

## Social cooperatives as a form of combating social exclusion in the local environment

### Spółdzielnie socjalne jako forma przeciwdziałania wykluczeniu społecznemu w środowisku lokalnym

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the article is to present the role social enterprises, especially social cooperatives, play both in the fight against social exclusion as well as in reduction in its impact. At the beginning, the phenomenon of social exclusion is discussed in multi-dimensional terms, taking into account socio-economic and cultural and political aspects. Next, the authors characterized the social entrepreneurship, among other things, by pointing to its importance as one of the priorities of the Community-led Local Development implemented under the Rural Development Program for the years 2014–2020. The greatest attention was paid to specific social economy entities that are social cooperatives acting for the benefit of social and professional reintegration of communities threatened with social exclusion.

**Keywords:** social exclusion • social entrepreneurship • social economics • social cooperatives

**Streszczenie.** Celem artykułu jest wskazanie na rolę, jaką przedsiębiorstwa społeczne, a szczególnie spółdzielnie socjalne, odgrywają zarówno w walce z wykluczeniem społecznym, jak i w redukowaniu jego skutków. Na wstępie omówiono zjawisko wykluczenia społecznego, w wielowymiarowym ujęciu uwzględniającym aspekty zarówno społeczno-ekonomiczne, jak również kulturowe i polityczne. Następnie autorzy scharakteryzowali przedsiębiorczość społeczną, m.in. wskazując na jej wagę jako jednego z priorytetów instrumentu Rozwój Lokalny Kierowany przez Społeczność (RLKS) realizowanego w ramach Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014–2020 (PROW 2014–2020). Najwięcej uwagi poświęcono specyficznym podmiotom ekonomii społecznej, jakimi są spółdzielnie socjalne, działające na rzecz reintegracji społecznej i zawodowej środowisk zagrożonych wykluczeniem społecznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekonomia społeczna • przedsiębiorczość społeczna • spółdzielnie socjalne • wykluczenie społeczne

## Introduction

The creation of social cooperatives and other social economy entities is aimed, first of all, to reduce or eliminate the phenomenon of social exclusion, and to strengthen integration. Their creation and subsequent functioning depend mainly on the local entities' initiative and willingness to act, being, at the same time, an opportunity to activate the inhabitants. In the subject literature attention is paid to a number of functions performed by social enterprises, among other things, by social cooperatives, with regard to local environments, among other things: activating, protective or socializing role, and all of them are aimed above all at combating social exclusion.

The functioning of various kinds of social cooperatives is compatible with the activation of people disfavored on the labor market. Currently, social enterprises are mostly characterized by strong linkages with local social policy entities, one of the fundamental tasks of which is social and professional reintegration of groups endangered with exclusion.

The aim of the present study is an indication of the role that social enterprises, especially social cooperatives play both in the fight against social exclusion and in reducing its effects.

## Material and methods

The study is a review based on the available literature domestic and foreign. It's also based on one of priorities of instrument Local Development Headed by Society (Rozwój Lokalny Kierowany przez Społeczność) carried out within the Rural Development Program for the years 2014–2020 (Program Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich – PROW 2014–2020), and by two priorities of Regional Operational Programs for the years 2014–2020, too. Moreover, the activities of social cooperatives were characterized on the basis of the document Informacja o funkcjonowaniu spółdzielni socjalnych działających na podstawie ustawy z dnia 27 kwietnia 2006 r. o spółdzielniach socjalnych za okres 2012–2013 adopted by the Council of Ministers and directed to the Speaker of the Senate of the Republic of Poland.

## Social exclusion – concepts and paradigms

The term “social exclusion” has been used relatively for a short time, which obviously does not imply that this phenomenon is something new.

The problem of “social marginality”, “unnecessary people” or “loose people”, “underclass” or “social margin” has been addressed for a long time by the classics of sociology, ethnologists or historians (Giddens, 2005, p. 346; Belcer, 2013, p. 10).

