

Agnieszka Makarewicz-Marcinkiewicz

## **Social cooperatives in Poland. Exemplification of the process of social reintegration within social cooperatives — the city of Poznań**

### **Introduction**

Social economy refers to a wide range of organisations between the state and the market, fulfilling both economic and social goals, the final objective of which is not the redistribution of profit, but its reinvestment in the organisation, in order to expand all the activities needed to accomplish the mission. The organisational forms adopted by social economy entities depend on national legal frameworks and can include associations, traditional cooperatives, social cooperatives, charities, foundations and other types of organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Social economy is a segment of business located in a triangle: market economy — civil society — democratic state. The location results from the assumption that the purpose of social economy is to foster reconciliation between different state's rationalities — the rationality of distribution, society — rationality of solidarity, and the market — the allocative rationality.<sup>2</sup>

Social economy is characterized by reference to the system of values, which applies to the activities, objectives and appropriate legal forms of all entities in the sector. The list of such values includes: solidarity and

social cohesion, social responsibility and commitment, democracy and participation, autonomy and independence.<sup>3</sup>

The most important function of social economy is to prevent social exclusion. Professional and social activation of members of these groups leads to greater social cohesion. This is the main feature of social economy, but should also include other relevant pro development tasks, such as: creating material basis for the actions of the third sector organisations, strengthening social capital, promoting the implementation of the idea of citizenship, promoting alternative forms of credit, supporting the regeneration of the local public space, as well as facilitating reform of public sector services.<sup>4</sup>

Social cooperative is a specific form of cooperative work. It is an association of people at risk of social exclusion (including: long-term unemployed, the disabled, addicts and the homeless). Within its activity it combines both the economic and social functions. The main objective of social cooperative is social and professional reintegration of its members. Social reintegration is understood by the legislature as social activities that aim to rebuild and maintain full participation in public life (including the fulfillment of

social roles at home and in the workplace). In order to define the vocational reintegration, the legislature adopted the measures which are designed to restore and maintain the ability to self-provision on the labor market.<sup>5</sup>

This paper is an attempt to diagnose the extent to which social cooperatives operating in Poland fulfill the obligation of reintegration of the groups at risk of social exclusion, imposed on these entities in the Act on Social Cooperatives. For this purpose, analysis of the relevant legislation, official documents and literature has been done. Conducted research was based on the survey methodology. The prepared questionnaire with both open-ended and closed questions has been served to the presidents of all social cooperatives in Poznań, with a request to fill it in. The survey was conducted in May 2013 in all such organisations operating in this city.

## The grounds for operation and objectives of social cooperatives in Poland

Social entrepreneurship in Poland is a relatively new form of economic activity, we note its beginnings on 27 April 2006, with the entry into force of the Act on Social Cooperatives. Social economy differs primarily from the private sector in that the entities are not profit-oriented but they are focused on the implementation of social goals. Social economy is distinguished from public economy mainly by the fact that it is not controlled by public administration, but by citizens and civic organisations.<sup>6</sup>

The key to the concept of social economy is the idea of social enterprise. Social enterprise is an operator the activities of which have a social purpose. It uses business tools and technology for the benefit of society. For the European Commission:

A social enterprise is an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or stakeholders. It operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives. It is managed in an open and responsible manner and, in particular, involves employees, consumers and stakeholders affected by its commercial activities.<sup>7</sup>

EMES determines economic and social criteria which should characterize the initiatives fit within the area of social economy. The economic criteria are: continuous activity producing goods and/or services, the independence from public institutions, economic risk-taking at a significant level and the existence of at least a minimum level of paid employment. The social features of a social enterprise include: a clear orientation towards the social goal for the community; grass-roots, coming from the public nature of the initiative; democratic governance, not based on capital ownership; the communitarian manner of functioning, including everyone to whom the activities refer; and limited redistribution of income.<sup>8</sup>

