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Final Report

“Forms of exclusion and inclusion experienced by homeless people living in Bishkek”

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Abstract

This study is about homeless people, how they view their situation, their access to existing shelters, social benefits, hospitals and services provided by NGOs. In spite of being a small city with less than a million population, the number of homeless people in Bishkek exceeds 3500 and according to the director of Fountain Jizni an (NGO that supports homeless people) their numbers are growing daily. They are mainly internal labour migrants who have come to the capital in search of work. In recent years the numbers of homeless young people and also the older generation who held good jobs in Soviet times have risen. One can see them walking the streets and in the vicinity of garbage bins where they search for plastic and glass bottles, cardboard, and old stuff, including food scraps they can eat. It is possible to see them sleeping or making fires close to garbage bins in cold weather. This study tries to understand the state of homeless people both from their own and NGOs and state agencies that deal with the issue of homeless people's perspectives. The study also uses the concept of social exclusion (and inclusion) when analysing the data.

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Introduction

This study is about the state of homeless people both from their own and NGOs and state agencies that deal with the issue of homeless people's perspectives and also focuses on forms of exclusion and inclusion experienced by homeless people. The numbers of homeless people living in Bishkek is steadily growing. They can be easily spotted while walking along the streets and passing garbage bins, where they can often be seen scrabbling for scraps of food etc. In winter they often try to sleep in stairwells in apartment blocks, but they are often moved on. According to information printed in the Vecherniy Bishkek newspaper (2010) on one weekend day alone in December 2010 more than 20 people froze or burned to death in fires they lit to keep warm. Many lives are being lost in this way and their number is growing daily.

Till 2003-2004 we dealt mainly with Russian homeless people, mainly about 40. We would rarely see homeless people in their 30s. But, today there are more Kyrgyz than Russians and they are of all ages. (NGO worker, 16th April 2011)

It immediately raises a lot of questions like: who are they, where have they come from what are their backgrounds, how come they ended up on the street etc.

This research is more descriptive, does not promote any particular theory but simply tries to discover general perceptions about the homeless in Bishkek and look at certain changes and tendencies in society.

Problem background

There are various reasons for ending up homeless: unemployment, family break up, alcohol abuse etc. they come from all walks of life and include doctors, Afghan war veterans, former prisoners, artists, singers, lawyers and teachers, the daughter of a parliamentary deputy etc. Nowadays many internal labour migrants are becoming homeless. More than 3000 people have come to us since we started working and more and more come every day. (NGO worker, 15th March 2011)

The economic crisis followed by the breakup of the Soviet Union affected lives both in villages and cities. Many people lost their sources of income and were expected to survive and adapt to the changes that came with the transition. According to Olcott (2005), Kyrgyzstan was the first post-Soviet state in Central Asia to engage in financial restructuring after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It introduced private ownership of land, albeit with some restrictions and reorganized its pension, healthcare and education systems to make them financially self sustaining. The new realities created by the transition forced people to develop more adaptable survival strategies. Huge migrations have taken place from villages to cities and neighbouring countries. the political and socio-economic changes that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union promised a brighter future for people, however only a few were able to benefit from

them and for many others life became a daily struggle for food, full of anxiety and insecurity and loss of hope in the future. They lost many social benefits that had earlier been theirs as of right but had become privileges now, including access to hospitals, education and security. The homeless are the ones who could not fit in, or adapt to the changes brought about by the new world order, who lost all sense of direction in life, including those who had held good jobs but could not cope with the changes in society.

This study believes that understanding the connection between socio-economic changes and their influence on homeless people's lives is vital in evaluating and assessing homelessness, but focuses more on the state of homeless people both from their own and NGOs and state agencies that deal with the issue of homeless people's perspectives. According to official data stated by a Vecherniy Bishkek correspondent, the officially registered number of homeless people is 595 (NGOs say more than 3500): in Pervomaiskiy district - 209, Sverdlovskiy - 175, Oktyabrskiy - 80 and Leninskiy - 132, however there is only 1 shelter for each region, which can accommodate no more than 50 people (January 2010) or a total of about 200, which means that even disregarding the number quoted by NGOs (3500), at least 395 homeless people cannot find shelter. In reality, more than 3000 people or more than 90 % of homeless people are affected. It is interesting how (on what basis/criteria) the 10 % for whom accommodation is available are chosen out of so many, but the question remains as to how the others are supposed to survive in winter. Thus, the study tries to focus on forms of exclusion and inclusion experienced by homeless people in accessing help from the government and NGOs.

Research Questions

1. What are the forms of exclusion or inclusion experienced by homeless people, particularly healthcare and accommodation and food?
2. What social benefits are available for homeless people in Bishkek? How can they get them?
3. What is the role of NGOs in dealing with homelessness (active NGOs, services provided by them, donors, access to their services)?
4. What are some coping strategies of homeless people in Bishkek?

