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Cohousing as a form of social innovation: Challenges in a new geopolitical situation in Poland

Abstract

This article addresses the topic of cohousing, understood as a form of housing that promotes a lifestyle that places greater emphasis on social cohesion and creates conditions to ensure that all residents have the opportunity to meet basic social needs. In this view, cohousing coincides with the concept of social innovation. The aim of the article is to present the idea of cohousing as an example of social innovation and an attempt to determine its significance in the process of integration of Ukrainian citizens in Poland after February 24, 2022. The paper is theoretical in nature, and the method of analyzing foundational data was applied, which included publications, reports and research on the problem addressed. In the first part, the issue of social innovation was presented, the idea of cohousing was presented and its features as a form of social innovation were pointed out. The second part highlighted the importance of cohousing in the integration process of Ukrainian citizens in Poland after February 24, 2022. The results of the research showed that within the framework of the available solutions for the current situation, it is worth reaching for new forms of cohousing that enable active inclusion of people with refugee experience in decision-making processes and foster closer neighbourly contacts, neighbourly control, a sense of security and opportunities for social support.

1. Introduction

Social innovation, which is the main focus of the author's considerations, is largely not oriented towards economic utility, but focuses primarily on the value system

and is therefore referred to when an idea is implemented to solve a specific social problem (Kesselring and Leitner, 2008). The new geopolitical situation following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, associated with the influx of large numbers of refugees into Poland, has presented our country and Polish society with unprecedented challenges in terms of new problems centred on migration policy. This policy can be defined as the totality of instruments and policy actions and decisions designed and/or made by state authorities with regard to migration processes and their participants (Kulesa, 2017). At the same time, as Łodziński and Szoner (2023, 7) rightly point out, the resulting "new" migration policy in Poland can be described "in terms of 'institutional bricolage'", filling the void left by the absence of this policy in earlier years, related to the necessity of solving migration problems on an urgent basis". Within its framework, it became an important task to define the conditions for the settlement of Ukrainians, including the establishment of rules within the housing policy. However, the established system of housing assistance for refugees was mainly based on ad hoc and short-term measures, and refugees were largely hosted by private individuals[1], which is related to the phenomenon of private "housing sponsorship" (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022), which largely avoided the creation of special refugee centres for Ukrainians. In addition to the basic problems related to the issue of housing for refugees such as discrimination against migrants in the housing market, difficulties in accessing rental housing or housing instability, efforts to integrate newcomers into local communities have also become an important challenge. These new migration problems can become a catalyst for innovative actions.

2. Theoretical framework of the research

Dick Urban Vestbro and Lisa Horelli (2012) define cohousing as housing with shared spaces and shared amenities for residents. It is a bottom-up, non-institutional housing model with an emphasis on a healthy balance of personal, family and community life (Meltzer, 2005). In cohousing, a balanced causality-community model of social perception applies. On the one hand, cohousing meets the individual needs of the residents, as private spaces offer the opportunity to rest from others on their own terms (a response to the rise of individualisation and the rise of diverse consumer attitudes and behaviours). On the other hand, cohousing responds to the problems of modern society, its alienation and isolation (Krokfors, 2012), and satisfies the need for increased interpersonal contact. The idea of cohousing originated in Denmark, and then spread to Europe and the United States.

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[1] Data at the end of April 2022: 38% – flat of Poles, private persons (living with and without a host), 23% living together with friends/family from Ukraine, 19% independently rented flat, 7% hotel/hostel/guest house (*Nowy dom…*, 2022)

Currently, cohousing is most popular in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United States, and Canada.

In order to analyse cohousing as an example of social innovation, a compilation of its characteristics was made from the point of view of the indigenous elements that, according to the literature, should be present for a practice to be recognised as socially innovative (Drucker, 1992; Staszel, 2019; Kwaśnicki, 2015; Westley, 2008; Pol and Ville, 2008; Moulaert et al., 2005) (Table 1).