An example may be the concept of social closure by Weber, according to which privileged groups functioning in the society either limit or prevent other both from accessing some goods and services and from participating. In this way, they protect their position and privileges, excluding, at the same time, other individuals or groups.

The concept was extended by Parkin, who indicated two mechanisms: exclusion and inclusion that, when functioning simultaneously, can lead to social inequalities. In turn, Jordan referred to the process of active exclusion that consists e.g. in the creation of services systems available only for the chosen (Golinowska and Broda-Wysocki, 2005, p. 34).

Owing to the complex character of the issue of social exclusion, as well as owing to multi-dimensionality of the term, it is defined in many ways. However, it is important that each of them should indicate the most important characteristics of this social phenomenon.

Based on different perspectives of the concerned issues, Szarfenberg (Cudo, 2013, p. 114) distinguishes four types of social exclusion related to:

- participation in social life,
- access to resources, goods, institutions and social systems,
- social rights and their exercising,
- poverty and deprivation of needs.

Giddens (2005, p. 738) defines social exclusion as “an effect of various kinds of social impairments in consequence of which an individual or a group cannot fully participate in economic, social and political life of the society they belong to”<sup>1</sup>. He pays also attention to the fact that it is associated and refers to the problem of the presence of underclass in society. Exclusion is, however, a broader term and as opposed to it “stresses the aspect of process” (Giddens, 2005, p. 346).

In turn, Frieske indicates that this is “a dynamic and multi-dimensional process of a full cut-off or partial limitation in the access to various social, economic, cultural and political systems that help the individual in integration with society” (Adamska, 2013, p. 252). On the other hand, in the opinion of Golinowska and Broda-Wysocki (2005, p. 32), the issues of social exclusion can be examined as well as defined in two contexts. The first is related to non-participation of an individual or a group in social life, which may result e.g. from weaknesses of civil society. The second in turn is related directly to the problem of poverty and, what is important, the term “social exclusion” is used interchangeably with the term “poverty”, or it is acknowledged that poverty is accompanied by this phenomenon.

When discussing the issue of social exclusion, it is worth referring to the concept connecting the issue of exclusion with the main streams of thought about the state and society. Silver (1994, p. 541–543) presented a multi-dimensional approach to the issue of social exclusion and treated it as a complex, socio-economic as well as cultural and political phenomenon. The author distinguished three paradigms of social exclusion: solidarity, specialization and monopolization. In the first perspective, namely in the solidarity perspective, social exclusion is associated with tearing social bonds that existed between the individual and society. It is closely connected with the functioning of a group and lack of acceptance for those who “do not fulfill the group criteria” (Bąbka, 2014, p. 92). Therefore, initially the bonds weaken and,

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Polish to English made by the authors of the article

as a result, disappear. This perspective is rooted in the tradition of republicanism, where the state is responsible for the creation of social policy entities and its institutions.

The second approach to the problem of exclusion, in the specialization perspective, puts emphasis on social division of work and related diversity of society. It causes disturbances in the participation of individuals in a free social exchange, due to differences in resources they have (e.g. skills) as well as contact networks or social participation. In this perspective, exclusion is identified with discrimination, and the approach alone is firmly embedded in the idea of liberalism (A. Nowak, 2012, p. 23).

In turn, the paradigm of monopolization assumes that social exclusion is the effect of social hierarchy in society. According to A. Nowak (2012, p. 23), “at this point social exclusion gains a macro-structural context because it applies to relations between the participating groups and the groups deprived of participate in social life” This system of relations makes social inequalities persist, which favors the protection of resources owned by the privileged groups. This paradigm arises directly out of the tradition of social democracy, where activity of the state plays an important role, for instance by leveling inequalities by means of social system (Bąbka, 2014, p. 93).

There are many social groups exposed to social exclusion. Some of the most susceptible to this unfavorable phenomenon are:

- the disabled,
- the mentally sick,
- the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed,
- people who leave penitentiaries and reformatories,
- single mothers,
- people with low professional qualifications,
- lonely elderly people,
- the homeless,
- members of national minorities.

