Homeless Services Booming in Poland but Homeless People Still in Crisis

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1. A Bit of History

The Polish welfare system is not as developed as it is in some western-European countries, as a result of Poland’s complicated history. During the communist era, government propaganda claimed that there were no social problems (or any other problems) in the country, so the existence of social welfare institutions was not tolerated. Neither were there any statistics about this (or any other) problem. This part of social life began to develop after 1989 (when it finally became “legal”).

From 1989 to 2004, Polish NGOs and local authorities (which became responsible for homelessness in Polish law) started to take the first steps towards organising a basic infrastructure (like opening night shelters and soup kitchens) but at the same time our country underwent a few serious economic crises (as a natural consequence of transition), which led to an enormous increase in the number of homeless people across the country.

Since 2004, when our country joined the European Union, the situation has changed. First of all, Poland’s economic situation has become much more stable, and there homelessness numbers do not change as radically anymore. Secondly, thanks to EU funds, Polish NGOs have started to develop many interesting projects. As a result, the services available for homeless people have become much more varied.

In summary, for the past 25 years, Polish welfare institutions have been trying to fill the gap in society and catch up with western standards, by organising a basic infrastructure, creating laws and educating their own specialists in different categories of social policy. Though a huge amount of work has been done in that time, there are still some issues that need improving. However, the situation of the sector is not that desperate anymore.
2. A Few Statistics

It is hard to give a reliable estimate of the number of homeless people in Poland as a whole. There have been no real statistics on the issue for the past few decades and, so far, all recent attempts at carrying out headcounts in the country have not produced reliable results.

The first research into the issue began to appear over a decade ago, but only at regional level and only in some parts of the country (for instance in the Pomeranian region).

The first attempt to count the number of homeless people in the whole country was made during the last census, but the result given, 24 thousand people, is completely unreliable. For instance, a few months later the Ministry of Social Affairs did their own count of the number of homeless people in Poland and their own result was over 30 thousand.

It is estimated that there might be more like 60 thousand people in the whole country, but that is just conjecture.

3. Polish Homeless Profiles

Of course every person is different and we cannot generalise about homeless people, but there are some trends that can be seen within the homeless population in Poland. Some of them are totally different from trends that might be visible in other western countries. I will list just a few of them here (but of course there are many more issues of interest too.)

First of all, the Polish homeless population is getting older (just like the whole Polish population). Regional research in the Pomeranian Region has shown that 50% of homeless people are over 50 years old, and people over 65 make up 20% of the population. What is even more important is that these numbers increase with every new study (they are repeated every 2 years), and young people are rather a minority in the homeless population. Ageing is the main problem for Polish homeless people.
Secondly, alcohol addiction is a problem connected with the majority of homeless people in the country. Drug addiction is related to a minority of homeless people and is definitely not among the main issues.

Thirdly, homeless migrants from other countries are extremely rare. They do exist, but only in a few regions of the country and in very small numbers. The vast majority of homeless people in Poland are Polish.

Poland is better known for the reverse: Polish migrants are present among the homeless population in western European countries and this might be another “Polish trend”. Since we joined the EU in 2004, great numbers of Polish workers have emigrated to the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway, to name but a few. Over time, some of the Polish citizens in those countries started to fall into homelessness. A decade on, this issue has become quite visible.

In most of those countries, there are some projects targeting Polish homeless people, supported by local authorities, but most of them concern sending people back to Poland and not supporting them in the host country. That is why the effectiveness of most of the projects is rather limited and, even if some people are sent back to Poland, many of them emigrate again after a while time. This is because it is better and easier to be homeless on the streets of Paris than on the streets of a small town somewhere on the border with Belarus.

Most of the initiatives targeting Polish homeless migrants focus not on changing their life, but on changing their location. As long as it stays this way, the problem will not be solved.

As for the male to female ratio, 80% of Polish homeless people are male and only 20% are female, but this is probably not much different from other EU countries.
4. Increasing Homelessness in Poland

It is not easy to have a debate on the increase in homelessness levels in Poland if we do not have good national statistics, research and reliable data about it. However, our regional research and general observations from experts involved in the homelessness sector show without a doubt that the homeless population in Poland is growing. It is not a big or dramatic increase, but it is still visible.

