

INNOVATION. SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH THREATENED WITH SOCIAL EXCLUSION - THE EXAMPLE OF THE FOUNDATION FOR POLAND

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Champ social | « Spécificités »

2016/1 n° 9 | pages 137 à 148

ISSN 2256-7186

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://www.cairn.info/revue-specificites-2016-1-page-137.htm>

Pour citer cet article :

Agnieszka Sawczuk, « Innovation. Supporting children and youth threatened with social exclusion - the example of the Foundation for Poland », *Spécificités* 2016/1 (n° 9), p. 137-148.

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INNOVATION. SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH THREATENED WITH SOCIAL EXCLUSION – THE EXAMPLE OF THE FOUNDATION FOR POLAND.

Agnieszka Sawczuk

In recent years, Poland has been praised internationally as a country characterised by positive GDP growth, as opposed to other members of the European Union that are going through a crisis. It is, however, difficult to talk about the considerable growth of affluence of Polish society since we are one of the most stratified countries in the EU as far as income is concerned. The zone of poverty is widening. Even though the scale of social problems decreased in the years 2006-2008, the level of poverty has recently started to increase again. At the end of 2011, 6,7 % of Poles (about 2.5 million) lived in extreme poverty, i.e. below subsistence level. A significant feature of poverty in Poland is its juvenilisation, in other words, the fact that in our country it often has ‘the face of a child’¹. According to studies conducted by the Central Statistical Office in 2012, the rate of the risk of extreme poverty among children and adolescents was 10 %, and people of this age constituted almost one third of the population threatened with extreme poverty².

¹ Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, C. Lopez Vilaplana, Statistics in focus 4/2013, EUROSTAT

² Poverty in Poland in the light of CSO’s research, Central Statistical Office of Poland, Warsaw 2013

What emerges from the data are enormous needs that have to be dealt with by the country's social policy, one of whose tasks is to support the poor. However, given the situation in Poland, our expenditures on social assistance are too low. Even though all of the 27 members of the EU increased their social expenditures as a result of the crisis – from about 26,1 % GDP in 2007 to 29,4 % GDP in 2010 – Poland was among countries which spent the smallest part of its budget on social welfare. The 18,9 % expenditure levels placed us substantially below the EU average. The only countries which spent less than Poland are the following: Slovakia (18,6 %), Bulgaria and Estonia (18,1 %), Latvia (17,8 %) and Romania (17,6 %) ³. Also of great importance is the structure of social expenditures. In Poland, about 61 % of these expenditures consists of annuities and pensions (compared to the European average of about 45 %), 32 % health care, and only what is left is devoted to real social assistance – family benefits, allowances, social integration, etc.

An important issue is the structure of governmental social assistance in Poland. Currently spending is mainly allocated to monetary benefits, and very little to services (caring, activation and advising) which should be the basis of such help. According to Prof. Karwacki from Nicolaus Copernicus University, the issue of diagnosing poverty leaves a lot to be desired. As a result, the problem is not properly diagnosed and the state has nothing to offer the poor, so support boils down to providing them with small amounts of money. Therefore, enclaves of poverty and stagnation are consolidated. An important and positive initiative is the setting up of Centres of Social Integration ⁴, which aim at social and vocational reintegration of those excluded and at risk of exclusion by providing them with psychological support and vocational training. The centers will help participants gain skills enabling them to find a job, start their own company or act jointly as part of a social cooperative. The number of centers is increasing – there were already around 90 in 2011. Unfortunately, some of those who are targeted by their activities do not take any actions or stop cooperation and continue leading their lives on the margins of society.

The most sensitive part of society are its youngest members. They are the group most strongly affected by the consequences of poverty and exclusion. During their most important years of psychological and physical development, they face serious risks associated with interruption of

³ Eurostat news release 165/2012, 27.11.2012

⁴ Centrum Integracji Społecznej (Centre of Social Integration), A.Sienicka, 2011 (www.ekonomiaspoleczna.pl)

education, helplessness, unemployment and even conflicts with the law. In order to avoid these risks, they have to be provided with special protection; otherwise, the consequences could be really serious. All of society will, sooner or later, pay the high cost of failing to help young people, as it starts to feel the results of lower skill levels and productivity, growth of unemployment, and consequently the need to increase spending on social welfare. In general, there will be a loss of social cohesion (defined by the Council of Europe as the ability of society to ensure the well-being of all its members and to minimise inequality and social marginalisation). The economic aspect is, therefore, a strong argument for the need to protect children against poverty and exclusion.

