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THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOCIAL AND THE HEALTH SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the definitions, objectives, fields and tasks of non-governmental organizations in social life, health system and health policy. In addition, the article addresses the issue of effectiveness and quality of NGOs' activity.

The term "NGOs" (Non-governmental Organizations) includes different categories of entities that operate not to obtain financial gain, and also do not belong to the government sector. Non-governmental Organizations' fields of activity were described in the International Classification of Non-Profit Organizations (ICNPO). NGOs are an integral part of a democratic society. Sociological sciences emphasize their importance in enhancing social integration, implementation of the principle of subsidiarity, building civil society, social dialogue and participatory democracy. The main tasks of NGOs in the health system are providing services and health advocacy. Provision of services includes medical, social and psychological services as well as, integration activities, care and nursing, material and financial support, educational and information services and training. Health advocacy is a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health goal or program. An important task carried out by NGOs is participation in the formation of health policy.

The increasing role of NGOs in providing social services and the participation in political processes, result in the need to confirm the validity and credibility of their operation. One of the ways could be to introduce the mechanisms to assess quality and efficiency, such as registration as a part of a legal system, self-regulatory activities (card rules, codes of ethics), certification, participation in networks, monitoring and audit.

Key words: *non-governmental organizations, health system, health policy, health services, health advocacy*

INTRODUCTION

The term "non-governmental organizations (NGOs) comprises various categories of entities, which do not operate in order to gain profit and which also do not belong to the governmental sector. One of the definitions of NGOs say, that it is a "group of people working independent of any external control with specific objectives and aims to fulfil tasks that are oriented to bring about desirable change in a given community or area or situation" (1). In English, there are several other terms existing alongside "NGOs" term, such as: *independent sector organizations, non-profit organizations, third sector organizations, voluntary organizations, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, grassroots (social change) organizations, private*

voluntary organizations, non-state actors, interest groups, self-help groups (2). Some papers assume that the "NGOs" is an overarching term and contains all the organizations, which belong neither to the governmental nor private sector. Other papers, on the other hand, consider Civil Society Organizations (CROs) term as the primary one. So far, the consensus has not been reached – there is no one commonly agreed upon and used definition (3,4,5). In Poland, the organizations which are considered NGOs are called: social, public, non-profit, third sector. Polish and English terms highlight different characteristics of such organizations, i.e. independence from the state, no emphasis on profit, activity for public benefit, social and voluntary character of an organization (6).

It should be noted that, in the broadest sense, among NGOs and various kinds of foundations, associations and self-help groups, there are producers, employers, employees and consumers' organizations, as well as political parties. Legal regulations connected to their functioning in particular countries provide them with a specific status, as well as with requirements and authorization related to them.

It is impossible to assess the accurate number of NGOs neither on a global scale, nor in particular countries. It is related to a large number of organizations, a variety of legal forms of entities and their registration, as well as the dynamics of their formation and stoppage of activity of the organizations (2,7,8).

Two terms were used in the article interchangeably: "non-governmental organizations" and the abbreviation "NGOs". The aim of this study is: 1) to present the characteristics of NGOs and their importance in social life, 2) to discuss the tasks of NGOs in health system and health policy, and finally 3) to outline the problems of the efficiency and the quality of NGOs' activity. The article is mainly based on international literature and does not focus on the non-governmental sector in Poland. A separate publication is devoted to NGOs acting only in healthcare field in Poland (9).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The characteristics of NGOs can be made in numerous overlapping sections. One criterion for such a division is the kind of represented interests. Organizations which can be distinguished under this section involve public interest organizations, commercial associations, science associations, religious associations, political parties (9,10).