Table 1. Cohousing as a form of social innovation

Social innovation characteristic	Cohousing, characteristics
Social need/solution of a specific social problem	– individualism/loneliness (integration of privacy and community – the causality-community model of social perception,) – ageing population problem (inefficiency of national healthcare systems) – housing problems (inefficiency of national housing policies) – migration problems (inefficiency of national migration policies) – problem of discrimination against women (e.g., women's cohousing, multi-generational cohousing) – problem of discrimination based on sexual orientation (e.g., gay male cohousing, multi-generational cohousing) – environmental crises (sustainable housing) – economic crises (sustainable construction)
Novelty	– a high degree of participation by community members, which implies the participation of future residents in the planning, design, organisation and management of the habitat – a wide range of shared products and services (sharing economy) – the shared space within cohousing is not created through interaction and social bonds due to spatial proximity, but the reverse is true: it is the space (which does not yet exist) that gives rise to the interaction and social bonds of the community, which are formed in order to create this space
More effective, and more efficient than existing solutions	– economic benefits (sharing the cost of ownership, sharing the space management costs) – social benefits (increased social cohesion made possible by a Common House, sense of community, reduced isolation of the excluded, the sense of being in control of one's own life, health benefits: improved physical and mental health and consequently improved the quality of life) – environmental benefits (sustainable construction, working towards a reduced ecological footprint through, among other things, lower energy and water consumption, sharing products and services, growing fruit and vegetables, raising small livestock, reducing the waste burden on the environment and more rational space management) – cohousing as a response to the inefficiencies of national policies on housing, health, migration, etc.

Increasing people's capacity to act, e.g., by creating new roles and relationships	– participation of future residents in the planning, designing, organising and managing of the habitat (e.g., developing team-building and leadership skills) – sharing knowledge and skills within the community (including, for example, an opportunity for retirees to find meaning and purpose as neighbours, mentors, and grandparents in a supportive and caring environment)
Excluded groups (integration and stimulation of activity)	– senior cohousing – women's cohousing – cohousing for homosexuals – multi-generational cohousing (including for people with disabilities and low income) – cohousing for immigrants (integration of host and guest)
Better use of funds and resources/mutuality	The idea of cohousing coincides with the assumptions of the sharing economy in terms of sharing: – space (Common House) – objects and equipment (shared lawnmower, washing machines, bicycles, cars) – skills (mutual assistance e.g., plumber, carpenter, bookkeeping, or childcare services) – community management responsibilities
Prosumption	A high degree of participation by community members, involving future residents in the planning, designing, organising, and managing the habitat
Grassroots activities	– bottom-up, non-institutional housing model – social entrepreneurship
Community management/social inclusion	– open or hybrid common space (offering services to the local community) – involvement of residents outside the community (building local social capital)

Source: own study.

By putting together the common features of cohousing and social innovation, it can be considered that in both cases we are dealing with activities undertaken for social benefit and aimed at solving important social problems. Cohousing can be a response to new social needs, especially in the search for new forms of socialisation in which a sustainable model of agency-communitarianism applies. Cohousing implies social participation and enhances society's creativity and capacity for action (e.g., through the creation of new roles and relationships), and increases opportunities for better use of resources (economic and environmental benefits). Indeed, the idea of cohousing coincides with the principles of the sharing economy in terms of sharing space, objects and equipment, but also in terms of the ability to help each other. In addition, it is directed at high-demand groups (e.g., the elderly, people of lower economic status, women or people with disabilities). Examples include the GenerationenWohnen multigenerational cohousing in Switzerland, which was set up to improve the quality of life of older people and people with disabilities by preventing loneliness and strengthening their autonomy, and

to promote solidarity between generations by encouraging different generations to exchange services and resources with each other. Another example is the Hope Meadows cohousing in the US, which was established to create a welcoming and safe environment for seniors to age in place in a multi-generational integrated setting, and to provide social security for families adopting children from foster care (LAB 60+, 2018). In addition, cohousing often provides a more effective and efficient (than previously applied) solution to social needs (a solution to the problems of an ageing population, inefficiencies in national healthcare systems, national housing policies or refugee policies). Consequently, cohousing improves people's well-being (both material and non-material). The revolutionary principle of treating future community members in cohousing as prosumers who actively participate in the overall process of creating and operating a shared space (from designing to space management) teaches co-governance and gives a sense of influence. This can consequently, in addition to improving the capacity of society to act, also strengthen the involvement of residents outside the community (increased social engagement). Cohousing as a form of social innovation can also be an important element in the process of community governance at the local level. By opening up their communal spaces, they can stabilise urban neighbourhoods and have a positive impact on social inclusion, due to the range of services they offer that are open to local communities (more: Markiewicz, 2023).

3. Research methodology

The paper is theoretical in nature, the method used was that of the analysis of the foundational data, which included publications, reports and research on the problem addressed. Websites of individual cohousing communities were also an important source.

