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# Participatory Response to Needs of People Who Experience Homelessness: the Example of "Homeful – Homeless" Box Project[1]

## Abstract

Social perceptions of homeless people seem to be deeply rooted, homogeneous and stereotypical. From that stems a stereotypical approach also to the needs of people who experience homelessness. Consequentially, that leads to a situation in which the assistance they receive is frequently inadequate, and thus ineffective. In that context, based on the example of the social model of disability, P. Beresford (2014) shows that it was not impairment that was the main cause of the social exclusion of disabled people, but the way society responded to people with impairments (Oliver, 2012: 43). Having in mind analogical perception of homeless people that functions in society, a thesis can be made, that it is not the mere fact of being homeless that is the reason behind the social exclusion of homeless people, but the way they are seen by others, and the way society reacts to them as a consequence of that perception. Beresford, among other things, suggests: to direct

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actions towards "targeting the disabling society" (Oliver, 2009: 51); to abolish the divisions between service users and service providers; and to enhance service users' participation in social work education, practice and research (Beresford, 2014). Our participatory practice co-constructed with people who experience homelessness refers to those postulates through "Homeful – Homeless" Box [original name: Skrzynka "Domni-Bezdomni"]. It breaks down stereotypes related to homeless people by engaging different social actors; it abolishes the division between users and providers of services, because the boundaries between them clearly become blurred due to the activities undertaken as part of the Box; and finally, it includes users of services within different spheres of life, including practice, because it is them who become experts on their own needs and the actions they take, and it is them who become involved in helping other people, or who initiate that help. Therefore, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between a volunteer and a participant of the project. The aim of this contribution is to recreate the actions that enhance the participatory potential of the social work project ("Homeful – Homeless" Box). The chapter starts with social construction of the homeless and its consequences with regard to the selection and the quality of social services. As a response to the problem of the social service system we present the "Homeful – Homeless" Box – the idea behind it, its evolution, and later on, also the social work with the homeless in the course of the project. Next, we present efforts to enhance the participatory potential of "Homeful – Homeless" Box.

# Introduction

In our work, the key thesis is that it is not the mere fact of being homeless that is the reason behind the social exclusion of homeless people, but the way they are seen by others, and the way society reacts to them as a consequence of that perception. This kind of assumption redefines a typical relationship between service users and social workers while planning services for the homeless.

We can find an argument in favour of this thesis in the work of Peter Beresford (2014: 29), who refers to an approach to social work in accordance with social model principles, developed by Michael Oliver (1983), which provided "a counter to individualized case work". He mainly points to the "disabling society" (Oliver, 2009: 51) as the main addressee of this model of social work. According to P. Beresford "equally including service users' knowledge, enhancing participation in social work education, practice and research, are likely to advance its commitment to these emancipatory goals and participatory practice. This also offers the prospect of challenging unhelpful divisions between service users and service providers and is consistent with a real commitment to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice" (Beresford, 2014: 36).

Our contribution fits into this model of thinking about social work. Our goal was to recreate actions that enhance the participatory potential of the social work project "Homeful – Homeless" Box co-created by volunteers (academic teachers, students) and the homeless. In the chapter we present social construction of the homeless and its consequences to

the selection and the quality of social services in our local context. Next, we describe the "Homeful – Homeless" Box, presenting the idea behind it and how it evolved (distinguishing the following stages: initiation of contact, building of relationships and "closing" the contact) and describing efforts that were made to enhance participatory potential of "Homeful – Homeless" Box. The contribution ends with conclusions on further areas in which participatory character of the project should be developed and enhanced.

## Social construction of the homeless and its consequences to the selection and the quality of social services

Homeless people are frequently described by society in accordance with the ingrained stereotype as: "vagrants", "dossers", "tramps", "the ones who brought it to themselves", "alcoholics", "thieves", "people of no value", "dirty", "smelly", "always drunk" (Gramlewicz, 1998: 51–61). Often they are defined on the basis of their current social role, and such perception is often reduced to the way of thinking that they have been homeless "since the day they were born" (more in: Kostrzyńska, 2010). Observations people make in an instant about homeless people they meet in streets allow them only to make hasty assessments, depriving them of an opportunity to have more sensitive insight into the perspective of those who experience homelessness.

