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Social Integration Clubs as a Form of Social and Professional Activation of Socially Excluded People

Kluby integracji społecznej jako forma aktywizacji społecznej i zawodowej osób wykluczonych społecznie

Introduction

Social integration clubs have been operating in Poland pursuant to the Act on Social Employment since 13 June 2013, and they are a form of support for socially excluded people, i.a. the homeless, the unemployed, the addicted or the disabled. Next to social integration centers, the clubs are supported employment entities whose task is social and professional reintegration and providing consultancy assistance. Clubs also provide support for activating people with similar difficulties and life problems, and serve as a place for self-organization of members to undertake joint initiatives and projects.

The purpose of this review article is to show social integration clubs as activating institutions, to discuss the issues of social exclusion, and above all, to present the implemented forms of social and professional activation on the example of the Social Integration Club in Chorzów.

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Social integration clubs – characteristics of an activating institution

Social integration clubs are organizational units whose main purpose is to help individuals and their family members rebuild and maintain their ability to participate in the local community's life, return to social roles in the place of residence and raise their professional qualifications. The clubs can be run either by municipalities (in most cases, clubs are created at communal social support centers) or non-governmental organizations (after making an entry in the register kept by the Province Governor).

Participation in social integration clubs is voluntary. Most of the participants are socially excluded people, unable to satisfy their basic life needs due to their life situation, which leads to poverty and prevents or limits their participation in social and family life. In particular, club members may be:

- homeless people implementing an individual program of getting out of homelessness;
- alcohol addicts, after completion of a psychotherapy program in an addiction treatment institution;
- people addicted to drugs or other intoxicants, after completion of a therapeutic program in a health care institution;
- people suffering from a mental illness;
- the long-term unemployed;
- former prisoners having difficulties to integrate with the community;
- people implementing an individual integration program (e.g. refugees);
- the disabled.

The catalog of groups eligible to participate in the club is not enumerative and may be extended to other people, depending on the needs arising from the knowledge of a given social environment. The eligibility is not limited to people entitled to unemployment benefit, pre-retirement benefit, disability pension or retirement pension.

Within social integration clubs, the following activities may be organized:

- activities aimed at helping to find a job, performing services on the basis of civil law contracts and preparation for taking up employment or undertaking activities in the form of a social cooperative;
- socially useful works;
- public works;
- legal counseling;

- self-help activities in the field of employment, housing and social affairs;
- professional internships, referred to in separate regulations.

The conditions of participation in a club are implementation of a social contract, which is described in the provisions of the Act on Social Assistance, and cooperation with a social worker. Social contract² is a basic tool for activating in social work and creating an active approach to the unemployed in social assistance, especially within the obligation to cooperate³ and conditioning the assistance⁴, which is closely related to activities aimed at social and professional activation. It is effective in supporting the unemployed combining social integration with professional integration. However, it must be mentioned that social contract as an instrument of active social work is widely known and used by social workers, but the assessment of its effectiveness is quite low (Kaźmierczak, 2011; Raćław, 2011). The period of participation in the club is fixed individually with each of the participants and it usually covers the period of a specific edition, i.e. from 2 to 6 months.

Within one edition, social integration clubs run activating classes in the fields of: social skills workshops⁵, career counseling and running one's own business⁶, economic training⁷, psychological therapy and e.g. elements of occupational therapy workshops. During the classes in the club, participants learn elementary

² "A social contract for a written contract concluded with a person applying for help, determining the rights and obligations of the parties to the contract, as part of actions taken to overcome the difficult life situation of persons or family." Act of 12 March 2004 on social assistance, art. 6, points 6, Journal of Laws of 2004, item 593 with later d.

³ "Persons and families benefiting from social assistance are obliged to cooperate in solving their difficult life situation". Ibid, Art. 4.

⁴ "Lack of interaction of a person or family with a social worker or family assistant (...) in resolving a difficult life situation, refusal to conclude a social contract and failure to comply with its provisions (...) may constitute grounds for refusing a benefit, annulling a decision to grant a benefit or withholding benefits cash from social assistance." Ibid, art. 11 paragraph 2

⁵ Classes in the form of social skills workshops include, i.a.: discussion of the dynamics of various social processes, acquisition of self-presentation skills, interpersonal training and communication exercises: reflecting, listening and paraphrasing.

