

OUTCAST OR INTEGRATED: THE CHALLENGE OF HOMELESSNESS IN RUSSIA AND EURASIA

2006 BEARR Trust Annual Conference, 24 November 2006

Report by Nicola Ramsden, BEARR Trustee

Michael McCulloch introduced the 2006 BEARR Trust Annual Conference by drawing attention to BEARR's next Small Grants Scheme, which aims to help young people who are homeless or in institutions to take a normal place in society. BEARR is already supporting one such initiative, and it is hoped that proposals for the new grant will address the challenge of how to achieve a wider impact on homelessness and reintegration.

Before turning to the main theme, the conference looked at the latest situation for NGOs under the new NGO Law.

Elizaveta Dzhirikova, Director of the NGO 'Sostradanie', spoke on **The new Russian NGO law in practice.**

The amended NGO law, put together in the context of defence against terrorism and supported by the President and the Duma, has replaced the relative freedom and light administrative burden enjoyed under the previous legal framework with a system of bureaucratic control. Sostradanie's members, survivors of the Gulag and of Nazi camps, are too old and frail to cope with the new regulations and paperwork, and will have difficulty managing re-registration (by April 2007 for domestic NGOs).

The new NGO law is taking Russia back to Soviet times in the sense that pleading with individual officials is once again the only way to obtain something. The individual sob story replaces collective political action, and so the system is open to arbitrary and incoherent official decisions. As a result the law is unlikely to be implemented uniformly across Russia, leading to the possibility that some regions will come to be considered "soft" on NGO activity and find themselves subject to pressure from Moscow. The law itself is full of contradictions, and despite political support for it, it is possible that it is unconstitutional.

In response to questions from participants, Elizaveta Dzhirikova made the following points:

- Foreign donations are tolerated when they are seen to meet basic needs such as medical supplies. If the recipient campaigns for legislative change however, the foreign funding could be regarded as 'political'. The Centre for Curative Pedagogics is an example of an organisation suffering from less benign official attitudes following the Director's campaign against the treatment of children in care homes outside Moscow.

- In the same way, awareness-raising is acceptable if it is confined to spreading information, but ‘Social Verdict’, which provides legal help to NGOs, appears to be having difficulties with the authorities.
- Despite this, it would be wrong, and lead to a loss of self-respect, to hold back from political campaigning. Unlike in Kazakhstan, there is little communication and cooperation between the government and NGOs in Russia, where the authorities both question the professionalism of NGOs and are unsettled when they prove to be competent.

Summing up this first session, Michael McCulloch commented that the situation described by Elizaveta Dzhirikova draws attention to the distinction between the role of NGOs in delivering social services, and their role in agitating for social change. Elizaveta Dzhirikova had shown us how innocent words such as ‘registration’, and familiar requirements such as filing an annual return can be interpreted to different effect in Russia. We all acknowledge that one function of NGOs is to create discomfort for governments – but how much discomfort can the Russian government tolerate?

The conference turned to its main theme with an **Overview on Homelessness in Russia** by **Dr Svetlana Stephenson**, Senior Lecturer in International Comparative Sociology at London Metropolitan University.

Introducing Svetlana Stephenson, Michael McCulloch said that homelessness was now a serious and deep-seated issue in Russia, affecting more than 1% of the population. Could modest amounts of money be used to aggregate or add value to the various initiatives under way?

Historical roots of public attitudes to homelessness

Svetlana Stephenson gave some colourful examples of public attitudes to the “Bomzhi” in Russia. De-humanisation of the homeless is not exclusive to Russia, but it permeates the whole tone of public discourse. Even the Russian Social Encyclopaedia describes the homeless as people who “rummage through rubbish, steal, cause fires and give moral discomfort to the public”.

There are clear historical roots to these attitudes, with a tradition of persecuting vagrants going back centuries. The regulation of residence has been a key feature of Russian society since at least the early 18th Century, when it became the basis for tax collection, conscription and general population control. Under the Soviet system, welfare was linked to residence and employment. Losing a job, being in prison, suffering a family break-up or moving to another area without a ‘propusk’ (residence permit) would often lead to homelessness. Vagrants were persecuted systematically in the 1930s; Stalin’s secret decree of 1937 instructed the NKVD to “clean the streets from asocial elements”. In the 1960s Khrushchev codified the law, and vagrancy or violation of the ‘propusk’ rules became punishable by 2 – 4 years in prison.

These criminal penalties were removed in 1991. A 1993 Decree stipulating that social services should provide for the homeless was only slowly implemented, so that up to

2001 the militia remained the principal agency dealing with the homeless. Homeless people were taken into militia detention centres, or were given tickets to return to their last place of residence.

