Activization – a Tool for Social Inclusion in the Context of Polish Cities?

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Abstract. This paper describes the link between social inclusion and activization in the urban context. After presenting a theoretical discussion on social exclusion and the possible contribution of activization to fight inequalities, it focuses on describing a community approach toward inclusion and activization. Such an approach aims at emphasizing collective, shared aspects of social problems that affect people's lives, and at helping members of communities to band together using specific programmes designed to solve these problems. Some German and Polish examples of activization programmes and their role in social inclusion will be described. However, it seems that in the context of Polish cities, activization is still underestimated as a tool of social inclusion.

Contemporary cities are the scene of a peculiar struggle – the struggle for the engagement and participation of their residents in the life of their neighbourhoods and districts. The great passive masses who merely wait for changes to happen in their lives are sometimes perceived as only a kind of ballast that prevents urban development. In most cases, the passivity of the residents is connected with their economic, racial, educational, and sometimes political exclusion. Inactivity is often a result of social inequalities, which manifest themselves in an especially strikingly manner in the urban context.

The aim of this paper is to describe a possible approach to fighting social passivity as a part of more complex inclusion programmes. The struggle for social engagement in such an approach is only a part of a broader programme of district or neighbourhood revitalization, which includes improvement of economic status, the rebirth of communities, the development of infrastructure, and so on. First of all, a set of theoretical assumptions on social inequalities, exclusion, and their relation to passivity in the urban context will be discussed. Second, the idea of a community or district approach toward inclusion and activization in the urban context will be introduced. Third, a positive example of a complex programme of inclusion and activization – the German *Soziale Stadt* programme – will be described. Fourth, three parallel Polish programmes will be critically described.

Inequality is an inherent feature of every society that exceeds a basic level of development. In the history of humanity, only the simplest social formations have been characterized by the minimal degree of inequality. Yet the growing differentiation of societies shows that a lack of equality is an immanent feature of every society. Inequality has various sources – Malcolm Hamilton and Maria Hirszowicz (Hamilton and Hirszowicz 1995, 6-7) state that there are three basic features which differentiate individuals and give a basis for social assessment. These are privileges, prestige, and power. Each of these features can be analysed separately, but we should remember that the character of this distinction is mostly analytical. Both social deprivation and privileges usually consist of a scarcity or excess of possibilities in one's hands – the possibility to satisfy one's needs, to evoke social respect, to influence one's life, and so on. In other words, social inequality in one of the dimensions usually entails inequality in other dimensions.

To describe this phenomenon of concentration of life possibilities, sociologists use different categories: deprivation, marginalization, and exclusion. The concept of deprivation, especially relative deprivation, relates to the psychological feelings of an individual who perceives that they possess far less socially desirable goods than other similar people.[1] It seems that the terms "marginalization" and "exclusion" are more useful in the analysis of social inequalities. However, as Wnuk-Lipiński (2005, 271) puts it, these terms are not equivalent: "The idea of marginalization relates more to the location of an individual *at the peripheries* of important parts of public life, while social exclusion is far more sharp and relates to a *lack of the possibility* of taking part in those important parts of public life." Also, "socially excluded people are those who want to participate in the mainstream of social life and in the division of national income – but either they don't know how, or they experience some serious obstacles which they can't independently over-come. Marginalized people are those who sometimes participate and sometimes don't, and their temporary participation can't be transformed, without external help, into more permanent forms of participation in the mainstream of public life" (Wnuk-Lipiński 2005, 272). For such reasons, it seems that for the purposes of this text the term social exclusion is more suitable.

In the cited work, Wnuk-Lipiński emphasizes exclusion from public life and the public sphere, ideas which will be especially important in our further analyses. Of course, we should also keep in mind that there are other meanings and interpretations of this term. Anthony Giddens (2004, 347) proposed a four-dimensional model of social exclusion: the first dimension – the economic – is caused by unemployment; the second dimension (which is in fact a consequence of the first one) is scarcity in the sphere of consumption; the third is political; and the fourth, social – meaning the inability to participate in social networks, and a lack of contact with others. We may complete this list with other sorts of exclusion, such as cultural and spatial exclusion (this latter referring to exclusion from particular spaces, which is visible especially in the case of districts reserved for people with the appropriate social status).