⁶ Occupational counseling classes provide club members with knowledge on how to properly write CVs and covering letters, ways to look for a job, creation of self-image on the open labor market and how to behave during interviews with potential employers, as well as issues related to starting and running their own business.

⁷ Economic training classes cover: home budget analysis, ways of obtaining revenue, rational expenditure planning and avoiding credit traps, as well as familiarizing participants with consumer rights (Antończyk, 2010, p. 36-38).

social principles, such as responsibility, cooperation, teamwork, listening and talking to other people, and punctuality.

Analyzing the literature on the subject and applicable law, we can distinguish the characteristics of social integration clubs – as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Characteristics of social integration clubs

purpose determined by the legislator	social employment
type of support offered	social and professional reintegration services with the possibility of professional practice
leading authority	public entity or third sector organization
activation strategies	social integration as a path to employment
recipient of support	excluded from the labor market, usually long-term unemployed
institutional embedding of the entity	an activating institution within the social assistance system inclining towards the labor market
market activity	does not run a business
helper staff	helper outsourcing
recruitment of support beneficiaries	recruitment for editing
individualization of support	yes – individual development plans
source of financing	unstable – EU funds, subsidies from local government budgets

Source: (Rymsza, 2013, p. 346).

Social integration clubs can play several important roles:

1. An integrating (activating) role towards the participants, as well as towards the families of the club participants and their immediate local environment.
2. Initiating the creation of local centers of social and professional activation, thus relieving social assistance centers and employment offices in fulfilling their tasks towards “difficult social groups” or “difficult clients” of social assistance.
3. Providing services to people in the need of help and support in the field of social and professional reintegration (e.g. psychological, educational, legal or professional services), primarily for groups using social assistance services.

4. Organizing jobs for club participants, which enables them to train their social and professional skills acquired at the club and makes it easier to reach their future employer.
5. Promoting social economy by undertaking activities to create new social economy entities (Kowalczyk, 2013).

According to B. Kowalczyk (2013), social integration clubs therefore combine three areas of social policy (in particular, activation policy) targeted at people at risk of social exclusion, i.e. (1) social assistance – by extending the activation offer of social assistance, using an activating social work tool in the form of a social contract; (2) employment services – by extending the offer of active labor market instruments; (3) social economy – through the possibility of social and professional reintegration in the conditions of work (e.g. useful social work).

In 2017, there were 219 active social integration clubs in Poland. Nearly 75% of them were run by local government units (GUS, 2018). Basing on my research in Silesian voivodeship, it can be concluded that the availability of social integration clubs (i.e. inclusion activities undertaken under the social assistance system for people suffering from social exclusion in Poland) is poor. In the opinion of the respondents, social integration clubs are among the least frequently mentioned forms of assistance applied by social workers to the socially excluded. Moreover, the respondents stated that the main institutions dealing with social inclusion, i.e. clubs and social integration centers, are inefficient – which is an alarming conclusion from the cited studies (Gierek, 2019). The main assumption of the empirical research was to gather views on the manifestations of social exclusion in the perception of social workers employed in social assistance centers in the Silesian Voivodeship. Information was collected using mainly the survey method, but also interviews and focus group interviews, as well as observation and analysis of official and statistical documents. The research was diagnostic and exploratory; it was conducted in 2016 on a group of 272 social workers⁸. The selection of the research sample in the research was based on a stratified-random pattern.

In conclusion, regarding the issue of social integration clubs as activating institutions, it can be taken from M. Rymśa (2013, p. 338) that social and vocational activation implemented in social integration clubs refers to the

⁸ Similar research on opinions about excluded and marginalized people was conducted on a group of social service employees in Chorzów in 2008. More on this topic: (Gierek, 2010).

general social competences of the participants and helps them solve their “unbearable” life problems. It is an opposite of the “work first” strategy. Here, employment is a solution that appears on the horizon and is achieved step by step. Professional work is treated as an aspect of life independence and an important element in the process of becoming independent. Social reintegration somehow determines the reintegration into work, but also the opposite: professional work is a mean of social inclusion.