Numerous research studies, including the one carried out by Małgorzata Kostrzyńska,[2] show how unfair and simplistic such negative perceptions are. Participants of her study included homeless people with amazingly varied experiences, both personal and professional. They were educated, they had professional careers that definitely did not make them fit the stereotypical social representations about people with no home. The participants of the research carried out by M. Kostrzyńska (2014), which involved the homeless staying at a hostel for homeless males, listed numerous negative consequences stemming from homogenisation

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[2]  Here the reflections on the research study carried out by M. Kostrzyńska are presented, which involved homeless people who were living on the streets of a big city (in the years between 2005–2008) and people who were staying in a hostel that was created as part of one of the associations independently founded by a group of homeless men (between 2007–2013). The interpretative method of investigation applied to this research allows us to know the perspective of the Participants (in this case, the homeless). Additionally, social involvement of a person that plays a role of researcher-participant in the explored reality reveals areas of empowerment, but also difficulties that appear on the way. Similar research results are presented by: Tomasz Rakowski (2009), or Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas (2004).

of homeless people perceptions, which is represented in the empirical material presented below:[3]

> How people see us from the outside.....we won't help those drunkards, because they are doing drugs, they are alcoholics, drug addicts. Ok, so come and see yourself, instead of making assumptions about people. Others say: I won't help such trash (F)

> For others (passers-by, institutions – MK) we are almost like a plague. They don't feel like doing anything, they do what they need to do during their 8 hours of work and then they go home (Ł)

> Obviously, people look at you..... like you are someone from the margins. They looked at me like at some kind of charlatan (N)

> The society looks down on the fact that you are homeless. They treat the homeless as people of worse category (G)

> They simply treat such people....like they are on the margin of life (F)

Such a standardised, negative perception of the homeless imply certain ways in which representatives of mainstream society address them. The rule that regulates their social reactions to the homeless involves looking for objects typical for "that kind of people", that would fit their perception. In other words, type of a "matching" object reveals the hidden dimension of stigmatisation. An example of such stigmatizing matching of an object to "this type of people" may come from a situation from a hospital where one doctor wanted to give a homeless man new pair of crutches but the other doctor reacted to that saying that "such person should get an old pair of crutches, because after leaving hospital he would sell them anyway".[4]

The arguments mentioned above allow to draw a conclusion that fixed and homogeneous social perceptions of a homeless person definitely have an adverse effect on quality and effectiveness of help that is offered to the homeless by professionals, which was also documented in the studies.

The study by Kostrzyńska shows how the paradox of "institutionalised mercy" affects effectiveness of help. This paradox is expressed in the relationship between the professionals and the homeless, in which the latter do not meet the expectations of professionals, who base their selection of services provided to the homeless on a simplified definition of homelessness.[5] The author reconstructed interaction processes during which this paradox occurs. Her study revealed that homeless people

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[3] Similar conclusions from their research are presented, among others, by Monika Oliwa-Ciesielska (2004) and Marcjanna Nóżka (2006).

[4] This example comes from the study of M. Kostrzyńska that involved homeless people staying outside institutions.

[5] Also the study of M. Oliwa-Ciesielska (2008: 186–187) reveal the contradictory expectations people have when thinking about the homeless. Workers at homeless shelters, or social workers expect them to be active, to care about themselves and to cooperate; on the other hand, society expects homeless people to be stereotypically apathetic and passive, and decides to provide support on that criteria.

create two types of their presentations to others: *as a normal person* or *as a homeless person*[6]*.* Usually, in the beginning they choose to present themselves as *normal people.* In such a situation the person involved doesn't stand out from people who have homes, it is impossible to tell that this person is homeless. Prolonging homelessness gradually leads people to lean towards looking "like the homeless" (that matches the look and behaviour stereotypically associated with the homeless that exists in society), because it guarantees that more varied services can be obtained. The words cited below clearly indicate that:

> I talked to the nun....she is on that X street....nuns from Mother Theresa of Calcutta are there...There are many of such homeless people, truly homeless who do not want to stay in a shelter, they say they don't belong there, because, for example, they want to drink booze...and they would be bothered that they can't do that...Plus, they don't want to keep physically fit and well groomed people there. I give you my word, I was there. I talked to the nun...sir...you are able to work, we don't need you here...you can go and earn money yourself, work for a month and rent a flat...We only take those who are on the very margin, those who sleep at the gates, who smell, whose limbs rotten, who have lice, who are dirty...And you seem to be perfectly fine... you are clean, well groomed...But, nun...I am just saying I only wanted to stay here for a while....That's impossible...(D)

That study revealed that social construction of the homeless speeds up the process of inclusion into the world of the homeless. Self-presentation that involved looking "like a homeless person" accelerated the process of becoming one in a mental sense. It happened because social reactions to people looking that way started to affect their identity. Moreover, such a person started to be drawn in by the homeless people who had lived like that for many years.

