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# The Impact of Structural Funding on Service Provision for the Homeless (EQUAL and Poland)

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› **Abstract\_** *As a result of accession to the European Union in 2004, a number of Central European countries were granted access to structural funding which allowed for the implementation of initiatives that previously had been impossible; in particular those relating to non-Governmental organisations (NGOs). Major homeless service providers throughout the region sought to utilise this opportunity and have successfully applied to the Community Initiative EQUAL programme, which is dedicated to establishing the viability of innovative ideas for erasing inequalities in access to the labour market for marginalised groups. This article, provides a basic description of CI EQUAL and aims to establish the reasons for its popularity among Polish homelessness service providers. This is followed by a description of the landscape of service provision at the point of the termination of the EQUAL programme. A number of features relating to the operation of the programme, including the implementation of its major principles are analysed, as are factors contributing to the current landscape of service provision. The article argues that the priorities and the manner of implementation of this particular funding stream, in conjunction with its popularity among homeless service providers, has had a direct impact on the homelessness service provision system. Although it has created previously unavailable service options for people who happen to be within the reach of organisations engaged in the programme, the sustainability and the dissemination of these options is questionable due to funding gaps and to a misunderstanding of the principle of mainstreaming, as well as other factors. Finally, some recommendations are outlined for the design of similar funding schemes.*

› **Keywords\_** *homeless; structural funds; employment; support; capacity; networks.*

## Introduction

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The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 enabled ten countries from the former communist block to gain unprecedented access to external tools supporting and assisting the development of society. These tools strengthened those mechanisms which were established throughout fifteen years of post-communist independence, including the rapid development of the third sector in the majority of Central European nations (Toepler and Salamon, 2003). One of the new tools was the European Social Fund (ESF) which was devoted to reducing differences in the levels of prosperity and living standards across Member States and regions and, as a consequence, promoting economic and social cohesion. The ESF opened access to large-scale funding to various institutions, in particular NGOs which had previously been unable to benefit on such a scale.

The impact of such intervention on the internal policies of each new member state has differed, depending upon diverse local/national conditions. This article analyses the impact on the support system for homeless people, of one particular ESF stream, namely the Community Initiative (CI) EQUAL which has been developed in Poland since 1990 (Wyganska, 2005, 2006). At the end of 2004, all major non-profit providers of services to the homeless had successfully applied to CI EQUAL and this programme has dominated both their funding and priorities. Partnerships such as *Agenda of Homelessness*, *Back on Track*, *Social Economy in Practice*, and the *Campaign Against Poverty* were established by all of the major networks: the Pomeranian Forum; BARKA Foundation; Saint Brother Albert Society; the MONAR Association; and CARITAS (Wyganska, 2006). Successful application for EQUAL funding meant that their major activities were immediately more focussed upon employment-oriented priorities.

Whereas earlier accession countries such as Spain, for example, enjoyed structural European funding for almost twenty years, it is not clear whether those countries joining the EU in 2004 will receive support from European funding on such a scale or for such a long period of time, although another round of large-scale funding has been secured for the period from 2007-2013. Seeing that structural funding has had such a considerable impact on homelessness services in Poland, and also allowing for the fact that it is not indefinite, it is important to analyse the impact of the very first experience of structural support granted to Poland following accession to EU membership. This article will compare the situation before and after EQUAL funding was provided and will analyse the impact that structural funding has had on the development of the current post-EQUAL stage. The analysis is based on available research, although it should be stated that some observations are those of the

author (an active participant in the process in her own right), reinforced by means of informal interviews with representatives of key stakeholders – leaders of NGOs benefiting from EQUAL funding.

## European Relevance

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From an international perspective, many elements of the Polish environment between 1990 and 2007 described below are relevant to other new member states, collectively referred to as post-socialist economies with broadly similar welfare regimes. Similarities can be found in the development of the third sector, the structure of external (EU, USA) financial support for NGOs, as well as homelessness service provision including the domination of NGOs, prevalence of services dedicated to ‘the homeless’ as defined by ETHOS and the slow development of housing support dedicated to ‘houseless’ as defined by ETHOS. As a result, some of the Polish lessons described in this article might be worth considering for future policies in other new member states.