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[1] Relative deprivation is a concept well described in a book edited by John C. Masters and William P. Smith (1987).

Marshall Wolfe (1995, 82) has proposed six other dimensions of exclusion, namely exclusion from

1. earning a livelihood;
2. social services, welfare, and security networks;
3. consumer culture;
4. political choice;
5. the bases of popular organization and solidarity;
6. obtaining an understanding of what is happening to society and to oneself.

Among the features that can be treated as both a stimulus of and a reinforcement of social exclusion are poverty, disability, race, sex, age, and place of residence (Lister 2007, 72-93). These specific characteristics of social exclusion – being handicapped in a few dimensions, combined with the tendency toward gradual accumulation of different social problems – are sometimes said to constitute a "spiral of poverty," and together they make exclusion one of the most important social issues of the contemporary world. It is an issue with which modern society is not able to cope, and yet at the same time is not willing to accept (Bauman 1998, 4-10). Among those social groups that don't experience social exclusion, there is a natural tendency to push aside the irritating sight of the poor. As Bauman (ibid., 12) observes, "Unneeded, unwanted, pushed away ... so where is their place? First of all, as far away as possible, and out of sight. The most important thing is to remove them from the streets and other public places used by the decent citizens of the consumer world. Not to let them to settle in a respectable neighbourhood."

Contemporary urban agglomerations furnish a particular example of such practices. Such places are sometimes described using the metaphor of "divided cities,"[2] which accurately indicates two interconnected issues. The first issue is related to the division or "ramification" of distinct life trajectories of the excluded and other members of society (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 1998, 38). The second issue is related to the fact that the spatial aspect of the urban exclusion is coming more and more into prominence – the poor are becoming concentrated in specific

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[2] See the works edited by Richard Scholar (2006), and by Susan Fainstein, Ian Gordon, and Michael Harloe (1992).

places or districts, resulting in ghettoization. Such places are described by colloquial expressions as being "dodgy" or "dangerous" districts, but sociologists call them "enclaves of poverty" (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Grotowska-Leder, and Krzyszkowski 2002, 135) or "impoverished neighbourhoods" (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 1998, 45).

Such places are typified by the accumulation of bad conditions: economically, infrastructurally, ecologically, and socially. People living in enclaves of poverty are unemployed or earn sufficiently little to benefit from social welfare. The residences they live in are dilapidated and undeveloped – they may lack basic facilities (such as hot water, heating, and sewage systems), as well as equipment such as furniture. Usually such places are overcrowded. Their environs may also be undeveloped – there may be a lack of basic (or nondefective) infrastructure, with roads and pavements in bad condition; the area might be lacking in public spaces which could serve for recreation, such as children's playgrounds, parks, and sports grounds; and the commercial infrastructure may be poorly developed. The residents' sense of security may be relatively low. Often one can observe the disintegration of social bonds among people living in enclaves of poverty.

Apart from these objective constraints, the position of excluded individuals within the social and political systems tends to be peripheral, despite the fact that most of them may possess the full set of formal rights associated with citizenship. Both the levels of traditional political participation (for example, voting, party membership, and similar) and the intensity of involvement in the activities of civil society (such as NGO membership, engagement in protest activities, etc.) seem to be lower (Verba et al. 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Therefore, there seems to be a strict correlation between economic deficits, participation, and influence deficits, which can lead to further worsening of the position of the economically disadvantaged and, on the other hand, to a crisis of legitimacy of public institutions in the eyes of these individuals. In other words, far from being a merely economic issue, the participation levels of the economically excluded constitute a vital social problem from the perspective of the functioning of the political and social systems. These participation deficits seem to stem from four major sources:

– Practical constraints: insufficient means for fulfilling basic needs on an everyday basis, and low social capital levels do not allow individuals to go beyond the mundane activities of labour (Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Gilliatt 2001).

– Cognitive boundaries: poverty and exclusion lead to the reduction of self-esteem and social aspirations, thus reducing the motivation for activity and social mobility (Hoggett 2001; Kincaid 1973).

