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# Routes out of Poverty and Isolation for Older Homeless People : Possible Models from Poland and the UK

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› **Abstract\_** *Policies in many EU countries have sought to address the link between worklessness, reliance on state benefits and the attendant poverty that they inevitably bring. However, the focus has tended to be on the acquisition of skills and education amongst younger people. Older ex-homeless people are rarely regarded as contenders in the employment market and it has been argued that resources aimed at improving their employability are unlikely to provide a sufficient return. Routes out of homelessness are frequently identified as requiring shifts in lifestyles and networks. In the UK, for example, there is often a focus on managing addictive behaviours. Success is commonly measured through the achievement of independence, however, isolation can frequently prove to be a problem when former social networks have to be abandoned. Some models indicate that it is possible to be successful in working with older previously homeless people via employment and community reintegration, offering a route out of poverty and dependence whilst alleviating the problem of isolation. This paper looks at two organisations, one in Poland and one in the UK, both of which work with homeless people who are or who have been roofless. It is argued that the language and ideology framing the work of an organisation will have a strong influence on the model of provision and that a holistic approach with community and meaningful activity at its centre may be the way forward for some homeless people.*

› **Keywords\_** *Solidarity; community; work; poverty*

## Introduction

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The diverse political contexts in which the UK and Poland developed during the second half of the twentieth century inevitably meant that government and public responses to homelessness took different forms. In the UK, there was a rapid expansion of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector from the 1970s onwards, this being a largely uninterrupted period of economic growth and political stability. In Poland, after significant social upheaval post-1989, there have been more recent opportunities for NGOs to develop services that benefit homeless people, often with considerable support from the European Union.

This paper is concerned primarily with issues relating to people without children accompanying them; principally because in the UK the legislation and consequently the help available is significantly different for people with dependent children. Single homeless people receive a much more limited service: although there is an entitlement to housing if they can be shown to be 'vulnerable', this is not always a straightforward process. Consequently, the NGO or voluntary sector in the UK has tended to concentrate its efforts on 'non-priority' homeless people.

Independent housing has come to be seen as the solution to homelessness for the majority of people and has come to dominate both policy and strategies. However, this may not be the aspiration or ideal solution for everybody and enabling a diversity of models to be explored and developed is important in recognising the different needs of people, some of whom may be less equipped to manage independence than others. This paper seeks to explore the way that the framing of responses and solutions to homelessness are influenced by the ideology and ethos of the organisation developing those services. Two paradigms – closely linked, but with core differences – will be explored and their effect on models of services for homeless people examined.

Two organisations, Barka Foundation and Emmaus, are compared, the former is Polish and the latter is international and has projects in the UK, to consider the ideology which underpins them, why they are distinctive and why they might have something particular to offer older homeless people. There is little published research about either organisation, with the exception of three evaluation reports commissioned by Emmaus, so this paper could be said to be a start point in an explorative debate.

## Solidarity versus Inclusion

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Social solidarity or cohesion has come to mean the bond that exists between members of society underpinned by a level of interdependence and a collective series of norms and values. This model may have been prevalent in Eastern Europe under the communist system with its state-dominated economies, however, solidarity was dealt a serious blow in the years of upheaval following the breakdown of the totalitarian regimes. Hulse and Stone (2007) express some disquiet about making use of this framework to denote shared values, in part because it can be difficult to apply in a multicultural society and could marginalise ideas such as social justice and human rights. Their analysis focused on liberal welfare regimes, and Chan et al. (2006) suggest that social cohesion sits uneasily within these systems as it does not address issues such as diversity and is best situated in a more traditional society.

Barry (2002) argues that recent public policy in the UK has been relatively consistent in undermining solidarity, which he says was evident in at least a diluted form until the 1970s. He attributes the decline in solidarity to the promotion of competition for resources amongst public services such as health and education, coupled with increased privatisation and widening disparities in income. A 2001 report for the UK Home Office, following unrest in some northern English cities, found high levels of local social cohesion as evidenced by common cultural backgrounds and understanding, but little or no connection with other communities or the wider society (Independent Review Team, 2001). Solidarity or social cohesion could therefore be viewed as a bottom-up rather than a top-down occurrence. Forrest and Kearns (2001) see cohesion as a micro-level phenomenon that enables people to manage their day-to-day lives effectively; this is 'neighbourhood as community', which is typified by friendships and everyday casual acquaintances.

