening in March, 2006. He was interested in understanding the nature of Moldovan politics and social action and was particularly interested in the plight of orphans. He got on a small but overcrowded "maxi-taxi" and rode over the icy streets of Chisinau, getting off at the top of a tall hill above where the Clipa headquarters were located. The sidewalks were coated in ice (it is never removed in post-Soviet Moldova, it just builds). The fact that there is ice all over sidewalks illustrates the fact that the government is incapable of either directly providing or indirectly enforcing any related safety regulations. Part of what was driving his interest in social problems was a lack of noticeable social consciousness on the part of the government in this small and neglected country. Walking down the ice he nearly slipped. Frustrated, he considered walking away to attend another meeting, but having made a promise he gingerly walked on. He was an American, a foreigner and this was a possible way to observe the local social action work. He

was worried that it would be a ruse or a false-front, an agency more concerned with fundraising than with actually delivering services to children. Finally, the door to the modest apartment opened and he found his way to a room where a table was surrounded with energetic teens and twenty-somethings discussing how to best distribute information to Moldovans about issues related to children's welfare via their new website, www.kids.md. The conversation switched easily between Russian and Romanian and even English at times; there were not enough seats in the room, so some of the 25 or so people were standing. They wanted to make a difference in the lives of children in their country—they were committed and they believed in what they were doing.

IV. The History of Clipa Siderala

In an ethnically fractured society like Moldova, the organic emergence of a truly unifying force is truly remarkable. Clipa Siderala (www.clipa.md) is a nongovernmental organization that seeks to improve the lives of children in Moldova. Clipa Siderala is Romanian for “Momentary Star” and the name is meant to convey that every child ought to have a moment in the spotlight, no matter what their background. The origins of the organization go back to 1989 when, as the Soviet structure was falling apart politically, Salavat Jdanov organized athletic tournaments for Moldovan children and guest teams from Bulgaria. Several years later he took four orphans on a camping trip to Crimea, Ukraine. As a physical education teacher, Jdanov wanted to get the children away from the institutional setting and let them have an outing that would bring some hope to their lives. Jdanov was hoping that in these last days of the USSR, he might be able to start a group home for orphans and move them out of institutions. His initial plan was not to start an NGO, in fact what he says, “I was trying to inspire and give hope to the kids. All it took to make a difference that summer of 1996 was an old bulky car, a tent, sleeping bags, some food

and tons of enthusiasm. The fresh salted air, early-morning hikes and warm sea water did the rest.¹⁷” Two weeks living independently had transformed the orphans – they smiled brightly, learned the basic skills of cooking, swimming and survival, and led active healthy lifestyles. Mesmerized by the changes, Valentina Bardusova, the principal of a small village school, invited Jdanov and the kids to visit the area the next year and to use the school building as their summer homes, transforming the classrooms into sleeping quarters and using the cafeteria. With a staff of 5 adult counselors, 2 cooks, and 3 technicians, the first summer camp of 1997 hosted 63 orphans. It was fully funded by Clipa Siderala, who later transformed the project allowing children from well-to-do families to stay at the camp and using the incomes to finance the camping experience for underprivileged children.

The original mission of Clipa Siderala that began 17 years ago—providing social and recreational opportunities for orphans as a means of mainstreaming them into society—has expanded to include broad youth services and community awareness activities. In 2004 the organization was awarded with a certificate acknowledging its contribution to the society as a “socially useful organization” from the Ministry of Justice of Moldova. It is a member of the National Youth Council and has 5 staff members and 100+ dedicated and energetic volunteers who initiate and lead the following projects:

- The annual International Festival of Friendship, engaging children in sports competitions and fostering intercultural exchange between children of different countries and regions;
- Weekly TV broadcasts on the national channel, promoting a healthy active lifestyle (aired in 1996-99 and 2003);
- Sparta Summer Camp in Crimea, annually hosting 80 Moldovan orphans;

¹⁷ Jdanov was interviewed by the authors on numerous occasions in 2006.

- Christmas Caravan, uniting various subgroups of the population to bring donations and positive interaction for around 20 Moldovan orphanages and boarding schools;
- Santa’s Post Service, replying to letters and finding donors for the most pressing needs and wants;
- www.kids.md, managing a web portal devoted to Moldovan children;
- Information Center, collecting and publishing data about orphans, their welfare and living conditions.

