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THEME: POLICY ISSUES

**Cutting the Gordian knot of families' exclusion in poor neighborhoods.**

**Policy lessons from qualitative research on excluded families – the case study of the Łódź  
Municipality in Poland**

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Abstract

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## Introduction

More than a half of the world population resides in urban areas and this share is expected to grow by around 1.44% - 1.84% per year till 2030 (WHO - Global Health Observatory). Cities (and particularly - metropolises) are the most important nodes of global economy. They contribute most to the creation of added value, they are the scene of innovation and creation of the new modes of life. Yet, cities are victimized by their own success – rapidly growing economic, social and spatial inequalities spill around the urban world.

The problem of urban poverty and deep social exclusion is most often described in relation to megacities in the "Global South" (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2012; 2014). Notwithstanding this socio-economic phenomenon is also present in developed countries (especially in the United States and Europe). Debates concentrating on formulation, implementation and effects of policies to reduce poverty (or more generally – to fight against social exclusion of poor families) in urban settings are highly visible in the scientific literature (Wilson, 1997; Moser, 1998; Kleinhans et. al 2010). Although there is a growing body of evidence on the topic, researchers underline the significant gap between the conceptual understanding of poverty and its measurement (DANIDA 2000). It seems that more effort is being made to quantify and measure various aspects on poverty, than to qualitatively investigate mechanisms of poverty. The latter attempts or approaches are often closed in ethnological or cultural studies (just to mention seminal works of Lewis (1975) and Harrington (1982) or more recent Appudurai essay (2004).

**The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that family exclusion, although caused by a limited group of similar factors, is always a unique, complex and context-dependent social mechanism.** There is a lot of truth in Anna Karenina's principle that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." As a result, there is a growing need to include such qualitative (in-depth) knowledge on poverty mechanisms into policy, which need to be comprehensive and targeted, not only at the state level, but also at the level of local agencies. This is why we claim, that regeneration policies should be always more socially oriented policies, rather than exclusively technical and spatial policies. The evidence behind such argument comes from our field research in Łódź Municipality (Poland).

## Background

*Population and urban context*

The starting point of the analysis is the demographic situation of the whole Łódzkie region and Łódź Municipality itself. It helps to understand the population context crucial for identified policy issues for deprived urban areas in Łódź that determines the instruments and methods of intervention.

The Łódzki region has been experiencing a decline in population number since 1990-ties and according to Central Statistical Office of Poland (CSO) this tendency is to be sustained in the future. This recorded trend together with negative projections are key determinants of development perspectives of the region (Janiszewska2014). It is to underline that population decline in the region has been exceptionally fast. In 2013 the population of the region was 93,5% of the population number in 1995 in comparison with 99,7% for Poland. The population structure by age is also disadvantageous. The fraction of working age population in the total population is the lowest in Poland (62,1% in comparison to 63,2% for Poland). This results from very low fraction of mobile working age population (38,2% in comparison to 39,8% for Poland). It means that in comparison to other regions in Poland the Łódzki region can be characterised by the deficit of the population resources that are most valuable in terms of economic and population potential – the mobile working age population. In Migration by age also plays important role in shaping the population structure of the Łódzki region. The negative net migration rate is the highest for the 25-39 age group that proves low attractiveness of Łódzki region as a place for work, living and family formation for young people. (Kałuża-Kopias 2014, CSO 2015).

The Łódź Municipality is of crucial importance for the region, where the above processes are intensified. Especially depopulation of Łódź together with gradual degradation of the city space can end up in strengthening negative processes distinctive for second-tier cities, such as formulating and expanding the poverty enclaves. If those negative processes exceed the accepted level, there is a serious chance for dramatic decline in location attractiveness of Łódź as the capital of the region. The choice of place of living is considerably more accessible for people with higher income, better educated, of higher socio-economic status, younger, having stronger social networks and also for individuals who strongly pay attention to the quality of the environment and society they live in. The loss of such persons deepens social problems, that accelerate the negative selection of inhabitants, loosing demographic, social and economic capital. This is self-enhancing mechanism which is to cease by reasonable public policy.

