

Poland: How good practices can be used to inform the reform of social services and reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty

ESPN Flash Report 2022/57

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The reform of social services in Poland was voted by parliament on 19 July 2019. This reform is currently being implemented and it is essential that the proposed solutions be grounded in good practices. An example of such a practice is the development of integrated support for families with children with multiple needs and long-term recipients of social assistance. Three cities in Poland (large, medium-sized and small) have successfully implemented innovative projects funded by the European Social Fund which could inspire the planned policy changes.

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Description

The reform of social services in Poland was voted through by parliament on 19 July 2019. It will introduce social service centres (centra usług społecznych [CUS]), one of the main objectives of which is to provide social services to all residents and families – i.e. not only to those who are recipients of social assistance cash benefits.

The Polish government is currently working on the implementation of the reform. One of the challenges is how to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It is essential that the proposed solutions be grounded in tested good practices. Examples of such practices are the innovative projects developed as part of the initiative “Breaking the process of intergenerational poverty in deprived areas”, under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development (PO WER) funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) (Abramowicz et al. 2021).

The good practices identified by Abramowicz and colleagues include three projects implemented in a large city (Warsaw), a medium-sized one (Wodzisław Śląski) and a small one (Przasnysz). All the projects were implemented by social assistance centres (ośrodek pomocy społecznej - OPS), alone (in Wodzisław Śląski), in cooperation with non-governmental organisations (in Warsaw) or with the support of a research institute (in Przasnysz).

In Warsaw, the project focused on twelve families experiencing poverty and deprivation and in which adults had already experienced this situation during their childhood. In particular, attention was paid to care and educational difficulties in the family resulting in the actual or potential placement of children in foster care. The focus of the project was on children in early childhood and in schools. The project followed a solution-focused and flexible approach that both respected the rights of the families and considered their resources. After the initial diagnosis, measures and goals (taking into account the family situation and the potential of the neighbourhood) were designed and jointly agreed with the families. The families were supported by an interdisciplinary team of eight professionals, comprising family assistants as support coordinators, and other family and child specialists. The project aimed to induce positive changes in many areas: the family’s employment and financial situation, the children’s educational results, such as school attendance and participation in extracurricular activities, relations within the family, relations in the local community, use of free time or of the support system. External evaluations showed that most families demonstrated improvements in most of the above-mentioned areas, or at least in several of them.

The second project was implemented in parallel with the modernisation of activities of the municipal OPS. A team of social workers was separated from the administrative team dealing with cash benefits. Therefore, they could focus on working directly with ten families. An innovative model for working with families experiencing intergenerational poverty

was designed and tested. The model focused on improving inter-institutional cooperation, by teaming up two social workers: one responsible for working directly with the family and the other for the support network and inter-organisational cooperation. For each of the ten families in the project, a tailored social plan was developed and twelve agreements were established with other institutions not directly involved in the project, such as schools, a labour office, and a psychological-educational counselling centre. One employee from each institution was part of the family support team. In six families, multidimensional improvement has been achieved and in the case of the remaining ones, the need for further support was identified.

The project in the small town aimed to create opportunities for increasing social capital to counteract the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The project activities were directed at both adults and children in ten assisted families. Both the social assistance centre and the peer environment were involved. The main idea was that children from both poor and non-poor families should participate in different forms of cooperation and activities. The OPS had a coordinating role, but worked with other local organisations and institutions. Parents were also actively involved, through the parents' self-support group (the parents' club), which worked well in the project. New bonds were formed through mutual support, and positive externalities were achieved. During the project, four women started working, which was not one of the project's direct objectives.

Social workers became directly involved and started to work with families and institutions with which they had not cooperated before.



Outlook and commentary

The European Union is committed to fighting the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage, as demonstrated by the EU Recommendations on Investing in Children [European Commission, 2013] and on the Child Guarantee (EU Council, 2021).

In Poland, the discussion on child and family poverty has evolved since 2015. For the Law and Justice government, the family is a key value, which is reflected in the family policy in the form of cash benefits and social services. The implementation of the universal child benefit was a key measure to fundamentally reduce family and child poverty. The emphasis is placed on supporting families, as an alternative to placing children (particularly those with disabilities) in foster care.

The three innovative projects discussed here show how social services for families with special needs and at risk of poverty should be developed in the context of this emerging system. They prove that "inheritance" of poverty is not inevitable, and they can act as a basis for policy changes and activities of other local governments. It is important that the lessons learned from these and other relevant good practices inform the reform of social services.

Further reading

Abramowicz, J., Grabowska, I., Leszczyńska, M., Piekutowski, J. and Polańska, Z. (2021), [Raport końcowy z badania w zakresie innowacji społecznych oraz oceny konkursu dotyczącego przeciwdziałania ubóstwu](#) [Final report on the study on social innovation and evaluation of the anti-poverty call for proposals], EGO - Evaluation for Government Organizations S.C. (see also [Short summary in English](#)).

[European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage \(2013/112/EU\)](#).

[EU Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee ST/9106/2021/INIT](#).

["Fachowa siła przyszłością dla rodziny" Informacje prasowe](#) ["Professional strength as a future for the family" Project information]

[Krasiejko, I. \(2022\), Asystentura rodziny w centrach usług społecznych](#) [Family assistantship in social service centres], Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Warszawa.

["Potencjały – nowe formy kapitału społecznego w gminie Opatów". O projekcie](#) ["Potentials - new forms of social capital in the municipality of Opatów" Project information]

["Praski kokon" Informacje dotyczące projektu](#) ["Praga cocoon" Project information]

Regulamin konkursu na makro-innowacje w temacie: Przerwanie procesu dziedzicznego ubóstwa na obszarach zdegradowanych [Terms and conditions of the call for macro-innovations on the theme "Breaking the process of intergenerational poverty in deprived areas"]

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