

Polish Homelessness Strategy in the context of European initiatives, including the Portuguese Homeless Strategy

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Introduction

Years of tackling homelessness have made a number of countries to set a goal of radically decreasing or completely ending the problem of homelessness. For some years now in the North America, Australia and Europe it has been discussed to re-orientate the social policies on homelessness, from “managing homelessness” to “ending homelessness” (FEANTSA, 2010a, p.2.). The main tool for fighting homelessness is found in strategies or programmes prepared and implemented on a central, regional and local level. Such strategies, based on reliable data and statistics related to homelessness, define the most important goals and tasks in the given time frame. Most strategies have also been equipped with financial mechanisms which enable implementation. A separate strategy for combating homelessness was assumed by i.e. the United States (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010), Australia (Australian Government, 2008), England (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2005), the Netherlands (Dutch Government, 2006), Norway (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2006), Sweden (Government Offices of Sweden, 2007), Finland (Finnish Government, 2008), Denmark (FEANTSA, 2010a, p.3-4), Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009), Scotland (Scottish Government, 2001), Ireland (Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008), France (Ministry of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable, Development and The Sea, 2009) and Portugal (FEANTSA, 2010a.)

Unlike many other European countries, Poland does not have its own homelessness strategy. Despite the severity of the problem, with brutal and extremely costly consequences, there is no national plan to solve this issue in Poland. From 2008 to 2009 the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy made an attempt to develop a "National Strategy of Transitioning from Homelessness". In 2009 the name and scope of the project was changed to the “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015.” Eventually the programme prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which included elements of a strategy, was not accepted.

Existing legal and systemic regulations, executed projects and programmes are rather parts of a dispersed and disintegrated social policy. After 20 years of democracy, in the mid-2010 the homelessness policy is still devoid of a comprehensive plan of action; there is no strategy that would not only systematise current activities of the state, but would also set goals for the future and offer tools to achieve them. Currently there are many good but dispersed acts of law (e.g. the Act on Social Assistance of 2004, the Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights (...) of 2001),

several governmental programmes, i.e. the national “Support Programme for the Social Re-integration of the Homeless” which subsidises NGOs, as well as a programme of subsidies for entities creating shelters, houses for the homeless, and social housing. There is a number of interesting projects carried out in the field of homelessness, financed from the structural funds, including the European Social Fund. However, these should be coordinated, made cohesive, and organised in strategic terms. Due to such fragmented character, the current social policy and systemic solutions in Poland are in fact more oriented at providing emergency and immediate relief to the homeless rather than at preventing and fighting homelessness.

In this document we analyse the attempt of establishing a homelessness strategy and the draft of “The National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015” which is a substitute of a strategic plan for resolving the issue of homelessness in Poland. We refer to European initiatives, including the European Union initiatives that create frameworks and mobilise Member States to develop and implement integrated homelessness strategies. Finally, we refer to the similarities between the social policies of Poland and Portugal, and analyse the possibility of implementing Portuguese good practices in establishing a strategy for Poland.

European Union and integrated homelessness strategies

- More and more often European Union institutions focus on the issue of ending homelessness. We should note, that in March 2008 the European Parliament joined the discussion and adopted the Declaration of the European Parliament on ending street homelessness by 2015 (European Parliament, 2008, p.1-2.) The Parliament declares that access to shelter is often the first step towards adequate and sustainable housing solutions for people experiencing extreme poverty and exclusion. Street homelessness is the most visible form of homelessness, and can only be addressed effectively as part of a wider holistic strategy. Therefore the Parliament calls on the Council to agree on an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015. One of the initiators of the declaration, signed by 438 signatories, was a Polish MEP Jacek Protasiewicz. The European Parliament came with another initiative, another written declaration, this time calling for the creation and implementation of a “European Union homelessness strategy” (European Parliament, 2010, p.1-2.) A written declaration is currently being signed by the members of the European Parliament, the lapse date is December 2010. Apart from calling to develop a homelessness strategy on the EU-level, the declaration also calls for the adoption and implementation of national strategies.
- Continuing the European Union's interest in combating homelessness, in 2008 the European Union Social Protection Committee approved the theme “homelessness and housing exclusion” to be the priority theme in 2009 in the context of European Union Social Inclusion Strategy. It means that every EU Member State collected data and information on homelessness and presented issues related to homelessness policies. At the same time, each Member State filed an appropriate report on these issues (in the summer of 2009.) The notion “light year” in terms of national reporting denotes a year when the EU Member States are not expected to submit National Strategic Plans on Social Inclusion. They do however present annual reports on selected social themes. In 2009 the theme was Homelessness (Olech, 2009.)

