



PROFESSIONAL ACTIVATION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIAL ECONOMY SECTOR IN POLAND: THE EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION CENTRES

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Abstract

This paper examines the role and responsibilities of the social economy (SE) in Poland in promoting social and professional integration for individuals at risk of exclusion. It specifically focuses on Social Integration Centres as an example. The central argument is that these centres play a crucial role in providing multi-level support to at-risk individuals, enabling them to achieve social and professional integration.

The paper provides an overview of the topic, drawing conclusions from relevant literature, data from Statistics Poland, reports from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, and scientific studies related to the social economy. The analysis shows that Social Integration Centres in Poland assist in the restoration and enhancement of the abilities of those who are socially excluded to enable them to perform social and professional roles independently. They implement multifaceted reintegration efforts, helping individuals to acquire the necessary skills to reengage in professional and social activities.

**AKTYWIZACJA ZAWODOWA I INTEGRACJA SPOŁECZNA
Z PESPEKTYWY SEKTORA EKONOMII SPOŁECZNEJ W POLSCE.
PRZYKŁAD CENTRÓW INTEGRACJI SPOŁECZNEJ**

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Słowa kluczowe: centra integracji społecznej, ekonomia społeczna, reintegracja społeczna, reintegracja zawodowa, wykluczenie społeczne.

A b s t r a k t

Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie o rolę i zadania ekonomii społecznej (ES) w Polsce w obszarze integracji społeczno-zawodowej osób zagrożonych wykluczeniem społecznym na przykładzie centrów integracji społecznej. W artykule sformułowano tezę, zgodnie z którą centra, realizując przedsięwzięcia skoncentrowane na wielopoziomowym wspieraniu osób zagrożonych wykluczeniem, odgrywają istotną rolę w wykonywaniu zadań z zakresu integracji społecznej i zawodowej.

Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy. Wnioskowanie oparto na przeprowadzonych studiach literaturowych z wykorzystaniem metody analizy i krytyki piśmiennictwa oraz danych pochodzących ze statystyki publicznej Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego, bieżących raportów Ministerstwa Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej oraz opracowań naukowych z obszaru ekonomii społecznej. Przeprowadzone analizy wykazały, że centra integracji społecznej w Polsce koncentrują się na pomocy w odbudowywaniu i podtrzymywaniu u osób wykluczonych społecznie zdolności do samodzielnego pełnienia funkcji społecznych i zawodowych. Podejmują wielokierunkowe działania reintegracyjne, pomagając w wykształceniu zdolności niezbędnych do powrotu do aktywności zawodowej i społecznej.

Introduction

Social economy is a new area in social policy and, simultaneously, a sphere of civic and social activity. Through economic activity, it serves vocational and social integration of people at risk of social marginalization, promotes job creation, and enables the provision of social services to the public and local development (*Krajowy program ekonomii...*, 2019, p. 12). Its actions are geared towards improving social, economic and environmental circumstances in specific local communities. SE is often seen as a system of enterprises and organisations, inclusive of their respective regulations, aimed at supporting people at risk of social exclusion (Juszczak & Balina, 2016, p. 32). Entities operating within SE represent a natural organizational response to the need for solutions whose superior goal is to achieve social objectives while seeking to ensure economic return on public expenditure (Wronka-Pośpiec, 2017, p. 9). Their principal aim is not only to produce specific goods and services but also to mobilize social capital, generate innovation and expand the market through increased participation

of the previously excluded persons (Pearce, 2003, p. 190). Although SE is part of the market economy, its mission and goals are targeted outside the market (Hausner & Laurisz, 2008, p. 9). According to B. Kryk, SE makes a significant contribution as a sector to boosting employment and sustainable economic growth and plays an important role in increasing the competitiveness and efficiency of the European economy (Kryk, 2017, p. 221).