Social reintegration can be achieved through activities such as therapeutic workshops, effects of self-help support groups and educational groups. Its main objectives are, inter alia: to teach essential skills to fulfill social roles and achieve social positions available to all citizens, to help members understand their needs and meet them by their own efforts (in particular by obtaining income through employment or running a business), encouraging more rational management of possessed financial resources. Vocational reintegration is achieved by measures which are aimed at restoring and maintaining the capacity to self-provision on the labor market. The means of implementation of these activities are, inter alia: acquisition of vocational qualifications, retraining, courses and training.<sup>9</sup>

The social cooperatives need a minimum of five founders (for individuals) and two (in the case of legal persons), and may consist of up to 50 people. The cooperative may be established by a group of people at-risk or affected by social exclusion, as well as legal persons such as third sector organizations, church legal persons or local governments. The Act on Social Cooperatives (27 April 2006), lists the groups at risk of social exclusion. The catalog includes:

- the unemployed (as defined in the Act on Employment Promotion and Labor Market Institutions, Journal of Laws 2004 No 99, item 1001);
- the homeless implementing individual program of transition out of homelessness;
- the addicted to alcohol, drugs or other intoxicants, after ending the psychotherapy in a special rehabilitation center or a treatment program in a health care centre;
- the mentally ill (as defined in the Act on Protection of Mental Health, 19 August 1994, Journal of Laws of 1994 No 111, item 535);
- people released from prison, having problems with reintegration into the community (in terms of the Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004, Journal of Laws 2004 No 64, item 593);
- refugees participating in the individual integration program (within the scope of the Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004, Journal of Laws 2004 No 64, item 593);
- the disabled (within the scope of the Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons of 27 August 1997, Journal of Laws 97.123.776);
- socially excluded people because of their life situation, who themselves are unable to meet their basic needs, are in a situation of poverty, which makes impossible or significantly restricts the participation of a person in social, occupational, or family life.

The members of social cooperatives can be both the founding members and other

persons (including those with a limited ability to act). The main body of the cooperative is the General Assembly which appoints the Board, shall adopt the report and vote for the Board. The Management Board represents the cooperative and conducts its current affairs as well as manages its assets. In case the number of cooperative's members exceeds 15, the Supervisory Board must be appointed, which conducts internal control over the cooperative's activities.<sup>10</sup> Cooperatives establish an employment relationship with their members by signing a cooperative job agreement. The minimum number of members of the cooperative is five people, of which 50% must belong to one of the groups at risk of social exclusion. If the requirement for a minimum number of members is not met, the cooperative must complete its human resources within six months.

The property of a cooperative is owned by its members. Surplus funds must be used to increase the resource fund — at least 40% and at least 40% must be spent on the social and economic reintegration of its members, socially useful activities (educational, cultural and social). The rest of the excess amount can be utilized for the investment fund. Thus, the excess amount cannot be divided between the members and, in particular, cannot be spent on increasing the share fund or used for interest rates. Every three years each social cooperative is required to undergo an inspection of legality, thriftiness and reliability of its operation.

Social economy is such a sector of the economy that combines business with social objectives aimed at reducing marginalization and social exclusion and promote mobilization and social inclusion. Social economy actors often play a role of:

- providers of the labor market services (training, career counseling, job placement);
- employers;

- institutions supporting employment — supporting projects aimed at creating new jobs;

- spokesmen of excluded groups.<sup>11</sup>

The presented studies are an attempt to confront the theoretical assumptions and legislation with practice of the cooperatives operation, to estimate how these entities combine social with economic goals, prevent social exclusion and promote social reintegration.

In order to obtain answers to these questions, the following databases were analyzed: National Auditing Union of Workers' Cooperatives, Mutual Aid Foundation "Barge," the Association for Social Cooperatives and Social Economy Map created by the Foundation for Social and Economic Initiatives in collaboration with the Association of Klon/Jawor. After the development of the data, the surveys were conducted in all social cooperatives operating in Poznań. The survey was delivered to the presidents of the cooperatives, and the research questions were related to cooperative activities aimed at social reintegration.