In a European context, the model of social exclusion has been developed as a means of identifying those factors that represent a threat to social cohesion. It is differentiated from poverty in being characterised by a decline in levels of civic participation, in access to the normal goods and facilities within society and in solidarity (Silver and Miller, 2002). Although originating in France, it has since evolved its own peculiarly Anglo-Saxon liberal interpretation, which is far more individualist and which, as Silver (1994) discusses, leads to social differentiation and specialisation. In the French model, the contract between the citizen and the state means that there are obligations on both sides; whereas the Anglo-Saxon, or possibly more appropriately the Anglo-American, idea of social exclusion has a much weaker notion of such a reciprocal underpinning. Since the 1990s the UK has adopted the model of social exclusion to both conceptualise and address problems within society. This liberal interpretation enables a multidimensional approach to

be taken whereby problems may have complex multilayered causes, and where individuals may be excluded within one sphere of society but not in another. Much of Continental Europe, however, has conceived of social exclusion as a lack or deficiency of solidarity. Here, solidarity is seen as the bond between the individual and society, and the converse of solidarity results in the Durkheimian notion of anomie threatening social cohesion. Citizenship, within the solidarity paradigm, includes the notion of work as a form of service or obligation to the wider community (Byrne, 2005). There is an intrinsic morality contained within the solidarity model, stemming from a combination of Catholicism and fraternity, and hence it sits comfortably in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, where the two traditions (religion and the egalitarian state) converge.

Birkholzer (2009) hypothesises that a social-solidarity-based economy will frame a particular type of response to social upheaval, such as that experienced in Poland. He puts forward a model for the social conditions that lead to the emergence of a new social-solidarity-based movement (p.3):

Economic self-help in the tradition of the co-operative and mutual assistance movement

Charitable help 'for others' in the tradition of the welfare organisations

Philanthropy in the tradition of donations and foundations

Voluntary community action and volunteering in the tradition of civic or civil society associations

These features are present to a greater or lesser degree in the models adopted by the two organisations that are the subject of this paper. How these different approaches of exclusion and solidarity have informed responses to homelessness will be explored. Although it might be assumed that social solidarity would be the model that informs homelessness provision in Poland, and the social exclusion paradigm would shape provision in the UK, it appears that this is not always the case and the ethos of the individual NGO can be the deciding influence.

## **Why Housing Is Not Always Enough**

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Ewa Les, in her 2003 research review for FEANTSA, notes that about 80 per cent of homeless Polish people are men, the majority being older, divorced, from rural areas and having problems with alcohol dependency. This group has had particular difficulty in adjusting to the breakdown of the communist state and often lacks the skills necessary for the new socio-economic conditions.

Loneliness, low self-esteem and lack of meaningful activity is a theme that runs through much of the applied research (Bowpitt and Harding, 2009; Broadway, 2008; Crane and Warnes, 2002; Crisis, 2006; McNaughton, 2005; Smith et al., 2007).

Busch-Geertsema (2005, p.206) concludes that 're-housing usually does not make homeless poor people healthy, wealthy and wise', and Willcock's 2004 report for Help the Aged found that loneliness was a significant factor for some older people in potentially precipitating a return to a homeless lifestyle. Bowpitt and Harding observe that 'It's easy to revert back to old ways and old friends because you feel lonely' (2009, p.6).

The research evidence suggests that issues of loneliness and low self-esteem are significant factors affecting the quality of life of many people who are either homeless or have been rehoused. In common with the general population, most people would like employment (which is fairly critical to raising people's self-esteem) and meaningful relationships with other people. However, the ordinary routes into employment can be very difficult for formerly homeless people to utilise, and a combination of a low skills base and often a low stress threshold can make it hard to gain and maintain work.

Secure, stable and often independent housing is extremely important to many people, but it is no guarantee of an improved quality of life and can at times lead to isolation, poverty and loneliness; all factors that may result in individuals eventually abandoning tenancies. This finding poses the question as to whether there are other models that might be relevant for some homeless people and that may tackle some of these issues that are barriers to a better quality of life.

## **What Is Distinctive about Barka and Emmaus?**

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Both of the organisations discussed here offer a model of community living and working. Barka has its origins in the era following the 1989 Solidarity revolution when many of the rural communities experienced their own upheaval (Kurczewski and Kurczewska, 2001). People who were previously employed by the state, for example in agriculture, lost their livelihoods but had few of the skills needed to adapt to post-communist Poland. Literacy levels amongst older people were often poor and unemployment rates were high, so the need was to offer people training in new skills and alternative types of employment. By 2003 there were twenty rural communities where formerly homeless people lived and worked, each with around twenty-five members.

