
The Existence of Communities of Homeless Persons in the Process of Vocational and Social Reintegration : Controversial Issues

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› **Abstract_** *The ideas presented in this paper are a critical response to the paper entitled 'Routes out of Poverty and Isolation for Older Homeless People: Possible Models from Poland and the UK', which describes the experiences of the Barka and Emmaus organisations in providing self-help services to the homeless. Focusing on the Barka communities in Poland, this response questions whether they are suitable for all homeless persons, regardless of age, causes of homelessness or current life situation. It argues that such communities do not help individuals to gain independence and integrate with society; on the contrary, they sometimes create an addiction to assistance and to the community of the homeless. The author suggests that the existence of such self-help communities is justified only for those individuals who have no chance of exiting homelessness. The paper also considers questions connected with the ghettoisation of public space and social solidarity.*

› **Keywords_** *Homelessness; community; solidarity; exiting homelessness; addiction to help*

¹ Translated by Monika Spanialska.

Introduction

Homelessness is a widespread problem in Poland. Current estimates of the number of homeless people in Poland range from 30,000 to 60,000.² According to the latest survey conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2010), the number of places to sleep for the homeless in 2009 amounted to 22,529 in 625 facilities. This number also includes people staying in uninhabitable places such as allotments, garden houses, railway stations, hospitals and other non-institutional sites. The question of homelessness being so widespread can also be considered from the point of view of the finances allocated to solve the problem: according to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2010), the financial outlays for combating homelessness in 2009 amounted to 105.5 million PLN (€26.3m), not including the money received as '1% of tax'³ (around 2 million PLN or €500,000) and funds from the European Union to carry out projects aimed at combating homelessness (5.5 million PLN or €1.3m).

Any district where homeless persons are registered is generally responsible for combating the problem of homelessness in Poland. Help provided to homeless persons is mostly emergency in character and is limited to providing shelter, food and clothing to those who need it (under the Social Assistance Act 2004). One of the flaws of the homeless support system in Poland is the fact that not much attention is given to people who want to get out of homelessness (integration) or to those at risk of homelessness (preventive and protective measures).⁴ Looking at the available forms of support for homeless people in Poland, we see that the model of linear support (continuum of care) based on the activity of facilities for homeless persons (heat distribution centres, night shelters, day shelters or supported flats) clearly dominates. Given the difficult housing situation in Poland, the housing first model, based on giving a homeless person a flat, is barely used.

As well as the different facilities designed for homeless people and run by non-governmental organisations and social assistance centres, there are institutions that follow the self-help model of supporting homeless persons, namely specific homeless communities run by such organisations as Wspólnota Chleb Życia (seven

² See www.bezdomnosc.edu.pl/content/category/4/34/54/.

³ An instrument that allows an individual to exempt one per cent of his or her income from tax and donate it to a chosen public benefit organisation. As much as 380 million PLN (around €100m) was donated through this scheme in Poland in 2009.

⁴ Other flaws of the homeless assistance programme include: long periods of time spent in homeless facilities, addiction to assistance, lack of a support system for social assistance specialists, charity model of providing help, lack of adequate infrastructure for the homeless (Dębski, 2010a).

houses for homeless persons)⁵, Wspólnota Emmaus (two communities in Kraków and Nowy Sącz) and those organised in and around the Barka Foundation. The self-help assistance system is based on the idea that homeless people are helped by other homeless people and thus create a community united by the same social problem: homelessness.

The following remarks offer a commentary on the paper entitled 'Routes out of Poverty and Isolation for Older Homeless People: Possible Models from Poland and the UK' in which Catherine Boswell presents the experiences of two institutions supporting homeless people in the vocational and social reintegration process in Poland (Barka Foundation) and in the United Kingdom (Emmaus). The following text points to the controversies surrounding the issue of specialist communities for homeless people and questions their usefulness in the final process of exiting homelessness. Indeed, it contends that such communities often hinder homeless people from gaining independence.