Following the Law on the Foundation of Social Services in 1995, 70 social assistance institutions were established, providing 8,000 places. Moscow has 12 night shelters, providing 1,600 places, but since the 'propusk' system is still enforced in Moscow, and most of the Moscow homeless are migrants, only a minority of Moscow homeless, those who can prove that they once had a home there, qualify for entry to a shelter.

The causes of homelessness in Russia

These are mainly:

- unemployment, especially among the unskilled
- inter-regional migration from depressed to more buoyant areas
- forced migration from war and conflict
- the closing of mental hospitals, orphanages and workers' hostels
- the high cost of housing (a problem following divorce)
- property fraud (less now than in the 90s)
- lack of provision for prisoners after release (their 'spravka' is not enough to entitle them to residence)
- family disintegration, creating large numbers of street children

Statistics on homelessness

A recent survey carried out in Moscow and St Petersburg estimated that there are 100,000 homeless people in Moscow, and 50,000 in St Petersburg. In both cities, about 15% of these are living on the street. The proportion who are local residents is higher in St Petersburg (63%) than in Moscow (17%). Between one third and one half are ex-prisoners, and the majority are men. Interestingly, between one in eight and one in twelve have higher education. Although these figures should not be regarded as very accurate, they do give some sort of profile to the problem. They do not include the 'hidden homeless' in adult mental institutions, and are not much of a guide to the 'hidden homeless' who move around friends' floors.

Much of the discussion that followed Svetlana Stephenson's talk centred on what is being done to change attitudes:

- Medecins Sans Frontieres ran a campaign to draw attention to the numbers of homeless people who die in the winter cold, and shelters are now advertised in the Metro. But Svetlana Stephenson had not detected any significant change in public attitudes yet.
- The role of literature: there have been no Russian novels comparable to 'Black on White', which did so much to draw attention to the treatment of children in orphanages.
- The role of the media: there seems little possibility of an equivalent programme to "Cathy Come Home" being made, since the Russian media continues to sensationalise the issue of homelessness, reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes.

But there are some initiatives under way which will have a practical impact on the lives of homeless people. One example is the 'Book of Homelessness' produced by Poverty Solutions in St Petersburg, which gives information from many perspectives about how to survive on the streets.

Homelessness among adults was explored by a panel comprising Sergei Krivenko, Board member of 'Memorial'; Jo Lucas, mental health consultant working in Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia; Rannoch Daly, former prison governor; Arkady Tyurin, Director of 'New Social Solutions' and of the St Petersburg Street Paper; and Sarah Powell-Pisareva of The International Network of Street Papers and Poverty Solutions.

Sergei Krivenko described the problem of housing ex-soldiers. Of a total Russian population of 140 million, 1.2 million are in the army and there are 180,000 former soldiers who have not been allocated apartments. They are living in hostels and temporary barracks, or are renting apartments – for which they are only partly reimbursed by the State. Since the possession of a home determines social status and access to welfare, many former soldiers rapidly fall into a lower social category, despite long and often decorated military service. The problem was recognised immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, but legislation dating from the early 1990s, according to which soldiers with 20 years' service were entitled to an apartment, was never fully implemented because of lack of funds.

A new programme has started, aiming to provide 30,000 apartments a year in order to clear the backlog over the next 5 to 8 years, and new officers now have a special account which accumulates over 20 years in order to buy an apartment at the end of their service. The problem is that property inflation is outstripping annual funding, and there is corruption and a lack of transparency in how apartments are distributed.

Echoing Elizaveta Dzhirikova's earlier comments about the absence of NGO / government dialogue, Sergei Krivenko pointed to the resulting bad legislation, and decisions that lack flexibility or adaptability. Different agencies are working at cross-purposes. In the past, conflicts between government departments might have been resolved by the Party Central Committee. Now, there is a gap in communications, but NGOs have not yet emerged as the intermediating agent.

Jo Lucas described the hidden homeless in State adult institutions. These are often people with minor physical and mental disabilities, who should not be there. The most important way of helping them is to spread the belief that they can lead a normal life, given the right opportunities. Information and resources are then needed to make it happen, as well as properly trained helpers.

Jo Lucas gave another perspective on working with local authorities. Some of the difficulties that arise are because the officials lack language skills, information, and the means to carry out research – they are in effect left behind.

Rannoch Daly described the exchange programme that began 8 years ago between officers from Leeds prison and their counterparts in Ivanovo (about 250 miles NE of Moscow). The focus has now moved outside prison, to police and court processes and to what happens on release, when prisoners may find themselves homeless.