– Identity boundaries: poverty leads to a negative stigmatization and does not constitute a positive basis for creating social identification (Cohen 1997). Apart from that, it is a strongly heterogeneous category that does not allow easily for the development of "we" thinking (Jenkins 1996).

– Political boundaries: The political system and the public authorities treat the poor as objects rather than as the active agent of politics (Rademacher and Patel 2002).

This tendency toward self-removal from the social and political system is visible even at the district and neighbourhood level.

Despite the weakness of the social bonds involved, exclusion should be interpreted as a phenomenon experienced socially, rather than individually. Enclaves of poverty with their specific accumulation of economic, social, and political barriers affect entire communities. This is why the fight against exclusion should be more focused on its collective aspects. However such practices are rather rare.

Looking at specific programmes aiming at social inclusion – at least those which involve the active contribution of the excluded – it is clear that the individualistic approach is dominant. This is a "liberal" model of social inclusion which consists of stimulating individuals into taking up different kinds of activity, with the aim of uprooting them from the social margin. Most activization programmes teach people strategies for surviving in an unfriendly environment, and for changing it. Nonetheless, it is still the individual who is responsible for making this effort, and it is this individual who can potentially benefit from the success of the programme. Yet the community remains excluded. One might even say that the community becomes more impoverished, in the sense that it loses the social capital of the neighbourhood or district. Individual strategies of social inclusion "rob" communities of their most active individuals. Those who remain are powerless, and unable to effect any kind of social change.

The solution to this problem might be strategies of activization which connect both the affected individuals and their communities. This means making communities (neighbourhoods, housing estates, and districts) the subject of social welfare and social work. The idea of district social work (*Stadtteilbezogener Sozialer Arbeit*) developed by the Institute for District Social Work and Counselling (*Institut für Stadtteilbezogene Soziale Arbeit und Beratung*) in Essen is a fine example of such a strategy. It focuses on paying attention to the collective, shared aspects of social problems that affect people's lives, and on helping members of the communities to band together using programmes aimed at solving these problems. The basic means to achieve this goal are the strengthening of neighbourly bonds, and mobilization of the local potential for action. This can be accomplished by making communication between neighbours more effective, and by improving organization – especially self-organization – which can accelerate the mobilization of people and other resources (Hinte, 1998).

Maria Lüttringhaus notes that the strategy of district social work should be founded upon six basic rules:

1. Wants-orientation: asking members of excluded communities the question, "What do you want?" instead of "What do you need?"

2. Activization: Asking what contribution members of the excluded community can make toward obtaining the goals that they themselves have defined.

3. The use of resources that are available in the district or neighbourhood.

4. The integration of action and resources at all levels of activity.

5. The creation of networks of important social actors, projects, and resources.

6. Improving the infrastructure of the neighbourhood.

The strategy of district social work is in fact a combination of social work, activization, and revitalization. However, activization in this context has a double meaning: The first meaning is the typical one, and implies employing individual strategies of reintegration to the labour market. The second, and more interesting from our point of view, sense of social activization is the revitalization of communities. This requires engaging individuals and communities in deepening social and political participation, as well as increasing self-organization and

the development of social bonds and a sense of community with other residents.

Such a complex strategy of social inclusion of city residents is rather uncommon. One of the few examples of such a strategy is the Socially Integrated City programme (*Soziale Stadt*) introduced in Germany at the end of the 1990s.[3] The basic principle of the programme is to combine the traditional approach to revitalization with the idea of social activization. An intended consequence of the programme was to be the integration of the residents from the so-called districts with special developmental needs (*Stadtteilen mit besonderem Erneuerungsbedarf*) into society, by first reviving the social bonds within them, and then the bonds between them and the rest of society. Multilevel actions (at the federal, state, city, district, and neighbourhood level) were employed by the programme to improve

– the economic situation of the residents, and their quality of life;
– the infrastructure of the districts;
– social engagement and participation;
– social bonds among residents;
– the economy of the districts.

From our point of view, the most important of these aims is the activization and increasing participation of residents. The programme used two sets of techniques – direct and indirect – that were intended to help the redevelopment of social engagement. Direct techniques were those such as

– activization surveys;
– social help;
– counselling;
– formal and informal meetings, and discussions among the residents;
– streetwork;
– creation and development of social networks;
– organization of parties, picnics, parades, and other events;
– mediation and conflict resolution.

