

BARKA REPORT

Background & Context

Further to recent discussions between the Barka Foundation and Dublin City Council regarding the social problems affecting Polish citizens living in Dublin, the Barka Foundation invited me to attend their conference and two day study visit to the city of Poznan where it is based. The Barka Foundation is a Polish social inclusion charity which provides information, outreach, transitional housing, and social economy employment and repatriation services to Polish citizens who are either homeless, drug addicted or long-term unemployed both in Poland and abroad.

Dublin City Council is leading out on the issue of migrant integration and interculturalism for the city and is developing an Anti-Racism, Diversity & Integration Framework Plan for Dublin City. Included in the measures that will emerge from this plan will be a need to form collaborative partnerships with both indigenous and international NGO's who share a common objective to support the social, economic & cultural needs of the very large migrant community in the city. Dublin City Council hopes to develop a relationship with the Barka Foundation which will lead to collaboration on projects affecting the lives of Polish migrants living in Dublin City. Dublin City Council realises that the Barka Foundation is in a strong position because of its expertise and commitment, to positively affect the lives of vulnerable Polish citizens living in Dublin City and that a Polish NGO like Barka is best placed to overcome the communication and cultural barriers that may prevent an Irish organisation from realising positive outcomes for these Polish citizens.

Study Visit

My study visit began in Poznan with a presentation of workshops and activities in the social integration centre of the Barka school. It was obvious that the participants in the workshops enjoyed what they were doing and when some of them spoke, they talked about how grateful they were for the opportunities Barka had provided.

My second visit was to the Social Economy Centre and Social Co-operatives. Most of the people here had been long-term unemployed or homeless or both. They were working on small co-operative projects which had the potential to be very successful. It was interesting to see how these people's lives were changing for the better as they now seen a future for themselves which included employment and greater social skills. The fact that co-operatives were being set up by individuals who had shared the same hardships in life helped to generate a sense of solidarity amongst them.

My third visit was to the hostel for the homeless. I was impressed by the work that the staff of the hostel carried out in such a challenging environment. Most of the people who stayed in the hostel had so many problems in their life including homelessness and addiction yet the staff were inspiring in their work and I have no doubt that this influences so many positive outcomes for the inhabitants.

My fourth visit was to the social housing settlement "Darzbor". This was a relatively new housing development. The construction of the houses was to a good quality. We met one of the residents who discussed his experience with us. He had many problems in the past but was full of praise for the way Barka and in particular Tomas Sadowska had changed his life.

On the second day in the morning I visited social co-operatives, social economy centre and social integration centres at Krzyzowniki, Kram & Kwilecka. These were very informative visits and it was rewarding for me to be enlightened by the innovation and hard work that was present.

I then visited the farm and social cooperative at chudopczyce. The farm is an amazing project with animals being raised and crops being grown by residents who in the past would have no experience of doing farming. They really enjoyed their work and the surrounding environment were all conducive to people who were attempting to rebuild their lives.

In the evening I went to the social economy centre in Drezdenko and Drzen Social Co-operative. The social economy centre was enterprising and busy, while the social economy centre provided the services that were needed. We had a joint dinner with the Barka members in Drezdenko with some lively and informative discussion.

On day three we had the conference at the Barka Foundation in Poznan. It was a wonderful day with speakers from different countries with many different perspectives on the lives of the most vulnerable citizens in our society. The Polish Parliament speaker talked about the huge problem that was caused by the mass emigration of Poles. He said that the Polish Government should provide money to agencies like Barka to assist these people in foreign countries. Representatives of English and Irish agencies talked about their experiences of interacting with vulnerable polish migrants in their cities. Polish citizens whose lives have been transformed by Barka also spoke about their experiences and how they had changed their lives for the better with the support of Barka.

Overall I am very impressed with the framework that Barka builds around the vulnerable individual. This framework supports the emotional, social and work skills development of the individual by providing psychotherapy in conjunction with increasing the individual's social skills and employment prospects. It is this dynamic framework that enables a holistic transformation in the individual and this is why there have been so many successful outcomes for Barka. Dublin City Council look forward to working with the Barka Foundation in the future.

Cormac O'Donnell
Strategic Policy Manager
Dublin City Council