EQUAL was introduced to fifteen EU member states in 2000 and extended four years later to ten new member states. Its aim was to promote a new means of combating all forms of discrimination and inequality with regard to the labour market. Implementation took place through geographically diverse and/or cross-sectoral Development Partnerships (DPs), and was guided by the following key principles: partnership; empowerment; trans-nationality; innovation; and mainstreaming (Dahan, 2006). It was a fully equipped laboratory in which social innovators were given ideal conditions in which to test their ideas to assess their effectiveness. It was assumed that effective solutions could be filtered out and mainstreamed into European Employment Strategy and, as a consequence, into adequate operational programmes to secure further funding from national sources. Mainstreaming was intended to ensure the sustainability of good innovations, since EQUAL is, by definition, temporary. The programme possessed nine thematic fields, out of which Poland chose to utilise five, with the following two being used by homeless service providers:

- **Employability.** Facilitating access and a return to the labour market for those who have difficulty in integrating or re-integrating into a labour market which must be open to all.
- **Entrepreneurship.** Strengthening the social economy (the third sector), in particular those services of interest to the community, with a focus on improving the quality of employment.

Implementation was divided into three stages: the establishment of partnerships and designing DP Strategy (six months); testing of innovative solutions (three years); and mainstreaming (three years). Stages two and three were implemented concurrently, although applying for stage three was not obligatory.

## Service Provision for the Homeless in Poland Before 2004

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Whilst attempting to understand the popularity of EQUAL among homeless service providers, it is important to examine the context of their operation before entry to the EU.

The *first* element is the role of the NGO sector in the provision of social services which, in some fields including homelessness, is a leading role. Despite a prevalence in terms of service provision, the role of the sector as a legitimate partner in delivering the goals of national welfare policy was not previously recognised. Organisations which had implemented many apparently innovative projects and had in practice performed the statutory responsibilities of state/public authorities were compelled to live with the label of 'private bodies achieving the goals of their funders':

*"Among the most striking paradoxes is that the Government continues to overlook these organisations as meaningful social partners in service delivery and in formulating public policy agendas despite the 'Solidarity' trade union movement's crucial role in the rebirth of parliamentary democracy and the market economy in Poland. Also under-recognized is the inherent capacity of the sector to complement and enhance Government service provision."* (Leś et al., 2000)

The *second* element was the context of the funding structure of NGOs, which traditionally had been organised from various sources including local government, foreign private foundations, voluntary input and donations. An important source of funding were the programmes established by the European Commission in order to support non-member states (PHARE Social Dialogue, PHARE Democracy, PHARE LIEN) and later candidates (ACCESS) for membership of the EU (Kolankiewicz et al., 2008). All of these funding sources shared common features: they were short term (eight to twelve months); did not cover the full cost of the activity (up to 80%); were dedicated to different and rather *ad hoc* priorities which changed year-by-year; and were allocated based on competition for grant proposals. The average scale of grants varied from €5,000 to €50,000. Pre-accession programmes such as ACCESS allowed grants of up to €100,000. Providing shelter to the homeless, which since the 1991 Social Welfare Act had been a statutory responsibility of local government, was performed by NGOs and financed on an *ad hoc* basis from European programmes based on competition for projects.

The third element was that the constant need for fundraising turned leaders of organisations into experts in the writing of grant proposals, fitting their activities within defined priorities and managing growing institutions in permanent financial instability. A major criterion of effectiveness was the ability to survive until the next project. It could be achieved by mastery in finding information on expected competitions/bids and writing grant proposals. Other criteria such as quality of services, achieved outcomes for clients or sustainability of results were beyond the reach of both funding institutions and organisations.

Finally, in 2004 it seemed that the lack of jobs was a key barrier in getting people out of homelessness and allowing shelter dwellers to move to independent living. It was mentioned both as a cause of homelessness and a major barrier in getting out of homelessness in almost all available research. Such a belief matched well with the priorities of EQUAL.

Under these circumstances, EQUAL seemed to be not only a perfect funding source for homelessness service providers, but also provided opportunities for strengthening organisational sustainability. Partnerships of NGOs and other institutions could apply for large-scale and long term (three years) funding. They were given six months to shape their strategies, employ staff and to cover administrative costs for newly established institutions, travel, conferences and equipment. The average cost of a three year contract was about €2m. Service providers were able to shape their ideas according to their expertise without being restricted by a scarcity of funding from local government. The popularity of EQUAL among Polish NGOs becomes apparent by simply drawing attention to the fact that 54.5% of all partnerships were led by NGOs (Kolankiewicz *et al.*, 2008).

