

INTERNATIONAL DAY
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ERADICATING POVERTY THROUGH LOCAL & NATIONAL STRATEGIES

POLAND

POVERTY WATCH 2025



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK



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**Robert Bosch
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Poverty Watch 2025

Poland

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Poverty Watch 2025 – Key Conclusions

The report shows that to understand poverty in Poland, we must look beyond the headlines. Different measurement methods and the turbulent economic context of 2023-2024 paint a picture full of paradoxes requiring precise interpretation. The key conclusion is the fundamental difference between the effects of ad hoc interventions and the need for stable, systemic social policy aimed at ending extreme poverty and homelessness.

Key Conclusions

1. **The paradox of measures – decline in extreme poverty and income inequality, rise in consumption distance.** Data for 2024 indicate a decline in extreme poverty (from 2.5 million in 2023 to 1.9 million) and income inequality (Gini coefficient), resulting from, among other factors, minimum wage growth and child-rearing benefit increase alongside falling inflation. Simultaneously, however, the relative poverty indicator based on expenditure (GUS) rose from 4.6 million in 2023 to 5 million. This apparent conflict is actually a warning signal: during economic recovery and declining inflation, the consumption growth rate of the poorer part of society is not keeping pace with the rest of society, which increases distance and the sense of exclusion.
2. **Two faces of child support – current improvement, strategic delay.** The one-off increase in child-rearing benefit to 800 złoty brought an immediate positive effect, visible in current indicators for 2024: both extreme child poverty fell from 521,000 in 2023 to 364,000 (GUS data), and severe material and social deprivation of children (Eurostat data). Despite this, Poland has a major problem meeting the target for reducing risk of poverty or exclusion in this group (AROPE). This results from the fact that this indicator largely relies on lagged data on income and work from the crisis inflation year of 2023. This exposes the weakness of relying on a single instrument whilst neglecting the entire system, including family allowances frozen for years.
3. **Systemic "social gap" – consequence of political inaction.** The persistence of an enormous gap, whereby 975,000 people living in extreme destitution are formally too wealthy to be poor according to the Social Assistance Act, is a direct result of a flawed mechanism for verifying income criteria. When the extreme poverty threshold rises with inflation, social assistance thresholds do not keep pace with economic reality, let alone the minimum wage.
4. **Hidden dimensions of exclusion.** The report indicates gross underestimation of key social problems: transport poverty (affecting 2.5 million people), food poverty and the real scale of homelessness (over 53,000 people and still underestimated), which remain off the official policy radar.
5. **Superficiality of poverty reduction strategies.** The National Programme Against Poverty and Social Exclusion is a document whose objectives are undermined by conflicting political decisions. The lack of monitoring mechanisms and genuine social dialogue makes it a rigid strategy detached from dynamically changing reality.

Strategic Recommendations

The response to these challenges must be a transition from ad hoc policy to a system based on stable and predictable mechanisms.

1. **Eliminating the "social gap".** An urgent introduction of an annual, automatic indexation mechanism for income criteria in social assistance is needed, linking them to objective economic indicators such as the social minimum.

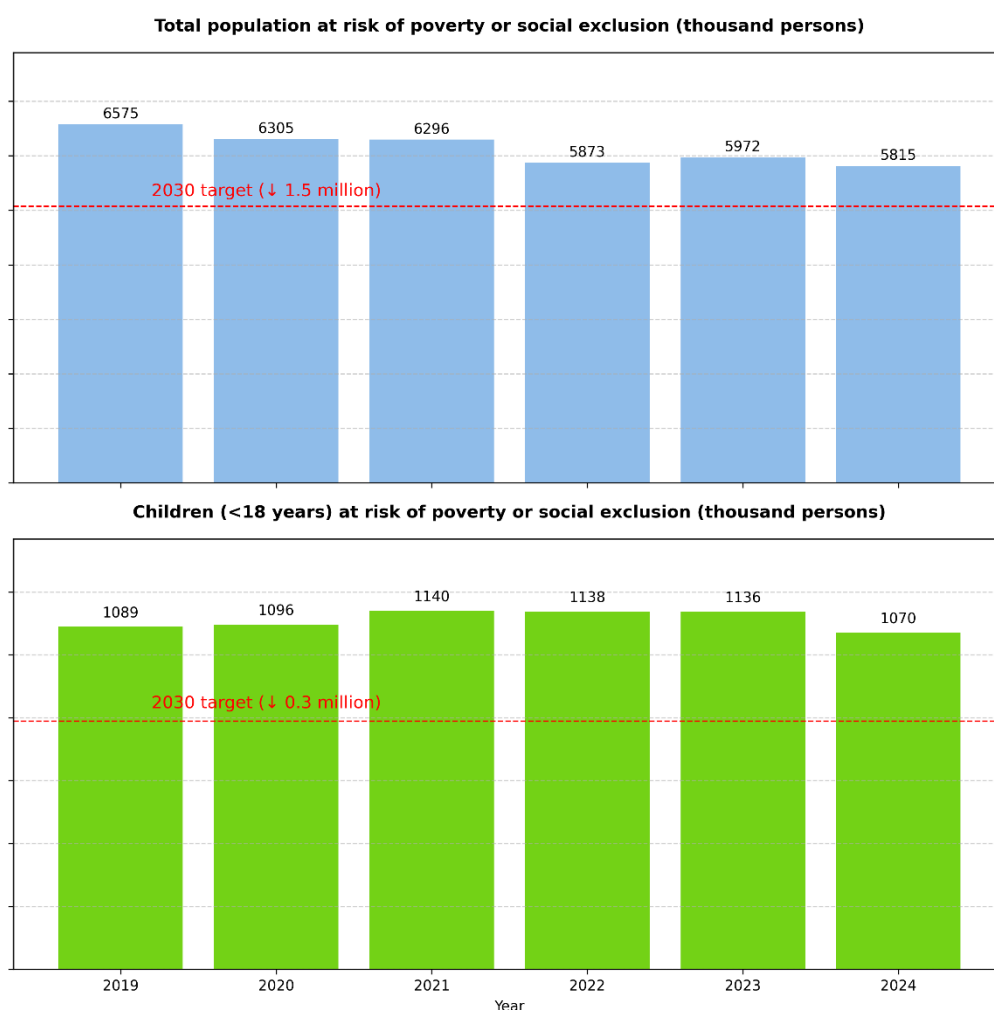
2. **Rebuilding the family benefits system.** A one-off, step increase in family allowances frozen since 2016 is necessary, along with introducing a mechanism for their regular updating. Income criteria in this system should be at least one and a half times higher than in social assistance, yet currently they are even lower. Transfers are effective in protecting against poverty, but they must become a stable and comprehensive system, not a tool for one-off interventions.
3. **Developing a credible strategy for reducing poverty and ending homelessness for 2028–2034.** Work on the new strategy must begin in a process of genuine partnership with social organisations and the voice of people with experience of poverty and homelessness. It must be based on reliable diagnosis, contain measurable objectives and effective monitoring and evaluation tools.
4. **Grounding policy in social rights.** Ratification of the Revised European Social Charter and its complaints protocol is essential, which will provide lasting legal foundations for fighting poverty and homelessness and subject national actions to international oversight.

1. Mapping Poverty and Homelessness in Poland

1.1. Polish Achievements and Failures in Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan Objectives

Under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, Poland has committed to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (according to the AROPE indicator)¹ by 1.5 million between 2019 and 2030. Within this main objective, the government has set a specific target: lifting 300,000 children (under 18 years of age) out of poverty and exclusion during the same period.

Eurostat data (EU-SILC) show that the total number of people in the AROPE group has fallen from 6.58 million in 2019 to 5.82 million in 2024 (a reduction of 760,000 people). This means that slightly over half (51 per cent) of the required reduction has been achieved after exactly half of the decade has elapsed. The overall objective is therefore being met according to schedule. However, the trajectory has not been linear – following a slight decline in 2020–2021, the indicator improved significantly in 2022, rose again in 2023, and returned to a downward trend in 2024. Further progress at approximately 123,000 people per year (slower than the current average of 152,000) would still suffice to achieve the target by 2030.



¹ Explanations of EU and Polish poverty indicators can be found in the appendix "Methodological Note".

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC AROPE.

Progress regarding children, however, is far from sufficient. The number of people under 18 years of age living in poor or excluded households (AROPE) stood at 1.09 million in 2019 and 1.07 million in 2024 – merely 19,000 fewer. After rising above pre-pandemic levels in 2021–2023, this indicator fell in 2024, but overall remains almost unchanged. Only 6 per cent of the planned reduction has been achieved, leaving a gap of 281,000 children to be addressed within 6 years. Achieving the target for reducing child poverty and exclusion now requires acceleration from the current 4,000 per year to approximately 47,000 per year!

It should be noted that these targets do not cover children and people experiencing homelessness, nor those residing in various types of residential institutions and facilities. These groups are not included in household survey-based indicators, and therefore are not reflected in the indicators cited above.

The Lisbon Declaration of June 2021 establishes the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, also signed by the Polish government. Its main objective is to end homelessness in the EU by 2030 through the implementation of five specific goals: ensuring that no one sleeps rough for lack of safe shelter; no one remains in temporary accommodation longer than necessary to find permanent housing; no one leaves an institution (hospital, prison, shelter) without an offer of appropriate accommodation; evictions should be a last resort, and when carried out, only with the provision of alternative housing. Furthermore, no one shall be discriminated against because of experiencing homelessness. The Platform promotes an integrated approach based on the "housing first" principle, focusing on the individual and their rights, supported by the exchange of good practices between Member States and the use of EU funds.

However, monitoring and assessing the implementation of these objectives in Poland is challenging.

1.2. Poverty and Homelessness in Poland in 2024 According to Polish Indicators and Research

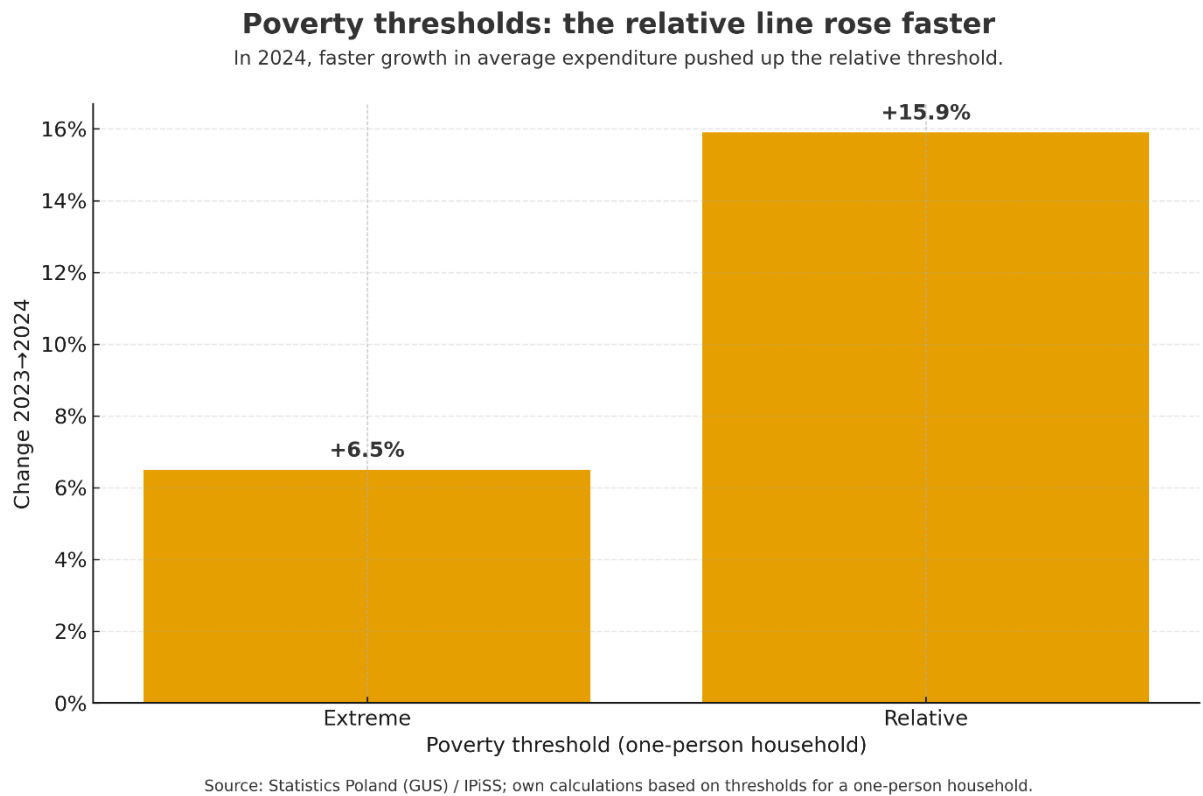
Economic Poverty

Socio-economic data for 2024 in Poland present a complex, at times paradoxical picture. A breakthrough came with the 60 per cent increase in the 500+ child benefit, combined with a substantial minimum wage rise and slowing inflation. Real average disposable household income rose by 14.1 per cent (GUS, 2025a). The national Gini coefficient decreased from 0.314 in 2023 to 0.300 in 2024, as the income share of the poorest 20 per cent of households increased whilst that of the wealthiest declined. The equalising effect was so pronounced in rural areas that, for the first time in history, the Gini coefficient for rural areas (0.292) fell slightly below that for urban areas (0.296) (GUS, 2025a).