The sector's defining discourses invoke solidarity and social cohesion, responsibility and commitment, participation, autonomy and independence, to meet the needs that other sectors fail to satisfy (Roelants, 2002, p. 3). Alternative terms include new social economy, popular economy, the economy of the poor, economy of local communities, civic economy, labour economy and cooperative economy (Spicker *et al.*, 2007, p. 183, 184).

This paper assesses the tasks and role of the social economy concerning the social and professional integration of persons at risk of social exclusion, given the example of social integration centres. With this end in mind, the following problem questions are formulated:

- what is the essence of the integrative activities undertaken by the SICs?
- in what form and to what extent do the centres implement socio-professional reintegration programmes for the benefit of the participants?

This study provides an overview of the field of social economy, utilizing relevant literature on the subject, including Polish and foreign-language publications, as well as current legislation governing the organization and operation of Social Integration Centres as entities that promote integration. In addition, the study examines existing data, including findings from other researchers and specialized institutions studying the social economy sector. The analysis of this data involves the collection, selection, description, and scientific interpretation of available sources such as public statistics from Statistics Poland, current reports from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, and empirical studies related to the social economy. The study shows that since their establishment in 2003, Social Integration Centres in Poland have consistently implemented specialized programs to work with socially excluded or at-risk individuals. These programs involve a comprehensive approach to social employment that aims to combat poverty and social exclusion. This is achieved through courses held at Social Integration Centres that promote professional and social reintegration, as well as supported employment, where individuals are assisted in finding employment or starting their own business (*Informacja na temat centrów i klubów integracji społecznej...*, 2022, p. 9). This text is intended to encourage further discussion to raise public awareness of the role and importance of social integration within the social economy framework. Due to the multi-faceted and extensive nature of the issue, the analysis has been confined to social integration centres as reintegration actors.

The first part of the paper defines social economy in the light of its integrative character based on available Polish and foreign literature. Next, the scope and

directions of SIC activities in social and professional integration are discussed. In order to accomplish the goal of this study in full, subsequent sections analyse statistical data on the centres in Poland, including quantitative changes in recent years, i.e. 2017-2021. The conclusion recapitulates the role and integrative activities undertaken to date by the centres to support socially excluded persons.

The Reintegrative Nature of the Social Economy

SE involves all forms of social activity combined with economic enterprise in the social space; the following characteristics constitute it: the primacy of social goals over economic profit, democracy, flexibility, innovation (understood as the capacity to adapt to fluctuating social needs and economic circumstances), as well as voluntary participation (Blicharz, 2017, p. 219). It is a domain of socio-economic action arising at the juncture between the entrepreneurial sector and the non-governmental, non-profit sector. Today, it represents a sector of the economy which remains complementary to the market and the state (Kryk, 2013, p. 83).

The approach to SE is twofold. Although it is a mode of looking at economics in the sense of social science, it is also identified with the social economy or entrepreneurship, and the latter notion is prevalent in scholarly and public spaces and discourses. As such, it denotes the practical aspect, i.e. specific legal solutions, as well as specific entities and their modes of operation (Szopa, 2007, p. 65). Simultaneously, whether in Poland or abroad, a single and consistent description and definition of social enterprise is conspicuously lacking. According to M. Bull and H. Crompton, three main types can be distinguished (Bull & Crompton, 2005, p. 6):

- social enterprises engaged in stimulating activity in local communities (maximizing the value arising from the social capital inherent in the community);
- commercial social enterprises which pursue a social purpose and mission;
- non-profit organisations which focus on entrepreneurship and financial independence.

J. Defoumy and P. Develtere underline that SE encompasses a multidimensional and broad range of forms of civic activity that draws on solidarity and cooperation. It is a mechanism capable of transforming the passive dependence of large groups of people into a system of mutual responsibility (Defoumy & Develtere, 1997, p. 1).

