The Development of a National Homeless Strategy in Poland : Achievements and Challenges

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> **Abstract_** *While several Western European countries have national homeless strategies in place, to date, no Central European country has fully adopted such a strategy. Poland has been developing a strategy on homelessness since 2008 but only a draft version has been produced so far and the publication date of the final strategy is not available. This paper explores the policy-making process in Poland and highlights challenges that make the effective adoption of a national homeless strategy more difficult than it is in Western countries. It reviews the drafting stages of the strategy in detail and contrasts this experience with other national developments, including local strategies, on homelessness. The paper identifies a number of learning points that would help the development of future strategies, including greater transparency, a broader involvement of stakeholders and a heightened role for NGOs (as well as the media and researchers) as advocates of a national homeless strategy.*

> **Key Words_** *Homeless strategy ; policy formation ; Poland ; homelessness.*

Introduction

In the last decade, and particularly over the last five years, there has been a trend for European countries to develop and adopt a national strategy on homelessness. Some of the earliest documents appeared in the United Kingdom, with a new Scottish strategy (and accompanying legislation) developed in 2001, followed by England (2002 and 2005), Wales (2006) and Northern Ireland (2007) (Benjaminsen

et al., 2009). Other countries developed strategies in the mid-2000s, including Norway (2005), Netherlands (2006), Sweden (2007) and France (2007). Most recently, Finland (2008 ; see Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009), Denmark (2009 – completing the Nordic countries ; see Benjaminsen et al., 2009) and Portugal (2009 – the first Southern European country ; see Baptista, 2009) adopted strategies.

The creation and adoption of a national strategy requires each country to undergo a policy-making process that involves : placing the issue of homelessness on the political agenda, engaging a range of stakeholders or actors in developing and testing the strategy, publishing the strategy document and putting measures in place to ensure its delivery and effective monitoring. National strategies require a strong government lead at the centre, but also rely on effective network governance (Klijn, 2008) involving complex interactions (and possibly, though not necessarily, negotiations) with a network of governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Whilst most Western European countries have national homeless strategies in place (although not all ; only one region of Germany, for example, has one in place), [1] to date, no Central or Eastern European country has fully adopted a strategy. Many post-communist countries are yet to place the idea of a homeless strategy on the political agenda (Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania). Two countries (Hungary and Poland) have attempted to develop a strategy but both are struggling to complete this process. It is difficult to elaborate on the situation in these countries as there are very few resources available to researchers. However, both countries enjoy good access to European resources and networks – such as FEANTSA – which promote exchange of information on the most recent solutions towards homelessness and housing problems. They also enjoy access to relevant funding and good practices in service provision have been successfully transferred in the past (Wygnańska, 2008). Nevertheless, such policy transfer does not seem to be happening with regard to the development of comprehensive national homeless policies.

Using Poland as a case study, this paper explores the reasons for this situation. Is there a link between lack of a strategy or difficulties in the process of drafting it and the post-socialist tradition of undemocratic policy-making procedures ? What are the challenges that might be preventing the effective transfer of appropriate mechanisms for the design and adoption of a strategy ? In order to begin exploring these questions, the paper provides an overview of the policy-making process in Poland that informs current homeless service provision and development, including a description of the main stakeholders in the homelessness arena. It then reviews the attempts by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to design a national homeless

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[1]   See www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp ? Page=1169 for a list of published strategies.

strategy in 2008 (renamed the 'National Programme for Reducing Homelessness and Developing Social Housing' in 2009). The paper contrasts this experience with the development of other high-priority national initiatives on homelessness and the adoption of local-level homeless strategies. Finally, it discusses the challenges observed in the policy-making process in the design of a national strategy and identifies learning points that need to be addressed to aid the development of Polish policy on homelessness.

Policy Formation

In Poland, as in other post-communist countries of Central Europe, state activity in the field of homelessness started to develop after the transition of the late twentieth century (Policy Reviews, 2005, 2006). The existence of people without any place to live was officially acknowledged, services started to be established and NGOs gained capacity. Legislative changes were introduced, such as regulations on social welfare and the division of public tasks between tiers of government (which assigned the responsibility for homelessness to the lowest level of local govern-ment, the *gminas*); these reforms were common within countries of the post-Soviet bloc (Filipovič Hrast et al., 2009). Groups started to specialise in running homeless services, and shared their grass-roots expertise with others. New public depart-ments to address the problem were established and private foundation and European institution funding programmes were introduced.