Much has been done to reduce overcrowding in prisons, which partly results from a reduction in the number of minor offences that carry a prison sentence. Prison numbers have fallen from 1.1 million to 800,000 – apparently a smaller prison population than in the US, a matter of some pride. The number of inspectors in the Penitentiary Supervision Service has been doubled to 10,000, allowing supervision of criminals as an alternative to prison and more support for ex-prisoners.

Arkady Tyurin spoke with first hand experience of being homeless for 11 years and sleeping on the streets for two and a half years. He still has no residence permit. He described the imaginative and energetic actions taken by his NGO, ‘New Social Solutions’, to deal with homelessness. These include the St Petersburg street paper, ‘Put Domo!’ (‘The Way Home’) and a photographic exhibition called ‘Eyes of the Street’. Art lessons given by therapists as a way of alleviating loneliness and exclusion had resulted in an exhibition and the sale of work. This, and the creation of sculptures symbolising the homeless who would die on the winter streets, would also begin to influence the majority of the St Petersburg population who care nothing for the homeless.

A further project of Arkady Tyurin’s, to promote social integration through sport, was described in more detail by **Sarah Powell-Pisareva**. EU funding was obtained to stage the ‘Homeless World Cup’. This event attracted 48 teams, and St Petersburg triumphed at the final in Cape Town, attracting much media interest. Arkady Tyurin and his colleagues are able to provide a regular stream of news to the media, and they intend to change perceptions of ‘Bomzhi’ from outcasts to victims.

The final subject of the conference, **Children and Young People**, was examined by a panel consisting of David Maidment from Railway Children; Lisa Hollingshead of Ecologia Youth Trust; Hannah-Louise Mobbs of Love’s Bridge in Perm; and Irina Kirillova, Director of the NGO ‘NABAT’ in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Introducing the speakers, BEARR trustee **Yuri Goligorsky** noted that the Russian government had demonstrated its alarm at the rapid decline in the population – at a present rate of 700,000 a year – by introducing measures to increase the birth rate. However, it was questionable whether the State could adequately provide for the current population of children.

David Maidment outlined the results of research commissioned by Railway Children in Moscow. (It is hoped that these can be published in full on the BEARR website in due course.) The ‘action research’ was combined with help in drug rehabilitation and finding adequate shelter for 750 of the 7,500 children picked up by the police on the Moscow streets last year. The children divide into two categories: neglected children who run away occasionally, and long-term homeless children who have made their way from

collapsing provincial cities to Moscow. Many of these are from state orphanages. They live in fear of the police and of enforced medical checks, and after a year of living in gangs on the streets – especially around railway stations such as Kurskiy – they prefer this way of life despite its brutality. Children who have recently arrived and girls (one third of the total) are generally more open to returning home. However, it is not clear how early intervention and family solutions can be implemented, although a pilot project to train social workers is under way, and the training of 14-16 year-olds as peer educators is a promising development.

Liza Hollingshead spoke about the Kitezh Children's Community, a 'foster village' for orphans after they have left their orphanages. One Kitezh village is complete, providing homes for 40 children in 10 foster families, and another village is being developed. So far, 90 children have been looked after in Kitezh – a small inroad into the 1 million children in state orphanages.

Kitezh helps mainly the 95% of orphans who are 'social orphans', that is, who have a living parent but who have been removed from their family, or given up, because of problems such as alcoholism. At maturity they are expected to return to their family (in contrast to 'true' orphans, who are theoretically entitled to a pension and accommodation). Homelessness almost inevitably results. Kitezh helps to support these children into higher education or vocational training, a task that needs energy and resources now that further education is no longer generally free. The BEARR Trust and Baker Botts are currently funding 4 students who began their further education this year.

Kitezh has potential as a training centre for fostering. Many of the children have suffered abuse, and foster parents have had to learn that love alone is not enough, and that they will be pushed to the limits by children testing for the point at which they will be rejected. Ecologia has sent experts in play and art therapy from the UK to Kitezh; this has also helped the adults who work there to understand more about the children they are helping.

Hannah-Louise Mobbs gave an encouraging account of good working relations between Love's Bridge and the local authorities in Perm. From the establishment of Love's Bridge's first centre for street children, opened in 2001, there has been a good dialogue with the authorities. As a result, Love's Bridge has continually changed the focus of its work in order to meet local needs. After the local government opened five shelters to care for young street children, Love's Bridge redirected its efforts to helping older teenagers, and opened a centre in 2003 to provide skills training and courses in independent living. With government cooperation, the centre is working successfully, and the training has been extended to teenagers still living in state orphanages. Love's Bridge has now returned its attention to younger children, this time focussing on early intervention to resolve family disputes and to reduce truancy and solvent abuse.