In the spring of 1989, nearly 200 orphans from villages and towns of Moldova and 25 volunteers became the participants of the first International Festival of Friendship, Creativity and Sports, a one-of-a-kind recreational activity in the Soviet Union bringing together underprivileged children and compassionate adults. “The atmosphere was very competitive – every team wanted to become the winner in either athletics or creative contests”, recalls Grigore Panuta, one of the most devoted Festival participants and the adult leader of the three-times champion team from the village of Carpineni. “We have been carefully selecting and training the best of our pupils. Looking forward to participating in the Clipa Siderala activities, they become more focused on their studies, practice sports, and are genuinely interested in succeeding.¹⁸” Centered on sports and welcoming approximately 400 participants and 30,000 viewers, today the Festival is the primary event in the fall agenda of the orphanages, educational public authorities, sport officials, Ministries of Defense and Interior Affairs, local donors, and Clipa Siderala volunteers. “Our mission”, says Salavat Jdanov, “is to raise awareness, to engage children in fun learning and to provide a brighter future for them.”

¹⁸ Interview with Grigore Panuta was conducted by the authors in Chisinau, during the XVII International Festival of Friendship, Creativity and Sports, organized by Clipa Siderala, September, 2006.

For the participating children, the activities of the Festival require using various skills – running, jumping, hiking, riding a bike, putting up a tent, peeling potatoes, singing and performing, dancing, shooting, painting, etc. Teams of 14 boys and girls, aged 12 to 15, selected by the institution they come from and accompanied by an adult



Festival participants designing a poster

leader, compete to win an annual cup. Whether at the largest athletic arena in the country or around a camp fire in the woods, each participant learns to work in the team, to accept successes, failures and differences, to communicate and to plan future actions. Traditionally, after the opening ceremony and a day out in the city going to the movies, museums and cafes, children spend a week trying to determine whose team is the fastest and the strongest. Independent experts recommended by the National Olympic Committee judge the sport competitions, soccer matches and obstacle courses during the day. In the afternoon, representatives of the Fire Department, Road Police Department and the military organize workshops on safety and first-aid, while volunteers moderate group games and creative projects. The evening plans usually include dances, concerts and guest performances. The team that was the most active and accumulated maximum points in a variety of activities is announced the winner. Regardless of their athletic or creative achievements, all teams receive prizes. Those prizes are awarded by the donors and co-partners of Clipa Siderala or by the organization itself. Over the years the Festival has brought together Moldovan, Romanian, Ukrainian, Belarus and Chinese children, fostering intercultural tolerance and integrating orphans with the community. It received substantial support from the Government of the Republic of Moldova and was commended in 2000 as “the best social initiative for children”.



Spartans on top of
Roman-Kosh, July 2005

The Festival's success and popularity inspired the production of a TV show CLIPA SIDERALA, aired weekly on the national channel TVM in 1996-1999 and again in 2003. Sport and healthy living was the main theme of the broadcast co-sponsored by UNICEF-Moldova. Individually or as a group, children from all over the country could apply to appear on the show. The contests were diverse and fun, some required running with a chicken in hands or timed watermelon eating, other tested endurance in racing and playing ball. The show had a fan club and thousands of letters coming each week with requests and suggestions. It received the highest popularity ratings in the history of Moldovan television and featured local pop stars and performers. The grand finale of the 2003 show was filmed in Crimea, a resort region in the south of Ukraine, where Clipa Siderala annually organizes a summer camp for approximately 80 Moldovan orphans. What started in 1996 as a holiday trip for five kids planned and organized by an adult today is SPARTA – a unique adventure for everyone. Children who attend the camp ("Spartans") participate in a variety of activities guided by counselors: hiking, swimming, sightseeing, playing games, etc. They build self-confidence, develop social skills, and work on leadership and communication skills, while enjoying the mountain air and beaches. For most children it is the first opportunity to go outside their orphanage and the country, to learn and practice social and life skills.

In mid December Moldovan orphanages become the destinations for CHRISTMAS CARAVAN, the charity drive from the capital to deliver donations and holiday spirit to the remote places of the country. The buses with volunteers arrive in around 20 orphanages, organizing a costumed performance for the children. Traditionally any individual can join the

Caravan by directly participating or contributing a toy, a book or a pair of shoes. Businesses sponsor the transportation expenses or provide soft drinks, juices, fruits, candy, ice cream, and snacks for the holiday parties. Some decide to offer larger donations – TV sets, computers, several thousands of shoes, hundreds of books and school supplies, clothes, etc; others provide assistance in publicizing the event or share creative ideas. The nation’s top singers, bands, actors and performers accompany the Caravan and communicate with orphans face-to-face. “We wanted to link the two remote worlds – the isolated rural orphanages battling with a lack of finances and the prosperous urban communities willing to help and be directly involved,” commented Iulia Talmazan, the current executive director of Clipa Siderala. “Three years ago we invited secondary school children from Chisinau to join the Caravan and they enthusiastically organized fundraising campaigns within their schools to buy equipment and supplies for the orphans.”