Research and Data collection

As part of this study, in-depth interviews have been conducted with 25 people, including experts from the NGO sector, city administration, government shelters, Ministry of Social Protection and homeless people.

In order to gain as detailed information as possible, we found in-depth interviews best for this study. Each interview lasted on average 45-60 minutes, so we had to use snowball sampling. As it

was difficult to reach respondents we had to ask NGO workers for help. Through in-depth interviews we were able to get full and clear answers, as well as important facts that could be missed with close-ended questions.

The first thing we did before starting our data collection was to go to the “Fountain of Life” NGO on a Saturday – a day when they usually feed homeless people hot food and tea. Our research team took along some clothes we wanted to donate and went to make our initial observations and meet the Director.

The center was established by Margaret Gordon in 2005. She started by distributing hot food to homeless people in need of help and officially registered the Fountain Jizni Center for the Homeless in 2009. The building is a typical family house with a big yard with long tables that can seat approximately 50 people. It has its own kitchen where hot meals are prepared, a hairdressing salon, 2 rooms for medical check ups and a laundry room. The staff work hard to ensure the homeless are well cared for and know them all personally. The homeless call Margaret the director of this center, Mother Teresa.

When we arrived at the center on a Saturday morning, a meal was just about to be served. We handed over the clothes we had brought with us and got ready to help the staff serve the meal, which that day consisted of delicious-looking meat, potatoes, bread and sweet hot tea and on that cold March morning we confess we really wanted to eat some as well.

We did not expect many homeless to turn up but approximately 200 people were served. To tell the truth at first, it was scary to see these homeless people let alone serve them their meal. They were aggressive, dirty, drunk and smelled of vomit and of all ages and nationalities and some were physically and mentally ill. There were young women with small daughters and one young man asked us about our educational background who said that he had also finished university but because he could not find a job he ended up on the street, like many others. There were a lot of men aged 20-45 there but most of them were too drunk and were heavily sunburnt or were scarred from fighting. They were very aggressive and ready to fight for a piece of bread.

After getting some information about homeless people from the NGO staff, we were able to interview them. Later we started looking for homeless people on the streets and approaching to them with food. We noticed how afraid they were of people and brandished sticks to protect themselves. Only after we showed them our food and gave the name of the NGO worker who had sent us, did they agree to talk to us. Some of them were eager to talk so that we could let everybody know what state they were living in.

Through the Fountain of Life Center we learnt of a man who had opened a rehabilitation center for homeless people who were keen to recover. He had a very interesting story in that he himself had once been homeless and had spent 2 years on the street. He was a recovering alcoholic who started helping homeless people and later on he opened his rehabilitation center for 111 people where they could get shelter and a hot meal. According to his records, 50% of all registered homeless go on to lead normal lives, find wives or husbands, find jobs, rent small rooms and offer free places to other homeless people who also want to live normally.

The whole picture of caring for homeless people and giving them all possible support completely disappeared when we started interviewing government agencies and shelters. We faced difficulties in getting permission to interview officials, as it took several hours or even a whole day to reach them. Another problem we faced was that they stopped the interviews after 10 minutes claiming they were too busy. Some of them shouted that we did not know anything. The situation in the hospitals was worse, as they have no facilities to work with the homeless. During our research we witnessed it for ourselves when we were in a hospital. A sick, badly battered, homeless woman had been brought to the hospital by NGO workers. They said her internal organs had almost disintegrated due to her heavy drinking. A greenish liquid was coming from her mouth and she constantly wanted to vomit, so she absolutely reeked. However none of the doctors wanted to deal with her and were saying to each other “you deal with her”, “No you deal with her”... About an hour and a half later she was still lying on a gurney. Then we went up to the senior doctor and introduced ourselves and the purpose of our research. He immediately said that they definitely accept homeless people and give free medical treatment. To our response that the homeless woman outside had been waiting for 2 hours by that time, he said, she would be taken care of and ended the interview. When we came out, a doctor was dealing with her. The doctor said that he could not examine her, until she had been cleaned up. So then a nurse was sent to do so. She started to complain that she was fed up with homeless people and couldn't stand their smell anymore, and why should she be cleaning her for her 3000 som salary. The homeless woman was taken into a small room. An NGO worker was asked to buy some soap, a piece of cloth, scissors (to cut her nails), gloves and some drugs she needed and something like “co-payment” was requested by the doctor (the NGO worker paid, we will talk more about that below) . We went in to help the NGO worker clean up the woman. It was after 10th of June, when the city had no centrally-supplied hot water, but the nurse said they didn't have hot water at all – something we verified for ourselves. It was very difficult to clean the ingrained dirt off with soap and cold water so we asked if some water could be boiled in a kettle – but were told that there was no electricity. In reality, the doctors didn't want to deal with her at all. After we had cleaned

her up, we took her onto a ward with 6 other patients – none of whom were happy to she was there, but there were no special beds for the homeless.