However, after twenty years of development, Poland does not have a comprehen-sive policy on homelessness. Rather, there are a few regulations scattered in various pieces of legislation (Social Welfare Act 2004, Rights of Tenants Act 2001), a few governmental programmes – national grant programme 'Return to Society' (MPiPS, 2006) and national subsidy programme (2006) for *gminas* constructing social housing – a diverse range of local solutions and good practices and a hetero-geneous third sector providing services funded from multiple sources (Human Capital Operational Programme, MRR, 2007). The majority of services target people sleeping rough or in crisis situations, whilst wider housing and preventive measures are in an embryonic stage. There is no national picture on the scale and needs of the homeless population and no national research to monitor progress (although good regional and local examples exist). Clearly, recent developments undertaken by both state and NGO stakeholders towards drafting a more comprehensive strategy were much needed.

To understand the policy context in Poland it is necessary to understand how the word 'policy' operates in the national context. There is no direct translation of 'policy' in the Polish language. The closest word is 'politics', which has two meanings. The

first is politics in the Weberian sense where the goal is to gain political power as well as politics on particular issues like housing politics, social politics etc. The second meaning can refer to a general ideology and long-term objectives in certain fields or it can be used in a narrow sense in regard to, for example, a national grant programme for NGOs dealing with homelessness. The direct transfer of policy-drafting models, successful in other countries, may be difficult in Poland without an adequate vocabulary that local stakeholders can utilise.

It is also important to understand the nature of the legislative process and how it tends to foster an array of regulations rather then strategies. Governmental activities towards solving social issues are usually regulated by one or more laws passed by the Parliament. The Constitution defines the following stages of the formal legislative process:

- High-level ministerial officials accept the need to prepare regulations in a certain field.

- The relevant ministry drafts a document that is accepted by all departments (ministerial consultations).

- The document is accepted by other ministries especially the Ministry of Finance (inter-ministerial consultations).

- Formal announcement of the opening of the social consultations.

- The document is accepted by the Council of Ministers and sent to Parliament.

- The document gains parliamentary acceptance (favourable vote).

As well as the drafting of Acts, the Resolution on the Council of Ministers (RM, 2002) provides an option for adopting a long-term programme, which is an 'individually specified project of government document'. Any ministry that would like such a programme to be developed by the government needs to present its plans, long-term goals and expected funding sources to the Prime Minister and gain the Prime Minister's approval.

Present state regulations on homelessness are based on single paragraphs across various Acts passed according to the first procedure. Intentionally, the drafting of the national homeless strategy/programme was based on the second procedure to allow various regulations to be captured in one document, which would, if successful, order the activities of different institutions into a long-term plan where goals could be achieved and the overall effectiveness of state activities towards homelessness could be improved.

The process of drafting the strategy was initiated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MPiPS) but other actors were also involved. These stakeholders were drawn from three key groups that operate in Poland: ministerial bureaucracy and Parliament (the regulative group), the third sector (implementation and consultative roles) and researchers and media (potential consultative and monitoring roles).

A major role within the ministerial bureaucracy is played by the Department of Social Welfare and Integration (DSWI) at the MPiPS. The DSWI is responsible for homelessness, although dealing with homelessness is not explicitly mentioned in the ministerial statute (MPiPS, 2008c), rather, homeless people are one of the 'chosen categories of groups at high risk of social exclusion'. Ministerial duties include: standardising services, creating ministerial and governmental long-term programmes, establishing special task groups and designing as well as reviewing legislation. The DSWI has been operating the national programme 'Return of Homeless People to Society' (MPiPS, 2006), which, through national and regional administration, provides grants for NGOs dealing with homelessness. It was also responsible for initiating the Ministerial Order on Standards for Services for the Homeless (see below). Since 2008 it runs the National Register of Services for the Homeless, which is available online. It is the department consulted by other ministries and departments of public administration on homelessness issues.

Among other important departments within the ministerial bureaucracy are those responsible for preparing diagnoses and forecasts regarding important social issues, particularly those required by international organisations such as the EU and OECD; and those responsible for setting priorities and the allocation of structural funding. On the parliamentary side, the Commission of Social Policy and Family is responsible for initiating and drafting legislation on welfare issues as well as giving opinions on draft legislation prepared by the government. It may oblige ministries to prepare long-term programmes on certain issues.

Major actors in the non-governmental sector include national or regional networks of service providers. Their size varies, from a few dozen to hundreds of local branches running up to two hundred different kinds of services each (mostly night shelters and shelters). The five biggest networks are members of FEANTSA. The performance of this network is complemented by local NGO services in one or more *gminas* or municipalities (e.g. the Warsaw Council for the Homeless, which is a platform of local service providers). Local organisations run many innovative and high-quality programmes, which are often recognised in the media, but their voice is not given the same priority in the national policy-making arena.