However, clear progress on the income front contrasts with official poverty statistics, which are based on household expenditure. Despite income compression, the relative poverty rate based on expenditure actually increased from 12.2 per cent (4.6 million) in 2023 to 13.3 per cent (5 million) in 2024 (GUS, 2025b). This discrepancy stems from the methodology – incomes of the poorest households rose, but consumption of the median-income household grew even faster, setting a higher poverty threshold (50 per cent of the mean). Simultaneously, however, there was a significant decline in extreme poverty (based on the subsistence minimum threshold), which fell from 6.6 per

cent (2.5 million) to 5.2 per cent (1.9 million). This indicates that whilst expenditure gaps compared to the mean may have widened, there is less extreme poverty (GUS, 2025b).

The extreme poverty threshold rose by 6.5 per cent whilst the relative poverty threshold increased by considerably more (15.9 per cent). Some of the poorest households thus managed to escape extreme poverty, but also poor individuals and families with higher expenditure were left behind by the strong growth in the mean.

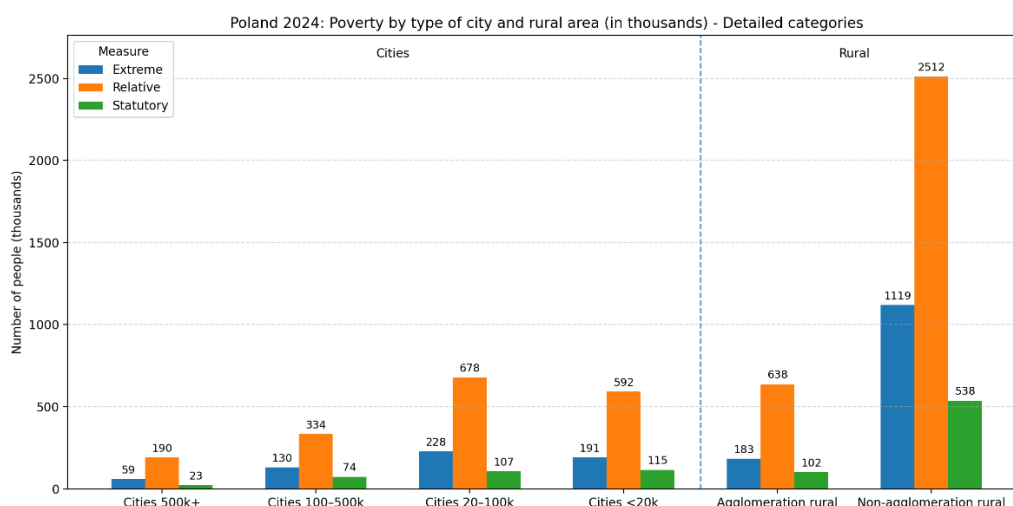


Aggregate data mask profound differences between demographic groups and territorial disparities. The increase in child benefit from 500 to 800 złoty per month contributed to reducing the extreme poverty rate for children (0–17 years) from 7.6 per cent (521,000) to 5.4 per cent (364,000) and by nearly half for families with at least 3 children: from 6.9 per cent to 3.6 per cent (GUS, 2025b).

Conversely, older people (aged 65+) experienced stagnation in extreme poverty and an increase in the relative poverty rate from 11 per cent (830,000) to 12.7 per cent (981,000), confirming that pension indexation and the increase in permanent social assistance benefits were insufficient to reduce extreme poverty and keep pace with the growth in average expenditure across society.

Households with people with disabilities remain disadvantaged – their relative poverty rate rose to 16.8 per cent, significantly above the overall rate and the rate for households without such persons (12.5 per cent).

Since 2023, GUS has published data on poverty in rural households divided into two types of areas. Agglomeration rural areas are rural territories located within the zones of influence of the largest cities, i.e., within commuting distance for work or education, where residents use urban services daily and are strongly connected to the nearby city. In contrast, non-agglomeration rural areas are located outside these zones, beyond the reach of large cities' influence, thus having weaker urban connections, a more traditional character, and more frequently being based on agriculture and local community.

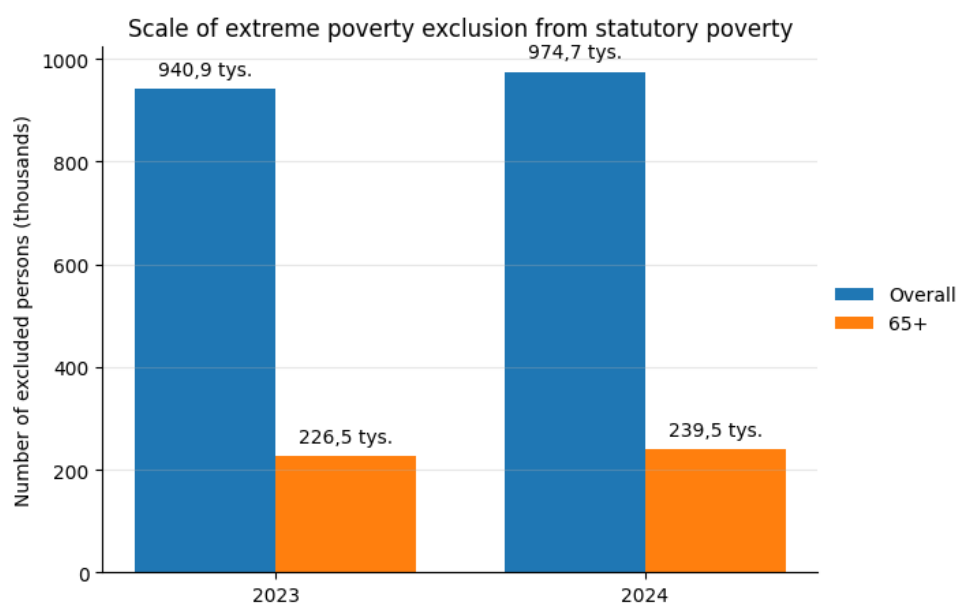


Source: own calculations based on GUS Annex (2025b) and population data.

In absolute terms, the largest number of poor people, regardless of poverty type, live in non-agglomeration rural areas. The smallest number of such people live in the largest cities with over 500,000 inhabitants.

In the 2025 report, GUS for the first time provided poverty indicators broken down by gender. Regardless of poverty type and age, the extent of poverty or deprivation was higher for men. This result is surprising given that analyses of EU-SILC income data show relative poverty rates to be higher for women than for men. However, the differences based on GUS household budget survey results are small and not statistically significant.

The most disturbing finding in the 2024 data is the systemic flaw in Poland's social protection system. The extreme poverty rate of 5.2 per cent is now twice as high as the statutory poverty rate of 2.6 per cent, where the poverty line is defined by income criteria used in social assistance to determine eligibility and benefit levels (GUS, 2025b). The social assistance gap in 2024 was 975,000. This many extremely poor people were not recognised as poor according to the law designed to help the poorest. This represents structural exclusion from social assistance, demonstrating a serious crisis in this system.



Source: Own calculations based on GUS Annex 2024 (BBGD) and population data.

The situation has been somewhat improved by raising income criteria from 2025 to the end of 2027. However, the increase is insufficient, and in 2026 and 2027 the situation from 2023 and 2024 will repeat itself unless the rules for verifying income criteria are changed. EAPN Poland has been raising demands on this matter for many years.

Transport and Energy Poverty

Transport poverty in Poland represents a significant and spatially concentrated problem, defined not merely as lack of infrastructure but as a key barrier preventing full participation in social and economic life (Białobrzaska, Maciejewska, Kucz, 2023). The National Social-Climate Plan defines it through a dual perspective (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2025):

1. demand side – as households' inability to afford transport costs due to low incomes,
2. supply side – as physical lack of access to public transport services.

In its most severe form, where low incomes and poor public transport access (below 30 per cent availability) converge, transport poverty affects nearly 2.5 million people (6.6 per cent of the population). The problem is considerably broader when considering all areas with poor transport provision – the number of potentially excluded people rises to over 8 million, approximately 22 per cent of the population (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2025). Geographically, transport poverty is most severe in border regions – particularly along the eastern border with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia – as well as in mountainous areas (Carpathians and Sudetes) and in the "internal peripheries" of voivodeships.

The consequences of this exclusion are profound and permeate all aspects of life. Residents of transport-poverty-affected regions are often forced into so-called compulsory motorisation. Owning an old, unreliable car becomes a necessity, creating a significant financial burden competing with other basic needs (Białobrzaska et al., 2023). This directly impacts economic wellbeing: 38 per cent of residents in affected areas forego employment opportunities due to mobility constraints. Moreover, lack of transport severely restricts access to healthcare: 71 per cent of people in excluded areas limit

visits to medical specialists, and 11 per cent forego them entirely, leading to long-term health deterioration (Białołbrzeska et al., 2023).

For Polish youth, transport poverty acts as a key mechanism of intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. As many as 44 per cent of secondary school students who considered transport options state that accessibility was the decisive factor in school choice, often forcing them to attend a closer but less suitable institution (Komornicki, 2024). Educational pathway restrictions are compounded by social isolation. Nearly half (49 per cent) of all young people have missed social gatherings with friends due to transport problems, and 29 per cent believe these barriers negatively affect their relationships and number of friends (Komornicki, 2024). The introduction of the EU emissions trading system for transport (EU ETS2) may worsen the situation. Analysis based on 2023 data shows that for the poorest 20 per cent of households, a carbon price of EUR 45 per tonne will increase their transport costs by 35 per cent, compared to just a 13 per cent increase for the wealthiest quintile. This means further deepening of spatial and social inequalities (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2025).

The forthcoming introduction of EU ETS2 in 2027 will significantly intensify the challenge of energy poverty in Poland through direct increases in coal and gas heating costs. According to recent simulations, the new climate charge will cause the national energy poverty rate to rise by 1.5 percentage points by 2032, with this increase persisting even with implementation of extensive thermal modernisation investments (Sokołowski, Mazurkiewicz, 2025). This translates into a direct financial shock for households, with projected annual energy expenditure increases for 2027–2032 ranging from 400–800 złoty for single-person households to 600–1,800 złoty for multi-person households.

To mitigate this impact, Poland will utilise the Social Climate Fund (SCF), which provides approximately 45 billion złoty between 2026 and 2032. The fund allows for a dual approach: direct income transfers and energy efficiency investments. Direct transfers will be essential to protect low-income households. Annual payments of 700–1,100 złoty for single-person households and 1,100–2,300 złoty for multi-person households are proposed. The support system targeted at those defined as energy poor would initially cover approximately 2.5 million households in 2027. The number of beneficiaries would decrease to 700,000 by 2032 as incomes rise and thresholds remain unindexed (Sokołowski, Mazurkiewicz, 2025).

Food Poverty

A recent study based on data from the Household Budget Survey (BBGD) from 2023 sheds new light on the scale and nature of poverty in Poland, indicating potential underestimation of the problem in official statistics and an alarming scale of food poverty (Dudek, 2025). Methodological analysis shows that the original OECD equivalence scale used by GUS to compare living standards of poor households may overestimate so-called economies of scale. This leads to underestimation of extreme poverty extent. According to the study's findings, applying an equivalence scale based on the subsistence minimum methodology, which more precisely reflects expenditure necessary for survival, would raise the extent of extreme poverty in Poland from the official 6.6 per cent to 12 per cent in 2023.