4. The importance of cohousing in the integration process of Ukrainian citizens in Poland

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, almost 8.9 million people from Ukraine arrived in Poland in a short period of time. As a result, for the first time in history, the size of the population of our country exceeded 40 million, and Poland thus became the second country in the world (after Turkey) with the largest number of refugees (the percentage of foreigners residing in our country reached almost 8% of the population) (Łodziński, Szoner, 2023). The massive influx of war refugees forced the Polish authorities to take quick action to accommodate them and, at least temporarily, integrate them into our society. These included measures concerning the conditions of settlement, including (of particular interest to the au-

thor) measures within the framework of housing policy. It became a major challenge to adapt the form of assistance to the specifics of the Polish housing system and the cultural and social values of the host country of migrants. As Łodziński and Szoner (2023) rightly point out, Ukrainian refugees are the closest to the imagined "ideal refugee", as they were primarily women and children fleeing the immediate danger of war (and additionally "white Europeans") and, thanks to the social (economic migration-related) and online networks created earlier, Ukrainian citizens were perceived by members of our society as familiar, with a similar historical and cultural (linguistic) background. However, despite the unimaginable upsurge and social effort in the initial period of the influx of Ukrainian refugees and the aforementioned cultural convergence, over time concerns arose in Polish society about, among other things, the loss of priority in access to public services (health, education, care) (Sadura and Sierakowski, 2022). The new situation we have had to face has highlighted problems that also affect Polish citizens in this regard. This includes access to the housing market. In view of the limited possibilities of funding housing for refugees (the housing policy for refugees was based on private "housing sponsorship"), there was a need to look for alternative ways to solve the problem that arose. A number of debates on the challenges of systemic support for newcomers resulted in a series of guidance and recommendation documents. They also concerned the housing market, where among the available solutions for the current housing situation of Ukrainians, the need to reach for new forms of housing is necessary (e.g. Biała księga, 2022; Milert, Nowak and Sroka, 2022; Solga, Kubiciel-Lodzińska, 2022). Alternative housing solutions, such as cohousing, are worth considering. It should meet the basic living needs of newcomers and serve as a way to counteract social exclusion of these groups and integrate the migrants into the host society. In the process of social integration, which is a multifaceted process, both the group of newcomers and the host society should be taken into account. Actions directed at the receiving society should primarily focus on building trust in newcomers and reducing fears that may relate to competition on the labour market, overloading public systems, and threats to safety (e.g., illnesses or illegal introduction of dangerous substances to Poland). Actions targeting migrants should primarily concern providing them with adequate assistance: psychological, medical, psychosocial and social.

Table 2 indicates the features of cohousing relevant to the integration process, together with their characteristics and the parties benefiting from them. Cohousing can be treated as social networks (migration networks), i.e. systems of interpersonal ties linking migrants and hosts, which can be a source of social capital (Massey et al., 1993). The resources available in networks (tangible and intangible) foster integration in multiple dimensions (economic, social, psychological), with the greater the heterogeneity of the network, the greater the so-called "network effect" and the possibility to access potential resources (Lin, 2002). Social networks enable the formation of networks of social support, which has been recognised as "a buffer

against the negative effects of life stress and critical, traumatic or simply difficult events directly burdening both the individual and his/her environment, hence its great importance in the course of migration" (Kozielska, 2015, 80). In accordance with the principle of network heterogeneity, the author assumed that cohousing is formed by both incomers (Ukrainians) and residents of the host country (Poles).

Table 2. Features of cohousing relevant to the social integration process of migrants

Feature	Characteristics	Benefits for immigrants	Benefits for the host country
Provides a space for mutual knowledge and integration	Within the communal spaces of the so-called Common House, the opportunity to establish personal relationships, friendships, camaraderie, strengthening the sense of security and togetherness, and consequently minimising the emotional and mental disorders associated with moving out of the country and newcomers.	✓	✓
Provides an opportunity to feel empowered	Proactively involving the person with a migration and refugee experience in decision-making processes at the local level. As experience from long-standing humanitarian and refugee crises has shown, there is a high risk that if refugees are not treated as agents and subjects, they will become dependent on external assistance (*Konsekwencje społeczne…*, 2022). It is therefore important to support the self-organisation process of people with migration and refugee experience and to harness their potential to create solutions to specific social challenges.	✓	✓
Provides an opportunity to share resources (tangible and intangible)	Cohousing can help reduce the cost of living by sharing certain spaces or everyday objects, which is especially important for migrants who often have limited financial resources. Social benefits include mutual help and support (e.g., cooperation in caring for children, the elderly or the sick or, so important in this case, learning each other's language), the possibility to spend time together, to cook meals, which seems particularly important in the context of the demographic characteristics of refugee families. Such arrangements thus foster closer neighbourly contacts, neighbourly control, a sense of security, and opportunities for social support. Cohousing also enables new resources and opportunities to be developed, e.g., by operating service or retail outlets in the cohousing space. Thus, it can be a more effective, efficient solution (than existing ones) to refugee housing policy.	✓	✓