## Post-EQUAL Scene in 2008

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Almost four years later, by mid-2008, the majority of DPs had stopped receiving EQUAL funding. This section describes the overall landscape of service provision for the homeless in the country at that time. *Has the institutional stability of major service providers been sustained after the withdrawal of European funding? What has changed in service provision system?*

It is too early to fully evaluate these issues, as the necessary research has not yet been completed (for example, the final evaluation report of EQUAL in Poland) although service providers themselves have raised questions. Their leaders share rather negative feelings, among which are: a great deal of money spent on solutions with results of unknown sustainability; qualified and experienced staff leaving for

other jobs outside the homelessness sector which is presently unable to offer sufficient employment; and the questionable implementation of pilot schemes into mainstream policy.

Certain elements of post-EQUAL homelessness service provision may be observed. First among them is the need to secure prospective funding for institutions established by DPs. Although the overall preliminary evaluation of mainstreaming (Jaszczolt *et al.*, 2007) provides some positive prospects for sustainability (43% of products have good prospects, 16% very good) none of innovative institutions established within homelessness DPs has a warranty for future funding from national or local budgets to the extent available during EQUAL. Most have had to reduce staff and increase the caseload of individual workers. While seeking funding, service providers are concentrating on other ESF sources rather than on lobbying and establishing local mechanisms of cooperation with statutory institutions responsible for homelessness such as employment offices, welfare centres and local government housing departments.

Secondly, the need to sustain EQUAL institutions oriented towards fostering participation in the labour market directs future initiatives towards employment-led programmes such as promoting social economy, Social Integration Centres and job training schemes. Meanwhile, unemployment is falling and larger towns in particular are suffering from a shortage of manual labour. Shelter directors from Warsaw report being constantly approached by employers. The lack of jobs is no longer a barrier. The key issue at the present time is the lack of affordable housing for migrating workers and those exiting homelessness.

Thirdly, the authorities responsible for homelessness seem to have taken it for granted that many programmes, especially more expensive ones such as assistance and specialist job placement, would be implemented by NGOs supported by European funding. It is accepted that local governments devote their resources to activities that have no potential to attract additional funding. As a result, local governments continue to constrain their interests to basic services (shelters, food and crisis intervention), continuing to rely on competition for projects as a funding allocation system. Effectiveness is still measured administratively, a point highlighted by experts working on a diagnosis of the Warsaw Social Service Provision System:

*“Indeed it is believed that the most effective service is the one in which all expenses were accounted for according to budgetary classification rules.”*  
(Marchlewski, 2008)

Fourthly, there were no substantial changes in homelessness legislation during the implementation of EQUAL, while legal change was one of the goals of mainstreaming. In 2007 some activities were undertaken towards the regulation of standards for services. The Department of Welfare and Social Integration (DWSI) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), held preparatory meetings in order to consult on a Ministerial Order on Guidelines for Services for the Homeless. There was no public call for consultation although three institutions had submitted their proposals spontaneously (Pomeranian Forum, Warsaw Council for the Homeless and CARITAS Kielce) and were invited to take part in the process. According to minutes published by participants in the meeting, the draft Order was declared to be prepared by the Department before the end of 2007 and sent to institutions which had submitted their proposals<sup>1</sup>. This has yet to happen.

Despite the lack of changes in the national legal framework, there have been improvements in the structure of European funding for 2007-2013 with regard to homelessness. Since 2007 all interventions of ESF in Poland have been embraced by the Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP) (MRR, 2007). This has two separate lines dedicated to homelessness buried within the priority on development of quality standards for welfare and integration institutions: Local Standards for Exiting Homelessness; and Street Working Standards (MPiPS, 2008). The financial allocation for 2008-2013 for the development of a Local Standard for Exiting Homelessness is about €300,000. Major non-governmental homeless service providers were informally asked to draft a common strategy to implement its priorities. They drafted a project entitled *Five Ways – One Goal* which was submitted to the HCOP Centre for the Development of Human Resources. So far, no information has been published by state institutions with regard to the negotiations of *Five Ways – One Goal*.