Leova orphanage children greet the Caravan

Clipa Siderala is the original sponsor of Mos Craciun, the Moldovan Santa Claus, who arrives in Chisinau accompanied by elves and fairy tale creatures each December. This arrival signifies the beginning of the holiday season. A Clipa Siderala volunteer, Mos Craciun visits the



Mos Craciun and President Voronin,
December 2003

Presidential Palace and schools and participates in the various activities around the city. He talks about his life beyond Christmas and explains myths and legends associated with his image. Requests or questions about his visit can be obtained through “Mos Craciun Academy”. In 2002 Clipa Siderala received exclusive rights to organize “Mos Craciun

Postal Service” (Santa Claus Postal Service) in Moldova. It allows children to write a letter to Mos Craciun and tell him about their wishes. In return everyone gets a personal originally designed response; because volunteers answer every letter. Clipa Siderala looks for donors for the most pressing needs and wants. Table 2 offers a summary of Clipa Siderala programming including the year that the program was initiated and the total number of children served.

TABLE 2: CLIPA SIDERALA PROGRAM IMPACT

PROJECT	Starting date	Target groups	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	TOTAL 7 years	TOTAL COMPLETE IMPACT
Festival	1989	Orphans / School children	356	283	284	246	307	350	200	2,026	3,500
TV show	1996	Any child / teenager				1,400				1,400	7,000
Sparta	1997	Orphans	92	86	64	60	56	48	25	431	750
		Children aged 9-16	160	180	230	280	270	200	180	1500	2500
Santa's Post Service	2002	Any child / teenager			6,000	3,000	1,500	600		5,700	5,700
Caravan	1997	Orphans	4,500	4,200	3,500	3,800	4,000	3,600	3,800	27,400	30,400
<p>Additional Impacts from the Caravan include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total number of institutions visited: 35 out of 65 total orphanages, boarding schools and specialized institutions for underprivileged children in Moldova. • Total Adult participants: 2650 <p>Data self-reported by Clipa Siderala 10/3/2006</p>											

New projects for Clipa Siderala include a web portal called “Kids.md” and an information center. Kids.md is the most recent on-line project of the organization. Created and managed by the volunteers, it features services and information about kids in Moldova (health, leisure, sports, holidays, education, contacts, culture, etc.) Launched in February 2006, the web portal facilitates communication and strengthens interest in self-development and self-education. It is daily visited by about 500 users who contribute articles and use forums. Within Clipa Siderala, plans exist for an Information Center will serve as a link between the orphanages and anyone willing to support and help them. Explicit goals related to the information center are to collect, verify and publish information about living and studying conditions in Moldovan orphanages, about Moldovan orphan children, their needs and welfare and to deliver the collected information to potential donors and contributors, including local and foreign businesses, organizations and individuals who might provide assistance.

Funding for Clipa Siderala's projects comes from various sources. For the last 10 years the government was an active contributor and supporter of Christmas Caravan and the Festival, namely Moldovan Departments of Education, Defense, Transportation, Police, and local administrative bodies. The National Olympic Committee is responsible for judging sports competitions organized by Clipa Siderala, while Posta Moldovei (Moldovan Postal Service) helps with thousands of free letters to Santa from Moldovan children. UNICEF-Moldova had sponsored the production of the TV show. Financial support was granted by the national commercial banks, business entities, advertising agencies, hotels and corporations. Among those are Coca-Cola Moldova, Efes Moldova, Bucuria Candy Factory, McDonald's, Orhei-Vit Canning Factory, etc. Theaters and museums in Chisinau organized free performances and tours for orphans during the Festival. The projects were promoted through the nation's

top news agencies, newspapers, radio and TV stations. Additional support was granted by the taxi and bus rental services, airlines and the Chisinau Airport. 30 various secondary educational institutions and 10 universities have actively engaged in the Clipa Siderala activities. Table 3 offers a summary of funding sources for Clipa Siderala.