Summing up, social construction of the homeless leads to a situation when this category of service users gets inappropriate help. Stereotypical perception of the homeless can lead to unification of the ways in which help is provided, or that such help does not meet expectations of the beneficiaries themselves.

Studies carried out for many years by Maciej Dębski, the member of Pomorskie Forum na rzecz Wychodzenia z Bezdomności [Pomeranian Forum of Help in Getting Out of Homelessness], confirm that. Dębski, thinks that the inadequate, thus ineffective organisation of the system of assistance for the homeless, stems from poor participation of the homeless in defining the services (Dębski, 2011).

The action described in this chapter was supposed to show an example of a participatory help co-constructed with homeless people.

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[6]   In the text the *in vivo coding* is used which, as colloquial interpretation of the phenomena, is taken directly from the language of the field of investigation. In-vivo codes are components of "theories" formulated personally by the producers of the text in question (Strauss, 1967) (in the text represented in italics).

Such help should take into account the diversity among homeless people, their vast experiences and potentials. This makes up the main part of our contribution.

# What is the "Homeful – Homeless" Box?

"Homeful – Homeless" Box is kind of a tool, which helps us to actively face the problems of the social service system for the homeless that is encumbered with the weak points that were mentioned above. The idea behind it and the process through which social services are provided will be presented in the following paragraph.

### The idea behind the "Homeful – Homeless" Box and its evolution

The idea comes from Eugenia Wasylczenko, the graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. It resulted from her B.A. thesis titled *Każdy może trafić na ulicę [Everyone can end up on the Street]*, that was created in the art studio of Krzysztof Wodiczko. The main goals focused on preventing the homeless from feeling that they are the separated social group, the other members of the society point their fingers at. Therefore, the Box[7] was placed in the city centre, becoming an integral part of it. Moreover, the author of the idea wanted to achieve empowerment of the homeless. Sheets of paper attached to the boxes were handwritten by them, signed, and they often contained a short information about their lives. It gave others the opportunity to know the person, whose particular needs are defined, a little better without labelling that person merely as "the homeless person".

The project we implemented called "Homeful – Homeless" Box is a continuation of the original idea of the Eugenia Wasylczenko. It has been transferred to the area of Łódź in 2015 by Łódzkie Partnerstwo Pomocy w sytuacji Wykluczenia i Bezdomności (ŁPP) [Eng.: Help providing Partnership in cases of Exclusion and Homelessness based in Łódź].[8]

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[7]  The box is the size of a big container. It consists of 12 drop boxes ("drawers" that can be opened). On each of them there is a list of needs of a particular person – the owner of a drop box. Gifts can be placed in the drop box, and they go straight to a box that is placed below, key to which is owned by a participant of the project and a volunteer. Pictures showing the Box and more information on how it works is available on the following websites: https://lodz.tvp.pl/.../skrzynka-domnibezdomni-stanela-na-pl-barlickiego; https://biuletyn.uni.lodz.pl/archiwa/10653 http://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/7,154682,23046615,spirala-zyczliwosci-ruszyla.html?disableRedirects=true (access: 28.02.2018.).

[8]  Currently the project is being carried out by the Centre of Social Innovations of the University of Łódź and by its interdisciplinary team consisting of researchers, academic teachers and students-volunteers.

The goal of the Box is to make it easier for the homeless to get out of their situation, but also to satisfy their basic needs, on their way to life stabilisation. It is a "link" between those who have found themselves in a difficult situation in their lives, having no home, and those who want to help, those people who have their homes and who are sensitive to suffering of others. This was described in one of the local newspapers:

> No fancy things – winter jacket, shoes, toothpaste, armchairs, pots. These are the dream of some citizens of Łódź. And everybody can help to make them come true. After several months of break, this unusual contact box that links the world of those who own things and want to share, and those who are in need and who dared to ask for help, is functioning again. It's white, it is the size of a container for recycling materials, equipped in paddle-locked drop boxes. On each of the locked drop box there is a room for a request. A drop box can only be opened by a person who owns a key. And everyone can put donations through a slot. If the requested things are too big to fit into a slot, phone number of the person in need or supervisor of the box is provided.[9]

People who help through the "Homeful – Homeless" Box can be sure that their support goes directly to a particular homeless person and that this satisfies the actual needs. Assuming that people want to help, but they often don't know how to do it and how to start, the Box offers some kind of a help that allows provision of support.