## Social reintegration in Poznań social cooperatives

The number of active cooperatives in Poznań is not easy to determine. The Map of Social Economy lists 10 social cooperatives. In the database of the National Auditing Union of Workers' Co-operatives 25 cooperatives appear. In the database of the Foundation for Mutual Aid "Barge" there are nine cooperatives. After verifying information from all sources, it turned out that ten cooperatives currently operate in Poznań. This figure was taken as the number of all cooperatives in further analyses.

The majority of Poznań cooperatives are multitrade — seven of them operate in more than one trade, only three focus on one type

of business. The dominant activities in Poznań cooperatives are cleaning and recycling services (such as maintenance of green areas, recycling, etc.), 70% of active social enterprises do this kinds of business; 40% of social cooperatives offer construction services, two social cooperatives are involved in care — one for the children, the other for the elderly, one social cooperative runs a holiday resort and offers catering services, one provides courier, interviewer and concierge services. Services such as cleaning, recycling and repair do not require specialized skills and knowledge, therefore can be provided by people at risk of social exclusion.

Half of the cooperatives have been operating for one year or less, two have been in operation for more than one year but less than three years, three of them have been operating for more than three years in Poznań. Only half of the operating cooperatives have been on the market long enough and so, according to Polish legislature, are not obliged to refund subsidies for the creation of the cooperative. There is a common assumption that the problems of social enterprises with finding a market niche, and then staying on the market are due to the fact that operators are focused on the work of the socially excluded or at risk of exclusion, often without professional qualifications or/and with social dysfunctions. The analysis of empirical research will reveal whether that assumption is true.

The prepared questionnaire has been delivered to the presidents of all social cooperatives in Poznań, with a request to fill it in. The maneuverability was 90% — nine of the ten questionnaires sent has been completed and returned. Therefore, data from nine Poznań cooperatives have been further analyzed.

The average number of members in Poznań cooperatives is five. It should be noted, however, that the minimum number of members in a social cooperative is just five

people, the persistence of a smaller number of members for longer than three months means that such a cooperative shall be wound up.<sup>12</sup> Such situation occurred in one of the social enterprises surveyed, however, that cooperative has not yet exceeded the required time to complete the staff. One of the surveyed entities associated more than five members (seven). The average (small) number of five members in Poznań social cooperatives may indicate great economic and social difficulties for this kind of social economy entities in maintaining larger human resources.

According to the Act on Social Cooperatives, a cooperative constantly needs to have in its ranks at least 50% of people at risk of social exclusion.<sup>13</sup> In all the surveyed cooperatives that rule was implemented. Among the members at risk of social exclusion, the majority comes from the group of the longterm unemployed — 15 members, 10 from the group of the disabled, 2 members were addicted to alcohol, 2 were addicted to drugs and 1 person was homeless. A low number of people addicted to alcohol is surprising, especially if we look through the prism of social cooperatives management response indicating alcoholism among employees as one of the main problems of running the cooperative. On the other hand, according to national data on people at risk of social exclusion, the long-term unemployed account for the largest proportion, right before people with disabilities, which could explain such a large share of this group among the members of cooperatives in Poznań.

In order to diagnose whether the social cooperatives currently functioning in Poznań are likely to stay on the market, the Board Members were asked to estimate the up-to-date economic condition of the entities. The economic condition of cooperatives has not been clearly defined by the members in charge. With a choice of five

answers in the questionnaire: “very good,” “good,” “average,” “poor” and “very poor,” most of respondents marked the answer “average” — 7 cooperatives. One of the respondents considered the condition of a social enterprise to be good, one regarded it as bad. When asked about the average annual income, the majority of respondents did not reply, which may be caused by the fact that the great number of cooperatives have been operating in the market for less than a year and such estimation is hard to make. Three cooperatives declared their average annual income, the spread of which is significant, ranging between 66 and 811 thousand PLN per year. Describing the financial condition of the entities, the majority of respondents chose the neutral response, despite considerable differences in income. Caution in the estimates may be due to the fact that these organisations have been operating for a relatively short time, so the Board does not want to stick out compared to other cooperatives.

