
SOCIAL ALERT

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summit

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We will be facing two crises: economic and social

The pandemic in Poland has been present for almost two months. We are in the stress adaptation phase. After this, exhaustion will occur. It means the deepening of anxiety behaviours, lack of energy, depression states, increased annoyance, moods of resentment and sometimes even hostile reactions. Much public attention is paid to the risks arising from the economic crisis. Unfortunately, there is rarely a reflection that we are threatened with two crises at the same time – not only economic, but also social one. Both will put social cohesion to the test. Even though many people and groups have passed the solidarity test in recent weeks, there is a real danger of a breakdown in trust in public institutions and one another. We have to prevent this and reinforce social mobilisation. One way to achieve it is to create new social agreements, concluded by companies, institutions, but also between local communities and local authorities, or NGOs and administrative authorities, which will allow us to enjoy better lives in a few months when the economic and social consequences of the pandemic become widespread, clear and actually felt.

With each day, we are increasingly aware of the scale and multidimensionality of the problems we are facing now, but also those that we will have to face when we return to the “new normal” state. The current situation reminds us, once again, about the need to carry deep structural reforms (public services, in particular, health care and education, the tax and contribution system or the labour market). At the same time, it painfully exposes the weakness of public institutions. Moreover, current social problems that are just arising, may be increased: the division into various groups of interest, the perpetuation

of opportunistic, xenophobic attitudes and social lack of tolerance.

In this Alert, we present recommendations for actions that can counteract the break of social bonds. In our opinion, there is no public authority or social organisation that can effectively deal with all the problems and phenomena “released” during the pandemic on its own. We need the actions of administration and local self-governments to promote social activity based on the principles of self-support. Equally important are the activities of local groups – social molecules of self-support and self-organisation. Only they can reach those in need, but they can also counteract xenophobia, increasing moods of resentment or hostility.

A rapid, unprepared change in the lifestyle fuelled by fear

Older people, persons with disabilities, health care workers and their families live in a state of permanent danger. Stress also affects children locked in homes and violently transferred to e-reality. The network no longer is for playing and communication, but it is a place to carry out obligatory tasks. It also applies to parents forced to interact with e-school. We are all burdened with additional duties, but often without being able to rest from one another. Those adults whose work has not changed leave their houses every day with the feeling of danger that they can infect themselves and their families. There is a growing fear of losing their jobs or of lower incomes. Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are concerned about the future of their businesses and the fate of contractors, employees and their own families.

In view of this forced situation, we believe that mutual assistance, an attitude of subsidiarity, but also a concern for the mental stability of society, is now as important as

medical protection against the spreading of the pandemic. Psychological and psychiatric support is especially needed for the most vulnerable groups. These are, as follows:

- older people who live in greater isolation than younger generations because only a part of them know how to take advantage of the contact opportunities offered by the Internet;
- patients and persons with intellectual disabilities for whom closure, the need to adapt to epidemiological rigors, is even more difficult to understand and reconcile than for persons without disabilities;
- people experiencing domestic violence – forced quarantine or isolation causes increasing aggressive behaviours in the family. Remaining in one house, the victims do not call the police, where when reporting, they need to accurately describe what has happened;
- students, especially those who are still uncertain about the most important decisions for them, affecting their life paths, i.e. the dates and ways of taking 8-grade exams, baccalaureates and vocational exams.

Our recommendations:

1. Central authorities and local self-governments should carry sensible, community-building, and not threatening, educational and informative campaigns. It is important that the messages transmitted are constructed in such a way that they do not deepen the feeling of loneliness and fear.
2. Local self-governments and central authorities should ensure the efficient functioning of crisis

intervention centres. Free psychiatric help and hotlines have to be available for those in need. Financial support is needed for systemic support solutions such as Blue Line, We Give Children Strength Foundation or helplines.