## Social work with the homeless in the course of the project

Working through the Box is a long term process. First of all, it is possible to isolate particular, subsequent stages that it involves. Secondly, cooperation between volunteers and participants of the project each time requires that they individually adjust to each other, adapt, and modify actions, and this takes a form of a continuous interactive process leading to mutual understanding. At the same time, working through the Box is an attempt to create participatory practice co-created with the homeless.

The work involves the following stages: initiating the contact, building of relation and "closing" the contact – a synthetized description of which will be provided below.

### Initiating the contact

The first stage involves initiation of contact, which means that volunteers begin to cooperate with potential participants of the project. Its aim is to initiate relationships and to set out rules of cooperation. This stage consists of several sub-stages: recruitment, conclusion of a contract and creating a description of needs.

9   http://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/1,35153,21196222,skrzynka-pomocy-poprosze-o-buty-i-paste-do-zebow.html?disableRedirects=true (access: 28.02.2018.).

Recruitment takes place in homeless shelters and outside institutions, which makes the process more varied. In shelters for the homeless meetings are organised during which volunteers present the idea behind the Box and the rules of its functioning, they answer questions from people who are interested in participation. Most frequently meetings involve individual/smaller groups conversations. On the other hand, reaching out to participants that stay outside any institutions usually takes place through street workers, who contact them on a daily basis. In such cases, street workers not only "chose" potential participants, but may also tell them about the Box, and they arrange first meetings between a homeless person and a volunteer, in which a street worker participates as well.

Once particular people declare that they want to cooperate a contract is concluded. The contract has a written form and it contains rules of cooperation between a volunteer (supervisor of a box) and a participant of the project. The formal character of the contract, the need for rules of cooperation and the obligations it imposes, upgrades the rank of the project and motivates those involved into taking actions. It contains the most crucial information which regulates mutual relations, for example:

- a name made up for the use of the project, written on the description of needs- this gives more anonymity to participants;
- rules of cooperation, such as the need for making of a list of needs and of its regular updating (satisfied needs are crossed out and new ones are added); or necessity for regular (at least once a week) checking and removing the content of drop boxes performed by participants;
- duration of cooperation, roughly defined for 3 months, and later on adjusted to individual needs of a participant;
- participants are allowed to resign from taking part in the project at their own discretion and they may be excluded for non-fulfilment of their obligations.

What is important is the contract includes obligations of both parties – the participant and the volunteer; therefore it is signed by each party.

After signing the contract, parties together prepare a description of needs of a homeless person. This stage allows us to reflect on what that given person really needs. Participants refer to their current stage in life, and what needs come with that. This way they are part of learning how to plan their future. That is why individual descriptions differ between each other, reflecting individual life situations of their "owners". Descriptions most often consist of self-introduction, short life story or the life situation in which a given participant currently is, a list of needs (material and non-material, such as job or therapy) and a contact phone number for a volunteer.

## *Building of relationship*

The second stage of working with the Box, after initiating the contact, is building of relations. It is not only about the deepening of the relation between volunteers and participants in the project, but it is also about making relations that go beyond that and involve relation with the world of people who have homes ("homeful") which is reflected in the name of the project. The box is treated as a kind of a "key", a reason to work with a homeless person in a comprehensive way. This work, on the other hand, is always individually planned, depending on the individual situation of a particular person, and it is always done after consulting that person. This stage consists of several sub-stages: regular "emptying" of the box and updating of the needs, building a support network, starting of a "kindness spiral".

Regular "emptying" of the box and updating of the needs simply prevents the drop box from being overloaded and allows access to people who want to help, not to let the drop boxes be "crammed". On the other hand, it is about learning how to be systematic. It activates participants who took up the responsibility of looking after their drop box.

When it comes to updating (crossing out or adding) of needs, it is meaningful for at least two reasons. First of all, it forces participants to verify their needs on a regular basis, taking into account what they have already managed to get, or to define what new needs appeared depending on the way their situation in life changed. On the other hand, crossing out needs from the list allows the supporting people to realise that the person they help is "in the process", that that person's situation is changing. This in turn, positively affects their willingness to continue helping such a person in changing her/his life situation. At the same time – as one of the volunteers stresses:

> Due to the box we manage to motivate homeless people to be active, only if it merely requires emptying of their drop box. They regularly verify their needs, update their lists, they think about it.