For instance, research in the Pomeranian Region shows that there has been a slight increase in the homeless population in the whole region over the past few years, increasing from 2,211 in the year 2007, to 2,620 in 2009 and 3,040 in 2011. Data from 2013 are not yet public but I do not expect the numbers will have gone down. We cannot say that numbers are the same in other regions but we can definitely assume that trends may be similar.

Some people ask - why is homelessness on the increase if there is no crisis in Poland?

First of all, it is not true that there has been no crisis. Poland has experienced the crisis, but its effects have been much less noticeable than in western European countries. There have been no dramatic events like there have been in Spain for instance, nor has there been a spectacular rate of bankruptcy like in the USA. However, if we look at unemployment levels in Poland, we will see that they have increased from 10% in 2008 to 13% today. This is a good example of the Polish crisis – it shows that the crisis has affected the country and that its effects are slowly gaining intensity.

The increase in homelessness is a natural consequence of that situation.

We should not forget that homelessness is a complicated problem and it usually takes time for a person to become homeless following a trigger event. If you were to lose your job today, you would not become homeless tomorrow. The process is longer and involves more
factors and more time. That is why the influence of the crisis on homelessness is only visible later.

That is why we are now seeing an increase in homelessness levels as a result of the earlier crisis.

The same applies to the process of exiting homelessness. This may take some time as well and it depends on many factors – not only on the economy. That is why, even though some analysts predict economic growth in the near future, we will not experience a sudden fall in homelessness levels. Even if we found huge oil fields under Warsaw today and most people became millionaires tomorrow, it would take another few years for homeless people in Warsaw to exit homelessness.

We have to remember that even if the two issues (homelessness and the economic situation of the country) are closely related, changes to one of them do not have an immediate effect on the other.

Some people ask - **why is homelessness increasing if homeless services in Poland are booming?**

That is true: thanks to EU financial support we have much more to offer homeless people now than we did five years ago. However, at the same time, the homeless population is still growing. Should it not be the opposite?

Unfortunately, the majority of the services for homeless people that are now being developed in Poland are not aimed directly at reintegration. They are mostly services like high standard hostels and night shelters, street work units, basic social work, providing food, coordination of winter support, better accessibility to therapy for drug and alcohol users, etc. Employment and housing programmes, which lead to a direct exit from homelessness,
are still in the minority and, compared with projects developed in big cities by big institutions, they are almost not available at all.

As long as this disproportionate situation is maintained, the boom in homeless services will not have an impact on reducing the number of homeless people. It will only allow people to be homeless in more humane circumstances.

5. The Future of the Homeless Service Sector in Poland

First of all, from being a “hosteling country”, Poland must turn itself into a “reintegrating country”. This means that the Polish homelessness sector must change its policies and invest in services that lead to people exiting homelessness (employment services, housing etc.). Without this transformation, there will be no way to reduce homelessness in Poland.

When I say this, I do not mean that NGOs must undergo a transformation, because most of them have already been transformed. Many of them run interesting, EU-funded projects aimed at helping people exit homelessness. However, their capacity is limited by the duration and location of the EU funding, so this is definitely not enough to bring about reform in the whole country. By ‘transformation’, I mean that the public administration, which has the real budget and is obliged by law to help homeless people, must change.

National law lays the responsibility for assisting homeless people on local authorities, but it only obliges them to provide food and emergency accommodation. There is no obligation to provide employment solutions for homeless people, which is why most municipalities (with a few notable exceptions) do not do it.

As long as national law does not oblige local authorities to reintegrate homeless people in the labour market and in society, there will be no real transformation in homelessness services and no reduction in the homeless population.
But there is hope. The past 5 years have seen the development of a huge project called “GSWB”, the aim of which is to create shared standards for services for homeless people and implement them in the whole country. The project was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and is in its final stage. The outcomes concern a wide range of issues, but among them are strong recommendations to change old policy and implement a huge number of reintegration services for homeless people in the whole country. Thanks to these recommendations, local authorities should now be obliged to provide reintegration services and pay for them out of their own budget.

Poland will be obliged to start meeting most of those standards over the next few years but, of course, the situation in the country is quite changeable and (as always, when it comes to promises) it is hard to predict today whether all obligations will be fulfilled or not.