In terms of other commentators, the media's interest in homelessness is restricted to reporting on individual events (e.g. a riot in a shelter) and seasonal matters (e.g. preparedness for winter) rather than on policy or governance of the issue of homelessness at the national level.

Finally, researchers and research institutes are also present with a reasonable amount of academic and applied research on homelessness and housing exclusion being undertaken.

The network established for the process of drafting the national homeless strategy included a few ministerial departments (most importantly the DSWI) and some NGO networks of service providers. The process is described in more detail below based on information gathered through informal interviews with stakeholders, participation in relevant events as well as analysis of resources made available through Internet sites. Overall, however, the transparency of the working process was poor, for reasons outlined below, making it difficult to ascertain all relevant details.

Drafting the National Homeless Strategy

In mid-2008 the DSWI officially initiated the process of drafting a national strategy on homelessness. It had been initiated by the Parliamentary Commission of Social Policy and Family, which, after listening to ministerial information on the 'Support to the Homeless and Those Threatened with Homelessness in Winter 2007/2008' (Sejm, 2008), obliged the MPiPS to prepare a draft strategy for exiting homelessness and developing social housing. The Secretary of State at MPiPS declared that he would provide the Commission with the major points of such a strategy in April 2008. It is not clear whether this happened. In mid-2008, however, the Secretary of State appointed a working group to draft the strategy. The DSWI organised a meeting and invited a few chosen NGO leaders (from three networks) to prepare the draft. The team decided to invite major networks and a few local organisations to take part in drafting particular sections of the strategy, contributing a chapter on the issue that it particularly specialised in. For example, Pomeranian Forum would write on research on homelessness, MONAR Association on drug and alcohol rehabilitation, Barka Foundation on labour reintegration and social economy, Caritas Kielce on health. It was also decided to organise an open conference to present the draft sections and consult more broadly.

The conference was held in July 2008 and many new stakeholders took part. Seven different sections of the draft strategy were discussed. However, the sections were quite different in style and perspective, which made it difficult to combine them into one cohesive strategic document. During the conference, participants agreed to provide the DSWI with final versions of the sections by a certain date. After the

conference a short note was posted on the website of one of the networks, and for some time a working draft was available on the MPiPS website. However, there is no information regarding further developments, it is not known whether any alterations were submitted and about two months later the draft strategy was removed from the MPiPS website.

It later became clear that a new draft was being prepared by the DSWI, organised around a different structure and with a new title, 'National Programme for Reducing Homelessness and Developing Social Housing'. It includes a short history of ministerial activities to address the issue of homelessness. Its mission is to force stakeholders from other ministries – most importantly the Ministry of Infrastructure, which is responsible for the construction of social housing – to recognise their role in addressing the issue of homelessness, which currently is assigned exclusively to MPiPS. The programme also describes a number of 'strategic fields' that are needed for existing homelessness projects and identifies issues in need of regulation (e.g. standards for services). New activity is proposed under the heading 'Real statistics on homelessness', based on locally managed empirical research and a methodology used in the Sociodemographic Portrait of the Homeless in Pomerania, rather than on administrative data from existing welfare and shelter services. The history of activity in each field is described briefly and expected results are outlined. Little mention is made of the methods that would be used to achieve these goals or of how the programme would be evaluated. No new funding is outlined, however, reference is made to structural funding for 'Local Standards for Exiting Homelessness'.

The draft programme was put under ministerial consultation and posted on the MPiPS website with a note outlining that inter-ministerial and social consultations had begun. In the meantime the strategy was mentioned in the Polish *National Strategy Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008–2010* (MPiPS, 2008a):

> By the end of 2008, the National Strategy for Preventing Homelessness and Development of Social Housing will have been adopted. The Strategy project provides for, inter alia, working out standards for providing services to the homeless and the implementation of mechanisms coordinating the activity of various institutions for the homeless and those at risk of homelessness.

However, up to May 2009, nothing had changed on the website. Informal information from the DSWI suggests that the process of drafting the programme had to be cancelled because it had not formally followed procedures for establishing long-term governmental programmes (as defined by the Statute of the Council of Ministers) in its early stages: the Prime Minister was not presented with its objectives and planned funding and his permission was not requested to start the drafting process. The DSWI is currently working on a possible solution to this situation.

Whilst the draft programme remained available on the website, it was informally admitted that the draft had been further revised since it was posted.