Building of social support network begins simultaneously with that previous sub-stage. "Social support network" means a network of various connections and relations between an individual person and members of those networks, which creates a system of mutual connections, and thanks to that its members can feel safe and have a sense of belonging (Kawula, 1996). Building of a support network means making contact with different institutions that provide support for the homeless, for example in a form of food, assistance in employment searches, access to medical care, or social assistance. The offered help focuses on "assisting, engaging in activity, supporting, watching, participating and helping to skilfully utilise impacts from the community" (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2007: 510).

At that stage, the work of volunteers also involves helping the homeless to reach for different forms of support. In relation to the above mentioned approach in social pedagogy, it is important to constantly activate the participants so that they make efforts to improve their life situation, to assist them in those activities that may initially seem overwhelming for them.

The described actions enhance the starting of a "kindness spiral".[10] "Kindness spiral" is strongly related to the above described support network, and in a way is a ground base for building of such networks. It is mentioned here on purpose, to enhance positive things evoked by the Box, also among people not related with any institutions. Their help comes deep from their hearts, and it is not an effect of any professionally organised institutional operations. What is important is that the "kindness spiral" is based on the rule of favourableness, which is reflected in positive relations of people that are sensitive to needs of individual human beings, who encourage people in need to take independent actions, and who enhance their approach that focuses on "successful solving of problems that bother them" (Kawula, 1997).

### *"Closing" the contact*

The third stage of working with the Box is "closing" of the contact – this is the moment when cooperation comes to an end, or it is rather a process that leads to that, as it not about one single situation, it is a series of activities that prepare participants for independent life, with no extensive support from volunteers. In fact, the process of "closing" of contact begins at the moment of the initiation of contact. It means that the participants are being prepared to become aware that they are themselves responsible for their own lives and that they should be aiming at self-reliance. It is worth highlighting, however, that in some cases, despite the closing of contact, the women who received accommodation, and started – to use their own words – *life on their own account,* had a strong need to keep in touch, phone contact at least, with the volunteers, to keep them posted about their current situation, to tell about their small accomplishments, or when they managed to handle some obstacles, which is represented in the following quote:

> Now I am staying in a social flat, and despite I am not homeless anymore and that I have started a new, better chapter in my life, I still cooperate with the volunteers of the Box. I know I can count on them, and I think they are wonderful people, and they are excellent at what they do. I am really glad that I agreed to participate in this action, and that I met people in my life, who wanted to help me and who are interested in my life and in a situation of my kids.

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[10] Kindness spiral is a concept brought in by a social pedagogue – Stanisław Kawula. It means positive relations that appear in a given community of an individual, which not only enhance support provided to that individual but also his/her self-development (Kawula, 2002).

# Efforts towards enhancement of participatory potential of "Homeful – Homeless" Box

Among our most crucial efforts towards enhancement of the participatory character of the project, the following can be listed: efforts to support voluntary and subjective decision about joining the project, actions in favour of participatory assessment of needs, actions aimed at inclusion of more members of the society into participatory practices co-created with the homeless, as well as efforts to enhance participatory effect on structural conditions of the situation of the homeless.

## *Efforts to support voluntary and subjective decision about joining the project*

A certain number of people live in a shelter for the homeless. Most frequently those people know each other, they make close relations, they communicate and support each other. Therefore, that institution allows to "seed the idea" of the Box, and the information about it is in a way spread by itself. It helps in making a decision for those indecisive ones, it makes it possible for them to think about becoming involved without a rush, to talk some of their doubts over. Encouragement often comes from the examples of other co-inhabitants, who received help "tailored to their needs", which, undoubtedly, is a great advantage of the Box. The group of first female participants of the project who were staying in a shelter with their children, was soon about to get social apartments and to start living on their own account. That is why it was important for them that the project satisfies their actual needs, at that particular moment of their lives. In case of those people it was also crucial that the first volunteers were people whom they had known before, and who did not represent any assistance providing institutions.[11] It seems it had a significant impact on them overcoming the first problems connected with doubts that they had. Also the open approach of the volunteers was encouraging and the fact that they believed that the participants were the only "experts" on their own life situation who can best define their own needs. The volunteers encouraged them to fully participate,

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[11] The results presented here show that homeless people often avoid contacts with representatives of institutions providing help (mainly those who live in the street), or they make contact with great distrust (inhabitants of shelters) because of their previous negative experiences. The fact that the volunteer introduced themselves as "outside" people, that is people who work outside assistance institutions those people they knew before, was conducive to making contact without the burden of previous unsuccessful attempts.

they did not judge, did not criticise, they allowed people to decide about themselves.[12] It made it possible to build a relationship based on trust.