Particularly concerning are the findings regarding food poverty, defined as the inability to afford food expenditure at a level ensuring biological survival. The study's author argues that significant economies of scale do not occur with food, therefore the appropriate measure is per capita expenditure analysis (Dudek, 2025). Using the value of the food basket from the subsistence minimum as the food poverty threshold (377.93 złoty per month per person in 2023), the study revealed that this problem affects as many as 42.4 per cent of the population (Dudek, 2025).

Analysis of the relationship between income and food poverty confirms that these phenomena are closely interconnected. As many as 88 per cent of people classified as extremely poor according to the subsistence minimum also suffer from extreme food poverty (Dudek, 2025). This phenomenon particularly affects the most vulnerable social groups. Among married couples with at least 3 children, the extreme food poverty rate reaches nearly 70 per cent, and in households subsisting on social benefits it approaches 60 per cent. These findings represent an important signal that despite social support, the food security of many Polish families is seriously threatened, and the scale of this problem remains largely unnoticed in official discourse on poverty.

Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy's survey of homeless people, conducted on the night of 28–29 February 2024, identified 31,042 people experiencing homelessness across Poland. This figure is underestimated for both the Polish population and foreigners. The survey registered only 1,950 citizens of other states in February 2024, which – whilst significant – represents merely a fraction of the actual scale of the problem (Szarfenberg et al., 2025).

Official data are critically flawed due to the systematic omission of the large population of Ukrainian refugees residing in collective accommodation centres (OZZ). These centres, established under special legislation following the Russian invasion in 2022, function as government-organised shelters providing basic accommodation and meals. Although not formally classified as homeless shelters, their residents meet the legal definition of a person experiencing homelessness crisis in Poland, as they lack safe, permanent accommodation.

Combining official data with the latest available OZZ data produces a dramatically different picture of homelessness in Poland. In June 2024, just months after the ministerial survey, approximately 22,390 refugees were living in OZZ (Szarfenberg et al., 2025). Adding this figure to the officially counted homeless population yields a corrected total of approximately 53,400 people experiencing homelessness in Poland in the first half of 2024. Foreigners, almost exclusively refugees in OZZ, comprised over 45 per cent of the actual, combined homeless population.

The scale of statistical underestimation varies dramatically by region, revealing inconsistent approaches to data collection. The discrepancy was most visible in Mazowieckie and Dolnośląskie voivodeships, where the official survey managed to capture merely 4 per cent and 2 per cent respectively of the estimated number of refugees residing in OZZ (Szarfenberg et al., 2025).

The OZZ system itself constitutes a parallel form of institutional homelessness management in Poland. A key turning point was the legislative change on 1 July 2024. The popular compensation programme for private hosts (40+) was terminated and state support was consolidated exclusively within OZZ contracted by voivodeships, generally requiring accommodation of at least 10 people in OZZ. This led to a significant wave of closures – the number of active centres fell from 1,071 in June 2024 to 939 in December 2024 (Szarfenberg et al., 2025). The resident population also decreased, from 22,400 in June to 18,190 by the end of 2024. Despite this reduction, the system still provides crucial shelter for the most vulnerable groups – including seniors, people with disabilities and single mothers with children. They are unable to transition to the private rental market and constitute a significant, though invisible, segment of Poland's population experiencing homelessness crisis.

The government seeks to reduce the number of refugees living in OZZ. One method, beyond introducing higher occupancy limits and fees, is support for those deciding to leave OZZ, served by the Ministry of Interior and Administration's project "Together Towards Independence".

1.3 Perspectives for 2025–2026 – Three Scenarios

We present three possible pathways for 2025–2026. Each is based on the same initial facts: in 2024, extreme poverty clearly fell, but the consumption gap between the bottom and middle of the distribution widened; the "social gap" in social assistance is re-emerging; energy and transport costs are growing in importance in the budgets of the lowest earners. The scenarios below are a tool for discussing what awaits us "if...", and how the government should respond to limit social costs.

The baseline scenario, stability with short respite, is the most probable. The economy moves forward at a steady pace, prices generally calm down, and real wages continue to grow, though more slowly than the previous year. Unemployment remains low. In the second half of 2025, energy bills rise following partial withdrawal of protections, but the scale of increases does not turn household budgets upside down.

In practice, this means extreme poverty remains low or decreases slightly further. The poorest families experience improvement, but part of this "respite" is consumed by energy and housing costs. Relative poverty may remain slightly above 2024 levels, as the middle of the distribution increases consumption faster (restaurants, services, private transport) than lower income groups. The most vulnerable areas are non-agglomeration rural areas (expensive commutes, lack of public transport) and households with high fixed costs (elderly singles, families renting flats).

Indicative rates for extreme poverty are approximately 4.8–5.2 per cent in 2025 and 4.9–5.4 per cent in 2026. Relative poverty (expenditure-based) will be approximately 13.2–13.8 per cent in 2025 and 13.0–13.8 per cent in 2026.

What to do now? Maintain and better target energy protections for the poorest. Introduce automatic, annual indexation of social assistance thresholds and family benefits, including substantial increases to family benefits (to close the "social gap"). Energy efficiency investments should be directed where bills constitute the largest part of the budget (housing stock in the worst condition).

The fragile improvement scenario. Inflation falls faster than anticipated, and energy increases are milder due to lower wholesale prices and/or better income protections. Real wage growth also encompasses lower quintiles.

What does this mean in practice? Extreme poverty clearly decreases, and relative poverty stops growing – improvement begins to "spread" more widely, not just to the urban middle of the distribution. Families with children experience benefits not only in their wallets (800+), but also in services (greater availability of nursery and healthcare), which alleviates the care trilemma problems (see next chapter).

Indicative rates for extreme poverty are approximately 4.4–4.7 per cent in 2025 and 4.0–4.5 per cent in 2026, and for relative poverty approximately 12.8–13.3 per cent in 2025 and 12.5–13.0 per cent in 2026.

What to do now? Transform the "respite" into lasting change: index thresholds and benefits, develop community social services (personal assistance, supported housing), strengthen public transport in municipalities with low service availability.

The rising cost of living scenario. Fixed costs of energy and housing rise more than expected; inflation remains elevated, and real wages slow. For some households (elderly singles, large families, people with disabilities), bills again begin to determine all other budget decisions.

What does this mean in practice? Extreme poverty may rebound upwards, and relative poverty increase more clearly, as the middle of the distribution maintains consumption whilst the bottom cuts it. The risk of "survival strategies" with high social costs increases: heating "below comfort", foregoing medication, compulsory motorisation at the expense of food – mechanisms well known from the chapter on hidden dimensions of poverty (see next chapter).

Indicative rates in this scenario – extreme poverty reaches approximately 5.5–6.0 per cent in 2025 and 5.8–6.5 per cent in 2026. Relative poverty will be approximately 14.0–15.0 per cent in 2025 and 14.5–15.5 per cent in 2026.

What to do now? Activate "safety brakes": accelerated verification of income criteria and benefit amounts, energy vouchers and higher housing allowances for the poorest, temporary reduction of fixed components in bills for vulnerable recipients, shortened pathways to services (debt counselling, housing support). Thermal modernisation of the worst-quality stock should be accelerated and SAN/Housing First expanded to prevent increases in economic homelessness.

These three scenarios are not competing forecasts, but a navigational map. They show which signals to monitor and what decisions to make to maintain course towards a society with less extreme poverty and smaller gaps in living standards – not just on graphs, but in the lives of specific people and families.

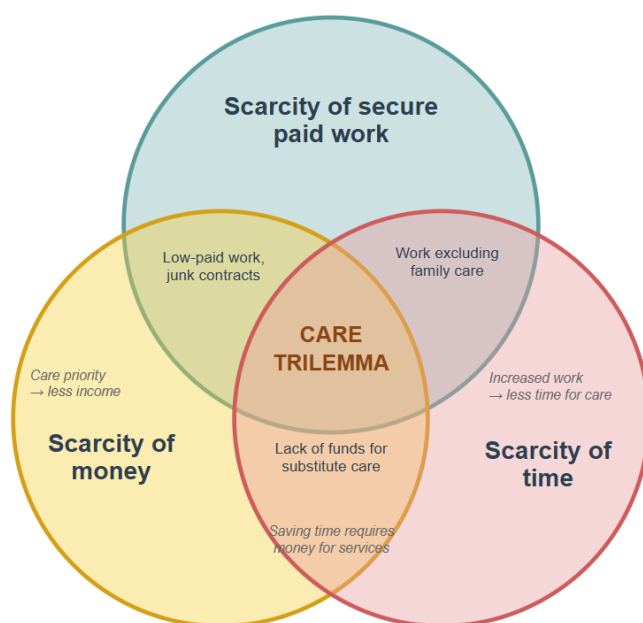
2. Poverty in Individual Experience and Problems of Social Work

2.1 The Care Trilemma – Living Experience of Poverty and Insecurity

The care trilemma is a situation in which low-resource families experience simultaneous deficits in three key dimensions: paid work, money and time (Daly, 2025). Improving the situation in one dimension inevitably leads to deterioration in the others – increasing work time limits time for care, giving up work for care reduces income, and saving time requires financial resources for childcare or care for adults with greater needs in this regard.

Care trilemma: intersection of three scarcities

Based on research by Daly (2025) - rEUsilience



Research from the rEUsilience project in six European countries shows that low-income families do not make real choices but are forced into constant juggling of deficits: "action potentially and partially solving problems in one dimension leads to deficit and potential deprivation in another key resource" (Daly, 2025). The problem intensifies through overlapping disadvantages – unemployment, low wages, health and housing problems.

The trilemma particularly affects women, who bear primary responsibility for managing care and household budgets, and migrant families deprived of extended family support. This mechanism reveals that work-life balance is a luxury unavailable to low-resource families, who instead of balance experience structural compulsion to accept the least disadvantageous options (Daly, 2025).

Table. Care Trilemma Mechanisms

Mechanism	Characteristics	Causal Sequence	Consequences
1. TRADE-OFF MECHANISM	Improvement in one dimension	Work → Time: More work hours = less time for care Time → Money: Care priority = loss of work income	Impossibility of optimising all dimensions simultaneously

	automatically worsens the situation in others	Money → Work: Need for income = compulsion to intensify work	• Constant balancing between deficits • Lack of possibility for real resolution
		Time spiral: Lack of time → organisational chaos → ill-considered expenses → higher costs	• Deepening problems over time
2. DEFICIT ACCUMULATION MECHANISM	Initial lack in one area triggers a spiral of escalating problems	Financial spiral: Low income → additional work → exhaustion → worse care → children's problems Care spiral: Neglected care → health/educational problems → additional expenses → fewer resources	• Domino effect between dimensions • Increasingly difficult escape from crisis • Intergenerational poverty transfer
3. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT MECHANISM	Apparent "choices" are actually compulsion to choose between bad options	Illusion of choice: decision between work and care = choice between poverty and child neglect Limited alternatives: all available options are unfavourable Loss calculation: families choose the "least bad" solution, not the optimal one	• Lack of real decision-making autonomy • Feeling of being trapped in the situation • Impossibility of long-term planning • Psychological burden of "bad choices"

Source: own elaboration based on M. Daly (2025).

Qualitative research provides a vivid picture of daily struggles and survival strategies of low-resource families in Poland. A study conducted in 2023 by Kurowska, Kasperska and Daly (2025) was based on focus group interviews with low-income parents, single mothers and families with multiple children in their care. The study reveals how families experience the care trilemma and provides important conclusions about poverty and deficiencies in Polish social policy.

The Double Pressure of Inflation and Insecure Labour Market

The most significant challenge reported by families was the overwhelming pressure of rising living costs (the study was conducted in 2023). High inflation experienced in the years preceding the study had a tangible and severe impact on household budgets. It forced families into constant difficult choices. As one participant bluntly put it: "Once you'd leave with a wallet with a 100-złoty note, go to the shop for some bigger shopping, now 100 złoty is a small bag, and you don't even know what's in it. You spent 100, you look and say: 'Good God, on what?'" (Kurowska et al., 2025).

Financial pressure was compounded by a second pressure, namely wage stagnation and insecure labour market. Even among those with professional qualifications, incomes were not keeping pace with inflation. A translator living in Warsaw noted: "My salary remains at the same level... Meanwhile all my expenses are rising because of inflation – electricity, water, all utilities, and even, I don't know,

daily shopping, right?" (Kurowska et al., 2025). For those in low-paid positions, the situation was characterised by increased competition and informal employment, including the spread of so-called "junk contracts", which offer limited rights and social protection. The combination of rising costs and stagnant, insecure incomes generated constant anxiety and prevented many families from building a financial safety cushion.

