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Experience in activating disabled individuals exemplified by the activities carried out by the Polish Organization of Employers of the Disabled – Branch in Podkarpacie

Any considerations regarding the role of non-governmental organizations in activating disabled individuals should be preceded by defining the social policy, its objectives and identifying those who pursue such objectives. In this respect, the definition proposed by Professor Adam Kurzynowski seems to be the broadest one, defining the “social policy” as the activities carried out by the state, local government and non-governmental organizations in order to shape general working conditions and welfare of the population, pro-developmental social structures and social relations based on social equity and justice, conducive to satisfying the social needs on the available level”. The above definition contains those elements which are most important in social policy, namely care for broad-sense living conditions, pro-developmental structures and social relations. It follows from the above definition that the activities of the state, local governments and non-governmental organizations are to serve the main social purposes specified above.

Therefore, it may be concluded that the purpose of the modern social policy consists, above all, in creating conditions of sustained social and economic development, thereby preventing social issues that impede such development.

Professional and social rehabilitation of the disabled forms an integral part of the state social policy. Its efficiency depends on the achievement of the main objective of the state social policy, in other words on pursuing sustained social and economic development. This may be achieved through harmonious and integrated cooperation of all entities responsible for the state social policy objectives addressed to the disabled, using financial instruments such as the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled or the European Social Fund.

The rehabilitation of disabled is understood to mean comprehensive process of team activities (medical, professional and social) aiming at restoring, in full or to the extent possible, physical and psychological fitness and ability to work and earn as well as the possibility to actively participate in social life.

Theoreticians of the rehabilitation concept assign key role to the professional rehabilitation and employment of the disabled individuals in the entire rehabilitation process and, subsequently, their positive integration with the community.

Pursuing one's career is a way to gain economic independence, strengthen the liaisons and the forms of social participation and helps in attaining the spirit of social usefulness.

Social policy addressed to the disabled should consist in stimulating and supporting local governments or non-governmental organizations instead of helping them out. *Such course of actions will result in even stronger role of the local governments as those who fulfill public tasks and stronger role of non-governmental organizations in the provision of public services, using public resources.*

Such activities should coincide with what we call today "active social policy", which contradicts the passive policy which ensures social security through financial and material means. Marek Rymsza is of the opinion that the goal of an active social policy is to ensure participation in social life, defined as active participation on the labor market. In the European Union, employment and unemployment prevention policies somehow supersede the social policy in its traditional area of social insurance system; the social policy programs are becoming employment programs. The above may be achieved through developing employment support on the regular labor market or in the social economy sector, and the activities carried out by the social policy implementing agencies should be so oriented.

One of the non-governmental organizations engaged in supporting the employment of the disabled persons is the Polish Organization of Employers of the Disabled (POPON).

The Polish Organization of Employers of the Disabled is the largest association of employers who employ disabled persons. It was established on 30 November 1995 and now it has over 600 members. Those companies employ altogether some 65,000 individuals, including over 35,000 are disabled. Their activities cover in total approximately 300,000 disabled persons annually. Through nine regional branches, this organization has a nationwide coverage.

The activities of POPON addressed to the disabled individuals include, but are not limited to, job seeking, Information Centers for the Disabled, Online Employment Exchange for the Disabled, the disabled individuals portal on the organization's website, Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled, and the Online Employers Database. POPON is also engaged in information and training activities which aim at providing the employers of the disabled with updated and reliable knowledge through, among others, training courses, seminars and consulting services organized in individual branches. For this purpose, the portal www.popon.pl has been used for several years. POPON attempts to create a transparent and

simple legal system that would efficiently encourage employment of disabled individuals. It mediates in central and local authorities and seeks official opinions on legal issues that may be doubtful in terms of how they are to be construed.

At present, POPON is implementing two projects of support and activation of the disabled, co-financed by the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled and the European Social Fund; these are the Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled and the Job Centers.

The Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled (CAZON)

Under the project implemented by POPON and co-financed by the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled and the European Social Fund under the Sectoral Operational Programme “Human Resources Development”, Action 1.4 Scheme A “Support for individuals with severe or moderate degree of disability on the open labor market”, there are 10 Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled operating (in Bydgoszcz, Katowice, Krakow, Łódź, Poznań, Rzeszów, Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk and Olsztyn). Their primary task is to provide consulting services in respect of employment activation and self-contained functioning on the open labor market for individuals with severe or moderate degree of disability who have problems with entering the labor market. Such Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled are open from Monday through Friday, 8:00 to 16:00. The Centers offer consulting services to the disabled by electronic mail, telephone, mail and during direct meetings in the CAZON offices. Furthermore, as part of the project, there are meetings of “active consultants” with disabled individuals scheduled to take place on regional level – in organizations, associations, job agencies, institutions or even private homes of such persons, etc.

The Employment Activation Centers for the Disabled provide individual consulting and vocational consulting services; the CAZON staff help the disabled individuals to properly assess their capabilities, predispositions and ambitions, and to select the best career; moreover, they also advise how to pursue such a career (they help to choose adequate forms of changing and obtaining professional qualifications). The advices obtained in the Centers enhance the abilities of the disabled persons to find a job and make it easier for them to adapt to the work environment. Employment activation covers the individual with severe or moderate degree of disability included in the job seeking database and the database of Employment Agencies.

The CAZON staff members establish cooperation with the organizations for the disabled, public labor market institutions, social welfare institutions and the like. Disabled individuals can benefit from the services offered by the Centers on numerous occasions. Each Center

employs 2 persons based on employment contract, working full-time jobs, who have relevant qualifications and experience in working with the disabled.

In such Centers, disabled persons have at their disposal a psychologist who, while on duty, offers advices in respect of developing social skills and strengthening motivation. The disabled may also avail themselves of the services offered by a lawyer, whom they may consult personally, by e-mail or telephone.

As part of professional and social activation of disabled youths who are about to graduate from schools, CAZON staff organize workshops on the value of work in human life, dealing with the labor market and self-awareness. Taking part in such workshops is a way for the participants to enter the labor market with self-confidence.