- The last and most important vote for developing national homelessness strategies came with the adoption of the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion by the Council of the EU and European Commission in 2010 (March 4, 2010). For the first time in history the European Commission called upon all EU Member States to develop integrated homelessness strategies. According to the Commission, integrated homelessness strategies should include the component of effective management, i.e. task- and duty-sharing with all stakeholders; the strategy's objectives should take into account homelessness prevention, improving quality of services for the homeless and establishing standards in this area, reducing the duration of homelessness, actions addressed at homeless people staying in inhabitable places, focusing on housing support and a wider implementation of the method "housing first" (European Commission, 2010.) In this respect the call of the European Commission seems to be a breakthrough, because so far the EU institutions have only promoted such solutions and never have they adopted any substantial declarations that imply very specific consequences. The Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2010 is undoubtedly a big step towards obliging all Member States to develop and implement integrated homelessness strategies.

The National Homelessness Strategy project

In 2008 in Poland an initiative was born to develop a "*National Homelessness Strategy*." The initiative was triggered by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The Department of Social Assistance and Integration, meeting the requirement included in the National Programme "Social Security and Social Integration 2008-2010" adopted by the Council of Ministers on December 16, 2008, which is a part of Action 2.5.2 "Development of Social Housing", opened the work on the project. The Action stated that a strategy would be developed, that would i.e. define quality standards of services for the homeless, implement mechanisms of coordinating various institutions' operations for the homeless and threatened with homelessness, and aim at developing social housing.

In the first half of 2008 Secretary of State Jarosław Duda appointed a work team that was to prepare a draft of the "National Homelessness Strategy." The Department of Social Assistance and Integration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy became the organiser and coordinator of the process, and it invited selected NGOs to cooperate. These included the St. Brother Albert's Aid Society, Caritas of the Kielce Diocese, MONAR Association, The Mutual Help Foundation BARKA, Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness, Open Door Association and "Being Together" Foundation for Social Enterprise. The Department of Public Benefit of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies was also invited to participate. It should be mentioned that the 3rd sector representatives participated on a voluntary basis, topics were also submitted voluntarily. In May 2008 a meeting of the whole team took place, during which the structure of the draft strategy was agreed on and further tasks were divided among the partners so they could prepare initial working documents. It was decided that the document would be divided into the following areas:

- Area I: A diagnosis and analysis of the scope of homelessness;
- Area II: Operational priorities for social assistance;
- Area III: Operational priorities for social housing;
- Area IV: Education and employment (including Social Integration Centres and Clubs);
- Area V: Access to health care services.

“Guidelines for developing a National Homelessness Strategy 2008-2015” were also created by the Department of Social Assistance and Integration. These guidelines assumed certain procedures for developing the document, together with extensive consultation. In July 2008 a national conference was held at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, to present the idea of the strategy and ideas for the content of the respective areas. The respective elements of the strategy were to be prepared by the work team members within the end of September 2008. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy divided the tasks among the partners. At that time the work team members did not meet. However, in September it turned out that the majority of the materials were not ready. Specialists responsible for preparing particular elements could not or were not able to prepare in such a short time the expected materials with required high-level content.

In October 2008 a draft of the project called the “National Strategy for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015” prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, was sent to the Ministry of Infrastructure for consultation. The Ministry of Infrastructure noted that in the field of social housing the document (the draft of the strategy) should focus on actions that aim at establishing legal grounds for obtaining social funding. In November 2008 the document, corrected after the remarks of the Ministry of Infrastructure, was sent for inter-ministerial consultation which closed at the end of the month. The majority of departments approved the proposal to develop such a document on the government level. In January 2009 a College meeting at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was organised, where the draft document prepared by the Department of Social Assistance and Integration was approved. At the same time, it was recommended that the name of the project be changed to “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015.”