Older Homeless People: The Context

Despite the lack of national research on homelessness in Poland, it is possible to identify three main issues associated with the problem: length of time spent without a home, the relatively old age of the homeless population and the poor condition of homeless people's physical and/or mental health. Obviously these issues are interrelated: the older the person and the longer he or she is homeless, the worse the subjective and objective evaluation of mental and physical health.

According to the results of the panel research conducted between 2001 and 2009 by the Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness, the average age of a homeless person in 2009 was 50 years and is predicted to rise to 53 years by 2013 (Dębski, 2010b). The average length of time for which a person had been homeless was 7.6 years in 2009 and in 2013 it will probably reach 9 years (long-term homelessness) (Dębski, 2010b). As for the question of health, 46 per cent of homeless persons in Pomeranian province have a disability certificate (in 2013 the proportion is expected to reach 51 per cent) and a subjective feeling of one's health condition reaches three points on a five-point scale and decreases the longer the person is homeless (Dębski, 2010b). Furthermore, around 11 per cent of homeless people were trying to obtain a disability certificate at the time the research was conducted. The data collected by the Pomeranian Forum in 2009 among 2,620 adults has been confirmed by other research conducted in different regions of Poland (CBOS, 2005; Śledzianowski, 2006; Przewoźnik, 2009; Maślowski and Sosnowski, 2009).

⁵ See www.chlebzyca.org.pl/.

Poor health, disability, old age and the length of time spent without a home influence a person's ability to become independent. Although the majority of homeless people have little chance of exiting homelessness, especially with the housing problem in Poland, 15 per cent of homeless persons point to the fact that proper medical care or rehabilitation would help them get out of homelessness (Dębski, 2010b). The above-mentioned problems also affect the course of homelessness and, to be more precise, the vocational activity of homeless people. Poor health is the main factor behind the inactivity of the homeless population in the labour market; this opinion was held by 44 per cent of unemployed homeless persons living in Pomeranian province (Dębski, 2010b). A similar situation exists throughout Poland.

Clearly, in certain contexts, it is therefore more important to provide conditions in which a homeless person is able to live and die with dignity rather than to focus on the process of getting out of homelessness. Broadly speaking, more specialist facilities should be provided for older homeless people who struggle with homelessness.

Barka Communities as the Response to the Pressing Needs of the Older Homeless Population

The Barka Foundation for Mutual Help, which has its head office in Poznań, is one of the largest non-governmental organisations in Poland dealing with people experiencing homelessness. According to the information provided on its website, Barka runs several key projects including a social economy centre, a social integration centre and social housing.⁶ Barka's activities are based on the network of organisations sharing a common vision and mission. Its objective is to provide support and represent the member NGOs acting for social and vocational integration, particularly in instances concerning the development of civic and mutual aid organisations. The activities undertaken by Barka are an interesting and proper contribution in the field of homelessness, as confirmed by the number of awards the organisation has received since 1989 when the first Barka community was established in Władysławowo.

The Barka Foundation currently consists of eleven communities, each giving shelter to twenty⁷ inhabitants. There are other similar communities in Poland that follow the example of Barka but are run by separate NGOs (e.g. four communities in Cieszyn). In 2004 twenty-four Barka and other NGO communities established the Association of Organizations and Foundations of Barka Cooperation Network. Barka also runs two self-help hostels giving shelter to 150 people altogether. For convenience, all previously mentioned communities (included in Barka structures

⁶ See <http://barka.org.pl/taxonomy/term/32>.

⁷ The community in Chudobczyce is an exception with seventy inhabitants.

or managed by other organisations) will be referred to as 'Barka communities' in this text. Such an approach is justified as the activity of all these communities is based on the experiences of one organisation.

For Barka, activity based on the community of people experiencing homelessness is crucial. According to its programme principles, the communities gather people who have experienced a crisis situation (e.g. eviction, single parenting or a stay in a children's home, mental hospital or prison) regardless of their age or sex.⁸ The community project is based on the idea of accepting people who are either socially excluded or experiencing a crisis situation resulting in their inability to live independently. Generally we may say that Barka communities are open to every homeless person regardless of, for example, sex, religion, cause of homelessness or marital status. There is one exception, however, people under the age of 18 years cannot join a Barka community unless they do so together with their parent(s).