TABLE 3: FUNDING SOURCES FOR CLIPA SIDERALA

	TOTAL	Internal Contributions	External Contributions
Festival	17 years – 98,000 USD	10,000 USD	88,000 USD
TV show	5 years – 300,000 USD	50,000 USD	250,000
Orphans at Sparta	10 years - 29,150 USD	29,150 USD	None
Sparta	10 years - 400,000 USD	50,000 USD	350,000 USD
Mos Craciun	5 years - 6,500 USD	2,500 USD	4,000 USD
Caravan	10 years - 116,900 USD	11,500 USD	105, 400 USD
Data self-reported by Clipa Siderala 10/3/2006, internal contributions came from operating budgets derived mostly from the operation of the Sparta Camp for paying clients.			

IV. What We Know About NGOs in Developing Nations and Where Clipa Siderala Fits In

The NGO has become a reality of international aid, often times more responsive and more efficient in delivering services than other aid organizations. They can have more dedicated staffs working on lower budgets than other aid organizations but they are also criticized for failing to provide full accountability, mission drift, and inability to redefine mission (thus perpetuating dependency on outside aid). In 1999, John Hailey¹⁹ explained that while NGOs represented between 20-30% of overall aid work in the developing world, still little was known about their operations, ethos, or impact. His work focuses both on the work of large traditional NGOs that meet the traditional funding base in the developed world with focused operation in the less-developed world. Among the large organizations that he discusses are OxFam, Save the Children, and the Red Cross. He also discusses more recent trends which point to the success that comes when local small-scale organizations take on problem-solving roles in their communities like agricultural cooperative programs in Africa. He rightly discusses the

¹⁹ “Ladybirds, Missionaries, and NGOs. Voluntary Organizations and Cooperatives in 50 Years of Development: A Historical Perspective on Future Challenges.” published in *Public Administration and Development* 19, 467-485.

challenges that come when well-intentioned outsiders enter a society with programming and seemingly endless funds. He points to literature developed in the 1970s and 80s that demonstrate the potential for both corruption and dependency that can emerge when locals cease to seek to find solutions to their own needs and find themselves dependent on outsiders for support. His conclusions point to the attributes of the most successful NGOs as being mission-focused and able to meet immediate needs while developing capacity for future problem solving.

Warren Nyamugasira²⁰ challenges the authenticity of NGOs that are based outside of internal cultures of the people that they serve. His work points to the need to empower individuals to advocacy, in essence to give them voice in decision-making that effects the development of programming and the distribution of aid designed to alleviate conditions affecting them. His work suggests that NGOs that emerge from the vision of the people closest to the needs that they are serving are usually the most effective at developing long-term solutions to the problems at hand. Clipa Siderala, of course, originates directly from the need identified by Moldovans and brings attention from more affluent Moldovans to the needs of children living in institutions. As the number of orphans has been reduced and the conditions of the institutions have been improved, a natural evolution has sparked movements to meet the needs of children living in poverty outside of institutions. The organization has established credibility and authenticity that makes it able to transform a national mindset and that is evidenced by the fact that the organization continues to draw support from across the spectrum.

V. Implications

While reading about the enthusiasm and energy of Clipa Siderala and its volunteers is invigorating in itself, we believe that the following five concepts can be generalized to other NGOs in other contexts:

²⁰ “NGOs and Advocacy: How Well are the Poor Represented.” 1998 in *Development and Practice*, 8: 3, 297-308.

1. Strive for Multi-layered Impacts
2. Strive for Authenticity
3. Remain Independent
4. Have Energetic Leadership
5. Seek Self-Sustaining Financial Resources

Our key finding is that through the direct authentic appeal, an organization can leverage attention to causes of concern. In the case of Clipa Siderala, the impact of pulling volunteers together in brain-storming sessions raises awareness. The critical contribution of the organization to the society is not just the work with orphans or disadvantaged children or even the dissemination of information about resources; but rather the building of awareness and civic capacity. By focusing the energies of volunteers and accepting all who come toward one of the several ongoing projects, leadership capacity is built—the impact of which may not come to bear on the nation for years but there is also an immediate impact on family and friends. They too are drawn into the work and the awareness of what the needs of children are and what solutions need to come as a result. Clipa Siderala can take responsibility for the general increase in the level of awareness about the plight of Moldovan orphans. First Clipa broadly disseminated information through a media presence and then subsequently it enhanced solutions through dissemination of concern through the volunteer network. Today there is a mass effort on the part of the government to find sponsors for orphanages (usually businesses or schools) and while the government can be easily accused of using coercion to insure such sponsorship, there can be little doubt that without Clipa Siderala and its work to bring awareness to the plight of Moldovan orphans, little domestic sponsorship would have been acquired.