We all have our fingers crossed and hope that the “GSWB” project will transform Poland and take it to another level, but only time will tell.

Secondly, Poland now has to change one paragraph in its national law, or change the interpretation of that law. I am mean the paragraph that refers to “linking clients with their last official address”.

According to Polish law, every Polish citizen must have an official address. This means that s/he must be formally “registered” at an apartment or house and its address must be written on his/her ID. If someone needs help from social services, they have to go to the municipality where their official address is located. If someone is homeless, they have to apply to the municipality of their last formal accommodation (the place where they lived before they became homeless).

Homeless people move around a lot and many service users (especially in big cities) do not originate from the municipalities where they currently reside. For instance, there are homeless people who have been living in Gdansk for the past 30 years, but their last formal
accommodation (before they became homeless) was in other part of the country. Despite the fact that they have been living in Gdansk for decades and they are Gdansk citizens, from a legal point of view they are not citizens of that city so they cannot apply for any kind of benefit (they cannot even go to a municipal night shelter). The law says that they should go back to the village where they came from 30 years ago, and ask for a night shelter there, because they “belong there”. Of course no one does that; that is why there are a lot of homeless people (especially on the streets of big cities) who are receiving no social assistance whatsoever and have no right to it.

There is actually a solution for that problem in our law. Article 101/Chapter 3 of the Polish Social Welfare Law (Ustawa o Pomocy Społecznej) says that, in exceptional circumstances, every municipality has the duty to help a person, even if his/her last formal address is in another municipality. The problem is that the law does not define what “exceptional circumstances” mean. For most people, there is no doubt that homelessness is one of the most extreme social problems there are and when someone becomes homeless it is definitely an exceptional circumstance for him/her. So, according to this paragraph, municipalities should help every homeless person who lives within their boundaries, even if his/her official address is in another municipality. Unfortunately, the fact that “exceptional circumstances” are not defined in the law allows for different interpretations. That is why all municipalities claim that homelessness is not “exceptional enough” to make them follow that rule, and they will only help people with addresses outside the municipality in the most unusual and spectacular situations, such as a terrorist attack, a nuclear meltdown, etc.

The best solution would be if the national law were to change, and instead of “last official address”, “current residence address” were to appear. If this were the case, a huge part of the homeless population, who are now considered as a people with no legal right to benefits, would finally became people with the right to help. The law also states that if a municipality gives help to a homeless person from another municipality, then the other municipality has to pay the bill. Unfortunately, big municipalities are afraid to do it (because
it would mean more responsibility, more expenses, more paperwork and the risk that other municipalities would not pay the money back) and so they try to keep the current law as it is.

There is a possibility that this situation will change in the future, because it was announced a long time ago that there will be an administrative reform in Poland and there will be no more requirement to be formally “registered” any more. This reform has been postponed many times and it is not known when exactly it will take place, but when it does it will force the welfare system to change. I hope that this change will include the right to help for homeless people from different municipalities.

Thirdly, there is big problem of ageing among the homeless population in Poland and this is an issue that needs some attention as well. There is an ethical discussion going on among workers in the social welfare sector: some people say that we should adapt hostels to the needs of homeless senior citizens, others says we should open special nursing homes for homeless people and others says that we should get these people out of the homelessness sector and into mainstream nursing homes and hospitals, and put homeless senior citizens in with “regular” senior citizens, because when homeless people get older, we should not see them as homeless anymore and treat them just like other older people. Whichever argument is the right one, Poland will definitely have to start doing something about the issue because in the next few years we will have many more service users needing special care and medical treatment, who are too old and too sick to reintegrate into the labour market and who cannot be helped to exit homelessness using the usual tools.

Unfortunately, this subject is not yet being taken seriously by the public administration.

6. Closing Thoughts

I am certain that in the next few years, the NGO sector and social services for homeless people will be still developing across the country, mainly thanks to EU funds. However,
there will be no serious reduction in homelessness levels without serious changes to the system, as I mentioned before.

“Change” is a process and every process takes time. That is why I am quite sure that Poland still needs some years to develop all these points.

I do not know if it is going to be 3 years or 5 years of longer but I believe that sooner or later reintegration services will became part of national welfare policy and they will become available for homeless people across the country.

This means that Poland needs at least several more years before a reduction in homelessness levels will be possible.