Social exclusion – around theoretical issues

The issue of social exclusion is a part of classical sociology (mainly because of the works of G. Simmel and R. Park, who described social marginality as a consequence of the disintegration of the cultural identity of individuals), although its scope falls within the boundaries of various social sciences, making it an interdisciplinary issue. The concept of social exclusion dates back to the sixties of the twentieth century; in literature, it is referred to as the most serious form of marginalization. Social exclusion translates into gradual breakdown of social bonds that connect an individual with society. The economic aspect of exclusion means no activity in the sphere of work and consumption, and the social aspect involves lack or limitation of social contacts (Grotowska-Leder, 2005, p. 29-30). It affects many areas of social life; groups at risk of social exclusion are described as low risk. The consequences of exclusion for those at risk may be deprivation of needs, helplessness, weakening of social bonds, isolation and even stigmatization, breakdown of family ties, weakening of self-control mechanism and loss of sense of identity and purpose in life. The effects on society are inequalities and the appearance of ghettos and underclasses. Exclusion can be manifested in passivity, loneliness, alienation and non-compliance with socially accepted norms of coexistence.

According to T. Kowalak (1998, p. 29), the most appropriate Polish translation of the French *exclusion* term is “exclusion from organized society”. According to L. Frąckiewicz (2005, p. 11–12), social exclusion can be considered as structural, physical and normative exclusion. Structural exclusion is affected by place of residence and an income below the poverty line; physical exclusion is related to age, disability and level of education of parents; normative exclusion involves conflicts with the law and social pathology phenomena. T. Kaźmierczak (2006, p. 46) claims that social exclusion is “exclusion from the margin of mainstream social life”.

The literature on the subject distinguishes three types of definitions of social exclusion: analytical definitions – indicating the characteristic features of the phenomenon, dimensions, mechanisms, manifestations (see Paugam, 1993; Castel, 1990; Silver, 1994); working definitions – operationalizing the category for research purposes (see Burchardt, Grand, Piachaud, 2002); official definitions – included in documents in the sphere of social policy. Social exclusion may also be explained in three ways. The first way, which emphasizes the importance of discrimination and the lack of fundamental rights and material deprivation, is called „British trend”. The second way of interpreting social exclusion focuses on individual behaviors and their moral evaluation – it is called „American trend”. The third one, called „French trend”, emphasizes the role of the institutions of the social security system in the process of evolution from the welfare state to the post-industrial era and globalization (Golinowska, Broda-Wysocki, 2005, pp. 32–33). However, the previously mentioned H. Silver (1994) claims that depending on the social order and the adopted concept of social integration and ideological options, three paradigms of social exclusion can be distinguished: the paradigm of solidarity, specialization and monopoly. Thus, the abundance of definitions, areas, indicators and paradigms of social exclusion means that one exhaustive definition cannot be considered. These concepts are relative and vary with time and circumstances (see Littlewood & Herkommer, 1999).

Social exclusion can be treated both statically and dynamically. It may apply to individuals or to entire social groups. Exclusion is a relative phenomenon because it refers to some norm of participation in social life. It may affect various areas of social life, such as work, consumption or education, but also political decision-making or participation in the life of local communities. It translates into restricting access to goods, services, institutions and rights. Social exclusion poses a threat to values such as dignity, fundamental human and citizen rights, and compliance with them. It can have an objective and subjective dimension, as limiting the possibility to participate in social life is accompanied by a feeling of exclusion on the lack of influence on own decisions and reduce the sense of subjectivity. An excluded person is often aware of the loss or threat of emotional contact with other people, which leads them to loneliness. When biological existence is threatened and interpersonal contacts are broken, a sense of loneliness and isolation is born (Koziński, 1998, p. 241).