The NGO networks that were engaged in the process do not appear to have commented on the ongoing process and none of their websites provide any relevant information. Some members have explained that they were asked to review the document during the social consultations but were given only two days to do this and therefore refused as it did not seem feasible. The homeless strategy has not been covered by the media.

In mid-2009 the programme is still at the drafting stage. The consultation process was quite limited, it appears that it did not properly follow legislative procedures, it did not generate much interest from stakeholders and it is unknown to the broader public. Whilst its content is to some extent innovative in the Polish context as it encompasses all-important processes that influence the homelessness arena, it fails to set long-term policy goals and put in place instruments that would allow real achievements to be made.

Other Policy Developments

In 2008 and 2009, parallel to the development of the national strategy/programme, a number of other policy developments took place. These included the preparations for the implementation of one of the streams of structural funding dedicated to Local Standards for Exiting Homelessness (LSEH) and the preparation and adoption of local homelessness strategies.

The LSEH initiative was conducted at the national level and was treated more like the implementation of a private grant than a policy initiative. It is described here because its potential impact and role in shaping national policy in the near future seems substantial and comparable to that of the national strategy – not only because of its planned budget of 30 million PLN (€6.9 million) but also because of its substance, which comes down to designing, testing and implementing patterns for local strategies or policies towards homelessness and promoting them further as universal 'good practices' to be implemented across the country. Interestingly, implementation of this project is one of the strategic fields of the national programme, whilst creating a national strategy on homelessness is one of the outcomes mentioned in the action plan as a result of the implementation of the LSEH project.

The process of drafting the LSEH was similar to that of the national strategy, with participation limited to as small a group of actors as possible and little transparency, perhaps in the belief that a more closed approach would strengthen the process and make it faster. Even though the network of partners was established

and draft projects created in early 2008, according to official information it began one year later when the call for partners for the project was published in an official bulletin. The call was won by a partnership of five networks and one local organisation – all participants in the 2008 activities. Participants were initially invited via the FEANTSA membership. Minutes were not taken at these meetings.

In late March 2009 the final project for the implementation of local standards submitted by the official partnership was accepted. So far it has not been made available to the public. Arguably, the use of a rather closed process involving future beneficiaries (NGO service providers) only will have reduced its chance of designing an effective method of implementation. Certainly, money that could have been working to address homelessness has remained unspent for many months.

The attitude to drafting important policy at the national level can be contrasted with a few successful initiatives to draft and successfully adopt modern social strategies at the local or regional level. These processes overcame the barriers that challenged the national initiatives especially the reluctance towards transparency and the restrictive attitude to the participation of stakeholders. The Warsaw Strategy on Social Problems was adopted in December 2008 and prepared under the patronage of the Warsaw President and the direct supervision of the Deputy President. It was drafted by almost ten thematic working groups in a process open to all stakeholders – in fact more than seven hundred actors participated, providing over one hundred expert opinions and evaluations. It was transparently described on a website that presented dates of important meetings, minutes of meetings and working and final documents. It was also extensively covered by local media. The strategy's component on homelessness includes specific proposals for the standardisation and coordination of services, monitoring the homeless population based on usage of service providers' and administrative data, legal regulations allowing for better coordination of homeless and housing services and the establishment of a coordinating platform of all stakeholders.

Similar processes also took place in other regions giving high-quality results and producing long-term strategies capable of making the necessary change in the condition of the homeless population of the area. These local examples show that a reluctance towards transparency and broad engagement of stakeholders can be overcome and that there is potential to apply more political and public pressure to other authorities to adopt similar strategic documents. In contrast, efforts at the national level (strategy and local standards) failed to integrate the public pressure factor to strengthen the effectiveness of the drafting process. Interestingly, NGOs did not show any interest in advocating publicly for their development.

Discussion

This paper has outlined the difficulties experienced in designing a comprehensive national policy on homelessness in the Polish context. Given that no other Central or Eastern European country has successfully devised such a strategy, it is important to investigate the possible underlying reasons for this.

First, it is necessary to consider the characteristics or attitudes of the Polish ministerial bureaucracy. This term comes from the report prepared on corruption risks and management of Polish public administration at the ministerial level (Heywood and Meyer-Sahling, 2008). The report, while analysing anti-corruption reforms of the public sector undertaken by a previous governing party, concluded that among its consequences were unwanted changes in policy-making procedures, including a general preference for informal, personalised forms of coordination and control. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the attitudes of those officials who participated in the processes observed in the homelessness arena. They tended to use informal and personalised forms of coordination and withdrew from organising open consultations, publishing draft documents, distributing information on planned agendas for policy design etc. Often they had no procedures to follow. For example, when choosing partners for LSEH, they preferred informal connections to other stakeholders and it was perhaps easier to use the 'Polish FEANTSA membership' than to organise an open call for partners.