The causes of these crises and the degree of reversibility may vary, but the common denominator is lack of housing and income. They include desocialisation, negative social stigma following release from prison or connected with prostitution, marginal position on the open labour market and unemployment, the necessity to look after children in difficult conditions (no job or place to live), and mental disabilities perhaps resulting from traumatic experiences in childhood or adolescence or a family conflict. While all Barka community programme participants are homeless and isolated they differ in terms of their potential to rebuild their self-reliance and their life in forms that are socially accepted. The group consists of people for whom state assistance (e.g. temporary accommodation, a social flat or a job) would be enough to prevent a life crisis as well as people who can no longer fully integrate with society or regain independence (perhaps due to their age, habits, lack of readiness to act, length of time spent in homelessness or poor health condition). For people in the latter group, a Barka community that will help them to build family-like relationships is likely to prove beneficial.

Communities of Homeless People: For Whom? For Ever?

Boswell's paper refers only to the situation of older and disabled people. If Barka communities were only for such groups there would be no problem. However, the Barka community model is also offered to other homeless people who are younger, able-bodied, have a good chance of changing their situation and are not eager to live in such communities. Anna Łojewska (2006) claims, based on personal experience, that creating community ghettos of excluded and marginalised people may pose a threat for those who wish to rebuild their autonomy and rejoin mainstream

⁸ See <http://barka.org.pl/node/120>.

society, and that people who are excluded from society will not be saved. It is difficult to disagree with this viewpoint. Łojewska also adds that Barka communities, by creating workplaces, can become springboards for those wanting to pursue a career. However, I suggest that such communities very often lack the necessary competence and cannot replace the involvement of the state in this area.

According to Przyemeński (2006), it is difficult to define the proportion of long-term and short-term homeless members in Barka communities, yet the fact that they include those who would be able to regain independence if provided with sufficient help (short-term homelessness) is indisputable. However, homeless people cannot obtain such help in the current aid system, which exists with no obligatory standards and no guarantees. They are therefore unable to choose such a strategy to work towards their social 'reintegration'. This is the core of the problem. Casual participants find themselves living in small rural communities, distant from varied labour markets, and working for the homeless community (and not for their own benefit), which moves them away from rather than bringing them closer to achieving independence.

The homeless population is a very diverse social category and each homeless person has different challenges, opportunities and aspirations. It is crucial to provide homeless people with individually tailored programmes to achieve social integration, programmes that give them the opportunity to choose their life path. The infrastructure and the aid system must be put in place to permit such a situation.

The time the participants spend in Barka communities may be used productively to solve problems of addiction (in cooperation with the foundation specialists and partner centres) and to learn how to exist in a group and in the local environment. Nevertheless, it seems that these places of 'enrootment'⁹ very often turn out to be permanent placements for the inhabitants, who even have the opportunity to be promoted in the community structure. It is an opportunity for those who, according to the organisers, most fully identify with the idea and present leadership, training and office skills (Przyemeński, 2006). It is common practice for the Barka communities to register their participants (if other community members agree) for one year in the place of residence with the possibility of extending this registration after twelve months. In practice this means that many homeless people will stay in the community indefinitely and therefore become permanently homeless. The problem of staying in the community indefinitely needs to be discussed further in the context of a serious flaw in the Polish aid system, namely the addiction to help (Dębski, 2010a).

⁹ See <http://barka.org.pl/node/120>.

Social Solidarity Concentrated around a Charismatic Leader: The Problem of Ghettoisation

Boswell emphasises the importance of social solidarity, which motivates the development of homeless communities. Along with social bonds, cohesion, coherence and social integration, solidarity refers to the fundamental social issue, namely the question of forces connecting people or the 'essence of human life'. It is worth adding here that this high-sounding notion of 'social solidarity' may have a negative source. It is not about the feeling of love or common interest but about the need for help in a situation where life may be in danger. When under threat, we tend to search for help and support, to look for people who will help us oppose somebody or something that we are unable to deal with alone. This need, the pillar of solidarity, is ethically neutral. The bond in question is powerful but transitory, it diminishes with the threats that invoked it and when common goals are achieved. The most prominent example of Polish solidarity in response to a threat and social humiliation was the trade union (NSZZ) *Solidarność*.