In the aforementioned social groups exclusion takes different forms. As it is noted by Czapiński (2014, p. 217), it is difficult to clearly determine a fully objective border of exclusion, like it is difficult to determine unambiguous and universal threshold of poverty. The author pays also attention to the fact that both phenomena are relative: one can be more or less poor as compared to the general level of life of society and one can be more or less socially excluded.

## Social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship or, in other words, social economy, is a complex phenomenon, and thereby it is defined in different ways (Roelants, 2002, p. 6). In line with the definition of the European Research Network, it is “activity with mainly social goals, whose profits are, according to the assumptions, reinvested in these goals or

in the community, rather than for the purpose of profit maximization or increase in income of shareholders or owners” (*Co to jest ekonomia społeczna?*, 2013). It is also worth quoting a definition of social enterprise formulated by Pearce (2003, p. 190): “It is a general term for all business entities, which have a social purpose, aren’t focused on the creation and distribution of capital and have democratic and measurable structure, based on co-management.”

Kawa (2013, p. 388) writes that “social economy supplements a gap in the economy because it links local environments as a result of the creation of a network of relations and cooperation with simultaneous achievement of social and economic goals”. The scope of activities of social enterprises is very wide and covers, above all, production of goods, as well as services in the local environment and, what is important, involves substantial work resources.

Initiatives being part of social economy should conform to some criteria, both social and economic. Social criteria include above all orientation of an initiative to a socially useful goal, its bottom-up (civil) character, democratic management system, community character of action as well as limited distribution of profits. On the contrary, the economic criteria include, first of all: running a business continuously, a high degree of independence in relation to public institutions, as well as, what is particularly important, a relatively high degree of economic risk (Szcudlińska-Kanoś, 2013, p. 41).

Szcudlińska-Kanoś (2013, p. 42) terms social economy as “community economy”, owing to its local and bottom-up character. She pays also attention to the fact that this type of initiatives, in spite of being oriented on social inclusion and growth in self-reliance, depend, after all, on funds, namely they must generate income. There are, however, significant differences between social enterprises and the private sector, being the basic difference that they are not profit-oriented and the earned income is allocated for social goals. The second difference relates to the fact that social economy entities are controlled not by public administration authorities but by civil organizations or citizens alone.

Great importance is attained to social economy entities in the implementation of Regional Operational Programs (ROP) for the years 2014–2020. These entities perform two basic functions: social function, mostly within social integration and combating exclusion, and employment function, namely creation of jobs. In turn, less frequently it is assumed that they perform the function of local development entities, economic function (namely social economy entities are treated as market elements) or service function (Skrzypiec, 2014, p. 17). Actions with regard to strengthening social economy within ROP contain two priorities: 9.3. and 9.8 *Support for social entrepreneurship*. Within both priorities, assumptions include investment subsidies for operating entities as well as the provision of services for their benefit e.g. advisory services, creation of partnerships for the purpose of development of social economy as well as, by using them, support for people excluded and endangered with exclusion (Skrzypiec, 2014, p. 23).

Social entrepreneurship is also one of the priorities of the tool Community-led Local Development (CLLD) implemented under the Rural Development Program for the years 2014–2020 (RDP 2014–2020). Assumptions within this tool include strength-

ening social entrepreneurship, especially at the local level in innovative sectors. It will have impact on the creation of new jobs as well as implementation of sustainable development based on rational premises of regional and local development (Prus and Marszewska, 2009, p. 267) e.g. tourism, cultural activities or renewable energy sources. The recommendations of the European Economic and Social Committee relate to creating social cooperatives and other social enterprises as well as partnership between local social entities and the local administration with regard to the provision of necessary services such as, for example, in education or social inclusion (Community-led Local Development, 2014, p. 8).

## Social cooperatives in the fight against social exclusion

Social exclusion may have various reasons. Szarfenberg (J. Nowak, 2013, p. 49) believes that its major reasons are the ones that can be attributed to the excluded people themselves (e.g. disability or the lack of education) or such that can be attributed to others or economic reasons causing e.g. problems on the labor market. A different division includes in turn impact of various kinds of factors such as biological, social, economic, health, competence factors as well as random factors.