The National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015

In January 2009 the Department of Social Assistance and Integration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy published for public and inter-ministerial consultation a document called the “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015” (MPiPS, 2009). The document, apart from the new name, contained only some elements of the originally planned strategy; it lacked the structure and scope approved by the work teams. During its development stage the “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015” was not consulted with the work team, either. It seems that the Ministry, discouraged by the previous cooperation with the work team or by the time pressure related to the preparation of the final document, chose to prepare the programme document on its own. In February 2009 the draft document was sent for inter-ministerial and public consultation. The following entities were included in the social partners list:

- Polish Committee of Social Welfare;
- Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness;
- The Mutual Help Foundation “BARKA”;
- Caritas Poland, Central Office;
- Caritas of the Kielce Diocese;
- St. Brother Albert’s Aid Society in Wrocław.

There was rather little time to send comments and remarks on the programme, so the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy received relatively little feedback and one of the few comments were the "Remarks of St. Brother Albert's Aid Society" (St. Brother Albert's Aid Society, 2009.)

During the consultation it was noted (by the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Regional Development and the Government Legislation Centre) that the preparation of a document that is intended as a long standing programme requires the approval of the Prime Minister, in accordance with the regulation Art. 7, section 1a of the Council of Ministers' resolution of 19 March 2002 *Rules and Regulations of the Government*, which pertains to an intention of establishing a long-term programme, i.e. assumptions. In March 2009 Minister of Labour and Social Policy applied with Tomasz Arabski, Head of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, for approval to develop a long-term programme, and for permission to carry out consultations on the Assumptions of the Programme. From April to May 2009 the remarks and comments on the shape and content of the "Assumptions for the Programme" were considered. One of the suggestions was to correct the date of the programme implementation, i.e. to change the time frame from "2009 -2015" to "2010-2015." In June 2009 the application of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy for permission to establish a long-standing programme was considered by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. In November 2009 the Chancellery replied and suggested to halt the initiative due to the global financial crisis, and advised to perhaps return to the idea later on, when the situation would improve. In May 2010 the Minister of Labour and Social Policy applied with the Chancellery of the Prime Minister for permission for re-opening the work on the document. Until today, there has been no answer.

Summing up, it should be noted that the draft of the "National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing" may not be viewed as a complex and integrated homelessness strategy. The document classifies and organises selected elements of the homeless assistance system, rather than defines national goals and tasks in combating homelessness. It focuses on selected aspects of homelessness, thus it is a document of lesser importance than a strategy. The objectives, mission and assumptions of the programme are not a complex answer to the issue of homelessness in Poland, which is rather clear if we accept that it is a programme and not a holistic strategy. Experts (Wygnańska, 2009) or NGOs (St. Brother Albert's Aid Society, 2009) are thus mistaken to expect that the document be a collection of objectives, priorities and holistic tasks in homelessness. Indeed, the development of a complex strategy was planned, but what was prepared at the end was a programme which has been suspended in its current shape. It is a programme which potentially might become a foundation or a starting point for discussion on a wider strategic plan for combating homelessness. The more so as the programme underlines the connection between homelessness and housing situation in Poland, mentions the need to monitor homelessness and refers to the quality standards of services for the homeless.