In the case of the homeless staying outside institutions, their first meeting most often takes place in the presence of street workers. A big difficulty related to working in an open environment is to find a place to meet, that would be appropriate for having a peaceful conversation. The homeless "without a roof" move from one place to another, and those who "adopted" a piece of street space, are not willing to invite anyone from "outside" right away, and volunteers definitely fall into that category. Sometimes, a homeless person is ashamed of their own place of living, and avoids meeting anywhere around it. Safety of volunteers is another issue.

Very often cases of "self-enlisting" of participants occur, this is when they find out about the project through "the word of mouth", they see the positive effects it has on their friends.

### *Efforts towards participatory assessment of needs*

Both for the volunteers and the participants of the project, the idea of the Box makes sense only when it responds to actual needs. Therefore, a great focus in the project was put on the participatory assessment of needs. This process involved numerous questions the participants had to ask, not only themselves but also the volunteers: "what can I need, after all I am staying in a shelter, and I basically have everything I need". The homeless explained that the difficulty to verbalise one's needs most frequently was related to the fact that the help they had previously received, was in a way of a "universal" character. Usually they were treated by institutions of assistance like all the other homeless people who are in a similar situation. Most of the people participating in the project were focused on basic needs, on life that is "here and now". Pondering about their needs required from them to "step out" of the present and to look into the future. Moreover, "pouring" their needs onto a piece of paper, in a way, made them apply some kind of "hierarchy" while making the list.

At the same time, it is worth remembering, that shelters offer basic help to their inhabitants, that allow them satisfy their basic needs, that are necessary to survive. They provide help to satisfy hunger, thirst, shelter, warmth and keeping of personal hygiene.[13] Being stuck in such situation for

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[12] Such an approach is close to social assistance, which in social pedagogy requires balancing of relations between subjects of the operations (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2007: 135).

[13] In accordance with Abraham Maslow's (2004) pyramid of needs, first, the most basic needs should be satisfied, which are related to our life functions (need for safety, food, water) and later needs of higher rank can be satisfied (need for belongingness, respect, feeling of accomplishment or self-fulfilment).

a while, homeless people can stop thinking about other types of needs as they believe "they don't deserve more", or even "they can't dream of more". It was quite challenging to make the participants realise that they shouldn't feel ashamed or apprehensive about being judged by people "from outside" in a situation when they ask for something that the homeless supposedly "do not deserve" or that it is "something they shouldn't be asking for". The participants often asked: "can I ask for that?" They were worried about being perceived as greedy, or that someone may think their needs are inadequate given their current situation. Stereotypical perception of the homeless by most members of society and the feedback they receive as a result of such perception may be the reasons behind the above mentioned attitude.[14]

### *Efforts towards including various members of society into participatory practices co-created with the homeless*

Efforts towards including various members of society into participatory practices co-created with the homeless were carried out in two stages. The first one was involvement of those in their closest environment (most frequently roommates); the second one – involvement of more and more distant ones who constitute a support network.

Involvement of the closest environment revealed strong bonds between the participants of the project and those inhabitants of the shelter who were not participating in the project. The participants were not only sharing things they received, but they also included the needs of their co-inhabitants on their lists of needs. This was undoubtedly an expression of solidarity between them, who shared not only their living space, but who also felt compassionate about the similar life situation they were currently in. This is the way one of the volunteers describes this situation:

> We came into a conclusion that people who have almost nothing (from the point of view of people who have their own apartments, jobs, family) share with others with ease, and they do it in a natural and spontaneous way.

Mutual support among the participants has an important meaning also for implementation of the concept behind the Box. They reminded each other about their responsibilities, sometimes they helped each other with "emptying" the drop boxes, if a given participant was unable to do it

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[14]  The fact that such stereotypes function is also reflected in comments and discussions in social media which happened during the course of the project, which included critical opinions about particular needs of the participants, such as a hair straightener, kitchen appliances such as a mixer or a deep fryer. There were also voices from by-passers, who read the descriptions of needs, which implied that they were not entirely getting it: "why a homeless person needs a fridge?", that was despite the fact that the description related to information about the future social apartment accommodation.

(inhabitants often work, look after children, take them and pick them up from school or kindergarten, they do chores in the shelter).