To sum up, social exclusion is a phenomenon that occurs in many aspects of collective life; it can be understood instrumentally – as a lack

of implementation of basic human social rights, and socially – as a form of breaking social bonds. The effects of exclusion in the individual context are passivity, apathy, lack of trust in others and failure to fulfill the assigned social roles, non-use of public resources, or failure to secure one's existence in a dignified and proper manner, which may eventually lead to social isolation. Among all assistance institutions, social and professional integration clubs contribute to counteracting social exclusion.

Social and professional activation of socially excluded people on the example of the Social Integration Club in Chorzów

The Social Integration Club SIC (*Pol.: Klub Integracji Społecznej KIS*) in Chorzów is a unit operating within the Social Work Center SWC (*Pol.: Centrum Pracy Socjalnej CPS*) and it belongs to the organizational structures of the Social Assistance Center since 2006. The building in which the center and the club operate was built in 1908 in the Neo-Gothic style and it is listed in the register of monuments⁹. The Social Work Center (SWC) carries out activities in the field of social assistance, and in particular deals with the social and professional activation of people excluded or at risk of social exclusion, as well as the activation and organization of the local community and is one of the few places bringing together various social groups. The help of the Center and the Club can be used by anyone in need of support, in particular: the unemployed, the homeless, the disabled, the addicted, families experiencing difficulties related to care and upbringing, people sentenced by a final and binding court judgment to perform unpaid controlled work for social purposes, residents of Chorzów using social assistance benefits and other forms of social security implemented by the Social Assistance Center, seniors and pensioners.

The main goal of the Chorzów Social Integration Club is to help individuals and families rebuild and maintain the ability to participate in the life of the local community, return to social roles and raise professional qualifications. The Club realizes reintegration services and supports the ability of individuals to stimulate their activity in solving problems. The Club offers following reintegration services package:

⁹ Several dozen years earlier, the building housed the monastery of the Borromero Sisters, and in the 1980s it was the place for the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Charity. An interesting fact is that Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, during her visit to Poland in 1986, visited nuns from the congregation she had founded and stayed in the building of today's Center and Club.

- social reintegration in the form of workshop classes and individual specialist counseling (type and form adapted to specific groups of people);
- vocational reintegration, i.e. activities aimed at rebuilding and maintaining one's ability to work independently in an open labor market.

The numerous effects of participating in the club include:

- increased skills in the labor market;
- raised motivation to actively look for a job;
- developing interpersonal communication skills and determining appropriate professional preferences;
- increased self-esteem and self-confidence;
- developing conversation skills for proper self-presentation as a potential employee during job interviews;
- increased responsibility for own decisions as well as increased independence in actions which leads to reduced social isolation.

The club in Chorzów is financed from the municipal alcoholism prevention fund. In 2018, four editions of the club were carried out, lasting from 2 to 6 months each. Assistance was provided to 51 people, including those with alcohol problems, the disabled and the long-term unemployed, i.e. socially excluded people.

In the club in Chorzów, social and professional activation is also conducted through coordination of socially useful work, Activation and Integration Program, Vocational Guidance Center, and Local Community Integration. Other forms of activation are regular meetings of various types of groups such as support groups, the "Active 50+" group, or meeting or integration groups.

The Social Integration Club (and in fact, the Center for Social Work) has a coordinating place for socially useful works which plays an instructory role in the labor market, addressed to the unemployed without the right to benefits who simultaneously receive social assistance benefits. This activity is conducted on the basis of the Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labor and Social Policy of 21 December 2017. The following criteria must be met by people referred to socially useful works: registration at the Poviast Labor Office, unemployment status and entitlement to social assistance benefits. Referring a person to perform socially useful work is carried out with the help of a social contract in the form of a contract between the client and the social worker.

Socially useful works coordinated and organized in various types of public institutions (mainly in social assistance organizational units, schools of various stages, pre-schools, offices, municipal institutions) or non-governmental organizations (associations and institutions operating for the benefit of the local community) include mostly simple works that don't require special qualifications (e.g. cleaning, minor maintenance, repairs, commercial, cleaning, gardening, simple office work, caring for the elderly, wall painting, etc.). The working time for these works is a maximum of 10 hours per week – however, no more than 40 hours per month¹⁰. The costs related to the payment of benefits for socially useful works are covered in 40% from the commune's own resources, and 60% from the Labor Fund.