Findings and analysis

State agencies' perspective on homeless people and the issue of homelessness and forms of exclusion and inclusion experienced (at state shelters, hospitals etc)

During our research we tried to get an overall picture of how the system for homeless people works, so we interviewed workers from the Ministry of Social Protection, City Administration, shelters and hospitals. Empirical data shows that the government does not deal with homeless and it is the city administration's responsibility. The city administration runs 3 shelters, each of which can accommodate about 50 people, which are open from November till March. However, this department keeps no current statistics on the homeless and considers homelessness to be an individual problem rather than an issue caused by socio-economic problems.

There are only about 100 + homeless in our city, most of who have come from rural areas and have being kicked out by their own families or being alcoholic. In fact most of them have homes in villages, or even in the city, but they do not want to go home. They could get construction jobs, but don't want to. It is their fault nobody will offer them work and if they want to live normal lives they should try to get the necessary documents and if they want to get a passport they should finish school, but if they have not completed or if their parents have not given them an education, it is their fault. I don't know how to help these people. It is almost impossible.

(Member of the mayor's office), 16th June 2011)

During our research we discovered that shelters and hospitals are not equipped or prepared to work with homeless people. They find working with the homeless risky because of the various diseases the homeless carry. Many shelter workers see homelessness as an individual problem and are very critical of the homeless.

We try to help them. The city allocates some money for homeless people, but it covers only food. We try to write projects for international organizations and sometimes get blankets. At the beginning of each season – from early autumn to spring - we make cosmetic repairs to the building. We do what we can to make them comfortable but they steal everything and sell it to buy vodka. They do not use the outside toilet and urinate on their beds. They smell terribly. You don't know, you haven't worked with them. They are lazy. In Kyrgyzstan we have single mothers with 5 kids who work hard to educate and feed them. The homeless are just lazy. They all come from the villages. I don't understand why they come, they would be better off in their villages. Who wants to work with them? Most of them have tuberculosis and many other diseases. Young nurses come to work with them and I feel sorry for them, because there is a high probability they will become infected. They are young and have families, so why should they risk their lives for the homeless, why should we help them, if they don't want to help themselves... Our shelters are not equipped to work with the homeless. We need constant hot and cold water to clean them, social workers who can deal with them, special rooms and specialized doctors, all in one place.

(Shelter worker, 21st June 2011)

The Kolomto shelter seems to be the best equipped according to the respondents (homeless people and NGOs). It was opened as a government shelter and is partially supported by the government and the city administration. They also find homeless people difficult to deal with.

Many shelters are not equipped to work with homeless people. We have better conditions than the rest and often homeless people are brought to our shelter by ambulance, the police, Fontan Jizni and other shelters or they come themselves. Before accepting any homeless into our shelter we ask that they undergo a medical check up here, because one never knows what kind of diseases they are carrying. Then we ask them to take a bath, if they can't we help clean them up. We have both hot and cold water. Then we change their clothes and try to turn them into humans. They can stay here for 10 days. When our doctor can't help them we send them to hospital. Since we are a government shelter, hospitals must take them, but if they admit themselves, none of the doctors will accept them. Although we are called government shelters, we don't receive any help from the government. It is very difficult to deal with homeless people. They urinate in their beds and these need to be changed often. They come in with frozen legs or burned arms, beaten up, with open tuberculosis scabs, ears full of worms, ... In Osh bazaar there are young people lying on the ground, faces covered in flies. They all come from the villages. Most of them have lost their documents or never had any. It is difficult for the elderly homeless to get into an old people's home and for young homeless to get a job. So it is a vicious circle.

(Shelter worker, 19th June 2011)

However NGO and Rehabilitation centers have different perspectives on shelters and what actually goes on in them. The NGOs and the government have shown opposing views on the problem of homelessness in Bishkek. During our study we found it almost impossible to get an appointment with the person who coordinates the city's shelters for homeless people and it appeared that the city administration is not aware of the current situation concerning homeless people, but only has information about shelters and the amount of money given to them and only deals with the problem of homelessness in terms of providing shelters and daily meals for four months a year. However conditions in the shelters are far from humane.

The city administration runs 4 shelters in the winter and at least try to give the homeless there something to eat. However conditions in the shelters are terrible. I really do not understand why they open them... they are in a terrible state with no ventilation, security or showers... People are dying there. The lack of security people means there are fights and sometimes women get raped there. Leninskiy is the worst. In winter, ambulances go there 2-3 times a week to take away people who have died. One case in point was a homeless man who was beaten up and became mentally ill but still knew what he was doing. When we went to the Leninskiy shelter, he was dying, infested with fleas and covered with ingrained dirt. He died that day. They are taken to the morgue and if relatives do not come they are buried. How can they look for relatives if they don't know who the person is... There are many people now who are looking for their relatives, sons, daughters or mothers and who knows, they may already be buried somewhere.