M. Boni observes that the social economy is an example of an innovative instrument of social inclusion, as it offers jobs and professional employment where competition between employees is not a priority since work is one of the elements which restores self-confidence, influences mobility and encourages one to acquire further skills on the professional market (Boni, 2007, p. 53). J. Neal

recognises that through the innovative introduction of social and systemic change, SE helps to address social disadvantages (Neal, 2010, p. 97).

As it follows from the premises of the National Programme for the Development of Social Economy (KPRES), the attention in the sector is primarily focused on persons at risk of social exclusion, meaning both workers striving to regain economic independence and subjectivity in terms of their professional situation, as well as persons who require special, individualized support in recovering their ability to participate fully in professional and social activity (*Krajowy program ekonomii społecznej...*, 2019, p. 17).

The concept of social exclusion is generally equated with poverty, social inequality, and widely noted discrimination. Social exclusion should be associated with expropriation from certain acquired rights or privileges, multidimensional deprivation, restitution, redundancy, irresponsibility, separation, alienation and marginality (Nowak, 2012, p. 19).

In recent years, social exclusion has become a major social issue, affecting those who, for various reasons, do not participate in social and professional life, preventing them from living a life of a fully-fledged citizen. L. Frąckiewicz defines social exclusion as an absence or limitation of the opportunities to participate, influence or benefit from basic public institutions and markets that should be available to all, especially to the poor, i.e. a situation which prevents or significantly hinders an individual or group from lawful engagement in social roles, use of public goods and social infrastructure, accumulation of resources or earning income in a dignified manner (Frąckiewicz, 2005, p. 11).

Hence, SE is an instrument by means of which independence and self-sufficiency of persons at risk of social exclusion may be restored. Given the degree of withdrawal from professional activity among working-age Poles, as well as the difficulties encountered to date in reaching people in adverse circumstances with effective support that produces lasting results, solutions in this area are necessary and should complement other mechanisms for a synergy effect to augment previously implemented initiatives (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2021).

The solidarity economy is a particular area within SE whose essential task is the professional and social reintegration of persons at risk of social exclusion. Entities involved in the solidarity economy include Vocational Activity Establishments, Occupational Therapy Workshops, Social Integration Centres and Social Integration Clubs (Lewandowska, 2018, p. 41). Their reintegrative character consists in creating appropriate conditions for those persons who, for various reasons, are unable to fully participate in social and professional life.

A term that should be clarified at this point is 'reintegration', which means social inclusion construed as a process that allows persons at risk of exclusion to obtain the resources which ensure access to the labour market, culture, education, healthcare, etc.

The Social Employment Act (Ustawa z dnia 13 czerwca 2003 r. o zatrudnieniu socjalnym. Dz.U. z 2003 r., nr 122, poz. 1143) refers to two types of reintegration, namely social and professional. Social reintegration is a broader concept and describes the effort of enabling the participant of courses at a social integration centre or social integration club to recover or maintain their ability to participate in social life and function in the social roles of employees, family members, etc. Article 2(4) of said Act states explicitly that “social reintegration is understood as activities, including self-help activities, aimed at rebuilding and sustaining [...] the ability to participate in the life of the local community and fulfil social roles in the place of work, residence or stay”. Social exclusion tends to be narrowed down to exclusion from the labour market and its correlates. Meanwhile, irrespective of the situation in the labour market, it should be remembered that there will inevitably be a category of persons functioning outside the mainstream of social life: people affected by profound poverty, addictions, homelessness or struggling to readjust to social life following a prison sentence (Karwacki & Kaźmierczak, 2022, p. 7).

In turn, professional reintegration denotes activities aimed at rebuilding and maintaining the ability to perform work on the labour market in a person participating in courses conducted in specialized SE integration entities (Social Integration Clubs and Centres) (Krzyszowski *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). It may also be underlined that the integrated complex of services intended for persons affected by social exclusion in Poland is referred to as social and professional reintegration services. The latter term implies the goal, i.e. reintegration, understood as restoring the capacity of individuals and groups to perform social roles (e.g. self-reliant person, parent, neighbour, citizen), which naturally includes professional roles (the ability to undertake work) (Karwacki & Kaźmierczak, 2022, p. 7).

