Comment on Stephen M. Wunker, 'The promise of non-profits in Poland and Hungary: an analysis of third sector renaissance'

Abstract

Both the pre-war tradition and the real socialist system have influenced the form of the non-profit sector emerging in Poland. In as much as the pre-war traditions are continued by the church charities, lay institutions are established on the basis of state structures in the form of specific non-profit organisations subsidised to a large extent by the state (the so-called 'non-profit social institutions'). Perhaps in this way partnership relations will develop between the government and non-profit organisations which will continue to expand. The stage through which Poland is currently passing means that a coherent system of non-profit organisations has not yet developed and, what is more, it is seldom called a 'voluntary' or 'third' sector. The only formalised institutions are foundations and associations. It is evidently necessary to fill the gap in social service provision caused by government and market failures, and we may cherish a hope that such a system of non-profit organisations providing services to those in most need will soon be created in Poland.

Introduction

Poland is going through a period of socio-political transformation. Being aware of this fact is of great significance for the present deliberations concerning the emergence of a voluntary sector. The transition from an economic system where the state ruled out the existence of poverty and where full employment was guaranteed by the Constitution to a system based on a market mechanism is a slow process, as the past exerts influence not only on the economy but also on human mentality.
The current period of transition, in which areas of poverty have been so acutely exposed, shows that it is necessary to establish a voluntary sector to fill the gap between the state and market mechanisms for satisfying social needs.

We are just at the beginning of the road to organising such a system. The question of to what extent the pre-war tradition and to what extent the period of real socialism have shaped the development of a voluntary sector so far is being widely discussed by every researcher in this area. In this context, the work of Stephen Wunker is playing an important role as an attempt at a comprehensive approach to processes occurring in Poland, and as an attempt to find an answer to the question of how the past affects the shape of the voluntary sector and what are its prospects for development.

A major merit of this work is also the fact that it makes one ponder over the hypotheses presented in it and their verification. Of course, every evaluation depends on a researcher’s point of view. The accuracy of many observations made by Wunker, who is an 'outsider', should be admired. Hence it is no wonder that some of his opinions are disputable. Difficulty of access to relevant statistical data and their unavailability are an undoubted barrier to a fair discussion. Nonetheless, on the basis of the literature, accessible statistical data and my own research experience, I would like to take issue with some of the author’s assertions. I hope that this discussion will encourage him to continue his studies on the functioning of the voluntary sector in Poland and in other Eastern European countries.

The evolution of the third sector in Poland

Before the Second World War the voluntary sector played an extremely important role in assisting the state in satisfying social needs. Its importance should be appreciated, but it is rather hard to agree fully with Wunker’s statement that before the state socialists took over, private initiatives, particularly those under the aegis of religious institutions, provided the bulk of charity, education and medical care for the Polish and Hungarian people (1991, p.90).

It is true that charities, and particularly charities run by the Church, were providing services in the spheres of education, health care and, in particular, social welfare. They were also undertaking various activities in this respect jointly with the government. They also deserve to be praised for drawing the government’s attention to the most drastic social problems (unemployment, difficult housing conditions, hunger and poverty) and exerting a pressure to deal with them.