The implementation of Portuguese good practices in developing a strategy in Poland

Comparison

The situation in homelessness in Poland and Portugal seems to be quite similar. Like in the southern European countries, traditionally people in difficult life situations were aided and supported by communities and informal networks such as families, neighbourhoods, local communities. Social changes, political and economic transformation, weakened these communities and their function was taken over by institutions, mostly non-governmental organisations and Church-related charity organisations. It is estimated that currently 90% of services for the homeless is performed by NGOs, and the majority of smaller organisations is co-financed by the central and local authorities. At the same time, organisations working in the area of homelessness treat each other as competitors (particularly when applying for funds for their operation); the organisations are more likely to compete with each other than to cooperate. Moreover, the public sector and NGOs tend to focus most of all on emergency actions, immediate assistance, rescuing, caring. They are oriented on coping with homelessness (caring) rather than combating homelessness (integration). That implies increasing effectiveness of the emergency system and a constantly low effectiveness of (re)integration. On the other hand, what is missing is coordination and cohesion in creating a coherent vision of social policy. Homelessness is perceived as a social issue, but only rarely as a housing issue. There is insufficient inter-ministerial cooperation (public sector, NGOs, private) and interdisciplinary cooperation (social assistance, labour market, housing, education, health care, system of justice.) There is no one entity that could take up the function of the creator of social policy; there is also no national homelessness strategy. What can be seen, though, is a wide differentiation of services for the homeless, which very much affects the quality level of the services. In the light of the above mentioned similarities between Poland and Portugal, it seems that in many aspects Poland could adopt a number of good practices and experiences in establishing a homelessness strategy.

Definition of homelessness

In Poland homelessness is defined in the Act on Social Assistance. The definition says: "a homeless person is someone who does not live in living premises within the meaning of regulations on Tenants Rights and Municipal Housing Stock, and someone not registered for permanent residence within the understanding of the regulations on General Registry and Identification Documents, as well as someone who does not live in living premises and is registered for a permanent residence in premises where residence is not possible."¹ In fact the definition is broader than the one approved in Portugal. The biggest Polish NGOs have accepted for their operations that ETHOS categories 1 through 7 (with the exception of no.6.3) stand for homelessness; categories 8.1 and 11, depending on the situation, can also mean homelessness while other categories are related to housing exclusion and with the threat of homelessness. Despite being so broad, the definition is accepted and understood in the Polish reality and complies with the legal and systemic framework. Such broad definition is also conducive for quantitative and qualitative research, carried out all over Poland.

¹ Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004, Journal of Laws 08.115.728 j.t.

Political context and other understanding of homelessness

The Portuguese strategy is particularly important as it ranked homelessness among political problems. It appears that without establishing the combat with homelessness a political priority, it would be difficult to develop and implement a strategy. There was however appropriate political will for action. In the meantime homelessness in Poland is still perceived as social pathology and as a phenomenon mainly related to the urban environment (streets, stations, parks). Homelessness is perceived as a choice and as related to individual factors leading to being homeless; it is much more often seen as a social issue than a housing issue. In the dimension of politics and the media, homelessness is only an issue in the winter, when emergency and protective actions are widespread. The lack of will and political determination to prioritise fighting with homelessness in Poland is well reflected in the Polish government suspending the “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing.”

Active participation

For Poland, the key experience in the development of the Portuguese homelessness strategy is the broad and active participation of many sectors and entities in the development and implementation process. The involvement of many stakeholders, transparency and openness of the very process of creating the strategy, together with participative task-sharing and role-taking are the factors that may be of use in the development of Polish solutions. It is also crucial to take into account the time needed to develop the strategy; it took two years to create the Portuguese strategy. The technical and organisational coordination of the Portuguese strategy development is also very interesting. There are no similar experiences in Poland; the process of drafting first the “National Strategy for Transitioning from Homelessness” and then the “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing” contained only some elements of active participation used in Portugal.

Summary

Following other European countries including Portugal, Poland should consider preparing a strategy that would be based on a reliable diagnosis and that would include versatile tasks in homelessness prevention, emergency services and immediate relief as well as integration. Such a strategy should also consider various groups of homeless people, e.g. elderly and disabled homeless, women with children or young people. A strategy should also guarantee the right level of services together with diverse and adequate financing. Such a plan should be developed with extensive consultation not only with researchers, specialists from the public, private and NGO sector, but also with people who are homeless or who have experienced homelessness in the past. The strategy should include all institutions and spheres of the social policy; not only social assistance but also housing, health care system, the system of justice, education and labour market. The entities that should be involved in the process include not only those dealing with homelessness, but also institutions, business companies and organisations providing services to all people, so as to increase the awareness that homelessness is our common problem. The institutions and organisations working in the area of homelessness are not supposed to blindly push for implementing the solutions used in other European countries; they should rather stimulate the debate on the direction and strategic objective of the social policy on homelessness.