Coping Strategies: Resilience and Its Costs

Faced with these challenges, families demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. However, these strategies often came with significant personal costs. To make ends meet, many engaged in meticulous financial management, home food production and taking on additional work. Taking a second job became a common strategy, as one participant from Warsaw explained: "When all this started, many of my friends and I just started looking for a second job. As you mentioned, with rising mortgage rates and everything else, people just started working much more" (Kurowska et al., 2025).

However, work intensification in families created a vicious circle, where the physical and psychological burden of more work led to health problems. This generated new healthcare costs, which consumed the additionally earned money. The psychological and physical resilience of families is thus weakened, and more work can be harmful to wellbeing in the longer term.

The Role of Support: Primacy of Family and Gaps in the Welfare State

The study emphasises the crucial role of informal support networks, predominantly family. Parents, and grandmothers in particular, were described as "golden grandmothers and grandfathers", providing essential and valued support in the form of free childcare, housework and occasional financial assistance (Kurowska et al., 2025). For many, especially single mothers, this family support was the only factor keeping them afloat socially.

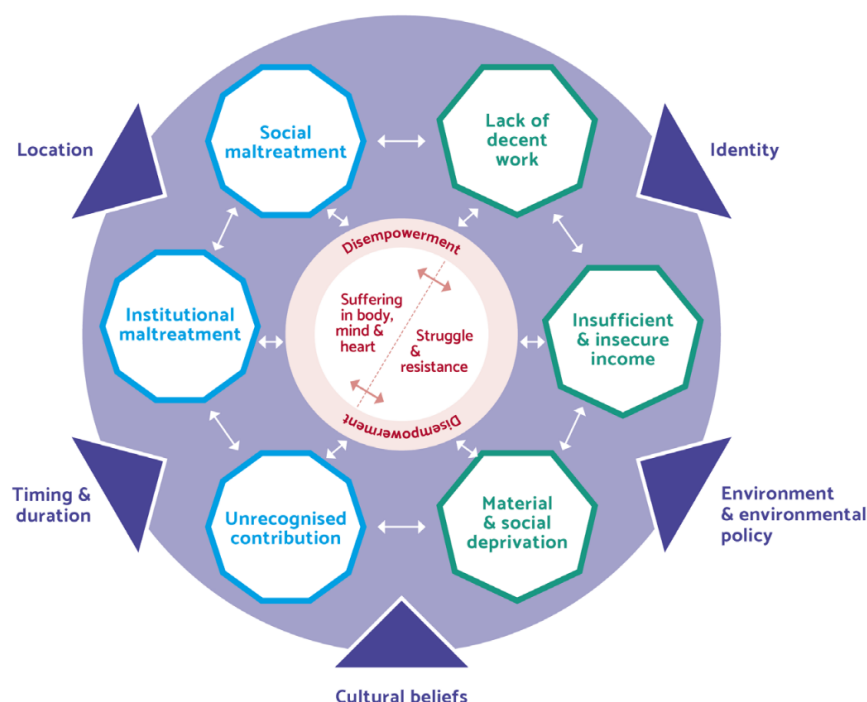
In contrast to family, formal support from the state was perceived as inadequate and difficult to obtain. Whilst cash benefits such as the Family 800+ programme were appreciated, participants strongly criticised the social policy system for its inability to provide basic public services. Two areas met with the greatest criticism: childcare and healthcare. Despite Warsaw having high levels of access to public nurseries, one mother of four noted: "It's incredibly difficult to return to work" due to the almost complete lack of public nursery places for children under 1 year of age (Kurowska et al., 2025).

The failure of the public healthcare system was described in even more dramatic terms, with participants telling harrowing stories of long queues and inability to access specialists. One woman shared her husband's story, who after a workplace accident "couldn't get rehabilitation and couldn't return to work... He waited for a psychiatrist for almost a year" (Kurowska et al., 2025).

2.2. Hidden Dimensions of Poverty Through Individual Stories

Full understanding of the realities of living in poverty in Poland requires looking beyond purely economic indicators and qualitative research. Statistics on income and material difficulties and qualitative research on family resilience are essential, but they do not capture the multidimensional life realities of the poorest. A valuable tool for deeper analysis is the hidden dimensions of poverty model, developed through participatory research by ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford (Bray et al., 2019). The model, developed in collaboration with people with direct experience of poverty, researchers and practitioners, identifies 9 fundamental, interconnected dimensions of poverty.

Multidimensional Poverty Model



Source: The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty. International Participatory Research, ATD Fourth World, University of Oxford, 2019.

The concept of hidden dimensions of poverty can be understood from the perspective of correlated adversity (Desmond and Western 2018). This is the overlapping and mutual reinforcement of various forms of deprivation that intersect across multiple dimensions of life – material, social, physical and psychological – and institutions such as schools, hospitals or prisons. This is not just about the care trilemma, but about situations where poverty co-occurs with addictions, mental illness, violence, housing instability, health problems and neglected neighbourhoods, creating a particularly complex situation. Different dimensions of deprivation are not independent of each other but cluster together, where one problem leads to another – for example, health problems hinder employment, which deepens income deficits, which in turn limits access to healthcare, creating a spiral of mutually determining difficulties from which it is very difficult to escape.

Below we have applied the ATD model to personal stories from the "Report on Poverty 2024" by Szlachetna Paczka (WIOSNA Association, 2024). This approach allows us to move from individual cases to a systemic understanding of how poverty destroys human dignity.

Core Experience of Poverty: Suffering, Disempowerment and Resistance

The model refers primarily to the core experience of poverty, which consists of 3 often invisible dimensions: suffering, disempowerment and resistance.

Suffering entails constant psychological and physical stress, the daily reality of fear and shame. This is visible in the story of Mrs Modesta, who sits in darkness from "fear of rising electricity prices", which "took away her last light in life".

Disempowerment manifests as lack of control over one's own life. This is perfectly illustrated by the family whose home was destroyed by flooding – they had no real choice and had to accept

accommodation offered to them in a flood-prone area, as refusal would mean losing their place in the queue.

Resistance – the model also recognises the active struggle of people living in poverty. This is not about protest, but about the profound resilience of a father like Tomasz, who works 3 jobs and denies himself meals to secretly slip his work sandwiches into his children's school bags.

Relational Dynamics: How Society Treats the Poor

Beyond internal experience, poverty is influenced by relational dynamics, i.e., how individuals are treated by society and its institutions.

Institutional maltreatment occurs when systems designed to help cause harm. Mr Wiesław, suffering from chronic lung disease, was effectively denied a life-saving transplant because he was too malnourished to survive the operation – a vicious circle the healthcare system could not break.

Social maltreatment includes stigmatisation and prejudice leading to social exclusion. The story of Arleta's daughter, Basia, who pretends to be ill to avoid school on trip days she cannot afford, is a moving example of how social judgement wounds children and pushes them into isolation.

Unrecognised contribution is another dimension – the skills and work of people in poverty are not appreciated. Mrs Natalia, who provides constant, comprehensive care for multiple ill and disabled family members, possesses enormous skills and strength, yet this remains completely unnoticed when potential employers reject her due to her physical disability.

Material and Social Deprivation

The dimensions of internal experience and relational dynamics rest on a foundation of more widely recognised forms of deprivation related to material and social needs.

Lack of decent work and insufficient and insecure income constitute a central problem. Mr Krzysztof, a qualified chef who lost his job, saw his disability pension income reduced to just 250 złoty per month after paying rent and medication – an amount making survival impossible.

Social and material deprivation means lack of access to basic goods such as adequate housing, sanitary conditions and healthcare. This is the reality of a 5-person family living in 20 m² with a plastic bowl instead of a bathroom, and the 80 per cent of seniors who cannot afford to fill all their prescriptions – a crisis symbolised by the Museum of Unfilled Prescriptions from the report.

Analysis of human stories in light of the hidden dimensions of poverty model clearly shows that poverty in Poland is a complex, vicious circle. These dimensions are not separate but deeply interconnected. Therefore, any effective anti-poverty policy must address not only income and expenditure but the entire spectrum of forms of deprivation that deprive people of dignified lives.

2.3. Problems of Social Work and Social Workers

The main role in combating poverty in the intervention component falls to social workers. They may be employed in the public sector or in non-governmental organisations, wherever personalised support is needed. Their working conditions and pay are crucial to ensuring – together with people experiencing poverty – the achievement of the best possible outcomes. Hence, this section briefly discusses changes in the situation of this profession.

The Polish Federation of Social Workers and Social Assistance Trade Unions (PFZPSIPS) warns of growing structural problems in Poland's social assistance sector in 2024–2025, which directly impact the quality of assistance provided to those in need (PFZPSIPS, 2024b).

PFZPSIPS (2024a) warns of an "avalanche increase in the number of attacks" on social workers. In 2024, 186 assault cases were recorded, representing a multiple increase compared to the 28 incidents reported in 2023. The Federation indicates that this dramatic rise results from the introduction in November 2023 of mandatory reporting of aggression cases through the Central Statistical Application of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MRPiPS), which revealed the actual scale of the problem. Most attacks occurred in Wielkopolskie (46 cases) and Mazowieckie (24 cases) voivodeships, with prosecutor notifications rising from 2 in 2023 to 18 in 2024.

PFZPSIPS (2024b) consistently fights for decent wages, emphasising that approximately 70 per cent of social workers earn minimum wage, despite 98 per cent of them holding higher education qualifications. The Federation has repeatedly intervened on this matter, appealing to the Prime Minister to introduce systemic solutions.

PFZPSIPS's greatest success in 2024 was securing a motivational allowance of 1,000 złoty gross per month for social assistance workers, introduced from 1 July 2024, with planned operation until the end of 2027. The programme covered approximately 130–133,000 workers (PFZPSIPS, 2024c). The Federation actively participated in the parliamentary committee's work on this project, emphasising that whilst the allowance does not solve all wage problems, it represents a first step towards improving workers' material situation. Among demands concerning wages and working conditions, PFZPSIPS seeks to introduce systemic solutions for wages, maintain the motivational allowance after 2027, reform rules for granting fieldwork allowances, and improve leave conditions and professional development.

PFZPSIPS also warns of a growing staffing deficit in social assistance, indicating that social workers are leaving whilst demand for their services is rising. This problem is deepening due to the closure of social work degree programmes for lack of interested candidates, the outflow of experienced workers to retirement, and a widening generational gap.

The Federation also expresses deep concern about the excessively slow pace of work on reforming the social assistance system. In a communiqué from 25 July 2025, the Federation stated that changes proposed by MRPiPS are insufficient and their processing pace too slow (PFZPSIPS, 2025). Trade unionists indicate that the reform team's work is to continue almost until the end of 2026, meaning no real chance of adopting changes by parliament in the current term. They also criticise the trimming of the change package within the so-called small amendment to the Social Assistance Act concerning leave and allowances for workers. In demands concerning system reform, the Federation seeks to accelerate work on amending the Social Assistance Act, introduce comprehensive changes in work organisation, professionalise the social worker occupation, and invest in modern technological tools.

In summary, according to PFZPSIPS, the situation of social workers in Poland in 2024–2025 represents deepening structural problems. Despite partial success in securing the motivational allowance, the Federation indicates the necessity of systemic changes in safety, wages and work organisation in social assistance. The dramatic rise in registered attacks, deepening staffing crisis and wages inadequate to qualifications indicate an urgent need for comprehensive reform of Poland's social assistance system in this dimension as well.

3. National and Local Strategies for Combating Poverty in Poland

In 2026, the European Union will adopt the first Anti-Poverty Strategy in its history. Poverty has been recognised as a problem the EU can address. It has existed in EU social policy since the Lisbon Strategy, i.e., for 25 years. However, there has been no separate strategy in this area until now. The EU's influence on Polish social policy in combating poverty manifests in various areas, both in legislation and in projects implemented thanks to cohesion funds, particularly the European Social Fund. Since the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 and its Action Plan (2021), we have observed increased Union activity in social policy. This was particularly pronounced in Ursula von der Leyen's first Commission term 2019-2024 (Sabato et al., 2025). Work is currently underway on updating the EPSR Action Plan and the affordable housing programme. The Strategy will integrate various EU actions, also in the context of the new funding period 2028-2034.