Another criterion is the purpose of the organizations. This section contains such organizations as: self-help (which act mainly on behalf of their members), caring (for all in need or for a particular category of people), representative (which act on behalf of a society or a group of people), minority groups (which act e.g. on behalf of religious or ethnic groups), ad hoc-created (founded with the aim of carrying out a specific action), hobby and recreation (for those interested in the specific area of activity), task (with the aim of performing some tasks, often ordered by the authorities) and so-called traditional (with a broad formula of activity and a wide range of people on whose behalf they act) (11).

NGOs differ in terms of the range of activity. They can act on the local, regional, national and international level. Networks of cooperation and so-called umbrella organizations unite organizations with similar aims of activity, often from different countries.

In terms of legal and organizational form, NGOs can either have an informal form or by choosing a legal form, they can register on the basis of the rules of a given country. Achieving a specific legal status is linked to definite responsibilities and privileges for an organization (e.g. tax deduction, the ability to obtain grants).

NGOs also differ in terms of the resources and capacity, including the human, material and financial resources – all of them have different personnel, level of experience and financial source and they use different forms of employment.

Areas (spheres) of NGOs activity and issues over which they are created, are included in the *International Classification of Non Profit Organizations (ICNPO)*. This classification distinguishes 12 universal areas of NGOs activity: (a) culture and recreation, (b) education and research, (c) health, (d) social services, (e) environment, (f) development and housing, (g) law, advocacy and politics, (h) philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion (i) international, (j) religion, (k) business and professional associations and unions (l) activities other than those mentioned above. In Poland, for instance, according to the Act on Public Good Activity and Volunteering, the areas of activity of organizations are encompassed into 33 categories included in the sphere of public tasks. Such divisions are of great practical importance, both for legal and formal purposes (cele formalno-prawne), as well as for the studies of the non-governmental sector, which are based on such classifications. Such a classification serves to systematize the information on the non-governmental sector. However, it leads to simplification, since organizations usually operate simultaneously in several areas (8, 12, 13).

It should also be noted, that NGOs may have various links to the governmental sector and may create indirect forms, that is semi-NGOs (e.g. training centres), as well as semi-GOs (semi-governmental organizations, e.g. colleges and universities) (14).

THE IMPACT OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS ON SOCIAL LIFE

NGOs are the manifestation of social activity, and are usually the expression of the rank-and-file initiatives (grassroots). They draw attention to social problems, which are troublesome and uncomfortable for politicians or producers. They perform invaluable and indispensable job supporting marginalized people in difficult life situations (11).

The formation of the third sector, from the perspective of economical and political science, is explained by *government and market failure theories*. Sociological studies emphasize its importance in: improving social

integration, the implementation of subsidiarity principle (by moving to a higher level only those tasks and social problems that cannot be resolved at lower levels), building civil society. The tasks which are most often assigned to NGOs are: 1) satisfying the individual needs, as well as the social ones in small groups with kindness and solidarity, 2) the adoption of active citizenship in the area of so-called local and human affairs, 3) the promotion of pluralism and diversity of social life; 4) development of the social sector, which fulfills individual and social goals and has different views from the government, 5) development of mechanisms of social participation in the creation and implementation of social policies in modern society (6,11).

Positive attitude towards NGOs is predominant in both, Polish and foreign literature, however, problem areas and dysfunctions are also emphasized. Some of them include limited resources and means of delivering public goods; formation of organizations more in response to available resources and social structure (e.g. available funds, social capital) than to social needs; particularism; paternalism; amateurism or excessive professionalism of an organization. Another issue is the representativeness of an organization, which usually unites a small amount of people. It should also be noted, that not all the NGOs are created as grassroots. There are some, whose activities were initiated top-down (15,16).