One of the multidimensional concepts portraying poverty among the youngest citizens is the concept of ‘street children’. In a report commissioned by the Council of Europe and prepared on the basis of research conducted in 24 countries on our continent, the term is defined as people under 18 who stay (for a longer or shorter time) on the street together with their peers. Although they officially reside at the address of their parents or some social institution, the bonds between them and their caregivers are weak or virtually non-existent. Taking into consideration Polish realities, they are young people who do not get adequate emotional support from their families and for whom the street is their main home⁵. They may have a variety of backgrounds, often affected by unemployment, alcoholism or violence. Every young person is a different story. Among them, there are ‘blockers’ or courtyard children as well as so-called ‘mall girls’ who look for ‘sponsors’ in shopping malls in exchange for sexual services. Some of the children engage in stealing, prostitution and begging while others try to earn money selling small, often stolen, products, experiment with alcohol and drugs, or just hang out on the streets.

In trying to describe the problem of poverty affecting children and adolescents in Poland which results in the phenomenon of ‘street children’, one has to go back to the initial period of our transformation in 1989 when new social problems appeared in Poland. During this period, large industrial enterprises were closed down at an alarming rate, State Agricultural Farms were liquidated, unemployment skyrocketed, districts and regions of poverty were created, and juvenile delinquency increased. The youngest citizens as

⁵ „Dzieci ulicy w sercach miasta”(‘The Street Children in Hearts of Cities’), art. A. Barczykowska, M. Muskała, Department of Social Rehabilitation, The Faculty of Educational Studies UAM, Poznań 2008

along with the rest of society, both in our country and across Central and Eastern Europe, bore the high costs of dramatic social and political changes. The state system of support for children and families, based on facilities and institutions that were shut down, was not prepared to deal with this new situation.

At the same time, along with social and political changes taking place in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s, throughout the country non-governmental organisations were quickly set up. They operated in the fields of education, social welfare, culture and healthcare and constituted the so-called third sector, filling gaps in the state system. International organisations and institutions supporting such initiatives offered financial support. Among them, there were French institutions such as Fondation de France, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and France Telecom. Gradually, there appeared the possibility of getting funds from Polish state agencies and local governments in the form of grants for the implementation of projects aimed at local communities.

Numerous non-governmental organisations focusing on the needs of children and adolescents noticed the phenomenon of ‘street children’ and began to help them in a variety of ways, resulting from a diversity of approaches to the problem and therefore of chosen forms of action. The first approach was characterised by a desire to provide immediate assistance to children where their health and safe were in danger. The form of action resulting from this approach was so-called ‘street working’, in other words: working with children directly on the streets, providing them with food, clothing, medicines, clean water to wash themselves and various kinds of advice. These activities focused on temporary assistance, albeit for sure very necessary. Another approach involved an attempt to prevent demoralisation by supporting adolescents and younger children in the process of growing up. Forms of actions resulting from this approach focused on presenting them alternatives to living on the street by organising various kinds of socio-therapeutic community centers and hostels as well as working with families, which meant providing long-term support. The Foundation for Poland, which was set up at the beginning of the new Poland and already in this initial phase of its operations sought to contribute to improving the quality of life of children and young people at risk of poverty, supported both these approaches, seeing the value of having a variety of ways of working with this group. The Foundation’s activities took the form of financial support as well as organisational support and training for new social initiatives. Having cooperated with organisations and institutions working with children and youth, the Foundation after some years focused on activities geared to children and adolescents from small towns and rural areas (‘Open School’

program) as well as children from socially neglected backgrounds along with their parents and caregivers. These activities laid the foundations for the flagship program of the Foundation for Poland, the Street Children Program, set up in 1997. The program was addressed to local organisations working with children and adolescents for whom the street had become a second home. Its aim was to determine their needs and improve their life situation in a comprehensive way.