Some groups are particularly exposed to social exclusion. It seems that, due to the subject matter raised in this paper, it is worth focusing mainly on people professionally inactive, unemployed as well as groups often ignored on local labor markets as e.g. the disabled, the mentally sick, the addicted or the people leaving penitentiaries.

Apart from social economy entities, social cooperatives play an important role in the fight against social exclusion. Social cooperatives are specialized in the provision of public services or reintegration disadvantaged workers and marginalized employees (disabled, long-term unemployed, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, etc.). Many social cooperatives were set up in Spain, and also in other EU countries. Most of them are owned by their employees, while offering an opportunity to engage other types of members, for example: volunteers, etc. (*What is a social cooperative?*).

A cooperative is run according to goals and principles in line with expectations and needs of its members, and these enterprises enable return to the labor market, especially to people without sufficient qualifications to be competitive (Kawa, 2013, p. 388). Social cooperatives can be established by people from the abovementioned categories (e.g. the unemployed, the disabled etc.), though members of social cooperatives can be other people, who do not belong to categories of endangered with social exclusion, provided that they may not account for more than half of the general number of founders.

Social cooperatives operate pursuant to the Act of 27 April 2006, though the possibility of their creation appeared already several years before<sup>2</sup>. These entities are a legal form (type of labor cooperative) and are based on their members' own work (Rymsza,

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<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to the Act of 20 April 2004 on employment promotion and labor market institutions (Ustawa z dnia 20 kwietnia 2004 r. o promocji zatrudnienia i instytucjach rynku pracy, Dz. U. z 2016 r., poz. 645, 691).

2014, p. 107). In other words, these are “activities focused on members of an undertaking” (Herbst, 2013, p. 11).

For several years an intensive increase in the number of recorded social cooperatives has been noticed – over four recent years it has increased by approx. 900. At the end of 2011, in the National Court Register 425 of this type of enterprises were entered, in 2012 – 615 and in 2013 – 936. At the end of 2014 there were 1226 social cooperatives, and at the end of 2015 there were 1266 of them (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2016, p. 11).

The Act on social cooperatives is an element of the social policy implemented by the authorities in Poland, and actions compliant with the policy provisions are aimed, first of all, to minimize social exclusion with simultaneous achievement of the possibly highest degree of consistency and social integration. These assumptions converge with the goals provided for in the National Strategy of the Social Integration. The Act provides for also (Article 2.1) that a social cooperative based on conducted business activities is operating for:

- “social reintegration of its members, namely actions aimed to reconstruct and maintain the capacity to participate in life of a local community and perform social roles at the place of work, residence or stay,
- professional reintegration of its members, namely actions aimed to reconstruct and maintain the capacity to provide unassisted work on the labor market” (Godlewska-Bujok and Miżejewski, 2012, pp. 17–18).

Social and professional reintegration is the main condition that determines the functioning of cooperatives and relates to its members. A document containing complex information on the functioning of social cooperatives in Poland in the years 2012–2013 adopted by the Council of Ministers (Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej [MPiPS], 2015, p. 32) states that under reintegration (on both planes) cooperatives conduct operations that “serve strengthening of the existing and creation of new social bonds, promote defined patterns and norms of conduct or, in general, serve local communities”.

According to the Act, “social reintegration includes actions aimed at reconstruction and maintenance of the capacity to participate in life of a local community and perform social roles at the place of work, residence or stay” (Godlewska-Bujok and Miżejewski, 2012, p. 19). This type of activities includes: civil activities (e.g. participation in meetings with politicians of various levels, actions for the benefit of cooperative movement, etc.), assistance or pro-social activities (granting assistance, support for members of cooperatives), cooperation activities (development of the skill of cooperation and integration with others).