Another question concerned the main problems arising from the functioning of social cooperatives. As it turned out, the most disturbing, according to the management of cooperatives, was the small number of orders (5 statements). Other respondents indicated the following problems: lack of reputation as a service company, alcohol abuse among the employees (2 statements), lack of motivation to take on challenges (1 statement) and not enough work for all members of the cooperative (1 statement). The research shows that presidents of the cooperatives see the greatest problems in the external constraints, independent from the manner and quality of management.

The presentation of the answers to further questions should directly show whether the actual solution to the problems stated above is or is not the responsibility of the person in charge. Social cooperatives as a subject of social economy are obliged to achieve some

social objectives, with the professional and social reintegration of its members being essential.<sup>14</sup> The entities can also provide social, cultural, educational services for their members and the local community. Policymakers of the two surveyed cooperatives responded that they do not carry out any activities for their members or for the benefit of the local community. Such a declaration is contrary to the idea of social economy. Other cooperatives declared undertaking such activities as the organisation of vocational training (5), language courses (3), meetings with life coaches (2). Additional activities not only for the cooperative's members were declared by three social enterprises. These activities were mostly confined to the meetings and incentive travel packages, only one of the cooperatives implemented a project aimed at fulfilling the needs of people with disabilities in the local community. These responses show that very few Boards of surveyed cooperatives have, so far, done anything to make up for the previously identified deficits: lack of motivation (poor morale), supplemental qualifications of the employees and the problem of alcoholism.

The last part of the survey referred to the assessment of the cooperatives' collaboration with government units. None of the cooperatives cooperated with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy or the local authorities. Three cooperatives cooperate with voivodship authorities, two with municipal authorities. In the case of cooperatives declaring cooperation, such collaboration was rated as "good." Worrisome, however, is the small number of the public-private partnership contracts.

## Conclusions

An enterprise can be defined as social, if it meets the following conditions:

- the business is conducted continuously, using economic instruments,

through sale of produced goods or rendered services;

- the entity is independent from public institutions;
- there is some economic risk in the activities;
- the enterprise employs permanent staff;
- there is a clear focus on the social objective of the project;
- bottom-up, civic nature of the initiative;
- possibly democratic system of governance;
- limited profit distribution.<sup>15</sup>

Although all the surveyed cooperatives fulfil the above criteria, there is the matter of proportion, and that, according to the research, is impaired.

It is undisputed that the social cooperatives were created in Poland as a kind of antidote to the high rate of unemployment (almost 20%) at the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Therefore, the Act on Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions (April 2004), introduced the Italian social cooperative model "B." The ultimate goal of this model is the professional and social reintegration of its members.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the area in which Polish social cooperatives have first begun to operate was the activation and reintegration of their members into the labour market.

It has been noted that: "The issue of employment of the members of social cooperatives seems to be absolutely crucial. If social cooperatives are meant to be enterprises focused on social and professional reintegration through work, people who create them must have the opportunity for employment"<sup>17</sup>. It seems, however, that this approach is being overinterpreted by the cooperatives' decision-makers, which leads to disequilibrium in the proportion of share within the main areas of cooperatives' social services. This relationship was revealed in the research conducted

in 2006 by the Association Klon/Jawor: *The condition of the social economy in Poland* — the labor market, employment, professional activation accounted for 70.4% of the total social services offered by those entities. By comparison, the issue of education was only 7.40% of total services; health — 3.70; law, including human rights — 3.70%. Research of Klon/Jawor has also revealed that as many as 18% of companies surveyed did not take any social action.<sup>18</sup> The results of the study conducted in 2013, although limited to the cooperatives in Poznań, showed that the involvement of cooperatives in social services has not significantly changed for the last seven years.