Currently there is no such debate in Poland, and its lack can be seen on a national, regional and local level. It seems that Polish people, as well as people experiencing homelessness or threatened with homelessness, deserve an ambitious strategy that will focus not on coping with homelessness and relieving its effects, but on the true combat and elimination of homelessness (Olech, 2010.) In the light of recent EU initiatives in this area, particularly the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion of 2010 that obliges Member States to create integrated homelessness strategies (European Commission, 2010), the development of the Polish homelessness strategy seems to be inevitable and unavoidable.

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Annex: Directions of the Polish social policy on tackling homelessness

Introduction

So far an integrated strategy of combating homelessness has not been developed and implemented in Poland. There was a “National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing” which had some features of a strategy, and although it was developed and rather well evaluated by the organisations providing service in homelessness, it has not been implemented and its progress was suspended. Nevertheless, there are certain programmes and projects in progress in Poland and they have a measurable effect on the social policy in combating homelessness.

Legal framework

The statutory duty of providing shelter, meal and necessary clothing to persons deprived of these, is a part of the commune’s own tasks (the Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Welfare, art. 17, section 1: “It is the Commune’s own obligatory duty to: (...) 3) provide shelter, meal and necessary clothing to persons deprived of these...”).

It is the task of the relevant Ministry responsible for social security, to e.g. create drafts and set directions of development within social welfare, and inspire and promote new forms and methods of action. The operations of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MPiPS) in the field of helping the homeless, carried out for a number of years and especially since 2005 when the “open coordination method” was implemented in Poland, assume complex application of several acts of law. Thus, they are not limited to “protective” support only, where standard types and forms of social welfare such as the following are used: a) to provide shelter, meal, personal hygiene products and clothing, b) to provide medical and sanitary aid, c) to provide assistance in obtaining a placement in Social Care Centres, d) to assist in obtaining social benefits, including social security aid, pensions and disability benefits, or assist in obtaining or retrieving personal documents.

It is the intention of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to emphasize (by means of promotion, funding local projects) the importance of synergic use by local authorities and NGOs of such individual support tools for the homeless as:

- individual programme of transitioning from homelessness – Act on Social Welfare of 12 March 2004;
- individual programme of social employment – Act on Social Employment of 13 June 2003;
- programmes of socially useful and public works – Act on Promoting Employment and Labour Market Institutions of 24 April 2004;
- as well as promoting the mobilisation of the homeless, or people threatened with homelessness in social cooperatives, centres and social integration clubs.

Since 2007 the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has also embarked on another direction of action: stimulating local authorities by running tender contests for programmes that aim at professional and social mobilisation of persons threatened with social exclusion (including the homeless), developing welfare housing and at the standard improvement of shelters for the homeless. In this way the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has indirectly participated in the implementation of the Act of December 8, 2006 on financial support for establishing social housing, sheltered housing and shelters for the homeless (Journal of Laws of 2006, No. 251, item 1844).

Government programme of Subsidy Funded financial support programme for creating social housing premises, sheltered housing, dosshouses and homes for the homeless

There is only one housing programme in Poland directly related to homelessness. It is currently called “Government programme of Subsidy Funded financial support programme for creating social housing premises, sheltered housing, dosshouses and homes for the homeless.” It was initially launched as the „Pilot programme of financial support for communes to build social housing premises, dosshouses and homes for the homeless.”² It was originally planned to close at the end of 2005, however due to the needs identified during the application phase and in the evaluation ordered by the Ministry of Transportation and Construction and carried out by the Urban Development Institute (Urban Development Institute, 2005), the programme was modified and its deadline was postponed to 2006. Also, additional funds from the state budget were earmarked for the programme. After the evaluation of the pilot programme on December 8, 2006, Polish government passed an Act on the “financial support for the creation of social housing, sheltered housing, dosshouses and houses for the homeless”³. As a result of the Act, the programme became a permanent element of the Polish policy of supporting housing initiatives. In 2009 the act was significantly modified; e.g. the limits of programme funding percentage share were increased.⁴