THE TASKS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN HEALTH SYSTEM

Health system is made up of all the organizations and institutions, which act to improve, maintain or recover health. It consists of activities from the field of healthcare, disease prevention, health promotion, and collaboration of various ministries (e.g. ministry of education, employment, transport) acting on behalf of health (17). The activities of NGOs can be found in all the areas of activities of the health system. The main tasks, which NGOs perform in health system is services delivery and health advocacy. Service delivery is to be considered as medical and social, psychological and integrative, care and nursing, material and financial support (assistance in the purchase of equipment, medicine and medical devices), as well as educational, informative and training. Health advocacy is a combination of individual and community actions planned in order to achieve social and political acceptance and support for specific purposes, programs and health initiatives. It is often identified with lobbying whose aims are legislative changes by means of participation in the process of creation and modification of legal acts. Lobbying is one of the methods of advocacy. The advocacy also comprises e.g. public meetings, participation in the public

consultation, building of a coalition with organizations and institutions, cooperation with media (2,18).

The tasks of NGOs in health area (as well as in other areas), are related to specifics of a particular country (region), e.g. the degree of civilisation development, culture and tradition, the political system, resources and needs. In an international study of tasks, which NGOs assisting breast cancer patients perform, it was indicated that the wealth of the country is related to the scope of work of an organization. In countries with low and middle-low income, NGOs mainly operated on the basis of medical community, their activity was focused on service delivery, raising awareness and prevention campaigns. In countries with middle-high income, the organizations were more specialized and less concentrated on providing medical services, united patients more often and exerted an influence on the development of other services, e.g. psychological support. As far as countries with high income are concerned, NGOs were typical patient associations (survivor-led), specialized and recognized, involved in clinical research, health advocacy and lobbying (19).

An important task of NGOs is the participation in health policy (4). The organizations representing: professional groups (doctors, nurses and other specialists); healthcare providers; insurers; payers; patients, citizens and consumers; producers (pharmaceutical companies, medical equipment and devices' manufacturers); other commercial organizations, whose activity is connected to health (food, automotive, etc) can take part in the process of health policy formulation and modification. The benefits, which result from the participation of various interest groups in so-called "open" political process, include e.g.: gaining a broader view on a particular issue by a decision makers; better prediction of the influence of a decision on various social groups. At the same time, potential limitations and risks resulting from the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders are indicated. These include: difficulties in resolving competing interests; diversity and duration of such a collaboration, the actual representativeness of NGOs, and their accountability to the representatives, excluding of smaller groups, while including the bigger and influential ones. The process of planning and implementing of policy becomes more complex, it includes more and more groups, which are becoming increasingly diverse. In spite of the rising pressure from various non-governmental sector groups, it is the government that both initiates the process of cooperation and governs it. Exerting a real impact on politics by different groups requires different abilities from the partners, such as the ability of political analysis of a situation and the ability of alliance formation with all stakeholders, e.g. the representatives of the government, professional groups, scientists, civil society organizations, sponsors, the representatives of the media.

In free market societies, especially in the time of the globalization of industry, the most influential groups are the business (commercial, e.g. the so-called Big Pharma) interest groups. Service delivery providers, as well as the medical community, also belong to influential groups because of the monopoly on medical knowledge. Governments have a strong position in health policy because of the financing of services largely from public funds, especially in the developed countries. Although the influence of consumer and citizen groups is growing, their role is more about attracting attention to problems and promoting new ideas, rather than political influence (4).

TYPES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN HEALTH SYSTEM

In the area of health there is a huge variety of NGOs. There are some, which operate internationally in terms of development and humanitarian aid, and some whose area of focus is connected to global health problems. They deal with the creation of basic healthcare service in developing countries, establishment of hospitals, carrying out vaccination programs, and emergency response. International and national professional associations, such as the *Union for International Cancer Control*, *International Union for Health Promotion and Education*, play a big part on the global forum.

In the area of health, there are national NGOs, whose work is focused on: 1) specific health issues, e.g. alcoholism, physical activity; 2) the needs and promotion of healthcare organizations/institutions; 3) health and social needs, as well as the rights of specific social groups, e.g. women, the elderly, professional groups, local communities; 4) health and social needs, as well as the rights of patients and their families, e.g. the disabled, cancer patients, accident victims. Currently there has been a rise in the role of the latter, that is the patient organizations, on scientific, economical, and political level (20,21).