Emmaus is an international organisation in existence for more than fifty years. It originated in France in the post-World War II period and subsequently spread to thirty-nine countries. The first UK community was established in 1992 and there are nineteen such communities in 2010.

The two organisations have distinct similarities in their ethos yet operate in very different strategic and policy contexts. Both place an emphasis on social inclusion through work and offer accommodation to homeless people, many of whom have experienced problems with alcohol dependency. The majority of those who choose to join their communities are older white men with experience of prolonged homelessness, often coupled with alcohol addiction.

Although Emmaus is an organisation that has a strong presence in many countries, particularly throughout Europe, in the UK it sits somewhat outside the mainstream of provision for homeless people. The Emmaus website<sup>1</sup> is interesting and includes statements such as 'giving homeless people a bed and a reason to get out of it' and 'a secular solidarity movement that has been tackling the causes of exclusion since 1971'. Such declarations are central to its approach: the first signifies the connection that Emmaus makes between housing and work, and the second the ethos of 'solidarity' within which it operates. These two key areas of community and the centrality of work make Emmaus particularly distinctive and its model differs from other organisations providing services for homeless people in the UK.

The ethos and funding that has evolved in the UK is based on the assumption that supported housing provision for homeless people will be temporary and that independent housing is the ultimate aim to be achieved through a process of acquiring 'life skills' and eventually being resettled into the wider community. Although undoubtedly this is a model that for many people holds good, it could be argued that it is predicated on the somewhat simplistic assumption that 'one size fits all' and in the process may restrict choice for individuals. This is particularly true since the inception of the Supporting People programme in the UK, which assumes that most people will move on to more independent accommodation after a maximum period of two years.

If people are either not ready to take that level of responsibility or for whatever reason do not wish to, there is little in the way of alternatives. Although there is an increasing emphasis on training and employment, much of this has been geared towards younger people and the focus for older people is more on a meaningful use of time rather than employment. So there are many excellent supported housing models throughout the UK providing educational opportunities or linking people to

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<sup>1</sup> [www.emmaus.org.uk](http://www.emmaus.org.uk).

facilities available in the wider community, but there is little evidence that housing-related homelessness organisations have become involved in the direct provision of employment opportunities on any significant scale.

There are fundamental differences between the approaches taken by Barka and Emmaus and those adopted by the majority of providers. Whereas the trend over the last twenty years or more has been towards an increasing professionalisation of the homelessness sector, both Barka and Emmaus are rooted in the philosophy of community, where the boundaries between 'staff' and 'resident' are blurred.

Barka has 'leaders', most of whom have been homeless and initially arrived as ordinary members of the community. Barka's philosophy is that only people who have experienced disruption and exclusion (for whatever reason) can legitimately persuade others to change their lifestyle, so the opportunity is available for people to take on this role and provide guidance and an example to others. Emmaus does not take this idealistic stance and, whilst people who have been companions (as the community members are known) may become leaders (and there are number of examples of this happening), it is not assumed that there is an intrinsic value in having experienced homelessness or addiction.

The people who make use of the two organisations can be subdivided into those who form the 'core' and who have elected to stay within the community long term if not permanently, and those who stay for a short period and who may or may not return. Emmaus identifies a third group who choose to move between the different Emmaus communities, finding it difficult to put down roots for any length of time, but liking the ethos and atmosphere.

The rural communities run by the Barka Foundation each have around twenty to twenty-five people and most people share bedrooms and other facilities. The ethos is that of inclusiveness and mutual support, and fundamental to the philosophy is the table at which people sit together to eat. The centrality of the shared mealtime is also the pattern of life in Emmaus communities. It is somewhat reminiscent of the aphorism that 'the family that eats together stays together'. Those who come to live and work in the Barka communities are regarded as members of the 'family'. Bornstein (2004, p.203) quotes one resident as saying, 'We are all people with problems... [the] biggest miracle is that we sit at one table and talk with each other... at the end of the day I feel needed'.

Crucially, both organisations operate a 'dry' policy and people approaching either organisation for help may be offered detoxification as necessary, with support and follow-up assistance.