Hannah-Louise Mobbs concluded that successful intervention depends on choice – the children must want what is being offered. Handouts don't help in the long term, and the development of independence in children is vital.

Irina Kirillova also described more constructive working relations between NGOs and the government in Kazakhstan. The country has resources, and the President's apparent readiness to listen gives NGOs the impression that they can influence policies.

NABAT's work has been made possible by powerful letters of support from government officials, ensuring that doors are opened and no obstacles are put in their way. NABAT deals with the problem that businesses refuse to recruit children from orphanages. By providing psychological and professional training, NABAT teaches orphanage children skills, self-respect and responsibility, and then helps them to look for a job.

Irina Kirillova concluded that NABAT's experience showed that collaboration between government and NGOs was far more effective than conflict.

The following points were made in discussion:

- Although 'true' orphans are given state support beyond maturity, they are still vulnerable to fraud and may lose their apartments. There is a feeling that the state pension discourages them from studying and working to develop a truly independent productive life.
- Orphans who move into adult homes because they are deemed incapable of living without help are treated badly.
- The collection of statistics to prove that fostering is cheaper and more effective than institutional alternatives is essential. India is one source of cost-benefit information.
- Children in Kitezh have chosen to go there, following a summer camp visit. Kitezh families have both a foster mother and father (SOS Villages have mothers only), and children must be compatible with the adults looking after them.
- The spread of HIV is shocking, but is one thing that can galvanise the authorities into action and possible collaboration with NGOs. In Odessa for example, where there are 3,000 street children, 22 of a sample of 30 tested positive for HIV. The local government was quick to respond to the results and is now funding a project to help street children. Again, HIV incidence is an area where statistics need to be collected urgently to provide evidence to the authorities – the Elton John Aids Foundation is campaigning for this.
- Some speakers believed it was pointless and even dangerous to campaign for changes in the state orphanage system. Other participants believed that the baby house system, in place since the late 18th century, must be tackled by giving support to mothers at the point when they would normally give up their child. The existing institutions are self-serving, benefiting from per capita payments. There appear to be no mechanisms to change this, and little media interest.

Michael McCulloch opened the follow-up discussion that concluded the conference by noting the complexity of actions needed to deal with the consequences of such fundamental economic and social change in Russia. Many institutions affect and are affected by the issue of homelessness. The increase in government revenues from oil and gas has provided a cushion, but raises concerns about how much worse the problem could

become in an economic downturn. The booming of parts of the economy has in some ways lessened sympathy for those who are outside the system; many people are too busy securing their own futures to bother about those left behind.

Sustainable change can only come from within, but there is still scope for partnerships with organisations from outside the region, provided these continue to develop in a spirit of collegiality and humility. There is still a large gap between the many individual initiatives under way and the scale of the homelessness problem. How much sharing and learning is going on? How widely known are the achievements of Arkady Tyurin in St Petersburg and of Love's Bridge and the local authorities in Perm?

Irina Kirillova commented that NABAT's work is consciously regarded as a pilot scheme with the potential to expand. She always makes sure that their work gets press coverage. **Elizaveta Dzhirikova** said that British organisations have already provided much help in Russia. There is a myth that foreign organisations support extremism, and we must not be brow-beaten into providing only basic material aid – legislative change is needed or nothing will change. Hamish Heald from Love's Bridge believed that decisions must be made locally, but continued moral support from outside was still of value.

Jo Lucas wanted to reframe the question as “Why are we still there? 15 years on, are British NGOs still needed in Russia?” **Michael McCulloch** replied that we ask ourselves that question every year, and yet it seems that interest in cooperation remains, even though the nature of it changes.

Tatiana Perevertseva-Birch, who had worked in an orphanage in Donetsk, believed that many more Ukrainian and Russian businesses were now open to charitable action; she had come across several examples of giving. **Francis Callaway**, who worked with Irina Kirillova in NABAT to persuade businesses to offer jobs to former orphanage inmates, and **Richard Servian** and **Daryl Hardman** all found that businesses usually give in kind, rather than parting with money. Daryl Harman noted that businesses were mostly interested in local issues or in the boss's particular interests.

Barbara Profeta offered participants a final interesting thought: perhaps there is no need for foreign NGOs to generate any more new projects in Russia, since people are developing coping strategies on their own. Instead, our efforts should concentrate on spreading information throughout the regions on what is happening elsewhere.

The BEARR Trust is grateful to Baker Botts in Moscow, and British Airways and Caspian Services in Kazakhstan, for support for this conference.