In addition the MLSP has recently started the process of drafting a National Strategy for Combating Homelessness. A working group has been established by the Secretary of State in order to develop the document and a conference has been held to discuss the draft structure of the Strategy. Major homelessness service providers were asked to participate in the Working Group.

In addition, the processes of negotiating the implementation of the aforementioned priorities of the HCOP and of drafting the National Strategy, reveal the attitudes of homeless service providers towards advocacy and, more generally, the tools which NGOs may use to influence the process of designing national policy. Service providers accept the fact that they are asked not to reveal information on consultations. They have sought to influence policy design individually, based on informal

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<sup>1</sup> Report from the meeting prepared by participants: [www.bezdomnosc.edu.pl/images/stories/raporty/relacja\\_spotkanie\\_standardy\\_ministerstwo.pdf](http://www.bezdomnosc.edu.pl/images/stories/raporty/relacja_spotkanie_standardy_ministerstwo.pdf)

connections with major decision makers while overlooking advantages that come with open advocacy based on the cooperation of all service providers in the form of a national platform actively publishing their claims regarding policies that are being drafted. They have not held the Government responsible for its declarations, for fear of damaging good relations with key officials, continuing to concentrate on informing the general public about their activities. Illustratively, in common language, people have replaced the Polish term for advocacy – *rzecznictwo* – with the term used in EQUAL for mainstreaming *upowszechnienie*, which in fact came down to dissemination of information to the general public.

Meanwhile, the open advocacy that comes along with informal influence on key decision-makers is an important function of NGOs in the process of influencing the state and, as a result, implementing their missions. According to Kramer (1981), advocacy is one of the four major roles of non-profit organisations, which are deemed to locate deficiencies and replace them with innovative programmes whilst advocating that the State should implement them into national policy. In spite of this fact, as in 2004 no national platform or mechanism for the representation of the interests of NGO service providers for the homeless exists in 2008. Organisations with many years of experience are not using their power to actively influence the Government to implement changes which are necessary for the effectiveness of homelessness provision.

## **EQUAL Implementation and the Current Landscape**

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It is not fully verifiable which of the elements of the post-EQUAL landscape discussed above can be directly considered to be a consequence of a three-year dependence on the programme. However, it is arguable that dependence on EQUAL funding and the manner of its implementation has had a significant impact on the development of homeless services in Poland. Based on the available evaluation studies of EQUAL (Jaszczolt *et al.*, 2006; Nałęcz *et al.*, 2008; Wiktorska and Oleniacz, 2008) it seems that the manner of implementation of the principle of mainstreaming along with two other factors – the validation of results and the form of initial diagnosis – have played a key role in this regard.

The goal of the mainstreaming principle was to identify effective innovations. Logically, this required planning innovations in order that they would be replicable in other settings of organisation, geography and time; and should be continued by establishing legislation followed, where necessary, by funding mechanisms crucial for broader implementation. As put in the reflection note on innovation and mainstreaming (*Ad hoc* working group, 2006) “*Innovation is not an objective in*



itself; it is a means to achieve better quality, higher productivity and additional functions. Innovations are successful if they are widely used". In the majority of cases this has not happened.

It may be argued that successful mainstreaming depends on the willingness of relevant stakeholders to continue funding services, which is an external factor and as such cannot easily be influenced by service providers. However, the potential of projects to attract long-term funding is a relevant consideration in their selection. Hence, there is a balance to be struck between promoting pilot projects which test specific policy solutions and those which are likely to win the approval of decision makers.

Effective mainstreaming also involves the process of monitoring, as only effective solutions should be disseminated. DPs were systematically and carefully monitored in terms of the administrative management of their projects. Qualitative analysis of the monitoring and evaluation techniques used by DPs displayed a limited use of ex-post surveys (17%), and cost-benefit analysis (13%). Instead, DPs concentrated on training evaluation questionnaires (95%). Evaluators found this striking:

*"It seems that in those programmes of 'experimental' character which aim at the practical testing of products being developed, the need for ex post surveys and cost and benefit analysis is obvious. Without knowledge of the future paths of beneficiaries, it is not possible to assume the quantitative results of the project, and without a comparative account of the costs and benefits it is not possible to calculate the unit costs of results produced. Without this kind of information it is hard to imagine effective (or at least intentional) mainstreaming"* (Ciężka et al, 2007).