Some indirect techniques were also employed:

– publishing district newspapers, posters, leaflets, and websites;

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[3] Where not otherwise indicated, information on the Socially Integrated City Programme is from the *Soziale Stadt* web page, http://www.sozialestadt.de/.

– preparation of press releases for local media;

– creation of logos and slogans for both the whole programme and its parts.

A very important role in making residents more engaged was played by the District management system (*Quartiersmanagement*) (Franke and Löhr 2001), whose main role was to create a network of communication and agreement. The social proximity of management personnel to the residents, along with the fact that they were embedded in the local context, were crucial factors in achieving success. Apart from that, their role involved including residents in planning and realizing specific actions. Accepting responsibility for specific tasks was especially important in increasing the participation of individuals and communities.

However, an analysis of the prevailing outcomes of the programme thus far shows that its ambitious aims have proven difficult to fulfil. The revitalization of the infrastructure and outlook of the district was the easiest part of the project. The other changes were much harder to accomplish. The authors of the process themselves say that although there is a distinct improvement in social activity among residents, it was achieved by cooperation with those who objectively were least affected by social exclusion. Those who most needed help failed to identify themselves with the aims and actions of the programme.

Nevertheless the *Soziale Stadt* programme may be treated as a positive example of the broad, complex approach toward social inclusion and activization. The combination of the improvement in economic status, the rebirth of the community, and the development of the infrastructure with activization is especially interesting and stimulating. Looking at Polish programmes of inclusion in the urban context, it is easy to notice that there are really no programmes with such a broad and complex approach. Usually the approach of programmes that are involved in changing urban reality is conventional, and their scope is limited to the revitalization of districts, neighbourhood, or single streets. This means that their emphasis is placed on changing the look and infrastructure of the urban space. Such tendencies are visible in most Polish cities. Rarely do municipal officials pay attention to other aspects of making urban life more tolerable.[4] Where programmes have other objectives, they are

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[4] A reaction to such an approach can be seen in the title of an article by Tomasz Tosza, describing the revitalization programme in Jaworzno: "Revitalize people, not stones" (Tosza 2004, 162-174).

usually aimed at another target, having been developed to fight against poverty and the economic dimension of exclusion. This lack of complexity results from a one-sided approach to the problem of social exclusion. It seems that social activization – understood as an increase in social participation and engagement, and the development of self-organization and a sense of community with other residents – is usually underestimated as a tool used for social inclusion. Taking that into consideration, it is worth looking closer at some selected activization programmes which have been implemented in Poland.

The first is the "Sun on Wschodnia Street" programme (Słońce na Wschodniej).[5] The aim of this project, run by the White Crows Foundation (Fundacja Białe Gawrony), is the social and cultural revitalization of Wschodnia Street in Łódź. There are two basic goals: The first to emphasize the beauty and exceptionality of Wschodnia Street, which is sometimes called "Piotrkowska Street's ugly sister." It is an untidy and vandalized neighbourhood, typical of tenement house districts. The place appears unfriendly to visitors, passers-by, and residents. Its social image is very poor. Yet it has great potential – the houses are dilapidated, but beautiful. As the authors of the project put it, "Our street has also more cultural facets: Reymont lived opposite this gateway during the time he spent gathering materials for "The Land of Promise" (*Ziemia obiecana*); nearby Agnieszka Osiecka wrote her lyrics (...) But the culture on Wschodnia Street is not just history. There are still a few important cultural institutions (...). When you take a closer look at Wschodnia Street, you notice that it is a kind of microcosm, a complete ecological system. You can buy anything here: American and Swedish clothes, cheap TVs; you can eat a cake, unlock your SIM card, and drink a beer. (...) We have two teahouses, where you can talk your head off all day long. Every year Wschodnia Street is visited by a Gypsy band." But the beauty and the potential of Wschodnia Street needs to be uncovered. The visitors and passers-by need to experience its exceptionality, and the residents need to appreciate it.

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[5] Where not otherwise indicated, information on the "Sun on Wschodnia Street" programme is from the White Crows Foundation web page, http://www.bialegawrony.org/.