Apart from engagement of the closest environment, also involvement of a broader society took place in the form of support networks. At this point it is worth highlighting that the volunteers' task is not to do work for the participants in their cooperation with different forms of assistance, it is only about helping them to initiate such contacts. Sometimes the volunteers help by providing information about the institutions that offer assistance; they "bridge" between the participants and social workers, for example. They mediate in relations between the participants and institutions, or act almost like "spokesmen" of the homeless.[15] In such situations the participants – as they describe – feel more confident, and they are treated better by officials (they aren't sent off and treated as objects, officials devote more time to them e.g. by helping to fill in required documents).[16] As they stressed, "institutions of assistance treated them with much more attention and were more interested in them".

Among those who replied to the request for help from the participants of the project, there were people who offered to finance renovation of a social apartment, who collected equipment and furniture among their friends for a flat, who offered their coaching work with the participants, who helped to prepare art workshops or who organised help by informing clients of their own restaurant about the needs of the homeless and prepared packages with food. Also companies offering employment for the participants got directly involved in help, a big pharmacy chain offered cosmetics, among other things, but also facilities which organise leisure time for children who also experience homelessness while staying with mothers at shelters.[17] It also worth to draw attention to the enforcement power of journalists, whose intervention helped to accelerate granting of a social apartment to one of the female participants of the project (she got it overnight, while before she had been waiting for several years).

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[15] About the roles of social workers, more in: (DuBois, Miley, 1999).

[16] The participants of the project often told about their difficult relations with social workers, or guardians. They often resulted from bad experiences or fear, that their parental rights might be terminated. One of the obstacles in making contacts with food providing institutions that distribute food packages turned out to be linked to a complex bureaucracy, with which they were not able to cope on their own.

[17] In contacts with people from outside, who declared their willingness to help, there were also difficult situations. Those involved instances when volunteers were treated as a cleaning service, when they were asked to pick up large size objects, or smaller ones but in large quantities, which were no longer usable or which did not match the needs of the participants. The fact that the volunteers did not agree to take them made those people frustrated. In those situation, volunteers were perceived as some kind of intermediaries in relations with all the people in need, those people claimed: "this may come in handy, you can give it away to someone".

These examples show how local communities support the functioning of the Box and how eagerly they get involved at its different stages, and how they are not indifferent to the new initiative. As the volunteers declare:

> The Box helps to break stereotypes – people start to realise that homeless people can have the same needs as they do. The Box provides not only material benefits, but it also contributes to making relations, building of bonds between the volunteers and the participants, between the participants and those who help.

That was how the Box has become a tool of "targeting the disabling society" (Oliver, 2009: 51), an actual link between the world of the "homeful" and the "homeless".

## *Attempts to exert a participatory impact on structural conditions of the homeless people's situation*

The participatory impact on structural conditions refers directly to radical social work, addressees of which are groups that do not hold authority. Those groups comprise of representatives of social minorities, which vary in terms of their qualities discrediting them in relations with the so called majority. The general aim of the radical social work is to make a social change, to look for ways to build a new social order, which would change the balance between the minority and the majority. The revolution should at least concern changes in social and political thinking (Payne, 1991). Radically oriented social actions are supposed to lead to consciousness raising, to change the society in which that social problem occurred, instead of changing the individual people who struggle to meet the requirements set by the "majority". It is impossible to eliminate social problems without introducing a significant social change. The change should not only ease the effect of marginalization and improve social conditions, but also affect structures that lead to social exclusion (Fook, 1993; Payne, 1991; Webb, 1981).

In accordance with the above statement, attempts to initiate cooperation between the homeless staying outside agencies and social workers is the most basic example of participatory effect on structural conditions. Cooperation with social workers should be based, in accordance with the Act on Social Assistance,[18] on diagnostic interviews they carry out in the place inhabited by clients. At the same time, social workers were ready to meet the homeless who stay at shelters, or who temporarily stay at their friends, but unfortunately they refused to have a conversation in a staircase, in a car, in a park or other places where some of the participants of the project

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[18]  The Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Assistance (Journal of Laws no. 64, item 593).

lived. This was the topic of many conversations with the management of the Local Social Services Office, in which we tried to explain that those locations were places those participants inhabit, and that they should not be using the Act to make excuses that they were "not allowed" to interview the participants in places other than apartment or rooms at shelters. In this case, the intervention of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights was not without a meaning. This organisation sent a letter to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy with a request to review their stance and to present their interpretation of the provisions of the Act which social workers need to observe. The reply from the Minister, rather general, on the one hand did not resolve the doubts of the management of the Local Social Services Office because of the lack of any particular guidelines, on the other hand, however, that general character allowed broader interpretation. This way, it was finally made possible to make diagnostic interviews also in the various places the homeless people lived (out of agencies), and to include social workers into the group of institutions that support the participants of the Box project.