During the first years of implementing the program, the Foundation for Poland focused mainly on actions aimed at improving non-governmental organisations' methods of working with children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion. A network of 20 local organisations implementing the program together with the Foundation for Poland was created. Their representatives met regularly to share their experiences of working with street children. Moreover, they transferred their skills to other organisations across Poland by providing training on methods of working with children at risk of exclusion. In 2003, the Foundation for Poland together with five other organisations – members of the network – prepared a publication addressed to all organisations working with street children, which described the experience gained thus far, as well as providing a profile of the street children and outlining ways of working with them (including socio-therapy in community centers, working with families and cooperation in a particular community)⁶.

Apart from providing local NGOs working with street children with support in the form of organising training courses and conferences for them, the Foundation for Poland also supported them financially. In the belief that a wide range of social groups and institutions (potential donors) should be familiarised with the needs of children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion, the Foundation organised numerous media campaigns publicising the problem. Especially popular was the public campaign entitled 'The street is not for children' organised in the years 2002-2005 in cooperation with Elle magazine and Levi Strauss & Co. Poland. Funds raised from the sale of products (T-shirts, bracelets) and from Levi Strauss employees' monetary

⁶ Supporting Street Children, Foundation for Poland, Warsaw 2003 (Publication was prepared in cooperation with the Association for Supporting Children and Adolescents 'Guardian Angels' Home' from Katowice, the Association for Children's Care 'Oratory' from Stalowa Wola, the 'Studio of Alternative Upbringing' from Łódź, the 'Psycho-preventative Society' from Bielsko Biala and the Charity Association for Children and Adolescents 'Give Them a Chance' from Żory).

contributions were given to local organisations. Financial support for implementation of projects devoted to street work was also given by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Representatives of many organisations received support from the Foundation for Poland and after improving their work methods day in and day out, they eventually became experts in working with street children.

In the following years, after researching the needs and looking for effective solutions addressed to young people at risk of social exclusion, the Foundation for Poland started to turn its attention to slightly older adolescents – those who were gradually entering adulthood and becoming independent⁷. This was the beginning of a new phase of the Street Children Program.

Cooperating with numerous partners from Poland and abroad, the Foundation began to implement new activities aimed at creating equal opportunities for adolescents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds starting their adult lives. In cooperation with the Microfinance Centre, the Warsaw School of Economics and the National Bank of Poland, the Foundation initiated projects focused on increasing knowledge of economics among young people and their caregivers. In 2009, the Foundation expanded projects aimed at creating equal educational opportunities for children and young people from poor and marginalised backgrounds (or at risk of marginalisation) and started the ‘Street Economy’ scholarship fund. Thanks to it, besides gaining knowledge and skills, young people taking part in projects implemented by the Foundation can get financial support for training courses, for equipment needed to start a job, and for continuing their studies.

The subsequent actions undertaken by the Foundation were a response to growing problems of young people entering adult social and professional life: unemployment and demoralisation, pessimism regarding chances for development, lack of faith in the government, emigration, and decline of social capital. The increasing rate of unemployment among young people is confirmed by statistical data. In recent years, young people, even those who are well-educated, have constituted a high percentage of the unemployed. EUROSTAT studies carried out in 2013 indicate that the unemployed under the age of 25 constituted 27,6 % in Poland⁸. Young people from difficult backgrounds, often from large families dealing with addiction and violence, without good educational qualifications or adequate preparations for entering

⁷ Przewodnik Usamodzielnienia (Guidebook to Becoming Independent), Foundation for Poland, 2007

⁸ Unemployment statistics, EUROSTAT 2013

the job market, are less likely to find good jobs, or any kind of work, for that matter. This is why it is essential to help young people at risk of exclusion to develop their social, vocational and educational skills. Without such support, they are very likely to remain on the margins of social life and continue the pattern of life of their parents and caregivers.