The social solidarity present in Barka communities should also be considered from the prism of shared benefit. As such, it is sometimes referred to as the rational bond. It is based on the individual calculation of the benefits of being a member of a particular group. Liberal theoreticians tend to believe this kind of calculation predominates in all communities and that no selfless activity for the common good is therefore possible (Olson, 1994). Critics of this view point to the fact that there are many communities where activities to achieve a common goal are possible and are practised. The dispute is probably the result of a different understanding of a community and its forms but the fact remains that human relationships based on the individual calculation of profit tend to become more and more popular. Some critics go so far as to call them economic social relations. The solidarity in such communities is extremely calculated. The communities' stability is also limited and constantly under threat because individual interests prevail, resulting in the lack of mutual trust among members.

According to Łojewska (2006), a Barka community leader has the key role in the functioning of each community and gives the final shape to its activities. This function is usually held by a person who has experienced homelessness and has been a community member for a long period of time. A situation in which a community is managed by one person (despite the assurance that decisions are made collectively) creates an opportunity for a charismatic leader to manipulate and influence individual community members. Łojewska, who used to be a member of a Barka community, emphasises the difficulties of being an individual in terms of your thoughts and perceptions of reality in such conditions. Here we may sense a

slight comparison to a religious sect that exerts full control over its members. Raising such issues may be considered inconvenient but charismatic leadership is an important element in Barka communities.

The question of homeless communities may also be considered from the prism of ghettoisation. In this context it needs to be pointed out that the close-knit Barka communities exist in a defined area. It is difficult to consider the question of gaining independence in a situation where the community does not facilitate contacts with the rest of the 'housed' society. The social and vocational (re)integration of homeless people has been described as an organised process with a wide range of influence on the recipients covering six key aspects of life: psychology, professional life, health care, social welfare activity, housing and social activity (Dębska-Cenian, 2008). Only the combination and equal development of all these elements may (but does not always) guarantee the success of homeless people in rejoining a properly functioning society. In Barka communities it seems that housing and social activities are conducted solely within a situation of homelessness. This problem has been identified by both Przymerński (2006) and Łojewska (2006), who claim that people experiencing homelessness should live and work among the 'housed' community and have access to the same workplaces as everyone else.

It is common practice in Poland to isolate communities of homeless people in remote places distant from urban areas, thus it is no wonder that the majority of Barka communities are situated on rural sites. A difficult housing situation in Poland (with only a small number of social and community flats accessible to homeless people) forces district authorities to search for areas outside city borders in order to create temporary or social housing estates for homeless people. This does not contribute to the eradication of the problem of street homelessness. On the contrary, it becomes another stage of exclusion for those who have already been excluded from society. Staying outside urban areas results in limited access to the labour market and high commuting costs to and from work. Although the location of Barka communities in rural areas may justify the development of 'community' workplaces, service points, kindergartens, schools and other facilities, this infrastructure is, in my opinion, another element of addiction to help provision and does not contribute to changing the life situation of homeless people.

Conclusion

The views presented here are critical towards the idea that self-help communities of homeless people may have a good chance of gaining independence. I believe that Barka communities are worthwhile for the support they offer to those who stand no chance of getting out of homelessness in Poland (e.g. older or disabled people). Diagnosis (including a psychological diagnosis) is very often neglected in the process of community formation but is of crucial importance. The process of accepting new members is another element to consider when creating such communities (currently it is the community leader and other members who make this decision). I fully agree with Przywieński (2006), who sees the necessity of introducing external control over such communities, their programmes, targets and results as well as market facilitation of service provision for people experiencing social exclusion, and for the homeless population in particular. Public administrators with responsibility for carrying out homelessness prevention activities and providing assistance to homeless people should develop a legally binding structure within which public tasks may be entrusted to public benefit organisations or create their own budget entities if they would be more efficient.

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