Another example of efforts taken to exert participatory impact on structural conditions of the situation of the homeless were the actions that motivated and empowered the participants to establish cooperation with people who have homes ("homeful"). The initial reluctance was usually linked to negative experiences related to the stigmatizing treatment the homeless had to deal with that came from people who had homes. As it turned out, not only the negative perception of the homeless, present in the consciousness of the local community, is verified, but frequently also the perception of an often hostile local community, that have functioned for years in minds of the homeless, is changed through direct contact with people that want to help. One of the volunteers writes about the engagement of the donors, which "helps to regain faith in people, especially among the homeless, who were seriously let down by them in the past". It was significant for the participants in the process of regaining faith and trust for people from "outside" – outside the world of the homeless. This is reflected in the followings quotes from the participants and volunteers of the Box:

> After difficulties in her life and the bad people she met on her way, she can finally relax and build a new home for her and her family.

> I didn't expect that people would respond to such an extent, because homeless people are usually not perceived well by other people. Thanks to the help of the donors I gained many things, such as beds, a washing machine, microwave, desks or cupboards. Those are some of the largest gifts, apart from that I also got a number of various things you need in everyday life.

> Thanks to the Box she started to believe that people are good. We managed to make her gather up her strength and power to fight for a better future for her and her kids.

It is significant that attempts for social integration that were taking into account the influence of the sense of belongingness (in this case of homeless people), and what comes with it also of responsibility and reciprocity (Hause, 1981 after: Kacperczyk, 1996: 21). As the participants describe:

> the Box is something amazing, it gives faith in people, who are not indifferent to the fate of either the homeless nor people who have homes; because their hearts are open to others

> …by taking part in this project I had an opportunity to find out that there are people who help others without judging them. I met many kind people.

To sum up, the efforts taken towards exerting participatory impact on structural conditions of the situation of the homeless, the most important was making the society more sensitive to and aware of what homelessness is.

As the volunteers reported, stereotypes were abolished about way the homeless were perceived by people who have homes, which is reflected in the following quote:

> It is about making the society more sensitive, and what comes with it, changing the way it perceives the homeless, and it's about shaping the awareness about the needs and life stories of the homeless, by showing society that homeless people are not only those who have a problem with alcohol, but they are also people who take different actions to change their current life situations.

Additionally, the following words of the volunteer, in a way it changes the thinking about the Box as a "tool" for helping the homeless, and shifts it. After that shift the Box is perceived as support coming from people with homes – that activates them to help others.

> Thanks to it the people in need are getting help, but it also makes people stop for a while and read the descriptions that are placed on the box, and to think about other people's problems. It helps people realise that there are people among us who, for different reasons, are homeless, that they have problems and that they are lonely. Thanks to that box we not only help the homeless, but we also raise awareness and activate citizens of our city.

# Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to reconstruct the actions that enhance the participatory potential of the social work project "Homeful – Homeless" Box. In the contribution we presented the social construction of the homeless and its consequences to the selection and the quality of social services. We presented the ways in which we addressed issues of the participatory potential of work with the Box, among them: efforts to support voluntary

and subjective decision-making about joining the project, actions in favour of participatory assessment of needs, actions aimed at inclusion of more members of the society into participatory practices co-created with the homeless, as well as efforts to enhance the participatory effect on structural conditions of the situation of the homeless.

The experiences we gained during the course of the project implementation also allowed us to name areas in which the participatory character of the project could have been enhanced. We did not fully make use of the outstanding engagement of some of the participants to the advantage of the project. From the time perspective, we have a feeling that they might also have become volunteers of the Box, because there were evident situations when the boundary between the role of volunteers and participants started to blur. Words of one of the homeless people are quite symptomatic "help us, we will do it on our own", which also seems not to be exactly reflected in this project. In retrospect, we ask ourselves a question why we failed to hear that?

De facto, that failure to hear that voice reflects how our complex human identity and thinking about the homeless is flawed. On the one hand, we were academic researchers, on the other hand, we were promoters of the idea of the participatory approach in working with the homeless in Łódź. On the one hand, we perceived them as resourceful, on the other hand we did not listen to them carefully and failed to see their potential. This discrepancy in thinking about the homeless that was revealed, seems to be an example of difficulties that stem from simultaneous "immersion" into the academic discourse about homelessness and carrying out participatory projects.

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