Among the conditions Member States must meet to use the European Social Fund is the requirement to adopt "strategic frameworks" for combating poverty and social inclusion. Requirements these frameworks must meet have also been specified, including evidence-based approach from research and participation of non-governmental stakeholders in preparation and implementation. In Poland, this condition is currently met by the document entitled "National Programme Against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Update 2021–2027, public policy with perspective to 2030" adopted by the previous government in 2021 (KPPU, Council of Ministers, 2021).

In this part of the report, we analyse and assess this very document to draw conclusions for the next update for the 2028-2034 period, when the new EU Anti-Poverty Strategy with requirements for national strategic frameworks will already be in force.

Currently, the KPPU is linked to two overarching strategies. It serves as a key instrument for implementing Objective II of the Strategy for Responsible Development (SOR), which focuses on achieving "socially sensitive and territorially balanced development". More importantly, the document is designated as the main implementation programme for Objective 4 of the Human Capital Development Strategy 2030 (SRKL): "reducing poverty and social exclusion and improving access to services in response to demographic challenges" (SRKL, Council of Ministers, 2021). The KPPU is thus embedded in the national socio-economic management system and is intended to transform broad strategic ambitions into a concrete action plan for the social policy sector understood in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

From the KPPU's relationship to the SRKL, it follows that this programme itself is not a strategy. It has the status of public policy, not a development strategy under the Act on Development Policy Principles.

3.1. Weaknesses of the Diagnostic Component

The diagnosis relies almost exclusively on AROPE indicators and the national approach to measuring extreme poverty extent. This omits the entire "ecosystem" of risks: working poverty, excessive housing and energy cost burden, rent arrears, energy poverty, consumer debt, transport poverty and digital exclusion. The absence of these indicators means the picture we receive is incomplete.

The document's narrative attributes declining indicators to large transfers (500+), but the diagnosis contains no information on whether benefits maintain real value over time (no reference to inflation

and wage growth). There are also no scenario simulations: what happens to poverty when energy/housing prices rise faster than benefits.

The diagnosis does not attempt to estimate how many eligible people do not claim social assistance benefits (non-take-up), housing allowance or family benefits and why (e.g., procedural barriers, lack of offline pathway, shame/stigmatisation). Improving benefit coverage requires first knowing the scale and causes of this phenomenon.

Approaching homelessness through successive one-day censuses every few years is insufficient. There is no application of the ETHOS Light standard and annual systematic situation study, nor data on "hidden homelessness" (staying with someone, overcrowding, foreigner centres, collective accommodation centres) and flows (entries/exits/returns). Since we do not measure homelessness consistently, it is difficult to assess which solutions work and which are ineffective.

The diagnosis lacks basic indicators for identifying housing problems, e.g., excessive housing cost burden, debts and eviction rates, waiting time for social housing, breakdowns by ownership form and rental market. The absence of a "stock map" and price pressure means we do not know where and for whom housing deficit threatens to push people into poverty. The diagnosis also does not use indicators such as ability to maintain adequate temperature in housing or payment arrears, nor does it monitor energy disconnections.

The document provides no measures of the time gap between the end of paid leave and the beginning of entitlement to early care (nursery/club/daily carer) and sets no coverage targets for children under 3 years. Without this, we cannot capture one mechanism pushing single parents into poverty and limiting women's professional activity within the care trilemma.

Growing poverty risk in old age is noted descriptively, but there are no indicators of benefit adequacy (in relation to costs of dignified living minimum, i.e., social minimum), long-term care availability (waiting time, geography, co-payments) and unmet health needs. This prevents linking diagnosis with service priorities.

Data and conclusions are mainly at voivodeship scale. There is no breakdown to smaller areas, cities and villages of different types where poverty concentrates, nor indicators of transport accessibility to services (travel time to primary healthcare, nursery or kindergarten, social assistance centre). These gaps result in territorial "averaging" and losing peripheries in the diagnosis.

The diagnosis contains no data on Roma, LGBTQ+ people, migrants in protection procedures; the gender thread is vestigial, lacking analysis of poverty feminisation and impact of unpaid care, but also typically male forms of deprivation.

There are no indicators and analysis of working poverty by sector, contract type, forced self-employment, collective bargaining coverage. There is also no coverage of cost pressure in agriculture and small entrepreneurship including individual, which are vulnerable to economic shocks.

The diagnosis does not use microsimulation to calculate ex ante effects of tax-benefit changes (who gains, who loses, what impact on poverty and inequality indicators). This limits the ability to identify the most effective instruments and combine transfers with services.

There is no built-in Poverty & Social Impact Assessment for the budget and major reforms.² The diagnosis does not identify potentially harmful solutions and connections between them (e.g., fees,

² This approach is recommended by the European Commission in its September 2022 communication entitled 'Better assessment of the distributional effects of Member States' policies'. In Poland, such analyses are carried

thresholds, verification algorithms, mutual linkage of income criteria and service fees) that may increase poverty in vulnerable groups.

The diagnosis did not use measures of service quality and access. There is no measurement of waiting times and application rejection rates in key services (long-term care, community care, housing, debt counselling), nor household own contributions for services. Yet it is precisely service barriers that affect entries into poverty.

The diagnosis relies on indicators with significant delay with no high-frequency indicators (e.g., quarterly energy disconnections, inflow to social assistance centres, rent arrears) that would allow quicker response.

A tone of "success" prevails, without counterfactual response to the question: what would the poverty path look like without specific instruments, or if they were indexed differently. Without such an approach, it is difficult to distinguish policy effect from business cycle.

In summary, the diagnosis for the 2028-2034 document should incorporate the above comments to better understand the mechanisms and processes determining poverty and homelessness of individuals and families. Better understanding of these mechanisms will also allow for more accurately set objectives and priorities.

3.2. Strategic Response: Paradigm Shift Towards Social Services

The strategic response formulated in Poland's KPPU shows an evolution in the country's social policy orientation. On one hand, we have confirmation of continued established income support mechanisms. On the other, the KPPU's core is an ambitious paradigm shift – moving away from primary reliance on cash transfers towards developing a comprehensive, integrated system of social services in the community. This change is expressed through the cross-cutting principle of deinstitutionalisation, i.e., a commitment to transition from caring for vulnerable groups in large, segregating institutions to community-based, person-centred models that promote autonomy and social inclusion (Council of Ministers, 2021). This vision is articulated through 5 key priorities addressing a broad spectrum of social needs.

The KPPU's main pillars focus on creating service infrastructure for key vulnerable groups. For children and families, this means expanding access to early education and care and strengthening family support in the community to prevent children being placed in foster care. For people experiencing homelessness crisis, the document advocates moving beyond shelters and night shelters by promoting systemic housing-based solutions. However, critical analysis reveals that these commitments, whilst strategically sound, remain at a high level of generality. For example, promoting the "housing first" model is a noteworthy and progressive element, yet the KPPU contains no specific financing mechanisms or inter-institutional coordination required to scale such a complex intervention nationwide. Practical implementation thus remains largely aspirational.

The most transformative and resource-intensive component is the deinstitutionalisation of care for older people and those with disabilities. This initiative aims to build a new ecosystem of services, including personal assistance, respite care for family carers and local support centres, designed to enable independent living. This aligns with contemporary trends in European social policy. Nevertheless, the KPPU's language often relies on generic objectives such as "developing" or "strengthening" these services, not always specifying quantitative targets, timelines or dedicated

out and published by the independent research centre CenEA, e.g. the impact of freezing family benefits on the situation of families from different income deciles and poverty (Myck et al., 2024).

budgets required for such systemic reconstruction. The lack of specific operational details raises questions about the feasibility of deep transformation within the assumed period.

The KPPU addresses social integration through employment support and migration policy. In implementing these directions, the role of social economy as a tool for job creation was emphasised. Thus, the potential of non-profit entities in reaching those furthest from the labour market was recognised. Similarly, including a priority for migrant integration is a forward-looking response to Poland's changing demographics. Let us recall that the KPPU was adopted before mass refugee flight from Ukraine.

However, a critical gap in employment-related actions is the limited attention paid to working poverty. The programme focuses almost exclusively on activation – getting people into the labour market – with little or no discussion about ensuring quality and sustainability of that employment, wage adequacy or concerns about non-employment contracts. This omission reflects a hidden, false assumption that any work is sufficient antidote to poverty.

The commitment to paradigm shift towards deinstitutionalisation and services was decisively confirmed and specified by adopting the document entitled "Strategy for Development of Social Services, public policy to 2030 (with perspective to 2035)" (Council of Ministers, 2022). It was intended to serve as a detailed and operational roadmap for the deinstitutionalisation process.

However, the creation process of this strategy was fraught with conflict. In a public appeal, numerous NGOs and local government representatives who participated in 18 months of joint work preparing a detailed reform roadmap accused the government of rejecting their input (WRZOS, 2021). They claimed the ministerial version published for pre-consultation was an "incoherent and practically impossible to implement" document that replaced their concrete, problem-oriented proposals with unclear text constructed around target groups. The government draft was criticised for lacking a precise timetable, inconsistent and "archaic" language, failure to address long-term financing of services initiated with EU funds, and marginalising the role of civil society as a key partner.

Disputes over the Social Services Development Strategy show that it, not the KPPU, focused stakeholders' attention in social policy. This led to the KPPU's marginalisation as a programme of changes with real impact on discussion and social policy itself. We saw this when the PiS government decided before elections to introduce the 500+ increase, and the new government implemented its own proposals such as the so-called widow's pension, supplementary allowance to social pension or benefits from the Active Parent package. The KPPU did not anticipate these changes, was not updated, and had already become a document rarely referenced, although it remained in force.

3.3. Social Rights and Inclusion: Selective Adaptation to European and Global Frameworks

The KPPU references European social policy documents and standards, positioning itself as a national instrument for their implementation. This is intended to provide a normative foundation for its priorities and serve as a reference point against which its ambitions and shortcomings can be assessed.

The selectivity of approach is most clearly visible in Poland's stance on the Council of Europe's fundamental social rights treaties. Whilst accepting the political guidelines of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) with declaration status, Poland has not ratified the Revised European Social Charter (RESC) for 2 decades, a more binding legal instrument it signed in 2005 (EAPN Poland, 2025;

Świątkowski, 2019). Successive governments' inability to ratify undermines the credibility of declared EPSR commitments.

Analysing the KPPU from the perspective of its 20 principles reveals varying levels of engagement with the Pillar's 3 chapters.

The KPPU substantially addresses equal opportunities and access to the labour market. The focus on inclusive education and expanding early childhood care (Priority I) directly responds to Principle 1 (Education, training and lifelong learning). Similarly, emphasis on active labour market policies and social economy development (Priority IV) directly implements Principle 4 (Active support to employment). Expanded childcare indirectly supports Principle 2 (Gender equality), but this adaptation is effect rather than intention – the KPPU lacks a proactive gender-mainstreaming approach that would address structural barriers to women's economic equality and consider men's specific problems.

In contrast, the KPPU shows minimal engagement with principles defined in the Fair Working Conditions chapter. The KPPU focuses almost exclusively on social protection and labour activation, not on regulating the labour market itself. Consequently, it is also silent on Principle 6 concerning wages, which explicitly calls for adequate minimum wages and prevention of in-work poverty. Although the diagnosis acknowledges that some workers remain poor, the KPPU proposes no instruments that could improve work quality, wage adequacy or limit non-employment contracts.

Chapter III: Social Protection and Inclusion is central to the KPPU. The KPPU's flagship priorities are direct responses to several principles of this chapter:

- Child and family policies directly implement Principle 11 (Childcare and support to children).
- The main deinstitutionalisation agenda serves as the national implementation plan for Principle 17 (Inclusion of persons with disabilities) and Principle 18 (Long-term care).
- Principle 19 (Housing and assistance for the homeless) is implemented through promoting social housing and the "housing first" model.
- Adaptation to Principle 20 (Access to essential services) is more instrumental – the KPPU refers to digital and energy access as key tools but does not address transport or financial inclusion.

The lack of will and announcement to ratify the RESC reveals the national strategy's limited ambition. The KPPU addresses housing issues and the relevant EPSR principle, yet avoids the more rigorous and detailed commitments of RESC Article 31, which requires states to take specific measures to prevent and gradually eliminate homelessness and provide affordable housing (EAPN Poland, 2025). Similarly, the entire KPPU can be seen as a response to RESC Article 30 concerning the right to protection against poverty. However, by avoiding ratification, Poland also avoids the mandate for a "general and coordinated approach" subject to continuous review and international accountability.