EFFICIENCY AND QUALITY OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

An increasing number of NGOs and their meaning, as well as handling out more and more public goods to them calls for a need to confirm their credibility, relevance and effectiveness, and also to refute critical opinions. The pressure is rising so as to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of NGOs. The doubts in questions are also related to NGOs, whose area of activity is health (2, 16).

The scientific literature more and more often poses a question about empirical evidence of the actual impact of various non-governmental sector representatives on policy. The research compares, e.g. the level of impact of particular groups of organizations. An example of an important role played by NGOs in international health policy was presented in research on the participation of NGOs in the process of creation and implementation of *WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)* (22). Another examples of an effective impact on the creation of legal framework for the disabled were the actions of NGOs in Zimbabwe (23). There are also studies available, that show a limited impact of NGOs on the process of health policy and consumer protection, or the environment of European Commission (10). While analyzing the effectiveness of NGOs, not only the internal efficiency of the organizations should be taken into account, but also the external factors (environmental factors), such as political decision-making mechanisms in conditioned data.

The effectiveness of activity is related to the matter of the accountability of NGOs. The question of who and what they are responsible for is a difficult one to answer. The use of financial measures of responsibility to sponsors and funders is a simplification of the problem. The rating, based solely on quantitative indicators (usually at the stage of application and project settlements), has little effect on the quality of services. It is much more difficult to measure the actual effects of organizations' activities, such as the empowerment of the recipients of the activity (2,16).

Another important issue is the quality of NGOs' activity. The international review of standards and methods for the assessment of the quality of NGOs' activity shows, that the surveillance in the form of registration and verification of authorizations, which is part of the legal system, is relatively effective. However, the peer pressure-induced self-regulatory activities involving the adoption of codes of rules, ethics and standards, are implemented to a small extent. This is related to their general and declarative-only character, which involves neither privileges nor consequences. The certification and the participation in networks of organizations seems to be a more efficient and acceptable method, in the environment of third sector, of stimulating the quality of activity and its assessment. In numerous countries, more and more organizations conduct this kind of activity. The activities of monitoring, evaluation, and audit aimed at: increasing the effectiveness, evaluation of the implementation of objectives, planning needs, justifying expenses. These activities are implemented to a different extent in particular countries (16). Dissemination of knowledge about the methods and benefits of regulatory action more common among the non-governmental sector representatives, may increase their interest in taking

similar initiatives. Obviously civil society activity is not subject to externally-imposed directions and ways of action, however, for organizations, which care for, e.g. enhancing public confidence, it may be a useful solution.

NGOs operating internationally, in spite of important achievements, are not able to perform all the tasks at the same time, that is they are not able to be providers of services, managers, protectors of rights, political activists, the alternative to government, etc. In national health systems, NGOs related to healthcare face a number of problems (e.g. limited resources, unskilled staff), which negatively affect efficiency and the quality of service. The literature emphasizes, that overcoming all problems and limitations is impossible, therefore the collaboration of governmental sector with NGOs in health area should be based on their strengths, while also recognizing the existing limitations (2,24,25).

SUMMARY

Non-governmental sector is very diverse. Various types of organizations represent various interests, set different methods of activity, have different amount of resources and perform different tasks. One specific area of NGOs' activity is health. NGOs in the health system deal with delivery of medical and physical services, education, integration, psychological support, as well as health advocacy. NGOs carry out important social functions, but also suffer from dysfunctions. The growing role of NGOs in providing social services and the increase in their participation in political processes, calls out for need to confirm the validity and credibility of the activity. One of the methods might be implementation of mechanism to assess the quality and effectiveness of organizations' activity. Regardless of all the problems and limitations, the activity of NGOs in the cotemporary world is essential. More and more people want to have an influence on the course of various processes and want their word to be heard in matters that affect them.

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