In 2005 OECD noticed that experience from Central-East and South-East Europe shows that transition policies towards market economies overlooked the role and potential of social economy in key areas of social inclusion, such as employment, social services and healthcare. OECD also noted that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe begin to make up for the lost time. The years 2005–2006, when numerous new social economy entities were created, gave reasons for being optimistic about the future of social economy in Poland.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, as it turned out, most cooperatives had difficulties finding the right place on the open market. Social cooperatives operate mainly in industries that do not require specialized knowledge and skills, such as cleaning, recycling and construction services. This fact allows the inclusion in the labor market, but on the other hand, it also has an impact on the financial condition of cooperatives.

The positive aspect of the development of social economy in Poznań is the functioning of the organisations supporting social economy. These are both public and private institutions, whose purpose is to support and promote social economy. A good example is the Association for Social Cooperatives functioning since 2003.

The main problems related to the functioning of cooperatives are: low competitiveness, and what comes with it — insufficient number of orders, inadequate amount of work for all members of the cooperative, the lack of remedies to tackle serious problems that prevent full social inclusion, such as alcoholism.

Seven social cooperatives surveyed associated five members — the minimal number required by law. All of the cooperatives surveyed have been employing the required number of people at risk of social exclusion. Most were long-term unemployed (15 members), disabled (10), addicted to alcohol (2), addicted to drugs (2) and homeless (2). Such a personnel structure, consisting almost entirely of two groups at risk of social exclusion may indicate a situation in which the Boards of cooperatives decide mainly on vocational activation of people, who are relatively facile to be restored to the labour market — without criminal past, not affected by diseases or homelessness. To verify this hypothesis, which was put forward after the analysis of the study, further research should be carried out in order to examine the selection process of potential candidates to work in social cooperatives.

Social economy subjects should strive to meet the requirements which other sectors are not able to cope with. In addition to emphasis on job creation, their area of interest should be: social cohesion, encouraging entrepreneurship, building a pluralistic, participating, democratic and supportive society.<sup>20</sup>

The modern model of social economy in the European Union is focused on:

- rebuilding “normal market” thanks to the social economy;
- important role of leaders, managers in the initiatives’ implementation;
- significant legal facilities for the social economy entities, with a relatively high level of economy regulation by the state.<sup>21</sup>

As is seen from the research which has been carried out for the last seven years, and was launched after the Polish accession to the European Union, the EU model of social economy has been implemented in Poland on a small scale.<sup>22</sup> The area of social economy lacks professional managers and the economy is deregulated rather than regulated by the state.

As far as the achievement of social objectives is concerned, analysed social cooperatives focused mainly on the vocational reintegration of their members, which, although very important, is not the only aspect of full social reintegration. The current process of social reintegration carried out in social cooperatives operating in Poznań leaves much to be desired.

<sup>1</sup> OECD, *The Social Economy in Central, East and South Europe: Emerging Trends of Social Innovation and Local Development*, Trento 2005, p. 2, <http://www.oecd.org/regional/leed/34955534.pdf> (date of access: 6.09.2013).

<sup>2</sup> W. Kwaśnicki, *Gospodarka społeczna z perspektywy ekonomii liberalnej*, *Trzeci Sektor* 2005, no. 2, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> B. Roelants, *How to Define the Social Economy?* Preparatory Dossier to the First European Social Economy Conference in the EU Candidate Countries, Praha Social Economy 2002 Enlarging the social Economy, CECOP, Praha 2002, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> M. Woolcock, Social capital and economic development: Towards a theoretical synthesis and policy framework, *Theory and Society* 27, 1998, pp. 168, 176.

<sup>5</sup> Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, *Sprawozdanie z funkcjonowania ustawy o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie za lata 2010 i 2011*, Warszawa 2012, p. 168, [http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki7ka.nsf/0/D473883ED1EA94E3C1257AD00050AE9A/\\$File/969.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki7ka.nsf/0/D473883ED1EA94E3C1257AD00050AE9A/$File/969.pdf) (date of access: 5.09.2013).