The purpose of the activities on the part of SE entities is related to the activation of persons excluded or at risk of exclusion. The broad spectrum of their undertakings is substantially important in economic terms (generating jobs, establishing new businesses and creating new forms of entrepreneurship) and in the social dimension (reinforcing democratic principles, counteracting social exclusion, developing and consolidating local communities) (Majzel *et al.*, 2021, p. 146).

Social Integration Centres

Social Integration Centres have a relatively short tradition in the economic and social space in Poland, occupying a particular place among social economy actors (Szarfenberg, 2015, p. 73).

The conditions for the emergence of CIS are related to the transformation of the Polish economy, which brought with it changes in the economy and politics.

At that time, a number of new problems emerged that Polish society had not faced before, or had encountered very rarely. A negative result of these changes has become the problem of multidimensional social exclusion, the extent of which has become a significant challenge for the Polish social economy. The insufficient results of the measures taken by social welfare institutions and labor offices forced the Polish legislator to look for an additional system to fill the gaps in the existing national legal order, which led to a new regulation of the system of social employment implemented by centers (Kawka, 2016, p. 205).

At the beginning of the 21st century, when the decision to create CIS was made, the key social problem in Poland was the high unemployment rate of about 20%. With almost half of the unemployed remaining out of the labor market for more than a year. The lack of employment opportunities translated into a low level of affluence in society indicating the need to intensify the efforts of various entities and institutions to create new jobs, including in social economy entities. The introduction in 2003 of the possibility of creating social integration centers created an opportunity for professional and multifaceted assistance to people at risk of social exclusion – those in difficult life situations, often cut off from real opportunities to return (or enter) the labor market.

The dynamically changing situation in the labour market and continued unemployment among persons situated furthest from the labour market, who often struggle with compounded problems in their lives, make it necessary to motivate socially excluded persons to undertake professional and social reintegration so as to develop appropriate attitudes to life and social roles both in the place of employment and residence, as well as restore their ability to perform independent work on the labour market; SICs were created to meet these very challenges (*Projekt ustawy o zmianie...*, 2021). Combining the activities specific to social and professional reintegration (of persons distant from the labour market) as part of SIC involvement was a certain novelty in Poland at the beginning (Goleński, 2019, p. 28). Operating at the interface of two key areas of social policy, i.e. social assistance and labour market policy, they have been counted among the most important reintegration actors within SE¹.

SICs were introduced into the legal order under the Act of 13 June 2003 on Social Employment (Ustawa z dnia 13 czerwca 2003 r. o zatrudnieniu socjalnym. Dz.U. z 2003 r., nr 122, poz. 1143). Early on, they were treated as auxiliary enterprises attached to social welfare centres. In 2009, following the amendment of the Public Finance Act, which provided for the liquidation of auxiliary enterprises as of 1 January 2011 (Ustawa z dnia 27 sierpnia 2009 r. o finansach publicznych, Dz.U. z 2009 r., nr 157, poz. 1240), their organisational

¹ SE reintegration entities include Vocational Activity Establishments, Occupational Therapy Workshops, Social Integration Centres and Clubs, all of which serve social and professional reintegration of persons at risk of social exclusion. These forms are by no means social enterprises, but may prepare one to run or work in a social enterprise, or be run by social enterprises as a service to the local community.

different financing modalities, as well as from regional traditions of community life and social activism (*Krajowy program rozwoju ekonomii...*, 2021, p. 85). The territorially differentiated distribution of Social Integration Centers is also related to the uneven development of the potential of the social economy sector in different regions of the country.

An analysis of data from Statistics Poland shows that between 2015 and 2021, the number of SICs increased steadily, which reflects the continuing need to activate the long-term unemployed who receive social assistance, especially in the areas where unemployment still exceeds the national average; the possibility of financing new SICs from EU funds (ESF) also plays a role.