Currently the programme provides support for communes to execute programmes such as developing social housing, opening dosshouses, houses for the homeless, sheltered housing and premises that are a part of the municipality’s housing stock but are not social housing (public housing). Commune unions receive financial support to carry out initiatives aiming at developing social housing, sheltered housing, opening dosshouses and houses for the homeless. Districts (poviats) receive support to carry out initiatives aiming at creating housing premises, to achieve goals in social assistance by providing sheltered housing. Public benefit organisations receive financial support to carry out initiatives aiming at developing social housing, sheltered housing, opening dosshouses and houses for the homeless. The Programme is managed by Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego.

² The Act of April 29, 2004 on the financial support for developing social housing, dosshouses and housing for the homeless in 2004-2005 (Journal of Laws of 2004, No.145, item 1533).

³ Act of December 8, 2006 on the financial support for developing social housing, sheltered housing, dosshouses and housing for the homeless (Journal of Laws of 2006, No. 251 item 1844) .

⁴ Act of February 12, 2009 on the change of the act on financial support for developing social housing, sheltered housing, dosshouses and housing for the homeless and the act on some forms of supporting the housing construction (Journal of Laws of 2009, No. 39, item 309).

According to the programme, twice a year (in April and in September) Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego announces the receipt of projects eligible for financing. In 2007 the amount earmarked for the Subsidy Funded financial support programme for creating social housing premises, sheltered housing, dosshouses and homes for the homeless was PLN 185 million, and PLN 125 million in 2008. Due to smaller than expected interest in the programme, funding for 2009 was cut down to PLN 45 million. The amount earmarked for the programme in 2010 was PLN 20 million. Almost 90% of the funds has been spent on creating social and sheltered housing and around 10% has been used to create dosshouses and houses for the homeless.⁵ As demonstrated above, the funds are gradually decreasing, which is disturbing, particularly when the housing situation in Poland worsens.

Support Programme for the Social Re-Integration of the Homeless

Since 2006 the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has executed a programme that supports NGOs' combat with homelessness. The programme, previously called "Homelessness" (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2000) had its content reviewed in 2006 and was renamed "Social Re-Integration of the Homeless" (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2006), only to be renamed again in 2010 as "Support Programme for the Social Re-Integration of the Homeless" (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2010b). So far the programme was executed in two channels; a Central one, addressed to supra-regional organisations, managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and a Regional one, addressed to local organisations and managed by the relevant Voivodship (Province) Office. For many years the programme supported a variety of organisations in providing immediate relief and emergency assistance. A supportive module was added to the programme in 2006; it promoted activities in social integration, transitioning from homelessness and prevention. In 2010 the division between the Central and Regional channels was abolished. The projects are now filed to the Voivodship (Province) Office where initial evaluation takes place. Next, they are forwarded to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy where the final decision is made and contracts with selected organisations are signed. Every year 5 to 15 million Polish zloty is spent on the Programme.

The Programme is indeed a useful tool in combating homelessness and it would be difficult to imagine social policy on homelessness without it. On one hand, it strengthens non-governmental organisations in Poland, which perform 80% to 90% of all services for the homeless, and on the other - it enables the execution of many interesting projects. The addition of the module that supported and promoted activities in transitioning from homelessness and in homelessness prevention was particularly important. The programme is a great resource of the Polish social policy on homelessness. It might potentially be the key instrument in improving the services for the homeless, both on the level of NGOs and public institutions. Changes which were introduced to the programme should be seen as positive, all the more so if the team at the Department of Social Assistance and Integration that worked on the implementation of such a huge project was so small.