The second goal is to fight against the social and economic exclusion of the residents by increasing their participation in the life of the street. A series of workshops called „Mutual Help'' was introduced to show residents possible ways of helping each other. This help could involve exchanging different resources – like skills, time (using a time bank system), and things that are no longer needed. Encouraging neighbours to be more active and, more importantly, creating networks of co-operation is a way of "bolstering their courage and power to undertake their own ventures, and to show them some goals that are possible to reach."

Although its main stress is on culture, the Sun on Wschodnia Street is an interesting example of combining a few targets – revitalization, activization, and inclusion. Of course the scope of actions is rather limited, but it helps to grasp its urban character and emphasis on neighbourly relations and bonds.

A second example of Polish activization ideas is the Dialogue project, run by the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy (Fundacja Rozwoju Demokacji Lokalnej).[6] Although its geographic range is wider than that of the Sun of Wschodnia Street – it is being implemented in four Polish cities (Białystok, Kielce, Opole, and Rzeszów) – its goals are more limited. It is intended mainly to increase the participation of citizens in local public matters and the public sphere, and to develop dialogue between citizens, nongovernmental organizations, and local government. However, this is impossible without creating lively communities, so the project aims also to develop better relations and co-operation between neighbours.

The tools and techniques used by the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy are in fact imported from America, and adopted to the Polish context. The first and most important technique is dialogue – meetings and brainstorming sessions that are intended to produce an exchange of ideas or concepts. "As a result of the exchange of arguments, our opinions are changing. When we take other points of view into consideration, we have an opportunity to look more broadly at various matters. We get to know each other better. A real, authentic social bond

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[6] Where not otherwise indicated, information on the "Dialogue" project is from the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy web page, http://www.frdl.org.pl/.

is coming into being between diverse people who previously were not familiar with each other" (Krzemionka-Brózda).

This dialogue technique helps to make the communication between different social actors (individuals, social groups, organizations, and local government) more successful. The effective flow of information helps to solve and avoid social conflicts. As a further result, strong and lasting social relations are developed.

Two other and more specific actions implemented by the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy are the training of local leaders – especially the young (by means of the Youth Leader Academy and Volunteer Centres) – and the initiation of specific community development programmes. This latter is especially important from our point of view because of its local, urban character. It consists of implementing an American-style "neighbourhood watch" in selected neighbourhoods. Common actions undertaken by individuals to make their neighbourhood safer means a deepening of social integration. Apart from that, setting up the neighbourhood watch programme required establishing cooperation between neighbour groups and other actors, like the police or city guard.

The last programme analysed here is the CAL or Local Activity Centres association (Centra Aktywności Lokalnej),[7] which is the first Polish community development programme that was designed to stimulate the growth of local and neighbourhood communities. The general aims of the programme are

– "creating a community of action and spirit – locally, regionally and nationally";

– encouraging activity on the parts of the residents and the animators;

– self-organization – helping others to help themselves;

– participation, and giving a sense of real influence to participants

– "to give this to the participants in our programmes, and they should give it on to their partners and the people with whom they work";

– "solidarity and integration – social networks, associations between people, and building a supportive community."

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[7] Where not otherwise indicated, information on and quotations from the "Local Activity Centres" project is from the CAL web page, http://www.cal.org.pl/.

However, achieving such goals needs a special approach which is more complex than the approach found in other activization projects.

There are three basic assumptions which seem to be the foundations of the programme: The first is to employ a holistic approach – when preparing a strategy to resolving diverse social problems, CAL ought to take into consideration all of the important factors that may affect the community. A broader context of analysis (extending to culture, poverty, ecology, economy, education, safety, and so on) and of actions may bring better results to a community which is constantly affected by those factors. This of course means that before undertaking specific actions, a diagnosis of the local community's condition needs to be carried out. The aim of such a diagnosis would be the identification of problems and needs that are important in the specific social environment.

The second is a social-ecological approach, which means emphasizing the significance of social space. The existence of a space which is open for both residents and the agents of diverse social institutions, and in which they are equal partners, is crucial for the realization of the project. This space may be the office of some social organization, a community cultural centre (*dom kultury*), a social help centre, or a school – the most important point is to have a real, permanent location for regular meetings.