In that period, 61 SICs were established, an increase of 43.6% (Fig. 2). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact on the functioning of those entities. Although SICs were compelled to considerably reduce their activities during the pandemic, their participants were still able (often online, using a learning platform) to benefit from “the provision of services for social and professional reintegration [...] Staying in quarantine or isolation at home was an extraordinary circumstance which was independent of the participants’ will, while the integration benefit was often their only source of income”, as emphasized by the Minister of Family and Social Policy M. Maląg (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2021).

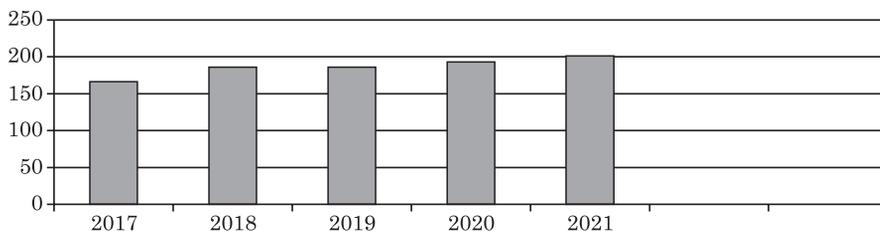


Fig. 2. The number of SICs in 2017-2021

Source: compiled by the author based on Statistics Poland (2022). Social integration centres, social integration clubs, vocational activity establishments, and occupational therapy workshops in 2021.

It is underlined in a report by the Supreme Audit Office that “the essential activity of SIC, consisting of social and professional reintegration of persons whose opportunities on the open labour market are the lowest, due to inferior qualifications or lack thereof as well as due to issues relating to full participation in social and professional life. Among other things, their aim is to counteract the dependence of benefit recipients on financial social security systems and solve the problem of unemployment and improvement of professional qualifications among persons at risk of exclusion” (*Zatrudnienie socjalne jako...*, 2013, p. 6).

For several years, the demographic of SIC participants has remained unchanged, as they are most frequently attended by the long-term unemployed, who account for 37.5% of all recipients of services provided by SICs, though

the share of this group decreased by 3.1% compared to 2020. According to M. Danecka and S. Nałęcz, the long-term unemployed are the relatively most promising group with respect to the successful completion of the social and professional reintegration process (Danecka & Nałęcz, 2007, p. 186). Subsequently, persons addicted to alcohol or psychoactive substances (15.5%) and persons with disabilities (12.6%) benefit from SIC support. On the other hand, persons for whom the main reason for exclusion is homelessness (6.3%) or mental condition (Fig. 3) constitute a small proportion of the SIC beneficiaries.

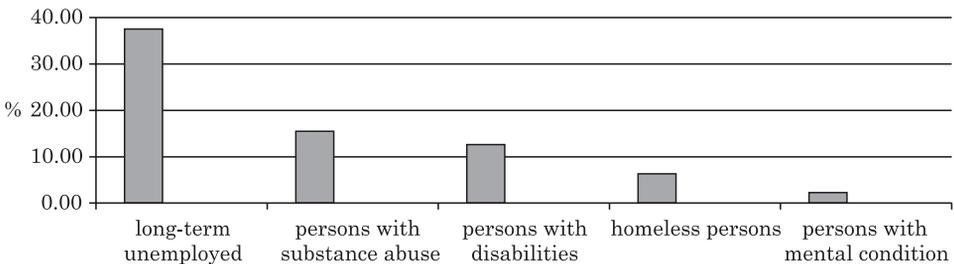


Fig. 3. Participants of SIC social employment

Source: compiled by the author based on Statistics Poland (2022). Social integration centres, social integration clubs, vocational activity establishments, and occupational therapy workshops in 2017-2021.