3. Local self-governments, other local authorities and their agencies (municipal and communal social care centres) should cooperate with neighbourhood communities, NGOs and parishes to organise assistance for the elderly and those in need. It is also necessary to create centres (or take care of their functioning) – including those maintained by NGOs – providing psychological assistance, helplines, including for children and teenagers.
4. Introducing a “silent report” of violence as soon as possible. There is also a need for intensive and regular contact on the part of the police, interdisciplinary communal teams as well as social assistance centres with families who have the Blue Card or which are considered potentially at risk by local structures.
5. Expanding the list of institutions that can benefit from philanthropic tax exemptions. Unfortunately, the government has narrowed the list of beneficiaries of tax exemptions to the Material Reserve Agency, the Central Database of Sanitary Reserves and the list of entities (hospitals) designated by the National Health Fund (NFZ). There are no non-governmental or local government entities on this list and there are no entities that are engaged in activities other than medical and rescue activities.

The self-support movement can build social community

In times of crisis (both social and economic), especially, there is a need for social organisations carrying out various functions. Equally important are the activities of organisations responsible for the provision of public services (e.g. health care or social support) and those that are currently overlooked, which we refer to as the guardians of values. Those that promote and protect values that allow different sections of society to set out and spread ideological, religious, political, cultural or other needs, views, preferences and interests. It is also important to carry out the activities of watchdog organisations responsible for monitoring and making available to public the activities of public authorities. The potential of the entire third sector (NGOs) in building cohesion and solidarity should be appreciated and taken advantage of, as well as it is important to remain sensitive to the needs and threats communicated by various groups and environments.

Our recommendations:

1. Foundation (coordinated by local self-governments or NGOs) of expert organisations, teams and bodies promoting dialogue and cooperation. Universities, parishes, local media, business associations, etc. should be involved in this movement. Apart from direct, ad hoc assistance to people and communities in need of support, the following activities gain importance:
 - educational actions popularising attitudes and behaviours promoting solidarity between various social groups (generational, professional or resulting from the place of residence);
 - information activities on persons and groups marginalised and exposed to violence, discrimination or social resentment;

- initiating, with the use of modern communication technologies, various forms of local dialogue in which representatives of differentiated communities can take part; the aim should be actions triggered by the current needs, but also focusing on future tasks.

We underline that it is not rules and regulations, but examples and identification with authorities that affect social behaviour.

2. Good communication and access to information are the basis for social assistance activities. That is why some NGOs have to take on the task of developing communication skills in order to be able to reach people and communities who are doomed to "information monoculture". At the same time, we recommend withdrawing from regulations that hinder access to public information. It limits the monitoring of the authorities' activities and prevents community actions from being planned for the future.
3. The pillar of social assistance action is the skilful sharing of experience and knowledge (education for self-organisation), but also resources (e.g. equipment), including the creation of common resources that can be used by various social stakeholders.
4. In situations where there is violence, discrimination or stigmatisation of individuals or groups because of their (actual or presumed) differences, we must respond by also reporting these facts to the relevant authorities.
5. Let us form a local self-government of social experts. The voice of such self-government will be more prominent than the voice of a single entity.

In this way, we have the opportunity to replace the consultation, which is mistakenly called participation, with open dialogue. New social agreements will have to be concluded.

The role of experts, social activists, people involved in creating public agora (not only journalists) is to remain critical. Involvement has to be combined with openness, but also with the ability to critically articulate assessments, especially with public authorities. Otherwise, authentic social dialogue is not possible. Critical dialogue is best for sustaining social bonds as it is a protection against unwanted domination.

The formation of autonomous self-support groups is now the most important form of volunteering. Volunteering, where there is a place for everyone, is a manifestation of human solidarity. And without it, authentic voluntary community will disappear. We will become a collective of excluded, lonely and helpless and isolating egoists and nihilists. Community is born and reproduced in human solidarity, which is needed even more if there are more the lonely and helpless. If we do not take care of it, we are in danger of irreparably collapsing social cohesion. There will be extreme material and social inequalities. It can become a source of political chaos exploited by the selfish people.

Social alerts are an initiative of the Open Eyes Economy think tank and the Faculty of Public Economy and Administration of the University of Economics in Krakow.

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