In developing a methodology for working with marginalised young people starting independent social and professional lives, the Foundation for Poland is trying to fill a gap in activation and grant programs aimed at this target group. The European funds present in our country concentrate mainly on professional activation of the unemployed. The programs of private foundations are, to a large extent, restricted to supporting talented people or awarding scholarships. There are no programs to help in a comprehensive way those young people who are not yet aware of their talents and require help to uncover their own potential, strengthen their self-esteem, and get them on the road to independence. Analysis of these needs and experience with implementing a range of projects addressed to children and adolescents from difficult backgrounds has made it possible for the Foundation for Poland to develop a series of comprehensive activities addressed to young people who are at risk of social exclusion and are entering adult social and professional life. These activities aim to enhance their functioning on the job market and in society generally. The methodology developed by the Foundation for Poland for working with young people at risk of exclusion can be called innovative, as it involves a variety of activities interconnected in a manner not done before. The methodology is based on the pedagogical thought of Janusz Korczak (1878-1942), a doctor and educator, whose educational concept was a basis for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, which is valid in almost every country in the world. The main idea behind Korczak's pedagogical concept was care for the development of children's and adolescents' autonomy manifested in various ways⁹. These ideas are reflected in the Foundation for Poland's activities. The methodology employed by Foundation in projects aimed at young people at risk of social exclusion also focuses on their empowerment, their independence and ability to take matters into their own hands. While disseminating this methodology, the Foundation is now moving away from the term 'Street Children Program' given that it has certain connotations stigmatising the program's beneficiaries. It will be soon called Better Start as

⁹ Pedagogika Janusza Korczaka (Janusz Korczak's Pedagogy), M. Fuhrman, Z. Kwieciński, B. Śliwerski, Pedagogika, v.1, PWN 2003 (www.edukacja.edux.pl/p-1494-pedagogika-janusza-korczaka),

it is more appropriate for the activities that we are undertaking and symbolises the beginning of the road to a better tomorrow.

As a rule, all the activities of the 'Better Start' program are carried out in very close cooperation with local NGOs. Thanks to that, the Foundation can operate all over Poland, wherever there are partner organisations. Their representatives are better informed about the situation of local communities. They are the ones who select young participants for the project, as they know which families are the most at risk of social exclusion. They are close enough to them that they know their most important needs as well as what abilities and talents of their need to be developed. This is why it is essential to make the right choice of partner organisations. The organisations should be strongly rooted in the local community and the mentors accompanying the participants should have the trust of these young people at all stages of the program.

Young people who come from difficult backgrounds often do not have self-esteem and do not believe in their own abilities. They lack a more enterprising approach to life and the everyday challenges that come with it. This is why the basic principle of the Foundation for Poland's comprehensive methodology of working with young people termed 'Better Start' introduces, at the very beginning of the program, activities that build up their potential and strengthen their social skills, both interpersonal and team-related. The first stage of projects carried out by the Foundation consists of training sessions and workshops 'A plan for changes' during which participants can uncover their own potential, gain skills and strengthen their self-esteem, so that they can later plan their professional development or further education in a rational manner. One of the results of the workshops is an individual plan of development prepared by each of the participants.

The young people who are the targets of the 'Better Start' program often live in poverty and, together with their families, receive social benefits. Having very little money, they are not able to rationally plan their expenses, and in the effort to keep up with more affluent friends, they often fall into the debt trap. This is why another element of the methodology of working with them is managing personal finances, which aims at preventing financial exclusion. It gives young people essential knowledge about managing household budgets and planning expenses. This is often the first time in their lives that they plan and calculate their expenses, learn why it is worth saving money and how to do it, and get familiar with the consequences of their financial decisions (e.g. loans, credits). Young people get to know various kinds of financial instruments. They also learn about the dangers posed by shadow

banks present on the Polish financial market, which are especially dangerous for such inexperienced customers.

One of the main objectives of the ‘Better Start’ program is to help young people to find a job in the future. Hence, the next activity is workshops with a career counsellor, who helps participants choose the best path of professional development (education, employment, own business) – during group sessions as well as individual consultations. Young people learn how to prepare CVs and cover letters. They get to know effective job-seeking methods and the basics of labour law.

Apart from organising such workshops, a vital part of this methodology of working with young people entering adult life is to create a space for free exchange of views and conversations on topics of interest to them. Such a space is provided by club meetings. The meetings can consolidate the skills acquired during training sessions and workshops. On the other hand, they can provide young people with an opportunity to meet individuals who are inspiring and can become role models, for example, successful people who have achieved something in their life through their own efforts or people who have successfully overcome an addiction.

An additional aspect of club meetings which is a reflection of the new direction of the Foundation’s activities is cooperation with companies and their employees. For the past few years, the Foundation for Poland has cooperated with companies based in areas where youth-oriented activities are being undertaken. These companies often provide financial support for these activities. Employees who want to take part in the ‘Better Start’ program as volunteers are co-organisers of club meetings. They get very involved in working with young people and try to help them plan their optimal path of professional development. In order to prepare them for personal contact with young people, an additional training session or workshop on communication or mentoring is organised. The volunteers’ interests and hobbies as well as life experiences are often very inspiring for young participants of the program.