Randall and Brown's 2002 evaluation of Emmaus provides some valuable information on views of both the staff and the companions. For those people who find that the model of being an Emmaus companion suits them, it can be an empowering experience. It is a basic principle of living there that everybody is expected to work to the best of their ability and that they are paid a small wage from the community funds rather than claiming benefits. However, there is a compromise in that to make many of the communities financially viable, housing benefit is commonly used to help supplement the income stream.

As noted earlier, people who are or have been homeless for any length of time are significantly disadvantaged in the employment market, not only in terms of entrance into employment but also in their ability to sustain work for an extensive period. Emmaus takes the two concepts of community and work and links them together in an alternative model.

Types of employment will vary between the different communities, but most commonly it tends to revolve around the recycling and rehabilitation of furniture and other goods. Sale of these for a modest amount provides an income stream that is also an opportunity for people to gain skills and as the work is full time, it provides a clear structure to people's days. Table 1 shows the views of the companions involved in Randall and Brown's study about different aspects of Emmaus' policies. It is worth noting the high percentage of people who valued the 'work not benefits' policy and the different aspects of community life that were also important.

**Table 1: Views of the companions involved in Randall and Brown's study**

Policy/Rule	No. who like the policy (Base 45)	% who like the policy
<b>Work not benefits</b>	41	91
<b>No drugs</b>	41	91
<b>Unlimited stay</b>	40	89
<b>Local community involvement</b>	34	75
<b>Family atmosphere</b>	33	73
<b>Shared meals</b>	33	73
<b>Responsibility for business</b>	33	73
<b>No alcohol</b>	33	73
<b>Non-judgmental</b>	31	69
<b>No one is turned away</b>	28	62
<b>No questions</b>	28	62

Source: Randall and Brown, 2002, p.24.



There are some strong similarities between the Emmaus model and the model that has evolved in communities run by the Barka Foundation. Barka also offers the opportunity of a permanent home in a community that proffers companionship and employment. The organisation aims to be self-sufficient but has been heavily reliant on EU funding via the EQUAL programme, which supports the development of social enterprises aimed at marginalised groups (Wyganska, 2008). In rural areas, where many people had previously worked on the land, agriculture continues to play a large part in the work of the community members. Barka has helped individuals to develop their skills and is trying to establish markets for organically raised livestock. A difficulty is that there is a very limited market in Poland for such premium-priced products and the worldwide economic downturn that started to be felt in 2008 has restricted foreign markets.

Another parallel between the two organisations is the way in which they reach out to the wider community. Barka aims to develop social enterprise models that provide employment for people living within its communities and in the surrounding area. For example, a care agency that offers a service to elderly people in their own homes, provides work for people that live within one of the Barka communities as well as people from the local villages. The aim is to provide employment and a limited income for a small number of people, but, crucially, participants take responsibility for the business and thus gain meaningful work and the enhanced self-esteem of running their own enterprise.

Involvement in the local community can manifest itself in a number of different ways such as a decision to donate money to a particular local cause or involvement through volunteering. For example, the Bristol Emmaus community chose to prepare and serve a Christmas meal in their community dining room for local elderly people. This offers a paradigm of some of the most disadvantaged people in our society reaching out to others. This connection to the wider community, which is a fundamental part of the Emmaus philosophy, enables both normalisation and integration, but also puts people who often can be regarded as having nothing to offer society in the position of being able to 'give something back'.

As noted earlier, for both organisations the concept of the community is epitomised by the dining table, around which everybody will share a meal. This activity not only represents the idea of family and community but also provides a democratic opportunity for people to share ideas and contribute to day-to-day decision making. Goldstein et al. (2008) argue that part of the success of organisations such as Barka is due to the 'social connectivity' that community living engenders, which creates an atmosphere of inclusiveness (closely aligned to the concept of social solidarity) that has a positive impact on the employment or social enterprise part of their work.

## Conclusions

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The definition of poverty needs to include the notion of poverty as a lifestyle epitomised by isolation and exclusion from many aspects of society. Combating poverty, in this paradigm, means offering the opportunity to engage in meaningful activity and in the life of the community.