The reluctance to commit to binding international law frameworks is the KPPU's most serious limitation from a social rights perspective. The KPPU serves as Poland's main vehicle for implementing key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Nevertheless, application of universal principles is inconsistent. That the KPPU does not address well-documented exclusion of Roma communities and LGBTQ+ persons – a clear violation of EPSR Principle 3 concerning equal opportunities – is symptomatic of this larger problem.

3.4. Governance and Implementation: Linking National and Local Levels

The governance model of Poland's KPPU is top-down, relying on decentralised implementation, creating a complex interaction between national policy objectives and local administrative and political reality.

The government, led by MRPiS, is responsible for setting strategic priorities, legislation, directing national and EU funds allocated to social policy. Regional authorities (voivodeship self-governments), mainly through their Regional Social Policy Centres (ROPS), play a coordinating role and build capacity of local governments. The front line of implementation rests on over 2,479 independent municipalities and 380 counties, which are legally obliged to develop their own local strategies for solving social problems (SRPS). The KPPU's success thus depends entirely on its ability to effectively bridge the gap between national ambitions and the capacity and will of these highly diverse local actors to implement them.

The KPPU identifies and seeks to address several historical gaps and challenges in governance. Firstly, it recognises the challenge of fragmented service provision at local level and proposes the development of social service centres (CUS) as a key innovation. CUS are intended to act as integrated "one-stop shop" coordinators for citizens with complex needs (Council of Ministers, 2021). This model is a direct attempt to break administrative silos between social assistance and other social services.

Secondly, the KPPU also recognises uneven levels of specialist knowledge among local governments and tasks regional bodies (ROPS) with providing technical assistance and training to mitigate the competence gap between larger cities and smaller, rural municipalities.

Thirdly, the main mechanism for ensuring coherence between national and local levels is the financial mechanism. Central government uses its control over national and EU funding streams to encourage local authorities to adopt priorities specified in the KPPU, such as deinstitutionalisation.

Monitoring of the KPPU has been entrusted to a formally established body – the KPPU Implementation Team – comprising representatives of central government and local governments as well as civil society organisations. This meets the basic EU partnership principle. However, the KPPU document contains no details about the Team's working methodology or its specific powers, creating a risk that it may function more as a consultative forum than an effective steering committee. Crucially, no direct participation of people with experience of poverty is envisaged. It is possible that by default it was assumed their perspectives would be conveyed indirectly through civil society representatives, which is however a significant limitation of participation in the spirit of "nothing about us without us".

The KPPU's period of validity provides some degree of resilience to government changes. The operational cycle covers 2021–2027, corresponding to the EU's 7-year budgetary framework and extending beyond the 4-year electoral cycle. This solution, combined with the legal requirement for Member States to have national strategic policy frameworks for poverty reduction to access EU social funds, creates a strong incentive for successive governments to continue the KPPU. However, this is no guarantee that the document maintains influence after the opposition takes power. As we saw above in the area of cash benefits, policy completely bypassed the KPPU.

Successful KPPU implementation is threatened by several unresolved governance challenges: • the ambitious service development agenda risks creating unfunded mandates for local governments, • reliance on local initiative without strong enforcement mechanisms may perpetuate an "access

lottery" (some municipalities have more and better services than others) and "reintegration deserts" in access to professional reintegration services, • many key innovations are tested through temporary, project-based implementations funded by EU funds, and the KPPU lacks a clear path for their permanent integration into regular local budgets.

The KPPU thus presents a governance model that looks good on paper, but its actual success depends on resolving fundamental tensions between central ambition and local capacity for implementation.

3.5. Evolution of Civil Society's Role: EAPN Poland's Engagement in the KPPU

Civil society engagement, particularly by EAPN Poland, in developing Poland's two KPPUs has undergone dramatic transformation over the past decade. The creation process of the first KPPU for 2014–2020 represents a noteworthy example of multi-stakeholder partnership. This contrasts with the preparation of the current KPPU for 2021–2027, which was characterised by a closed, administrative process effectively excluding substantive input from non-governmental entities.

KPPU 2014–2020: A Model of Constructive Co-creation

Development of the first comprehensive KPPU was largely the fruit of civil society influence. This engagement was not merely consultative but integral to creating the document (Szarfenberg, 2013). The process was initiated and shaped by non-governmental experts.

The nature of engagement was informal but highly effective, based on co-creation. EAPN Poland, together with a coalition of other key civil society organisations including the WRZOS federation and the Polish Federation of Food Banks, worked in close, informal partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (predecessor of MRiPS, subsequently replaced by MRPiPS). The EAPN Poland representative played a crucial coordinating role, supporting the work of the expert group that drafted the KPPU's main components. This went far beyond formal opinions on a finished document – civil society actors were directly involved in setting the programme's objective structure, adding diagnostic elements based on their knowledge and gradually shaping the content (Szarfenberg, 2013). The final document reflected this joint effort, integrating specialist knowledge from NGOs representing various groups at risk of poverty and homelessness.

KPPU 2021–2027: Transition to Formal Exclusion

The creation process of the current KPPU for 2021–2027 was the antithesis of the co-creation model from the previous period. Formal consultations on the programme draft took place in early 2021 (lasting one month), but proved to be a superficial exercise. In a formal letter with comments from 4 February 2021, a broad coalition of nearly 100 civil society organisations, including EAPN Poland and WRZOS, presented detailed and highly critical comments on the draft. The letter clearly stated that earlier, more substantive work by expert groups on deinstitutionalisation, established by the Ministry in February 2020, had been ignored and there was no response to their letter (WRZOS, EAPN Poland, 2021).

NGO comments highlighted serious procedural and substantive flaws in the KPPU draft, none of which were addressed in the final version. Organisations criticised the document for being a collection of "generalities and declarations" rather than a strategic plan with specific reforms. They challenged the lack of a legally required financial plan, absence of a report on the previous KPPU's results, and omission of key policy areas such as dramatic demographic pressure from an ageing society. Furthermore, they indicated that the draft ignored Poland's commitments to the EPSR and

lacked a coherent, methodologically sound set of progress indicators (WRZOS, EAPN Poland, 2021). The letter concludes that the claim of "cooperation" in the KPPU's introduction was an abuse, as the process was limited to one-sided listening without any genuine dialogue or co-creation.

Thus occurred a transformation from deep partnership to formal but empty consultation, resulting in marginalisation of civil society knowledge and raising doubts about the final KPPU's grounding in poverty realities. At no stage was there engagement of people with experience of poverty. Their participation was not envisaged, and no mechanisms for direct consultation were established. The process relied solely on a representational model, but as demonstrated, even formal comments from civic organisations were ultimately ignored.

The editorial process cannot be considered transparent or inclusive in any meaningful sense. Although a formal consultation window was opened, the lack of MRIPS response to detailed comments, refusal to engage in dialogue about raised criticisms, and absence of any substantive changes in the final document based on received comments – all indicate a process that was formalistically consultative but substantively exclusionary.

3.6. KPPU Assessment: Growing Gap Between Programme and Reality – The 2023 Lesson

Poland's KPPU, with its focus on long-term, structural reform of social services, does not adequately respond to the most urgent challenges currently facing people experiencing poverty and homelessness in Poland. The Poverty Watch 2024 report revealed that the main driving force behind the recent, dramatic rise in poverty is not lack of specific services, but a serious income inadequacy crisis caused by high inflation and erosion of the real value of social benefits (Szarfenberg, 2024). The KPPU prioritises deinstitutionalisation and service coordination, but people experiencing poverty speak of the need for stable work and income to cover rent and basic needs, not solely access to a specific service programme (Szarfenberg, 2024). The testimony of a mother caring for a son with disabilities revealed that her main challenge is the enormous gap between low benefits and rising costs of living, therapy and basic needs, forcing her to sacrifice her own health (Szarfenberg, 2024).

The programme contains no remedies for the main problem identified in Poverty Watch 2024: systemic failure to adjust social benefits to inflation, which pushes families and individuals below the poverty line. The KPPU did not address the most urgent needs, which were and remain predominantly financial.

KPPU implementation and objectives are undermined by contradictory decisions in other key policy areas, mainly fiscal and social benefits. The Poverty Watch 2024 report identifies an accumulation of negative trends created by the collision of high inflation with decision-makers' inaction (Szarfenberg, 2024).

The government's decision to freeze family allowances for low-income families since 2016 and to lack automatic annual indexation of the main child benefit 800+ directly contradicts the KPPU's objective of reducing child poverty. As inflation erodes the purchasing power of these benefits, their ability to protect families from poverty diminishes, which together with inflation is the direct cause of the recent rise in child poverty rates (Szarfenberg, 2024). We also see that the one-off increase in the child-rearing benefit was one of the factors that caused the decline in child poverty in 2024.

The methodology for setting income criteria for social assistance is flawed. As the Poverty Watch 2024 report and the current report show, income criteria for social assistance have fallen below the official extreme poverty threshold based on the subsistence minimum. This creates a paradox of

Polish social assistance, in which a significant portion of the most needy households become legally too wealthy to receive financial assistance. This policy directly undermines the KPPU's function in creating a last-resort social safety net effectively protecting against extreme poverty.

The KPPU identifies migrants as a vulnerable group requiring integration. However, recent policy changes towards people with UKR status, such as introducing co-payments for collective accommodation centres and abolishing housing support of 40 złoty per day, create conditions conducive to homelessness and housing exclusion. This directly contradicts the KPPU's objective of preventing homelessness and – as indicated in last year's report – contributed to the dramatic but officially underestimated rise in hidden homelessness among refugees.

Presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski's proposals, supported by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, concerned introducing special restrictions for Ukrainian families in accessing child-rearing benefits. These purely political decisions were later justified by "sealing", although the key issue for this is establishing children's residence, not conditioning benefit access on employment. These are manifestations of a phenomenon called welfare chauvinism (Szarfenberg, 2025a), which is expressed in views and policies to restrict social benefits for foreigners. This policy causes net social harm and contributes to sharpening social divisions (Szarfenberg, 2025b).

The main obstacle hindering KPPU implementation is weak governance and lack of political will to create systemic, universal, automatic social protection mechanisms. The key problem identified in our previous and current report is the discretionary nature of benefit adjustments and tendencies towards their social segregation and conditionality.

3.7. Evaluation and Monitoring: A System of Formalism Without Feedback

A critical failure in managing Poland's KPPU is the systemic lack of regular, transparent and effective evaluation and monitoring. Although the document itself outlines a formal oversight plan implemented by the KPPU Implementation Team, there is no public evidence that this body functioned as an effective steering committee under either the previous or current government. Its existence appears to be largely illusory, with no publicly available meeting minutes, recommendations or influence on social policy adjustments, making the monitoring process opaque.

The lack of a functioning evaluation mechanism means that stakeholder engagement in the process consequently did not exist. The KPPU envisaged a role for civil society organisations in its monitoring Team, but without regular and meaningful evaluation activities, this inclusion remains merely a commitment on paper. Importantly, there was no engagement of people with experience of poverty in any formal evaluation process, as no such process was made public or available. Their knowledge, priorities and direct opinions on the effectiveness of anti-poverty measures were neither collected nor integrated into the policy cycle concerning the KPPU.

The most convincing evidence of this failure in monitoring and evaluation is the government's passivity during the high inflation period of 2022–2023. As documented in last year's report, KPPU objectives were undermined by freezing or insufficiently raising key social benefits, leading to a significant rise in extreme poverty. A functioning and effective monitoring system would have identified the erosion of these benefits' real value and recommended urgent adjustments and reforms. The KPPU was allowed to become detached from direct socio-economic reality, making it an ineffective tool during crisis.

The lack of implementation feedback is a direct consequence of the document preparation process, which was exclusionary and non-transparent. In the letter from the coalition of civil society organisations, including EAPN Poland, it was indicated that consultations on the current KPPU were one-sided. The social side submitted substantive comments but received no response (WRZOS, EAPN Poland, 2021). We are thus dealing with a governance model that lacks learning and adaptation mechanisms. For this reason, it is rigid and unresponsive to either expert criticism or the evolving needs of the people it is meant to serve.