A further form of validation was through the EQUAL National Thematic Networks consisting of DP representatives and independent experts. As participation of the latter has fallen substantially during the implementation period, projects were validated by peer voting. None of the three kinds of validation fosters the use of effectiveness measures as experienced by beneficiaries (outcome measures). A desirable shift from the exclusive use of performance measures towards at least some use of outcome measures has not been fostered at all; indeed it was blocked by the preponderance of EQUAL funding in the homelessness sector.

Another problematic element during implementation was common practice with regard to the initial diagnosis of the population to be served. Rather than analysing the potential target group (including those former and future clients of the organisations applying to EQUAL funding), applicants usually described the basic demographic characteristics and needs of their current clientele. However, if a particular solution was tested and subsequently 'mainstreamed', it would have been much better to have done a proper analysis of the total population in need of services for

which the funding was sought. This type of diagnosis could also have served as a reference line against which to measure the effectiveness of tested solutions. In fact the only DP that managed to inscribe its results into national policy (Agenda of Homelessness – street-working in HCOP) is the only one which had conducted a thorough diagnosis of local needs.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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EQUAL has provided extraordinary opportunities for Polish institutions to build capacity and develop various mechanisms that foster solutions to numerous social problems, including homelessness. For three years the institutional capacity has flourished, bringing certain benefits to clients of service providers who were offered a range of unique and previously unavailable services. However, the equipment of an EQUAL laboratory, in conjunction with its use by Polish service providers, seems to have failed to provide sustainable solutions to a 'homeless person'. Since the end of EQUAL funding, the quality and reach of services has decreased, while the housing needs of homeless people have still not received sufficient attention. Furthermore, services have not managed to attain and maintain certain minimum standards, whilst organisations continue to fail to utilise their power to influence national policy by means of a common strategy of advocacy.

However, in order to balance this somewhat negative overview it should be mentioned that it was undertaken at the point of transition between two planning periods for European programmes. Both service providers and local governments are at the point of negotiating future programmes which seem to provide better prospects for the implementation of a support system for the homeless. In due course the system will again acquire the prosperity of stable long-term (five years) and large-scale structural funding. It is therefore vital to consider the lessons learnt and to seek recommendations which will be made for both non-governmental service providers and the future principles for external structural funding schemes which will be available to Poland and other new member states.

Non-governmental service providers for the homeless should not constrain their activities to one field. Homelessness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and effective supports should embrace those programmes oriented towards supporting employability, housing, education and health. Furthermore, comprehensive programmes should be funded through multiple sources, including European funding and the local resources of national stakeholders. In addition, more attention should be placed on evaluation techniques which concentrate on outcomes for service users rather than the administrative performance of institutions. Finally, a platform-based advocacy and national cooperation as well as local, should become

an inherent part of the activity of NGO service providers so as to foster sustainability and to scale out and mainstream solutions designed and tested on a local and organisational level.

New European funding programs to which NGOs may apply in the near future offer numerous opportunities. They include the assumption that project outcomes should extend beyond benefiting direct beneficiaries. There are three recommendations worth making in this context. Firstly, agencies receiving funding should be obliged to conduct a robust analysis of the potential for the scaling out of the results of their projects. One of the recommendations that will be made in the forthcoming final evaluation of EQUAL in Poland (expected Jaszczolt, 2008) is that DPs should provide a specific strategy for mainstreaming activities to be undertaken in order to foster the sustainability of their projects. It should be written *ex ante* and consist of the needs assessment of a universally described group of beneficiaries (any potential client meeting a set of characteristics), along with a defined reference line against which the progress of the implementation of the product may be evaluated. Secondly, mechanisms for careful validation of effectiveness of results should be implemented (such as cost-benefit analysis and ex-post surveys) allowing for a real assessment of the effectiveness of the schemes. Furthermore, it is important that projects dedicated to the provision of services which already lie within the legally defined competencies of national or local authorities should be co-financed by those agencies, so as to avoid a withdrawal of certain fields by the state. Programmes providing special conditions to test innovative solutions should not finance testing in fields in which innovation is already on the table; in these cases emphasis should be put on mainstreaming and implementing innovations on a larger scale based on national legislation.

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