The analysis of data from Statistics Poland shows that the increased number of operating SICs does not translate significantly/substantially into a higher number of participants (Fig. 4), which has remained at a similar level for years. Moreover, the decline in unemployment, decreasing number of social assistance beneficiaries or the changing economic realities do not significantly influence a higher/lower number of participants. On average, there are 60 participants per SIC. The total number of participants attending social and professional reintegration courses conducted at SICs increased from over 11,500 in 2017 to 12,100 in 2018, only to decrease in the following years to 11,100 persons in 2019 and 10,400 in 2020, prior to rising again to 11,600 in 2021.

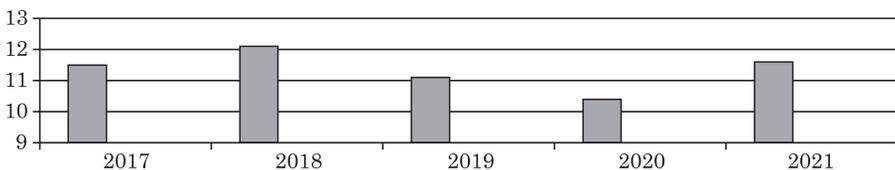


Fig. 4. Number of SIC participants in the social and professional reintegration framework in 2017-2021 (in thousands)

Source: compiled by the author based on Statistics Poland (2022). Social integration centres, social integration clubs, vocational activity establishments, and occupational therapy workshops in 2017-2021.

Pursuant to the Act on Social Employment, refugees are also entitled to SIC services if their life situation prevents them from independently satisfying their elementary needs and participating in professional, social, and family life or when their participation in these spheres of life is limited for various reasons. They follow an individual integration programme within the meaning of the social assistance law (Ustawa z dnia 13 czerwca 2003 r. o zatrudnieniu socjalnym. Dz.U. z 2003 r., nr 122, poz. 1143, art. 1 p.7). The various refugee groups currently in the country include citizens of Ukraine staying in Poland as a result of the war waged on the territory of their country, who most often participate in the activities organized by SICs. Between 24 February and 2 October 2022², between 80 and 524 Ukrainian citizens (325 persons on average) participated in reintegration at SICs. Their share in the analysed period ranged from 1.8% to 9.3% of all SIC participants (*Centra integracji społecznej...*, 2022, p. 4).

The essential task of the centres is to implement a multi-level social employment programme to mitigate poverty and social exclusion. The catalogue of persons subject to social exclusion (the homeless, persons with substance abuse, persons with mental conditions, the long-term unemployed, persons released from penal institutions, refugees, and persons with disabilities) can always be extended to include other categories of persons who are in a special situation on the labour market and have limited opportunities to function in social and professional life (Borowski *et al.*, 2014, p. 8). The Act defines them as “persons who are subject to social exclusion, incapable of satisfying their basic existential needs through their own efforts due to their life situation and find themselves in a situation which results in poverty and prevents or restricts their participation in professional, social and family life” (Ustawa z dnia 13 czerwca 2003 r. o zatrudnieniu socjalnym. Dz.U. z 2003 r., nr 122, poz. 1143).

A characteristic feature of professional reintegration carried out by SICs is that its beneficiaries participate in various forms of employment, whereby the conditions resemble the actual workplace. The participants are not party to an employment contract and do not receive remuneration within the meaning of the labour law³, as no such employment relationship is established between them and SICs. As a result, they continue to be registered with the authorities as unemployed, receiving the integration benefit, which is perceived as a form of unemployment benefit. As part of professional reintegration, SICs offer vocational retraining (courses, training), practical classes and courses in starting

² The data originates from an additional survey carried out in 10 measurements by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, in view of the involvement of SICs in assisting Ukrainian citizens. The actual total number of Ukrainian citizens who receive support from the CISOs cannot be stated, as one person may have been reported repeatedly in several measurements.

³ Social employment does not constitute employment as defined by the Labour Code. The work is a form of professional placement combined with various types of training and support to resolve the issues which contributed to e.g. long-term unemployment; however, it counts towards seniority, as the relevant social insurance contributions are paid on integration benefits.

and running a business, with particular emphasis on the operating principles of social cooperatives. One of the components of the vocational curriculum is running a business involving services, commerce or manufacturing, the revenue from which may provide additional funds for the operation of a given SIC⁴.