A preference for informal contacts was in part obscured by assigning certain roles to chosen partners. For example, NGO activists were referred to as experts. Whilst they are experts on their organisations, they face a conflict of interest in being the experts who design the project from which they will be direct institutional beneficiaries. It seems that a more appropriate label would be 'practitioner' as it would underline their grass-roots experience and would not overestimate their independence or objectivity. Treating NGO leaders as the only rightful experts on homelessness might also be due to the withdrawal of researchers from the policy-making arena. In all the processes described, researchers only took part if they were involved in the activities of participating NGOs.

The attitude of NGO stakeholders is another possible obstacle as they appear reluctant to openly contradict proposals coming from the ministerial bureaucracy. For understandable reasons, including future funding considerations, their priority seems to be to maintain good relationships with key officials. This situation, however, prevents NGOs from holding the government responsible for the declarations it makes. For example, the draft national homeless strategy as well as the draft ministerial order on services were declared to be ready many times – dates were cited in official documents (minutes from the meeting of the Commission of Social Policy and Family, *National Strategy Report on Social Protection and Social*

Inclusion 2008–2010 etc.) The implementation stage of LSEH was initially promised to take place in March 2008 and later other dates were given. Yet there was no open comment or reminder from NGO actors when these promises were broken.

NGOs do not appear to be motivated to create a formal representative platform that could powerfully advocate on the national level, as exists in many other countries (e.g. Shelter in the UK). An informal network does exist and its establishment started around FEANTSA activities (preparing national reports on thematic issues such as health in 2007 and housing in 2008) and was further reinforced by usage of the 'FEANTSA key' for establishing governance networks for processes described in this paper. However, the role of NGOs could be further developed in this area.

In Poland we can observe an acceptance of the 'whispering at the back door' phenomenon as described by Osborne at al. (2008) with regard to NGO service providers in Hungary seeking to access governmental funding for services on a local level. However, in the Polish case, it seems that this kind of whispering would not be accepted if used for the same purpose. Access to public funding for local contracts is fully transparent and has well-established control mechanisms (Public Benefit and Volunteering Act 2003) that prevent individuals from informal influence over allocation of such funds. Nonetheless, such whispering seems to flourish on the policy design level in Poland. Both NGO activists and ministerial officials appear to prefer 'whispering' to, for example, public campaigns and open consultations.

The final explanation may come from the lack of interest in using media events to put homelessness on the national public agenda. The art of using the media to direct the public's attention to certain issues and to create pressure on the govern-ment seems to be unfamiliar to Polish homelessness NGOs. There are many examples of such strategies from across the EU (see, for example, Loison-Leruste, 2008) and within Poland (e.g. a tragic fire in a former workers' hostel near Szczecin that had been used by the local government as social housing for families attracted extensive media coverage and drew attention to the very low physical standards of municipal housing for the poorest citizens). However, none of the NGO service providers has used frontline news to put homelessness issues on the public agenda in order to force changes in the relevant regulations.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates that Poland has a dynamic homelessness arena. The country has made significant progress in recent years as it moves from centralised, undemocratic policy making, with no freedom of association and party officials dominating processes. Stakeholders have managed to work many useful policy-making mechanisms into a post-communist reality, but further mechanisms can and should be applied to address the remaining challenges. Their application should guide future developments in the preparation of a national strategy on homelessness.

Three key aspects stand out as in need of attention. First, a greater transparency of process is desirable. Publishing minutes from meetings is useful not only for transparency but also for the process itself. Promoting information on the drafting process may attract stakeholders whose knowledge and expertise can fill gaps in content and shed new light on issues under discussion. Transparency also creates more public pressure on authorities, which are ultimately responsible for adopting the policy documents. Second, access to the policy drafting stage should not be restricted to too small a group of actors. The experience of drafting local homeless strategies shows that large groups can effectively work together to develop one coherent policy document. A broad involvement of actors also strengthens the legitimacy of the final document. Third, it is crucial for NGOs to recognise and make use of their potential in advocacy. They have an important role to play in forcing governments to improve policies to benefit NGO clients. Public campaigns pointing out both the pitfalls and achievements of governmental policies should be encouraged. Sometimes governments have to be openly contested.

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