⁵ Public Information Bulletin of Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego,
<http://www.bgk.com.pl/index.php?module=site&catId=476&pl>

Systemic project – 1.18 “Forming and developing service quality standards in social assistance and integration” in the task (no. 4) in standardising the work with the homeless, including the development of the model “Municipal Standard of Transitioning from Homelessness”

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, in its promoting and inspiring activities, has most closely cooperated with NGOs, although in the recent two years (2007-2009) more and more often authorities of municipalities joined them. The municipalities are obliged to have a certain plan of action in the field of homelessness: the so-called *municipal strategy of solving social problems* (regulated by the Act on Social Assistance). Unfortunately, not all municipalities in Poland have such documents, not to mention its particular part - counteracting homelessness. That is why in 2009, using the European Social Fund, an attempt was made to develop a model of “Municipal Standard for Transitioning from Homelessness,” that would serve as an example of actions that every municipality in Poland should have, to arrive at more uniform actions towards homelessness.

The project has been implemented in the framework of Operational Programme Human Capital 2007-2013, Priority 1: Employment and social integration, as Action 1.2: Systemic support for the institutions of social welfare and integration. Human Resources Development Centre is the institution responsible for the project’s implementation. The action is financed from the European Social Fund. It is a part of systemic projects, executed by public administration units and organisational units of the public sector.

The undertaking (task no.4), known as the Municipal Standard for Transitioning from Homelessness is a vital precedence on the national arena of combat with homelessness. Never before has there been a national project that would involve so many non-governmental relief organisations. The task is executed by a partnership of six large, experienced NGOs representing a wide spectrum of ideas and methods of working with the homeless. Apart from the involvement of the third sector partners, the participation of numerous homelessness experts should be noted. Such approach is a practical example of participative thinking: the participation of groups which are relatively close to the problem (both in theory and in practice) in the effort of creating a catalogue of actions that make up various methods of transitioning from homelessness. The participation of a wide group of specialists will not only bring better results, but it will also mean that more professionals will have real influence on the homeless support system, which will later on translate into easier implementation of the Municipal Standard in everyday work.

As it was already mentioned, the Municipal Standard is executed by six partners: the Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness, St. Brother Albert’s Aid Society - Central Office, the MONAR Association, Caritas of the Kielce Diocese, The Mutual Help Foundation BARKA and the Open Door Association. The partnership is led by the Human Resources Development Centre. The Department of Social Assistance and Integration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is the initiating institution which gave the idea of the Municipal Standard; it is also responsible for accepting and approving projects. The participants involved in the project make it an exceptional initiative also in another dimension. It is the very first initiative where government institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) invited NGOs to cooperate in an execution of a systemic project that is a part of a group of projects initiated by central authorities.

The task's objective is to increase the effectiveness of the system of solving and relieving the effects of homelessness-related problems, by developing and implementing standards of service for the homeless and threatened with homelessness, which may be added to the Municipal Strategies of Solving Social Problems. At the end, a path of transitioning from homelessness should be developed, that would follow the pattern from a standard to a model, to a strategy, and ending on specific recommendations for legislative solutions, particularly draft regulations. The actions within the Municipal Standard are carried out in six phases: diagnosis, model, educating-informative, pilot, recommendation and report. Each of them contains a range of activities focused around a specific topic.

Summary

Existing government initiatives, i.e. "Support Programme for the Social Re-Integration of the Homeless" and "Government programme of Subsidy Funded financial support programme for creating social housing premises, sheltered housing, dosshouses and homes for the homeless", as well as the Systemic project – 1.18 "Forming and developing service quality standards in social assistance and integration in the task (no. 4) in standardising the work with the homeless, including: the development of the model of "Municipal Standard of Transitioning from Homelessness", show that there is a potential and will in Poland to engage in actions aiming at solving the problem of homelessness. The analysis of the scope and execution of the programmes shows that homelessness policy is scattered, chaotic and not cohesive, and that it is realized by various entities in an uncoordinated manner. There are only elements of different solutions which do not come together to form any strategic plan. So far the practical policy was directed at coping with homelessness, rather than at tackling or reducing it. National and European conditions, including e.g. the obligation imposed on the EU Member States by the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion of 2010 to create integrated homelessness strategies (European Commission 2010), and by the Declaration of the European Parliament on ending street homelessness (2008), result in the need to follow other countries and establish in Poland an integrated homelessness strategy.

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