Participation in the courses conducted by the centres may take place at the request of the interested person, but they may also be referred to a SIC by a substance rehab centre, district family assistance centre, district labour office, social assistance centre, non-governmental organization or social integration club, with the consent of the person in question or their legal representative. It is the prerequisite for the person wishing to participate in SIC activities to conclude the Individual Social Employment Programme. This programme involves observation and assessment of changes in one's professional and social situation (Kawka, 2016, p. 207). It is drawn up individually with each SIC participant and demonstrates certain features of a contract, as it must be signed by two parties to the legal relationship, i.e. the participant and the head of the

Table 1

Systemic and individual goals pursued by SICs

Systemic goals	Individual goals
Comprehensive provision of assistance to persons at risk of social exclusion based on the developed and subsequently implemented individual programmes of social and professional integration	mitigating the risk of social exclusion through the opportunity to acquire new professional qualifications
Introduction of an appropriate support and assistance system dedicated to the participants	material and psychological support for excluded persons and their families as they overcome difficult life situations with which they are unable to cope on their own
Animation of the local environment to support people excluded and at risk of social exclusion	social integration and activation by motivating individuals to change their current lives and by enabling the participants to develop and improve social or personal skills so that they may function in society without hindrance
Application of various activities resulting in the improvement of life circumstances of the SIC participants and their families	integration with the community for persons leaving penal institutions; homeless persons involved in the individual programme of leaving homelessness; persons addicted to substances (upon completion of psychotherapy programmes)

Source: own elaboration on the basis of Borowski *et al.* (2014).

⁴ As part of professional reintegration, a centre may engage in manufacturing, trade or services, as well as production in the agricultural sector, with the exception of enterprise consisting in the production of or trade in products of the fuel, tobacco, spirit, wine, beer industries, as well as other alcoholic products with alcohol content exceeding 0.5%, as well as products made of precious metals or involving such metals as components, in accordance with Article 9.1 of the Act on Social Employment.

centre (Stachowicz & Żołądowska, 2020, p. 41). The implementation of the social employment programme focuses on empowering persons affected by dysfunctions, at risk of or subject to social exclusion through professional and social education with a view to that person achieving economic independence on their own; also, it prioritizes general social prevention and the creation of institutional mechanisms that enable the employment and related professional readjustment and social integration of such persons (Centrum Integracji Społecznej Rumia, 2018).

In relation to persons excluded or at risk of exclusion, SICs aim to achieve systemic and individual goals concurrently.

It is fundamental for successful reintegration that the process of social and professional reintegration takes place simultaneously. Through activities aimed at increasing professional and social activity, SICs help to develop the abilities that beneficiaries will need in their later professional career (Kawka, 2016, p. 222). It is also worth noting that empowerment, i.e. the subjectification of the participants, is crucial at SICs. To that end, the participants are invited to contribute to their own individual social employment programme. SICs teach new methods of acquiring professional qualifications and key skills such as teamwork and self-direction, which is why their activities are also inherently educational. The courses include various types of workshops and specialized training sessions in which the participants have the opportunity to acquire new qualifications as well as supplement or increase their existing professional skills. The centres can also organize traineeships and work placements with selected employers (Koral, 2008, p. 2).

Table 2

Professional reintegration services

Professional reintegration methods			
Professional retraining, acquisition of new vocational qualifications (courses, training)	developing effective job-seeking skills	practical instruction (workshops, traineeships)	courses in running a business, taking into account the operating principles of social cooperatives

Source: own elaboration on the basis of Borowski *et al.* (2014).

