Public Policy of Social Enterprises in Poland: the Impact on Tradition and Transition

A “social enterprise” is a relatively new term in Poland. It was first mentioned mainly in academic discussions and government documents after Poland joined the European Union and implemented projects relating to combating social and professional exclusion. Despite the gradual dissemination of the term, the issue of social enterprises does not seem to have been properly recognized in Poland. Social enterprises as institutional providers of public services remain on the margins of discussions on the transformation of the contemporary socio-economic system. Meanwhile, although the socio-economic and developmental potential is lower in Poland than in Western Europe, the impact of social enterprises in the field of the welfare state is becoming increasingly visible. This is due to systemic reforms such as decentralization, democratization and the withdrawal of the state from many social obligations, which has resulted in a profound institutional gap in many social services. What is more, it can be said that the role of social enterprises as suppliers of public services will grow in coming years because of the strong budgetary constraints at the central and local levels and the increasing pressure of service users, who try to influence social services during the phases of their development and delivery. Moreover, a system of institutional recognition of social enterprises is slowly being shaped in Poland, although it is still much less advanced compared to Western European countries.

Given the above characteristics, the article attempts to describe the current level of institutional recognition of social enterprises in Poland. It addresses the key complexities and the terminological heritage of “a social enterprise” by referring to the major theoretical approaches, i.e., the “earned-income’ school of thought”, the “innovation’ school of thought” and the definition of a “social enterprise” developed by the international research network EMES. The institutionalization of social enterprises in Poland after 1989 is discussed in the context of historical, economic and social changes. The article refers to the typology of models of social enterprises in Poland developed by Ciepielewska-Kowalik et al. as part of the ICSEM Project. The article provides an overview of the most current Polish literature and public statistical data on social enterprises.

Keywords: social enterprise, the third sector, model, institutionalization