There are several factors and characteristics of the Łódź Municipality contributing to degradation risks for the city. However, we mention only the most important ones. The first is the depopulation process of the city. The dynamics of depopulation in 1995-1993 in 10 biggest cities in Poland was labour market. Among 10 biggest cities in Poland Łódź is characterised by the highest unemployment level, which is even higher than in the whole Łódzki region. This has been a sustainable trend. The third

factor is low quality of dwelling resources. The Łódź Municipality has had the lowest fraction of flats connected to the canalisation network and having bathroom and flush toilets in flats, as well as central heating (CSO, 2015).

These negative characteristics are concentrated in the post-industrial city centre. These issues are also important in terms of generalization of our findings and their adaptation to broader spatial contexts. Łódź, previously known as “Polish promised land”, thanks to the vivid development of textile industry cluster, is now quite often referred to as “Polish Detroit” – the shrinking, post-industrial city. Although this metaphor is appealing, there are more commonalities between Łódź and other Eastern European and Post-Soviet Asian Cities, where urban deprivation and families’ poverty has to be attributed in large part to economic transition and decline of state run enterprises, downsizing of many industries in former production centers, and growing inadequacies in services (Baker 2008).

### *Institutional*

Nowadays Łódź Municipality is going to be regenerated socially, economically and spatially through complex public policy. The need to adopt complex measures to prevent deprivation of urban, post-industrial (most common) is present also at national level. The general goals and frames for policy actions are depicted in the National Urban Policy (draft of 2014), National Regeneration Plan (draft of 2014) and Regeneration Act (2015). On that basis cities are to prepare their own Local Regeneration Programs initiating tailor-made actions to prevent social, economic and spatial deprivation of the cities. At the end of 2015 Łódź Municipality has been working on Local Regeneration Plan.

## **Methods/Data**

The paper presents results of ethnographic case study conducted in the Łódź Municipality (Poland). The study was restricted to the urban downtown area, in which the biggest poor neighborhoods concentrate. Research team conducted overall more than 120 Individual In-Depth Interviews (IDI). 84 IDI were conducted with families living in poor neighborhoods (including the homeless from the area) – this group was selected on the basis of the random route sampling. Additionally, about 40 IDI were conducted with representatives of local public agencies and stakeholders (municipal administration, local labor office, social assistance offices, NGOs, local employers, housing administration/landlords) - this group was selected on the basis of purposeful sampling. Interview protocols focused on the following topics: households (size, structure, expenditures), housing characteristics, education and employment, health, social relations and public life attitudes, expectations/plans.

Each interview has been recorded and transcribed. The corpus has been coded in two coding cycles. Initial data was coded with descriptive coding techniques and then, in the second cycle, with pattern coding techniques (Saladana 2009). To triangulate the data sources, we have also collected the quantitative data from municipal registers, and other public institutions - Police, Social Assistance Office, Labor Office. Finally, Focus Group Interviews (FGI) with NGO, academia and public administration representatives were held to refine the findings and formulate conclusions in participatory manner.

## Results and policy messages

Systematic coding of qualitative data enabled the mapping of families' poverty and exclusion mechanisms that occur in the studied urban area. The main finding is that although three main group of factors contribute the most to poverty and exclusion (work-related, health-related and substance abuse-related problems), each family path to exclusion is different.

There are no traces of racial, ethnic or cultural exclusion in Łódź, but three most vulnerable groups are women, disabled and older people. Multigenerational families serve as a basic form of social organization and shelter for those who face most difficult problems. They usually occupy overcrowded and physically deprived dwellings. Although they are the basic source of help in day-to-day problems they are totally dysfunctional as far as profound, life changing actions are concerned. The external assistance is of a great importance for such families.

Physical degradation and spatial concentration of poverty in neighborhoods plays important role in petrification and transgenerational transmission of exclusion. This is one of the strongest contribution for individual and family perplexity. As a result, this social setting is characterized by structural inertia, which poses even bigger challenge for policymakers.

Such complex issues require systematic approach, but cannot be solved entirely from the state level intervention. Paradoxically, general, state-led policies, like income support policies, can petrify the structures of social exclusion (e.g. keeping mothers at home, preventing from active job-search or qualification building).

Another key message is that there is an urgent need of enhanced policy integration and coordination. Not only does the fragmentation of actions reduce their effectiveness (not to mention efficiency), but sometimes it causes the opposite outcomes. The current system of policy support, where housing policy, social policy, labor policy, family policy is run separately and by different administrative actors, creates confusion and lower the availability of assistance for those who need it most.

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