Tomlinson et al. (2008) explore a model for measuring poverty, identifying it, like social exclusion, as a multidimensional concept in which income is found to be only weakly associated with poverty. Many of the indicators discussed in their work have common ground with social exclusion, including civic participation and social isolation; the latter, as highlighted earlier, making people vulnerable and more likely to remain within the cycle of homelessness. This paper has sought to highlight the importance of these other contributory factors to demonstrate that poverty is a complex idea that cannot be addressed through income measures alone and, critically, solutions need to be sustainable over long periods of time. Gaining independent housing may appear to indicate that a person is moving away from the poverty of homelessness, but if the tenancy is not sustained or social networks do not exist, then the individual is very vulnerable to a return to his or her previous lifestyle.

Isolation and loneliness have been identified as important factors that can lead to tenancy breakdown, and are arguably more difficult to address than any other facet of social exclusion. The communities developed by Barka and Emmaus offer a solution for some sectors of the homeless population. They are in many respects low-stress environments as responsibility for bills and much of the day-to-day minutiae of life become a shared and hence a lesser burden. People are accepted largely without being 'judged' and are with a group of people who have had similar life experiences. A community model appears to result in an enriched quality of life for its members, the converse being loneliness, which could be viewed as a poverty of meaningful relationships.

There are many initiatives aimed at creating employment opportunities for homeless people through social enterprise, a model that has proven to be successful; but there is little evidence of a holistic approach being taken to the multifaceted needs of people who have been homeless for lengthy periods of time. Older long-term homeless people are intrinsically disadvantaged in the open labour market, yet many may well have skills and abilities that could be utilised. The more 'protected' nature of social enterprise, although needing to at least financially break even, can offer a more flexible and accommodating environment that enables people to progress at a gentler pace than is commonly available in a mainstream setting.

Although the financial resources available to Barka may be more limited, (and the social enterprise model needs to be developed further if it is to be sustainable), it has certain advantages that Emmaus in the UK lacks. The increasingly scrutinised and regulated sector in the UK appears to have resulted in less flexibility and reduced opportunities for innovation. The Supporting People funding regime is tied into an expectation of particular outputs, and most pertinently the assumption that people will move on to some form of independent accommodation. Emmaus has to justify an approach that has a stable core of community members who are long-term residents. Such a proscriptive framework is not in place in Poland and Barka has largely found support from the *gminas* (local municipalities) though this does not necessarily translate into financial support.

Perhaps inevitably this type of community and social enterprise approach can only work with an ethos of abstinence from alcohol or drug misuse. It requires people to adopt a daily structure and a willingness to engage in work that would be difficult if they were continuing to lead a chaotic lifestyle. But abstinence is not for everybody and it is apparent that some people leave Emmaus or Barka because they find that they cannot or do not want to comply with this requirement.

Barry (2002, p.23) makes reference to social solidarity as being 'a sense of fellow feeling that extends beyond people with whom one is in personal contact'. The concept of solidarity is embedded in the premise that all people are a part of society and their community and as such they have a responsibility to contribute to that community. Civic participation is often identified in the literature as engagement in the community and the strong emphasis on participation within the wider community is core to the beliefs of both Barka and Emmaus. By making work central to the daily functioning of the community, both organisations offer a structure that provides meaningful activity and enhanced self-esteem within a supportive environment.

The paradigm of 'social exclusion' is based on the premise that some people, and groups of people, including those who are homeless, stand outside and apart from society. Programmes aimed at inclusion or insertion into society tend to be complicated because the different facets of exclusion are disaggregated, with strategies and policies often focusing on specific aspects of inclusion. Although there is an increasing emphasis on tailored approaches and multipronged interventions, multi-agency working is by its nature time-consuming and complex. If the social exclusion model prevails, the individual is, initially at least, a recipient of services; whereas in the solidarity model, the individual is expected to be a more active participant and has a responsibility to contribute to society through work and community engagement and not to be a passive receiver of benefits or services. The impact of this is that self-esteem is raised and, as has been demonstrated, raising people's self-esteem is a critical element in the move away from homelessness.

Earlier reference was made to the problem that the idea of social cohesion or solidarity appears to have limited value in a multicultural or diverse society (Hulse and Stone, 2007). It would seem possible that this might be why the model explored here has a particular significance for a specific sector of the homeless population – older white men, who exhibit a strong degree of homogeneity – and does not appeal to the broader spectrum of homeless people such as women, young people or those from minority ethnic groups. But although there are implications about the wider applicability of the model explored here, there is a need to acknowledge how a model based on solidarity can have resonance for some homogenous groups in our societies, whose needs are not necessarily well met by ‘conventional’ services.

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