In 2018, 197 participants took part in these works, 20 of which became professionally active, whereas in the years 2011-2017, 264 out of 2,297 participants took up employment after completion. A detailed summary of the effectiveness of socially useful works is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The efficiency of socially useful works in the years 2011-2018.

Year	Participants of socially useful works	Professionally activated		Resignation from socially useful works	
		altogether	in %	altogether	in %
2011	523	49	9	160	27
2012	455	79	17	69	15
2013	47	10	21	5	11
2014	377	30	8	78	21
2015	384	43	11	73	19
2016	260	23	9	23	9
2017	251	30	12	24	9,6
2018	197	20	9,1	32	16,2
total	2494	284	11,4	464	18,6

Source: Own study based on reports on the activities of SIC and SWC.

The effectiveness of the mentioned actions taken against unemployment is not satisfactory, buy taking into account the specificity of this group of residents of Chorzów, it should be considered that they bring specific measurable benefits, at least to the participants. It is worth noting that since the beginning

¹⁰ In 2019, the benefit for performing work was PLN 8.50 per hour. The service is subject to periodic indexation.

of the program, a total of 5,503 people have participated in it, of which 785 have become professionally active.

Socially useful works enable the unemployed and the socially excluded to return safely to the labor market and to achieve their own income, which has a significant impact on improving their economic situation and support their families. In addition, the works create opportunities for self-fulfillment and self-acceptance for the participants. All activities carried out as part of these works are aimed at improving the living conditions of the residents of Chorzów, with particular emphasis on groups of people most in need of help and support, while enabling as well the activation of the long-term unemployed. Socially useful works reduce the scale of unemployment in the city and limit the social effects of this phenomenon.

The implementation of these works has a social dimension as well. It enables the participating institutions to carry out a number of cleaning, adaptation, renovation and similar works, which they were not able to carry out before due to staff shortages. It also creates a new image of the unemployed benefiting from social assistance. These people are no longer perceived only in terms of recipients, but also as those who help others (Antończyk, 2010, p. 39-40).

Activation at the Club in Chorzów is also carried out in cooperation with the Poviast Labor Office on the basis of an agreement on the implementation of the task through the Activation and Integration Program. The program covers two blocks of activities:

- activation block, in which the unemployed are directed to socially useful work of 10 hours per week;
- integration block, in which the participants are assigned activities in the field of social integration through specialized group counseling, coaching workshops and support groups; at least 10 hours per week.

Like socially useful works, the program is targeted at the unemployed entitled to social assistance benefits. In 2018, 3 editions of the above-mentioned program were carried out, each of them lasting 2 months.

Another form of professional and social activation of the Club in Chorzów is Vocational Guidance Point aimed specifically at the excluded, the unemployed and the disabled, as well as those unable to navigate efficiently in the open labor market. As a part of its operation, group workshops with a vocational counselor and psychologist are organized, as well as individual consultations in the field of vocational counseling.

Another program run by the Club is Local Community Integration. It offers activities related to social activation addressed mainly to the residents of the district in which the Club and the Center operate. Festivals for residents, open-air meetings, regular meetings, discussions and conferences take place within the program. All these projects support development, activate and inspire positive changes; they are also aimed at stimulating and strengthening people's inherent resources. During meetings, participants can watch interesting educational films and take part in numerous activities. Most of the meetings take place in the conference room – Oratory of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Other forms of activating work of the Social Integration Club in Chorzów include the organization of various groups, e.g. support groups or the “Active 50+” group. Support groups are most often organized for those who have completed the program in order to continue activities carried out earlier in the Club. Participation in a support group allows participants to:

- maintain previously acquired knowledge and skills;
- share experiences in overcoming difficulties;
- maintain social contacts with people in a similar life situation;
- share emotional support;
- eliminate helplessness while facing problems such as illness or death;
- build strength, hope and self-esteem, and exchange useful information with other participants.