Reduces the isolation of excluded people	Social integration and stimulation of activity create a sense of belonging to a community, empower and increase the acceptance of newcomers by the host population, thus strengthening the social fabric.	✓	✓
Enables demand for public services to be reduced	Social benefits – including health benefits (improved physical and mental health and consequently the quality of life), result in refugees being able to place fewer demands on local health and social services, reducing concerns about the availability of these services in the host society.	✓	✓
Contributes to the activation of civil society	A high degree of participation by community members, which means their involvement in the planning, designing, organising and managing of cohousing in practice enables members to develop team-building and leadership skills and encourages greater democratic participation at a wider level.	✓	✓
Provides an opportunity to test innovative solutions	Cohousing can be an inspiration for solving the housing problems of Polish citizens and is an opportunity to test some target solutions for when refugees leave cohousing settlements, and can serve people from Poland, e.g., those facing homelessness or lack of care after the death of their parents or carers.		✓

Source: own study.

Despite the indicated opportunities offered by cohousing in terms of integration of Ukrainians with Poles, it is also worth characterising the limitations in terms of the use of this form of housing, which include above all the lack of experience in the use of this form of housing and legal solutions on the Polish market facilitating the realisation of such a form of housing and the low level of development of civil society, and thus the capacity for bottom-up initiatives. The special nature of cohousing for immigrants also requires the participation of the state aid in its organisation and management.

Also crucial to the success of cohousing are the appropriate criteria for selecting cohousing residents. First of all, the cohousing communities created should not be based only on a group of incomers (Ukrainians), but should be formed by both hosts and incomers to our country, according to the principle of heterogeneity of the community. Otherwise, such spaces (the resulting social ghettos of sorts), due to the homogeneity of users, may become the embodiment of xenophobia and negate the idea of place as a platform for potential social interaction and integration of newcomers into the host society. Additionally, due to the fact that Poland already had a very large Ukrainian diaspora before the war, the "new" refugees can quite effectively function in our country, remaining in contact almost exclusively

with other Ukrainians. This also does not support integration processes. Secondly, the criteria for selecting Ukrainians as potential cohousing residents should go beyond financial factors. This is because it is risky to build cohousing for financially dependent people, as this can lead, as experts point out, to problems of social exclusion and stigmatisation. Criteria should increase the chance of building a financially self-sufficient, diverse, and resilient community.

The authors also point out the risks associated with the participatory model of cohousing community management, in which most of the responsibilities are carried out by residents, emphasising the need for local governments to support members of this type of community to ensure their sustainability (*Konsekwencje społeczne*…, 2022). For this reason, it is important to create cohousing communities where residents are not just visitors to our country.

Due to the specific nature of cohousing for migrants, it is necessary to involve various actors (including the stakeholders themselves, i.e. Ukrainians) in its organisation and management, in which the state should play a key role (at least in the initial period). Policies to support cohousing can consist, for example, of subsidising rent or helping refugees to become active in the labour market, according to their professional (often specialised) qualifications, which gives them the chance to earn more and pay for housing. Another form of assistance for cohousing residents can be the creation of so-called assisted housing within them. Such solutions are particularly important not only because of the financial instability of Ukrainians, but also from the point of view of the dependent, sick, or incapacitated among the newcomers.

5. Conclusions

Effective integration in the new geopolitical situation in which Poland finds itself requires above all the creation of a platform, a place where it will be realised. A cohousing community may be such a platform, assuming that the resulting community is made up of both outsiders (Ukrainians) and insiders (Poles). Cohousing as a form of social innovation is, in this case, a new solution to a specific social problem – the migration problem. This alternative form of residence provides a space for Ukrainians and Poles to get to know each other, gives the opportunity to share resources (mutual benefits: social, economic, and environmental), and gives the newcomers a sense of empowerment, reduces the isolation of the excluded, enables a reduction in the demand for public services by its residents, contributes to the activation of civil society, and provides an opportunity to test innovative solutions on the Polish market.

Finally, it should be noted that cohousing should be considered as a long-term solution. This is because it requires a number of actions (and the involvement of many entities due to the nature of this type of cohousing) in order to function prop-

erly on the Polish market, where there is not yet much experience with the application of this form of residency (also in terms of appropriate legal regulations). However, the situation we are facing may become a catalyst for change in terms of innovative, alternative forms of residence, which may also be successfully used as a solution to other problems (apart from migration) faced by our country, such as housing problems of Poles (inefficiency of national housing policies), the problem of an ageing society (inefficiency of national healthcare systems), or problems related to the economic and environmental crisis. The above-mentioned opportunities give hope that refugees will feel that they are fully-fledged members of their host communities, ready to take action to become independent of external assistance (including the state assistance), which will also have a positive impact on the host society's sentiments regarding anti-immigration and xenophobic attitudes. Living together on a daily basis in an open, friendly environment with a "community" character will strengthen intercultural interactions, build trust, and result in an open society and a stronger social fabric.

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