Further, we find that when an organization, such as Clipa Siderala, builds a base network that transcends traditional societal boundaries (including ethnic, social, and economic divisions in this case), that the NGO's impact has the potential for lasting effect on the society. The authenticity allows the organization to take on other challenges in the society—in this case, the needs of disadvantaged children. Clipa Siderala's success has spawned local domestic competitors in Moldova, including certain politicians becoming eager to take credit for, or even co-opt, its traditional programming. Remaining focused on the training and energizing successive generations of volunteers, developing new programs, and reinforcing its ties within the country allow Clipa Siderala to retain its authenticity—regardless of the social, political, or economic climate. As discussed previously, Moldova is divided by language and ethnicity but Clipa Siderala is not. The director, Salavat Jdanov is a Russian speaker but the organization has a Romanian name and discussions flow freely in Romanian, Russian, and sometimes even English. There is no hesitation to flow between languages—an oddity in Moldova. The overarching respect for the organization's mission and the individual contributions of each volunteer or staff member at the table is a hallmark of the organization. This is what defines the authenticity of this organization: the commitment to a simple mission and the openness to having broad participation from anyone who happens to be at the table at any given moment.

Clipa remains absolute in its resolve not to become associated with religious or political entities, insuring that its integrity is best protected through its independence. With the simple recognition that politicians come and go and that coziness with a current one may defeat your influence with a future one, Clipa Siderala remains independent in an environment where most other organizations are either externally funded or have taken on a political identity. Independence is a difficult goal to pursue when politicians are eager to have organizational

endorsement of various political agendas and religious groups (both internal and external) are willing to claim charitable endeavors—even occasionally offering additional funding. But the decision to remain apolitical and nonreligious bolsters the perception of organizational integrity that is critical to recruiting new generations of volunteers and making Clipa Siderala a unifying force and not become yet another component of division.

All organizations are to some degree are reflections of their leadership.²¹ This is especially true of an organization that is under the direction of its founder, as is the case of Clipa Siderala. The simple truth is that often innovation is stymied by transformational leaders that are unable to allow their organizations to adjust and reshape with the times. One of the characteristics of this organization is that leadership in various activities is devolved—meaning that volunteers and paid staff have equal input into program design. This builds stake-holdership as well as insuring that programming does not become stagnant. Sometimes observing the planning for Sparta Camp, the longest-running program of Clipa Siderala, it seemed that it would be easier to simply rerun last year’s successful program. However by allowing redesign and agreement to be developed from a consensus of volunteers, programming remains fresh and those involved in implementation have a stake in the process. It is not to say that pandemonium existed at Sparta, quite the opposite—life is well-organized and the staff is oriented to insuring that children are having quality programming. Clipa Siderala has developed high-quality program leadership by being open to new ideas and the development of broad leadership skills of those involved in programming, all while balancing its past record of success.

²¹ Jim Collins discusses the challenges of community service leadership in his 2005 supplement to his book *From Good to Great*. The authors find much of what Collins identifies as “level 5” leadership present in Salavat Jdanov’s leadership of Clipa Siderala. These include dedication to mission, the willingness to share credit, and the ability to motivate others to a greater good. This style of leadership, according to Collins, harnesses energies that may otherwise be left untapped.

Every NGO must find operating budgets from somewhere, and in the developing world, financial autonomy can be particularly difficult to find. Clipa Siderala realized early on that by running three sessions of summer camp for paying campers (and a no-cost one for orphans), they could self-sustain the rest of their regular operating budget including staff salaries and other programming expenses. These funds are supplemented by local donations that are used in direct programming needs. These financial arrangements reinforce the role of Clipa Siderala as a conduit that brings together Moldovans from different walks of life to focus on the needs of children. It is not that Clipa Siderala is opposed to having outside funding. Rather it is the case that the organization works under the assumption that building programming, establishing a record of quality, and being a visible leader will lead to community support and funding opportunities. The lesson for NGOs across the globe is that the mission is the focus that leads to funding, rather than vice-versa.

While every context, every leader, and every organization is different, one can find solace that sometimes one little engine just does—it does not spend all its resources looking for additional resources, it does not reshape politics, it does not single-handedly reform complex economies; sometimes it just does—and the simple momentum of pulling begins to pull others into doing as well. We would argue that external aid is best channeled to direct needs when it is partnered with NGOs that are authentic, flexible, and accountable.