

INTRODUCTION TO PUBLICATION “HOUSING FIRST IN POLAND – WHY THIS WAY?” BY ADAM BODNAR PH.D. THE COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN POLAND

Since the beginning of my term of office as the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights, comprehensive activities counteracting homelessness have been among my priorities. For today's Polish society and Poland itself, homelessness is not only a prick of conscience, but also a violation of one of the most basic of human rights – the right to housing – as well as an infringement of human dignity, which is the most fundamental of our rights determined in Art. 30 of our Constitution. Homelessness also involves violation of the right to health care, since it is most often accompanied by long-term illnesses, as well as an absence of realistic conditions to treat them.

Being the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights, I decided to deal with homelessness for three reasons. Firstly, the environments dealing with the law (and sometimes also non-governmental environments) pay insufficient attention to problems which are simply complex at the system level, where assistance lies not only in changing the law but also in adjusting social and health-related policies, in the appropriate coordination of activities, or in direct work with the excluded persons. And it is the Commissioner's role to influence the national policy via a variety of instruments, without limiting his/her activity solely to legal aspects, and to apply instruments of social

reaction. Secondly, we must realise that we live in a country which has 38 million citizens and is relatively wealthy. Can we really afford having 36,000 homeless persons (according to official figures, although according to experts this figure is significantly underestimated)? Homelessness is a dramatic infringement of human rights, which we can see every day when passing by homeless persons. However, many people are trying to pretend that this problem does not exist, that homeless persons are to blame for their own situation, that they should get a job, means for their own livelihood, etc. Thinking in terms of one's individual success, responsibility for one's own situation cannot really be applied to people who have been forced to live on the streets for many years. Without external support, it is very difficult for them to break out of their situation. Thirdly, when thinking about the homeless, I still remember the symbolic funeral of Grzegorz at one of the central Warsaw squares – he lived among us, but he left just like many other homeless: without a family, close friends, forgotten, and the public authorities failed to support him at the appropriate time. I can also remember the story of a homeless man who was bricked up in an abandoned dwelling. These scenes from the Polish reality show people's dramas taking place here and now, in our own

country, near us. It depends on us whether we decide to react to them – and if so, in what way.

I am very happy that the Committee of Experts for Counteracting Homelessness established by the The Polish Commissioner for Human Rights's Office is such an extraordinarily active body. I count on the action programme we had adopted to lead to a gradual limitation of homelessness, the strengthening of non-governmental organisations, and for it to have an impact on debate. I do not care about one-time actions, but I do care about the consistent, long-term repetition of why we cannot accept homelessness and what the role of the central and local government is in counteracting the phenomenon.

I believe that the “Housing First” programme created by Sam Tsemberis is one of the instruments which can be used to limit homelessness. The programme has proved successful in many countries. Their experience shows that the provision of housing to some categories of the homeless, and the subsequent support given to them in keeping their accommodation, can help them regain dignity, health, privacy, and gradually move out of homelessness. The dissemination of knowledge on the programme, backed by in-depth research and facts concerning its actual degree of success, should convince decision-makers that they should invest in such programmes. And this is not just about occasional actions involving the provision of support to a few non-governmental organisations and the supply of several dozen subsidised flats. It is not about “ticking off” programme implementation in Poland. What is really important is the development of action at the system level, facilitating the creation of a network of such flats and the provision of support to non-governmental organisations and other institutions supporting them. We must always think in terms of the sheer scale of the problem – the thousands of affected people – and suit our aspirations to that. I trust that the above is possible for the heads of some Polish urban centres and that they will appreciate such initiatives and will be able to develop the appropriate programmes in cooperation with non-governmental institutions. It is my dream to see the development of the “Housing First” programme on

the national scale, and we need to exercise all efforts to see it happen.

The “Housing First” programme is innovative and revolutionary. Since we are experiencing a general housing crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of people, such initiatives are not always openly supported. After all, they involve the provision of public funds and the management of flats, which are very scarce goods. We must not get discouraged by this and we need to patiently explain the sense of the programme, and the scope in which it fits the general problems of availability of housing to the poorest and excluded persons, and primarily why the homeless are a group of people who need to be provided with a special support dedicated solely to them.

Many churches and public institutions organise Christmas Eve suppers for the homeless. It is a symbolic moment of showing support to them, sharing a meal, talking and exchanging wishes. Some of them immediately after the supper say goodbye using the words “see you in a year”. These words have a special bitterness resulting from the acceptance of one's own life as it is, a lack of prospects for the future and resignation from thinking about one's own future. Being public authorities, let us extend our hands and do everything possible to meet our brothers and sisters in their own normal homes “in a year”.

Adam Bodnar, Ph.D.

The Polish Commissioner for Human Rights