On the other hand, according to the Act, professional reintegration “includes actions aimed to reconstruct and maintain the capacity to provide unassisted work on the labor market” (Godlewska-Bujok and Miżejewski, 2012, p. 20). Activities of cooperatives in this respect include first of all expenses on growth in motivation of its members to enhance education and professional qualifications and gain new skills, as well as develop their own professional career path e.g. through contact with professional advisors.

Social cooperatives are public benefit organizations and as such are authorized to benefit from reliefs and exemptions guaranteed by law (Ustawa..., 2003) as well as from the Labor Fund. Their functioning is based on support from the state and local governments, by: subsidies, loans, sureties, services or consulting, e.g. financial, accounting, legal or marketing consulting and reimbursement of inspection costs (Barszczewski and Pankiv, 2014, p. 80).

The already mentioned document on the functioning of social cooperatives in Poland (MPiPS, 2015, p. 82) provides information that most social cooperatives did not collaborate (or this cooperation was occasional) with offices from the central level (it was related to ministries, provincial offices and marshal's offices) as well as the Polish mass media or universities. On the contrary, they were cooperating with local authorities, both at the level of a county and municipality, as well as with the local mass media and non-governmental organizations. The presence and active interaction with local authorities is of great importance for the creation of social capital on a local scale, which may facilitate solving many problems (Satoła, 2014, p. 25).

A particularly important role is played by local authorities in the context of activity of social cooperatives, since it is them who, by supporting this type of entities, combat social exclusion, also as a result of e.g. widely understood resources they have at their disposal. Kawa (2013, pp. 389–390) pays attention that thanks to the fact that cooperatives operate within local communities, they can easier respond both to the needs of the excluded people or people endangered with exclusion as well as select appropriate forms of support.

A significant role played by cooperation of social cooperatives with non-governmental organizations is indicated also in Information on the functioning... (MPiPS, 2015, p. 85). Well, almost three fourths of social cooperatives where research was conducted in the period 2012–2013 were cooperating with non-governmental organizations or with other social enterprises, operating in their local environment. The forms of this cooperation are, first of all, exchange of experience and information on the conducted activities, execution of common initiatives, as well as study visits.

From the point of view of combating social exclusion in the local environment, it is important to define major areas of public benefit activities of social cooperatives. Most often they indicated undertaking activities for social and professional reintegration of groups endangered with social exclusion, including the disabled. Cooperatives declared also activities being part of the social service system (e.g. assistance to families in a difficult life situation), as well as promotion of employment and professional stimulation (of both the unemployed as well as the endangered with unemployment), activity with regard taking care of the elements of cultural heritage, support for elderly people or support for the development of entrepreneurship (MPiPS, 2015, p. 72). What is important, almost 60% of the social cooperatives analyzed in the above document were employing people with confirmed disability level.

Benefits indicated under the assessment of the functioning of social cooperatives concerned largely economic aspects, namely the creation of new jobs (almost 79% of the cases), as well as “reconstruction and maintenance of members’ capacity to provide unaided work on the labor market” (approx. 63% of the selected answers). On the contrary, the aspects important from the point of view of the local community



or the social aspects were described as an important but implemented in the second place. These were e.g. widely understood activation of the local community, also with regard to production of goods and services, as well as strengthening of interpersonal bonds and awareness of participation in social life (MPIPS, 2015, p. 96).

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of social exclusion is an extremely important problem of contemporary societies and affects many groups. It is also a multi-dimensional term and as such covers different planes of the individual's life.

In this paper different theoretical concepts, as well as paradigms of exclusion are presented. Social exclusion was presented in a multi-dimensional perspective, including both socio-economic as well as cultural and political aspects.

Certainly, possibilities of combating this adverse phenomenon are created by social entrepreneurship, defined as activities focused on social inclusion and growth in self-reliance. It is worth mentioning that its weight is indicated in one of the priorities of the tool Community-led Local Development implemented under the Rural Development Program for the years 2014–2020, as well as two priorities of the Regional Operational Programs for the years 2014–2020.

An example of social economy entities that perfectly fall within the scope of combating social exclusion on many levels of life are social cooperatives, which operate for the benefit of social and professional reintegration of environments endangered with exclusion.

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