3.8. Regional and Local Anti-Poverty Strategies

The KPPU sets overarching objectives and priorities at national level, but the fight against poverty in Poland is legally anchored in a decentralised framework requiring each level of territorial self-government to create its own regional or local strategy. For municipalities and counties, this is the strategy for solving social problems (SRPS), and at voivodeship level, the social policy strategy (SPS), as one of the voivodeship development strategies.

However, the KPPU contains only one mention of these strategies, informing that they exist as a result of legal obligation (Article 16b of the Social Assistance Act). This means no mechanisms exist to translate KPPU national objectives into local government strategic documents. These documents are simply not coordinated with each other in any way.

Meanwhile, the Social Services Development Strategy initiated a process of developing three-year regional plans for social service development and deinstitutionalisation. This strategy imposes on voivodeship governments the obligation to prepare such plans, which are approved by voivodeship board resolutions – following prior public consultations. Thus, a new system of documents was created, focusing not so much on reducing poverty and homelessness itself, but on one of the instruments serving this purpose.

Below we present two SRPS case studies from a large city and a small rural municipality to demonstrate the quality of local strategies.

Case Study 1: Metropolitan Approach – Rzeszów

The first case is the SRPS of the large city of Rzeszów. We will first assess the diagnostic approach of the "Strategy for Solving Social Problems of the City of Rzeszów for 2023-2030". We identified a significant discrepancy between the detailed description of the social assistance system and the diagnosis and dismantling of actual poverty mechanisms. The strategy stands out from similar studies with an exemplary spatial analysis that precisely locates the concentration of social problems at neighbourhood level. Nevertheless, as a foundation for effective poverty reduction policy, the diagnosis is insufficient.

The key methodological shortcoming is falling into the "administrative poverty trap". Rzeszów's diagnosis relies almost entirely on data from the Municipal Social Assistance Centre, equating the scale of poverty with the number of registered beneficiaries. This approach drastically narrows the picture, omitting key dimensions such as relative poverty, the phenomenon of "working poor" and the scale of material deprivation among people outside the formal support system (the so-called dark figure of poverty). As a result, the strategy ignores a significant portion of the population experiencing economic difficulties, focusing only on the most visible symptoms.

The document also lacks in-depth causal analysis. The diagnosis is mainly descriptive, without exploring the structural causes of poverty in the local context. The impact on household budgets of dynamically rising living and housing costs, local labour market structure (including low wages and

employment precarisation) or barriers to accessing key public services was not examined. Analysis of long-term poverty effects, such as its impact on health, education and the risk of intergenerational poverty transmission, was also omitted.

A fundamental deficiency, preventing evidence-based policy, is the complete lack of evaluation of the effectiveness of existing intervention instruments. The diagnosis provides no answer to which local actions actually contributed to lasting escape from poverty and which proved ineffective. Without this knowledge, strategic planning remains detached from reality, making the document an administrative tool for managing the existing assistance system rather than a transformative roadmap genuinely reducing the scale of urban poverty.

Analysis of objectives and actions contained in Rzeszów's SRPS confirms that this document functions primarily as an optimisation plan for the social services system, not as a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. This is a direct consequence of the diagnosis limitations, which narrowed the picture of poverty to an administrative dimension. The document's strategic architecture dilutes the poverty problem, treating it as one of many problems dispersed among siloed intervention areas (e.g., family, senior policy). As a result, the fight against poverty loses strategic rank, becoming an element of administering the support system instead of a horizontal priority of urban policy.

The proposed actions are characterised by clear disproportion between reactive approach and structural prevention. The strategy focuses on mitigating poverty effects through continuation of standard social benefits and care services. Though necessary, these interventions offer no innovative mechanisms for lasting escape from poverty nor address support adequacy in the context of rising living costs. Furthermore, strong emphasis on competence education and family assistance, whilst omitting economic barriers, risks "pedagogising poverty" – holding individuals responsible for problems with systemic roots.

The strategy's key deficit is its inability to impact structural poverty generators in the city. The document completely omits integration of poverty reduction policy with key urban policies: labour market policy (no actions for "working poor" and promoting decent wages), housing policy (no response to rising rental costs and shortage of affordable housing) and education policy aimed at equalising opportunities and counteracting intergenerational poverty transmission. Without interventions in these areas, the strategy remains conservative and unable to break mechanisms of economic exclusion creation and perpetuation in a dynamically developing city.

Case Study 2: Community Approach – Dobroń Municipality

As with the Rzeszów SRPS case analysis, we will divide the analysis into assessment of the diagnostic and strategic parts of Dobroń Municipality's SRPS.

The diagnosis contained in the "Strategy for Solving Social Problems of Dobroń Municipality for 2021-2025" is critically insufficient as a basis for planning effective poverty reduction actions and illustrates the formalistic approach to strategic obligation in small local governments. The document is characterised by low analytical quality, relying solely on desk research analysis from public statistics and the Municipal Social Assistance Centre. Despite declarations of applying a "participatory-expert approach", the diagnosis lacks any evidence of conducting primary research or engaging the local community, depriving the analysis of qualitative depth and genuine insight into local context.

The study's reliability is further diminished by significant methodological errors. These include using grossly outdated data (e.g., basing social structure analysis on the 2011 Census), very short trend

analysis horizon (2017-2019) and internal inconsistencies in presented data. The analysis is purely descriptive, presenting indicators without critical interpretation and examining causal relationships.

A fundamental error from the poverty-fighting perspective is reducing this phenomenon solely to an administrative dimension. The scale of poverty is equated with the number of GOPS beneficiaries, leading to radical perspective narrowing. The diagnosis completely omits key aspects such as relative poverty, the working poor phenomenon and material deprivation of people outside the formal support system. The document does not examine structural causes of municipality poverty – such as labour market barriers or the impact of low infrastructure access (e.g., only 27.6 per cent of the population uses sewerage) on costs and quality of life. A key neglect is also the complete lack of evaluation of existing intervention instruments' effectiveness, preventing development of evidence-based strategy and condemning the local government to reactive management of the assistance system instead of proactive poverty reduction.

The strategic part of the "Strategy for Solving Social Problems of Dobroń Municipality" is a direct consequence of flawed diagnosis and confirms that this document does not constitute a real poverty reduction plan, but rather a roadmap for administering the social assistance system. The strategic objective, defined as "Efficient and adequate (...) system for solving social problems", is process-oriented and focused on institutional efficiency, not on achieving measurable social results in reducing economic exclusion scale. Such architecture reveals the local government's conservative approach, concentrated on maintaining the status quo rather than social transformation.

The strategy's approach to poverty is characterised by siloed thinking and reactivity. Poverty is treated as one of many isolated problems, ignoring its horizontal character and preventing interruption of mechanisms of mutual reinforcement of various exclusion forms. Proposed actions are mainly palliative – focusing on mitigating poverty effects through standard cash benefits and social work. However, innovative activation and lasting empowerment instruments are lacking. Moreover, strong emphasis on care and educational competences whilst ignoring economic barriers risks "pedagogising poverty".

The potential for implementing any proactive actions is additionally limited by low institutional capacity. The Municipal Social Assistance Centre functions with minimal employment (3 social workers), which in practice limits its role to administering benefits, preventing in-depth reintegration work. As a result, Dobroń Municipality's SRPS is a formalistic document lacking capacity to genuinely impact mechanisms of poverty creation and perpetuation in the local community.

Evaluation of the Local Strategies System

Let us now compare the SRPS assessments for the City of Rzeszów and Dobroń Municipality. This analysis identifies similarities and differences in approaches to strategic planning, focusing on their effectiveness as tools for reducing poverty through addressing its causes and mechanisms.

Differences between strategies stem primarily from disparities in analytical potential, institutional resources and the specificity of local challenges.

The difference in quality of elaboration is drastic. Rzeszów presents a professional document based on solid desk research analysis. It distinguishes itself with very good spatial analysis (geolocation of problems), in-depth demographic analysis and use of a broad spectrum of current data. Dobroń presents a low-quality, formalistic document. It contains serious methodological errors, such as relying on decade-old data (2011 Census) and internal inconsistencies. The analysis is rudimentary and lacks in-depth interpretation.

Rzeszów undertook genuine actions to include stakeholders and experts in the diagnostic process (limited qualitative research was conducted without poor people). In Dobroń, the declaration of a "participatory approach" is superficial – the document was created solely through desk research.

Rzeszów has an extensive administrative apparatus and significant resources, creating potential for implementing complex projects. Dobroń functions at the edge of minimum staffing (3 social workers), drastically limiting the municipality's capacity to implement any proactive actions beyond benefit administration.

Rzeszów's strategy more accurately identifies urban challenges (e.g., demographic differentiation, city centre ageing). Dobroń's strategy poorly identifies key rural challenges (infrastructure, transport), which are fundamental for understanding poverty mechanisms in this area.

Despite differences in quality and scale, both strategies replicate the same fundamental conceptual errors that prevent them from effectively reducing poverty. The most serious common denominator is equating the scale of poverty with the number of social assistance beneficiaries (MOPS/GOPS). This approach depends on understated income criteria and also ignores key dimensions of poverty: relative poverty, the working poor phenomenon and material deprivation of people outside the support system (hidden poverty).

Both diagnoses are mainly descriptive and do not analyse structural causes of poverty. Rzeszów omits the impact of rising housing costs and labour market quality. Dobroń ignores the impact of critical infrastructure deficits (e.g., lack of sewerage for over 70 per cent of residents) on quality and costs of life. Neither strategy examines mechanisms of intergenerational poverty transmission.

Both documents lack evaluation of previous interventions' effectiveness. It is unknown which actions genuinely contributed to residents' lasting escape from poverty. This prevents evidence-based planning and condemns local governments to repeating unverified action patterns.

Strategic objectives are reactive and conservative. They focus on efficient management of the assistance system and mitigating poverty effects, not on proactively creating conditions for lasting escape from poverty (structural prevention).

In both cases, the SRPS functions in isolation from other local policies. Fighting poverty is not integrated with economic, educational, housing or infrastructure policy, which is a necessary condition for addressing poverty causes.

Comparing the Rzeszów and Dobroń cases leads to several key conclusions regarding the strategic approach to reducing poverty at local level in Poland. Firstly, the analysis confirms that regardless of local government size, there exists a systemic tendency to confuse administering social assistance with conducting active poverty reduction policy. SRPS function within a paradigm of managing poverty, not combating it.

Secondly, even high-quality, detailed diagnosis (as in Rzeszów) does not lead to an effective poverty reduction strategy if there is a lack of political will or methodology to address structural causes and move beyond the social scheme.

Thirdly, in smaller municipalities (like Dobroń), the strategic obligation often leads to formalism and creation of documents with low substantive value. This reveals an enormous competence and resource gap requiring systemic support in analysis and evaluation.

Fourthly, ignoring structural causes of poverty and lack of evaluation culture leads to perpetuating a reactive intervention model. Effective poverty fighting requires paradigm change – moving away from

an exclusively social and social assistance model towards an integrated social investment model (cash benefits, but also education, activation, infrastructure) and close horizontal integration of local policies.

However, this model encounters numerous barriers. Mandes (2015) indicates lack of effective coordination both vertically (between municipalities, counties and voivodeships) and horizontally (between social assistance, employment, health and education sectors). As a result, the success of any integrated initiative often depends not on formal strategy but on personal relationships and informal networks between individual officials and specialists. Personalisation of policy of this kind makes the system highly unstable and susceptible to political or personnel changes.

These problems are well recognised and a solution has even been proposed involving organisational transformation of social assistance centres into social service centres with requirements to outsource these services to civic organisations and social economy entities. However, the future and scaling of this organisational innovation are unclear. Currently, it is a project pilot conducted with EU funds. We await evaluation of its impact on poverty and mechanisms of its creation and overcoming in local communities.

Key Recommendations for National Policymakers

Analysis of Poland's KPPU and the broader context of the poverty and social assistance crisis revealed in this report indicate the need for urgent and systemic reforms.

I. Reform of Rules for Setting and Adjusting Income Criteria in Social Assistance

Problem. The sharp rise in extreme poverty in 2023 (from 4.6 per cent to 6.6 per cent) whilst maintaining income criteria at a fixed level led to "statutory poverty" being significantly lower than extreme poverty. Although extreme poverty fell in 2024, we still face the same situation. This represents a discrediting of the cash assistance system for the poor, as it excludes an increasingly large portion of the extremely poor from support.