Participation in a support group often becomes the beginning of new relationships and even friendships in real life, outside the group. Participants contact each other in situations of crisis and help each other in daily matters – they form a sort of social support network. Support groups are a way to reduce the sense of isolation among their members. “Active 50+” group is addressed to people over the age of fifty, who want to actively participate in social life, and are motivated to take actions to improve their life situation. Meetings are held once a week and the size of the group is always dependent on participants' specific needs. Depending on them, the Club may also organize meeting and educational groups, most often for people who want to learn something new or develop their interests, including arts or handicraft.

Other forms of social activation within the Club's activities include:

- “Social housing” program, which is aimed at people helpless in life, lonely or handicapped. It involves carrying out minor repairs in social flats (beneficiaries of social assistance) that are in the resources of the

- Chorzów commune, by a repair team created for this purpose and formed by people participating in socially useful works;
- cooking workshops conducted as part of the Operational Program Food Aid 2014-2020, co-financed by the European Aid for The Most Deprived; the workshops focus on the optimal use of food received under assistance and counteracting its wastage while applying the principles of rational nutrition;
 - musical workshops;
 - point of free legal assistance and legal education;
 - family mediation point;
 - point of information on social economy.

Within the activities of Social Integration Club and Social Work Center in Chorzów in 2018, 618 people benefited from various forms of social and professional activation. However, this number is much greater because it does not take into account other activities or programs that are not mentioned, as well as people seeking individual advice only.

A detailed description of selected activities – instruments of social and professional activation within the Club's activities – is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Selected instruments of social and professional activation implemented as part of the activities of the Social Integration Club in Chorzów in 2018.

Program name/action	Number of participants
Social Integration Clubs (4 editions)	51
Activation and Integration Clubs (3 editions)	21
Socially useful works	197
Career Counseling Point	34
Group „Active 50+”	91
Support group	103
Culinary workshops „Cooking with FEAD”	121

Source: Own study based on reports on the activities of SIC and SWC.

The Social Integration Club in Chorzów is therefore open to the needs of the local environment and activates socially and professionally thanks to its programs. Its activities are conducted in accordance with reported needs, adapting working methods for the various categories of customers, classified as risk groups.

Conclusion

To sum up, social integration clubs operating in Poland are among the institutions of special support for people experiencing the effects of various social problems, whose situation makes them unable to make own efforts to meet the basic needs. The clubs remain key centers that activate socially and professionally, and counteract the phenomenon of social exclusion (this undoubtedly includes the Chorzów Social Integration Club). Social exclusion, however, can mean “man’s escape from himself” (Tischner, 1999, p. 180). It can therefore be seen as breaking the dialogue with other people, and as a physical distance between individuals. The direct consequence of exclusion is social isolation and loss of dignity. It is worth pointing out that despite the good economic situation in Polish society, the number of socially excluded groups or groups at risk of this phenomenon is constantly growing. As the research shows, the efficiency of clubs is not satisfactory, so more efforts should be made so that the activities of existing social integration clubs (as well as of newly created ones) are intensified, and at the same time made more attractive to those interested, so that the clubs can effectively activate and integrate a wider group of people living on the margin of society.

Abstract: The presented article describes social integration clubs functioning in Poland as one of the main activating institutions. They also serve as entities of supported employment; one example is Social Integration Club in Chorzów. The clubs’ main task is social and professional activation, as well as counteracting social exclusion, which is understood as the most serious form of marginalization.

Keywords: social integration clubs, social exclusion, social activation, professional activation

Streszczenie: W niniejszym artykule scharakteryzowano działające w Polsce kluby integracji społecznej jako jedną z głównych instytucji aktywizujących. Funkcjonują one również jako miejsca wsparcia zatrudnienia; za przykład służy Klub Integracji Społecznej w Chorzowie. Głównym zadaniem klubów jest aktywizacja społeczna i zawodowa, a także walka z wykluczeniem społecznym, rozumianym jako najpoważniejsza forma marginalizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: kluby integracji społecznej, wykluczenie społeczne, aktywizacja społeczna, aktywizacja zawodowa

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- Regulation of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of December 21, 2017, Journal of Laws 2017, item 2447.

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