The third assumption, however, is the most important: CAL should aim at making not only individuals, but rather whole communities – and their social environment – more socially active. This community approach brings a broader perspective of social activity, understood not only as actions taken by individuals interested in improving their environment, but first and foremost as cooperation within the community.

Although the CAL project exists nationwide, it has a network structure. As Paweł Jordan states, "Building a network organization is an extremely efficient way of spreading verified solutions, using developed methods of action, without repeating the same mistakes, while sharing diverse valuable experience. Creating diverse types of cooperation network and connection may be the future of social development in Poland, yet it is still underestimated" (Jordan).

Every CAL centre has its own programme and specific aims. The centres provide mediation between the institutional structures of the state and local government, and the formal (NGO) and informal (community group) structures of local civil society.

In accordance with its credo "Help others to help themselves," CAL was designed to supply local communities with know-how, rather than with other material resources.

The main specific technique used by CAL is informal education: teaching local leaders and animators, and stimulating free exchange of experiences and discussion between participants. Local leaders and animators are, in a way, local agents of social change. Their actions are used to prompt other residents to participate in the life of their neighbourhood.

The CAL project is exceptional not only because of its complexity, but also because of its self-conscious character. It involves elements of social research, such as diagnosis and, even more importantly, evaluation (Skrzypczak 2006, 171-172). The main outcomes of the project have been the development of a very efficient programme of local leader training, and a quite active network of local CAL centres. Still other outcomes, especially at the local level, were differentiated, and in many cases hard to measure.

The Polish programmes of social inclusion and activization which have been presented here are of course only examples, but they have been chosen to show a general tendency. Their analysis clearly shows that Polish programmes of social activization in urban contexts are poorly developed, and they have several important shortcomings that need to be emphasized.

First of all they are fragmentary – they are usually focused on one dimension of social exclusion. One can hardly ever find more complex approaches toward the problems of socially excluded people, approaches that would combine activization with other ways of changing neighbours, districts, and the lives of their residents.

In most cases they are fragmentary and limited to a relatively small range, such as street, neighbourhood, or district. There is a lack of broader projects that – like CAL – would be designed as tools for changing urban reality in different cities and towns. There are many interesting and successful programmes, such as the Sun on Wschodnia Street, but it should be emphasized that they don't give the opportunity to propose standardized methods and techniques of social activization and inclusion. They have been planned and implemented as specific programmes for specific needs and problems that affect some of the

urban spaces and social environments. Such approach is in fact self-limiting, and gives no opportunity to developing more universal tools.

This shortcoming is even reinforced by the fact that in most of the cases, the activization strategies are not based on solid research into the state of Polish social urban activity and its peculiarities. Sometimes they are based on Western experiences, but most commonly they are planned on the basis of the creativity and the imagination of the authors of the project. In both cases, the result may the application of incongruous means for specific aims. The danger of such inaccuracy is even greater when we take into consideration the fact that most of the programmes do not use any kind of evaluation of either specific techniques or of the overall approach.

Rarely is there cooperation between social activists who aim to develop social activity, and academia. The lack of such cooperation seems to result from a reciprocal distrust and a lack of communication between activists and scholars.

The last shortcoming is the fact that the state, as well as most of the local governments, do not have any strategies for social activization and social inclusion. The activists are implementing their programmes in kind of institutional void. Of course in many cases there is cooperation between NGOs implementing inclusion programmes and municipal government, but this is a relatively rare situation, which usually results from the initiative of the NGOs.

It seems that the latter shortcoming may be the source of the whole problem. The fact that it is the NGOs that are main actors of activation and the stimulation of inclusion, and not the agendas of the state and municipal governments, is a crucial one, which causes a deepening of fragmentation in approaches toward these important social problems. Only cooperation between the state, local government, NGOs, and the communities has a chance of succeeding in bringing about the dialogue that is necessary for developing more sophisticated programmes which aim to change urban reality in Poland. Without such a dialogue, without cooperation at different levels, and without a broader perspective, no change is possible. Only changes implemented from above in cooperation with those from below, and only changes which affect all the spheres of life important to the excluded, will bring positive effects.

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