Recommendation. Introduction of a legal mechanism for automatic, annual verification of income criteria based on estimates of a modified social intervention threshold (PIS). The modification should ensure that PIS moves increasingly closer to the social minimum and fully accounts for basic needs of participation in society.

EAPN Poland participates in the work of the Social Assistance Reform Team at MRPiPS. In October 2024, specific proposals for changes were submitted so they could come into force from 2026. However, the draft changes in this area did not appear in the list of the government's programme and legislative work (to October 2025). The draft budget for 2026 envisages decreases in expenditure on social assistance benefits. This means that in 2026, the old system will still apply, in which again a large portion of extremely poor people will be excluded from the assistance system for the poor.

II. Reform of Family Allowances and Integrated Universal Child Benefit

Problem. Income criteria and amounts of family allowances and supplements have been frozen since 2016. As a result, increasingly more poor families with dependent children lost access to these benefits, and for the remainder their real value was increasingly lower. The family benefits system, together with 800+, should operate on the principle of proportional universalism, i.e., all families should be supported, but support for poorer families should be higher due to their lower incomes. However, if amounts and income criteria for family allowances are frozen, this part of the system is in increasingly worse condition. The current government does not intend to raise the child-rearing benefit, on which poor families lose relatively more. Nor does it intend to do anything with family benefits (as of October 2025), on which poor families also lose. This is thus a double blow to this group. Considering the difficult situation of public finances, we propose action first in the area of family benefits. Nevertheless, ultimately the child-rearing benefit should also be systematically indexed and integrated with family benefits, so that the level of income support for families increases as their income decreases.

Recommendations

1. A one-off 100 per cent increase in family benefits and supplements and income criteria for them, to compensate for the drastic fall in their real value since 2016.
2. Introduction of a legal mechanism for automatic, annual verification based on estimates of a modified family income support threshold. The modification should ensure it moves increasingly closer to the social minimum and fully accounts for basic needs of participation in society. The income criterion for family allowances should be at least 1.5 times higher than criteria for social assistance.

3. Work on a new system of integrated universal child benefit with appropriate verification of criteria and benefit levels, administered by ZUS.

III. Development of a Strategy for Combating Poverty and Ending Homelessness for 2028–2034

Problem. In this report, we indicate numerous flaws in previous Polish KPPUs. In 2026, the EU will adopt a strategic document on combating poverty. In 2026 and 2027, the government will have to prepare for the next EU funding period 2028–2034. One condition will be the adoption of a new Polish strategic framework or plan, whose implementation will be monitored and accounted for by the European Commission (EC). Having experience from 2 editions of previous programmes, we should begin preparing a new version based on previous experiences, which will determine social reforms and investments over a longer period. We propose this be a development strategy entitled: "Strategy for Combating Poverty and Ending Homelessness 2028-2034".

Recommendation

1. Establishment within the Social Assistance Reform Team of a group whose main task will be preparing the new Polish anti-poverty strategy.
2. Within the above group, meaningful participation of people with experience of poverty, homelessness and using social assistance and other support systems must be ensured.
3. Establishment of a steering committee with participation of civil society organisations and people experiencing poverty for the future strategy, which will be equipped with real possibilities for monitoring, evaluating and updating during implementation.
4. The new strategy should include revision of Polish methodology for research on poverty and homelessness in cooperation with GUS, the Institute of Labour and Social Affairs (IPiSS) and other stakeholders. This task should be financed by European Social Fund within the separate project.

IV. Ratification of the Revised European Social Charter (RESC) and Establishment of a New Institution of Social Rights Ombudspersons

Problem. Combating poverty should be based on social rights defined by RESC and EPSR. The first of these documents is legally binding and equipped with a complaints protocol. After 2 decades since signing, Poland still has not ratified RESC, avoiding legally binding commitments regarding social rights. Particularly important from this report's perspective are Articles 30 (access to effective social protection) and 31 (access to decent housing conditions). The ATD Fourth World organisation prepared through a participatory process a draft for a new function of social rights ombudsperson (RPS), which will be an important complement to the rights-based approach in anti-poverty policy (ATD, 2020). The first city to introduce RPS was Kielce.

Recommendations

1. Ratification of RESC along with the protocol concerning the collective complaints system.
2. Transformation of aspirational strategic objectives into enforceable social rights.
3. Ensuring international oversight of commitment implementation.
4. Establishment of a Polish system of social rights ombudspersons.

Implementation of these recommendations requires not only legislative changes but also – above all – a paradigm shift: from discretionary and fragmented policy to a systemic approach based on human

rights, empirical evidence and participation of all stakeholders. The costs of inaction, measured in human suffering and lost potential, significantly exceed the investments needed for these reforms.

Methodological Note

All indicators in this note concern people living in private households. By definition, people residing in collective households and institutions (e.g., care homes, prisons, boarding schools) and people experiencing homelessness crisis outside them are excluded. This has significant consequences: results do not cover the most difficult housing and institutional situations. In EU-SILC, this exclusion is expressed directly; in BBGD – it is a consequence of sampling frame and tool selection.

EU-SILC Survey (Eurostat/GUS) – Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey combining cross-sectional and panel modules (multiple interviews with the same households), with data obtained through interviews (CAPI/CATI/CAWI) and – in some countries – from administrative registers (improving data quality). Income and work intensity refer to the preceding year (T–1); payment arrears – to the last 12 months; many variables (e.g., deprivation) – to the survey year.

Household Budget Survey BBGD (GUS) – continuous survey using budget diaries (paper or electronic) completed by households during their participation month, supplemented by interviews on rare expenditures; covers income, expenditure, consumption and selected subjective assessments.

Eurostat and GUS apply equivalence scales for comparisons between households of different compositions. The EU-SILC standard is the modified OECD scale (1; 0.5; 0.3). GUS uses the original OECD scale (1; 0.7; 0.5) for determining poverty thresholds (relative and extreme), and the modified scale in general income/expenditure cross-sections (national EU-SILC, BBGD).

Eurostat Indicators Based on EU-SILC Survey

AROP (at risk of poverty, income poverty, relative poverty) – percentage of people in households with equivalised disposable income below 60 per cent of the national median (after transfers).

VLWI (very low work intensity) – people aged 0–64 living in households where adults (18–64, excluding i.a. students 18–24 and some pensioners 60–64) worked ≤20 per cent of potential work time in the year preceding the survey (T–1).

MSD/SMSD (material and social deprivation) – percentage of people unable to afford certain goods/activities. The threshold for SMSD is ≥7 of 13 items (set listed below). In 2021, the deprivation component within AROPE was updated, significant for comparisons with older data. The 13 items divided by household and person level are as follows:

- Household level (7): unexpected expense; one-week holiday away; no arrears (rent/mortgage, utilities, loan instalments); meal with meat/fish/vegetarian equivalent every second day; ability to keep home warm; access to car/van for personal use; ability to replace worn-out furniture.
- Person level (6; 16+): internet access for personal use; replacing worn-out clothes with new ones; two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including one all-weather pair); small amount of money for weekly personal expenses; regular leisure activities; meeting friends/relatives at least monthly (meal/drink).

CS-MD (child deprivation) – every three years ("Children" module: 2021, 2024) Eurostat measures child deprivation for children (0–15 years). A child is considered deprived with lack of ≥3 of 17 items. The set includes 12 child-specific items, 4 household items and 1 adult-level item (internet).

Table 1. Set of Items in CS-MD (17)

Category	Items
12 "child" items (module)	new (not second-hand) clothes; 2 pairs of properly fitting shoes (including one all-weather pair); fresh fruits/vegetables daily; protein meal daily (meat/fish/equivalent); age-appropriate books; outdoor equipment (e.g., bicycle/ball); indoor games/toys; regular leisure activities; celebration of special occasions; inviting friends home; participation in school trips/events requiring payment; one-week holiday away from home.
4 household items (annual)	replacing worn-out furniture; no payment arrears; keeping home warm; access to car/van.
1 "adult" item (annual)	internet access (if at least half of adults in household lack this access).

Source: Eurostat – Glossary: Child deprivation.

AROPE – people meeting at least one criterion: AROP or SMSD or VLWI (without double counting). This is the headline indicator for EU 2030 target.

Table 2. Reference Periods for Selected EU-SILC Components

Component	Reference Period
Income (AROP)	T–1 (previous calendar/tax year; exceptions – e.g., Ireland: last 12 months)
VLWI (work intensity)	T–1 (months worked by adults vs potential)
Arrears	12 months before interview
Deprivation (MSD/SMSD)	Survey year (T)

Source: Eurostat – AROPE methodology and reference periods.

Considering reference periods is important for reports such as Poverty Watch, where we analyse the latest data from the previous year. In Eurostat databases, relative poverty indicators (AROP) also have survey year designation, but income data actually concern the year preceding the survey. This type of poverty in 2024 according to GUS concerns 2024, whilst according to Eurostat it concerns 2023.

GUS Indicators Based on Household Budget Survey

Relative poverty – percentage of people in households whose equivalised expenditure < 50 per cent of average expenditure per equivalent person (thresholds in original OECD scale). A relative but expenditure-based measure, not income-based.

Extreme poverty – expenditure below subsistence minimum (basket at biologically alarming level, estimated by IPISS based on GUS prices). Absolute measure developed and introduced in the early 1990s.

Statutory poverty – household expenditure below statutory poverty line (income criteria qualifying for social assistance).

Sphere of insufficiency – expenditure below social minimum (basket containing richer survival baskets and social participation requirements, estimated by IPISS based on GUS prices). Absolute measure systematically estimated since the 1980s.

GUS does not publish a separate comprehensive publication on poverty and social exclusion in Poland, only annual signal information with an annex containing tabular compilations. These concern exclusively Polish methodology. Until recently, there were no compilations by gender; only the latest publication included this characteristic for the first time. Information on poverty of people with disabilities is still provided only for households with such persons, not for the individuals themselves. EAPN Poland has repeatedly demanded treating people with disabilities as subjects in these statistics.

Table 3. Comparison of Basic Frameworks: EU-SILC (Eurostat) vs GUS (BBGD)

Dimension	EU-SILC / Eurostat	GUS / BBGD
What we measure	Relative income (AROP), deprivation (MSD/SMSD), work intensity (VLWI), aggregate AROPE	Relative poverty (expenditure-based), extreme (ME/IPiSS), statutory, sphere of insufficiency (MS/IPiSS)
Lines/thresholds	AROP: 60% of median equivalised income	Relative: 50% of average expenditure; extreme: ME; statutory: criterion from act; insufficiency: MS
Equivalence scale	Modified OECD (1;0.5;0.3)	Original OECD (1;0.7;0.5)
Reference period	Income/VLWI: T–1; payment arrears: 12 months; deprivation: T (data designation year)	Participation month (diaries) + supplements on rare expenditures, reported annually: T (data designation year)
EU aggregates	AROPE (AROP or SMSD or VLWI) – serves to determine EU 2030 target and national targets	No equivalent
Child deprivation	CS-MD (17) every 3 years (2021, 2024)	No equivalent
Population	Private households (without institutions and homeless outside them)	Private households (without institutions and homeless outside them)

Sources: Eurostat – AROPE methodology/periods; GUS – indicator definitions; IPiSS – subsistence minimum, social minimum; BBGD – survey description.

Both types of surveys (Eurostat and GUS) have well-recognised methodological problems. It is difficult to include both the poorest people, including homeless, and the wealthiest. For the former, this affects poverty underestimation; for the latter, it causes underestimation of inequality indicators. Regardless of whether income or expenditure poverty is studied, Polish research relies on declarations and documents from households selected for the survey. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, survey participation is falling rapidly, meaning decreasing representativeness. It is

necessary to make greater use of administrative data from ZUS, tax offices and other institutions in poverty and inequality research in Poland.

It should be added that Polish poverty research has suffered two very serious losses in the last decade.

The first was the long-term panel survey Social Diagnosis (8 editions, 2000-2015), independent of GUS, which studied poverty in dynamic terms and multidimensional social exclusion.

The second loss is GUS's Social Cohesion Survey, which was to be conducted systematically every three years. However, only three editions were conducted, the last in 2018. This survey used more extensive indicators than Eurostat's material and social deprivation – living conditions poverty covered 30 needs, and the budget imbalance indicator was analysed based on 7 household income and expenditure items.

The loss of these two surveys represents a serious regression in Polish social statistics!

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