There is no doubt that over the 18 years of their presence in Poland, SICs have adequately filled the gap in the system of services provided by social policy institutions, which thus far have not catered to persons with low basic skills to such an extent. Their outstanding characteristic is their holistic approach that spans various spheres in the lives of the participants, from psychological, social and legal issues, to addressing educational and professional deficits (*Informacje dla instytucji...*, 2005, p. 2).

Conclusions

The above demonstrates that reintegration entities occupy an important place among all SE actors. They perform a vital function in activating and reintegrating people who, without extensive support, remain outside the labour market and their participation in social life is limited. According to the provisions of the KPRES-in a perspective until 2030-all activities of SICs should be planned in a manner which allows for a comprehensive approach to reintegration. Depending on the individual needs of people at risk of social exclusion, the reintegration process may continue after their SIC participation has ended, enabling practical implementation of reintegration paths and a smooth transition from exclusion to social and professional activity (*Krajowy program rozwoju ekonomii...*, 2021, p. 37).

Social Integration Centres have recently proven to be an enduring and significant entity within SE. Thanks to a multi-level system of social and professional integration dedicated to socially excluded persons, they become major centres of local activation. Their invariable goal is to strive for a higher level of social and professional performance of individuals facing potential exclusion. The assistance provided by the centres continues to include new categories of people and encompasses ever broader groups of recipients of such services (which, among other things, follows by way of response to social change).

The analysis of pertinent research and literature indicates that centres, as institutions implementing specialized programmes of work with persons excluded or at risk of exclusion, make a substantial and unquestionable contribution to the pursuit of active social policy in this area (Ciepielewska, 2011, p. 4). Activities aimed at the parallel accomplishment of individual and systemic goals serve to increase the professional and social activity of the participants. Ultimately, through social and professional reintegration, the SIC participants obtain an opportunity to become self-reliant and independent of state support systems (e.g. social welfare institutions). It follows from the analysis that over the years, the centres have consistently implemented a specialized work programme for those who are socially excluded or at risk of exclusion. The support system based on reintegration activities is multifaceted, thanks to which the SIC beneficiaries have the opportunity to acquire or improve their professional qualifications and social competence. As reintegration entities, they effectively bridge the gap between the social assistance system and the labour market, playing a leading role in the fight against social exclusion.

The available data collected by Statistics Poland or the Ministry of Family and Social Policy clearly shows that the number of centres in Poland has been systematically growing in recent years. They develop as one of the solutions within the system of active social policy, owing to the need to activate the unemployed – often beneficiaries of the social welfare system – especially in those regions of Poland where unemployment is still higher than the national average.

The centres focus on seeking the structured provision of new forms of social and professional activation to the residents in such regions, taking advantage of the financing opportunities available through EU funds. The types, forms and range of services offered by the centres are informed by the nature of the social economy, in which the emphasis is put on supporting and activating persons who are subject to the exclusion processes. As a result, the diverse human needs, deficits and inadequacies make it necessary to continuously expand the range of integrative services provided by entities in this sector. In modern societies, each individual should be able to meet their needs and realize their own individual aspirations and goals in life. If a person is unable to do this on their own and through their own efforts, the state should create other opportunities for their benefit. One of these is precisely the assistance available within SE, with its range of services oriented towards social and professional reintegration.

The primary function of the centres is to counteract exclusion in the field of professional and social activity. In order to mitigate exclusion effectively, it is necessary to devise and implement comprehensive and individualized forms of support in the form of active inclusion services. The effort to identify and apply effective activation tools with persons requiring such support reveals how complex these issues are and shows that a more profound diagnosis with respect to social inclusion is indispensable (*Analiza sytuacji wewnętrznej regionalnej...*, 2019, p. 90).

Further development of the centres largely depends on the extent to which this form of activity results in actual benefits to its participants, as well as to society as a whole. Moreover, any undertakings to support the development of SICs should be planned in a way which facilitates a comprehensive approach to the reintegration of people at risk of social exclusion. Such an approach will enable the practical implementation of reintegration pathways and a smooth transition from exclusion to social and professional activity.

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