<sup>6</sup> K. Głębicka, Rola ekonomii społecznej, [w:] eadem (ed.), *Ekonomia społeczna — wyzwanie dla instytucji pomocy społecznej*, Warszawa 2010, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission Social Business Initiative, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels 2011, p. 2, [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/social\\_business/docs/COM2011\\_682\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/social_business/docs/COM2011_682_en.pdf) (date of access: 15.08.2013).

<sup>8</sup> J. Defourny, M. Nyssens, The EMES approach of social enterprise in a comparative perspective, *EMES Working Papers Series* 2012, no. 3, pp. 12–15, [http://www.emes.net/uploads/media/EMES-WP-12-03\\_Defourny-Nyssens.pdf](http://www.emes.net/uploads/media/EMES-WP-12-03_Defourny-Nyssens.pdf) (date of access: 12.08.2013).

<sup>9</sup> Article 2 point 4, The Act of 13 June 2003 on Social Employment, *Journal of Laws* 2011 No 43, item 225, uniform text, as amended.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> I. Gosk, *Ekonomia społeczna jako aktor rynku pracy*, *Ekonomia Społeczna — Teksty* 2006, no. 22, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> The Act of 27 kwietnia 2006 on Social Cooperatives, *Journal of Laws* 2006 No 94, item 651, as amended.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> R. Spear, Ramy instytucjonalne dla przedsiębiorstwa społecznego: wyzwania dla Polski i innych nowych krajów członkowskich, *Ekonomia Społeczna — Teksty* 2006, no. 7, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> J. Brzozowska, Usługi społeczne świadczone przez spółdzielnie socjalne, [w:] M. Grewiński, M. Rym-sza (eds.), *Polityka aktywizacji w Polsce. Usługi reintegracji w sektorze gospodarki społecznej*, Warszawa 2011, p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> J. Brzozowska, Praktyka działania przedsiębiorstwa społecznego — jak blisko koncepcji przedsiębiorstwa społecznego, [w:] J. Dąbrowska (ed.), *Od trzeciego sektora do przedsiębiorczości społecznej — wyniki badań ekonomii społecznej w Polsce*, Warszawa 2008, p. 194.



<sup>19</sup> OECD, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> J. Hausner, *Ekonomia społeczna jako kategoria rozwoju*, [w:] idem, (ed.), *Ekonomia społeczna a rozwój*, Kraków 2007, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> M. Grewiński, *Wielosektorowa polityka społeczna. O przeobrażeniach państwa opiekuńczego*, Warszawa 2009, p. 230.

<sup>22</sup> Por. Informacja o funkcjonowaniu spółdzielni socjalnych działających na podstawie ustawy z dnia 27 kwietnia 2006 r. o spółdzielniach socjalnych za okres 2010–2011 (Information on the functioning of co-operatives operating under the Act of 27 April 2006 on Social Cooperatives for the years 2010–2011), Warszawa 2012, <http://ozrss.pl/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Informacja.....-OPUBLIKOWANA-DPP-12.2012.pdf> (date of access: 10.09.2013).

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## Social cooperatives in Poland. Exemplification of the process of social reintegration within social cooperatives — the city of Poznań

### Summary

Social cooperative is a specific form of cooperative work. It is an association of people at risk of social exclusion, which combines both the economic and social functions. The most important goal of social cooperative is to prevent social exclusion. Vocational activation of the members is part of a complete social reintegration and leads to greater social cohesion. The objective of this paper is to determine the extent to which social cooperatives operating in Poznań fulfill the obligation of reintegration of the groups at risk of social exclusion, imposed on them by the Act on Social Cooperatives. The article contains analysis of the relevant legislation, official documents, as well as the results and interpretation of empirical research based on survey methodology.