The capstone of the series of activities carried out as part of the ‘Better Start’ methodology are scholarships. The possibility of getting one is a strong motivational factor for participants of the program. Scholarships are awarded through a competition (as part of the Street Economy scholarship fund) and make it possible for young participants to get grants for implementing chosen educational and vocational projects or for developing their own passions. Grants are usually used to pay for courses and training (language courses,

driving lessons or a variety of vocational courses) or to buy essential equipment required for starting work, e.g. craftsman's tools.

During the last few years of developing the 'Better Start' methodology, the Foundation has cooperated with numerous NGOs in many Polish cities while carrying out activities aimed at young people aged 16-21. Projects were implemented in big and medium-sized cities. In each of the places, we and our local partners have tried to reach young people in desperate need of support.

In the case of long-term projects, including those addressed to adolescents, it is very difficult to clearly see results. It requires several years of thorough observation of specific participants. Lasting results can be seen only after a few years. Still, interviews conducted with participants at the end of the program give grounds for optimism. The vast majority of the young people say that participation in the projects was very useful – they believed in themselves and realised that they do not have to follow their parents' pattern of helplessness and have a chance to lead a better life. This feeling is conveyed well by the words of one of the girls who took part in the project: "Before I joined the project, I was certain that in the future I would lead a life would be similar to my family's. Participation in the project and the scholarship which I was awarded showed me that it does not have to be this way". Another person taking part in the last edition of the project said: "When I look back at everything I experienced in this project, I can say that for the first time in my life I was proud of myself".

As some of the participants are still in touch with the representatives of local organisations who were their mentors during the program, we can find out how things are going for them. Many of the project's participants have continued their education or have found a job. Some of them have started happy families in which the bad patterns from their own family homes are not being followed. Others, thanks to scholarships which have enabled them to buy, for example, photographic equipment, can pursue their passion and combine it with earning money. What is especially gratifying is the fact that a considerable number of them are socially active and take part in many local activities. Surveys conducted after the conclusion of all activities showed that about 75 % of participants are involved in the activities of organisation or remain active in their communities in some other way. In this manner, people who gained some knowledge and experience during the project can easily become persons who pass this knowledge on to other people. This shift of roles from student to teacher is the key moment when young people become aware of their capabilities, skills and potential. They start looking at themselves in a different way and see prospects for changing their own lives.

This is why the Foundation for Poland plans to include people who took part in previous editions of the program in its future activities. They will then become a support for new participants of the project and will accompany them in the process in which they themselves took part.

The implementation of the projects in accordance with the methodology described above also has a positive impact on local non-governmental organisations – partners of the Foundation for Poland. Representatives of the organisations have the opportunity to gain experience in working with young people from marginalised backgrounds as well as learning new techniques of training and cooperation. One of the mentors of the youth said: ‘Thanks to the project we had an opportunity to share experiences in the field of training and advising, but we could also observe the creative approaches of volunteers. It allowed us to look at volunteering from a different angle’.

The implementation of projects which involve volunteers from companies co-funding activities (e.g. Alcatel Lucent and Bank Pekao) has an impact on the volunteers themselves. Active participation in project activities enables them enhance young people’s chances of having a better start in their social and professional lives. One of the volunteers said: ‘Doing something valuable with people who share a common idea gives tremendous satisfaction’.

The fact that all parties participating in the ‘Better Start’ program win proves that the program is indeed innovative and effective. Young people at risk of exclusion win because they really begin to believe in themselves; organisations win as well since they get to know new methods of working with young people and acquire new partners. Moreover, companies win too: they give their employees an opportunity to have an impact on young people’s lives and, therefore, give them completely new prospects of development. Also worth mentioning is the fact that companies start being perceived differently in their communities. Finally, the Foundation is a winner as well since it introduces innovations into its work methods that are based on the real needs of young people. In addition, it enables the Foundation to combine various forms of work that used to be carried out as separate activities – only after being combined into an integral whole do they create a completely new quality. Is it, then, inNOvation?