(NGO worker, 4th May 2011)

After a long investigation and finding out who is in charge of the homeless we learnt that the MOSP is not responsible for the homeless and does not recognize them as a vulnerable group and therefore has not developed any particular structure to deal with them. From our conversation

with a MOSP official it was obvious how annoying our questions were. The fact that the main social institution helping people does not even regard the homeless as a group of people in need for support, has resulted in deadlock.

We don't help the homeless because we do not have any laws and regulations regarding how to do so. We are trying to find some data on homeless people in order to include some strategies regarding them in a draft law due to come into force in 2015. We provide social benefits only for large families on low incomes. I do not have any information about shelters, you can just ask them, as we do not have any connection with them. As I said we do not have anything, we ourselves are looking for some.

(MOSP official, 14th June 2011)

Medical institutions and homeless people

Homeless people live on the street for an average of just 3 years, due to the harsh conditions and the lack of healthcare. According to the Leninskiy Social Protection department, a lot of the homeless suffer from various diseases, some of which are contagious. When government shelters admit homeless people they have to place them in one room and frequently healthy people get infected. This is better than the alternative of freezing to death on the street. Homeless people we spoke to said they don't go to hospital when they are ill because nobody will treat them. Admitting homeless people to hospitals is very complicated, as on the one hand the legislation states that hospitals have to admit and treat everybody, while they are so chronically underfunded they draw up unofficial treatment policies. The official concept of free treatment for all is just an illusion.

When respondents spoke of their treatment they recounted how they were refused treatment and told they could not be treated without documents and payment. In some cases where NGOs have paid for medicines and treatments, they have been attended to – a situation that has become more and more frequent.

Our hospital system makes us responsible for the homeless. They say to us “wash your homeless”, “take your homeless”, “pay for your homeless”. The system itself does not work well and I am not talking about its subsystems. If a homeless person is taken to a hospital by the Kolomto Shelter, since it is a government-run institution (supported by the city administration) they take them and treat them. But Kolomto can't deal with all the homeless as there are lots of them and they all have health problems. So we take the worst ones, but the hospitals will not look after them until we clean them, give them clean linen and pay co-payment. Co-payment (for staying in a ward, food, linen) is the most important. Then they ask us to buy drugs - often very expensive ones that they rarely use for the homeless. We try to bring them in clean, but sometimes when there is an emergency and they are dying we have to bring them in as they are. But finding a doctor to treat them is difficult. There is no law regarding them, so we can't say anything, though they are citizens of this country. I often think what would happen to them if we closed down and could not make these co-payments etc.

(NGO worker, 28th May 2011)

The hospital where we made our observations is not equipped to take such unconditional patients. Patients who are cannot be washed, have their haircut, don't have their own supplies and no money and documents are simply rejected and sent to those who will support them, simply because hospitals are unable to do so. If a homeless person is not taken care of and left all alone, he/she can be a danger to others. They can infect others if they have open tuberculosis scabs, or if injured, burned or frozen, then they will probably be physically unable to work and recover in general.

Loss of documents/passport

During the interviews the issue of documents (losing and replacing) was raised as a vital issue that is faced by shelters, NGOs and homeless people themselves. It was reported that about 90% of homeless people have lost their documents/ passports.

Many homeless people don't have their documents (passports). Some of them have never had any and since they don't use them much in their villages, they only realize how much they need it when they come to the capital. But when they become homeless their priorities change, they think they don't need a passport at all. However among them there are people who will go back to a normal life. It is very difficult and require strong will, but the difficulties replacing lost documents make it even harder, sometimes even impossible. In order to get new ones, they need to go back to their villages, but they cannot afford to and are too embarrassed to face their families so usually end up going back to the life they have got used to.

(NGO worker, 16th April 2011)

Both in the case of hospitals and in dealing with the issue of replacing or getting documents there are no clear regulations, which could be used to claim that homeless people should be admitted to hospital without any co-payments. During our research we talked with Professor of Anthropology Emil Nasritdinov and asked him about the current situation concerning the registration of internal migrants in Bishkek. Nasritdinov has conducted a lot of research on migration issues in Kyrgyzstan. For homeless people it appears to be impossible to get documents due to health problems, lack of money and loss of all contact with relatives and family. But being homeless does not really require documents and they get used to living this way. According to our respondents, some of them have tried to renew their documents but could not do so and just gave up.

In 2005, the B Talon was introduced to make registration easier but once they lose documents they are no longer controlled. There are no clear regulations covering one's rights involving the loss and replacement of documents either.

I wish the government would take the issue of documents seriously, because once people don't have them they cannot access the services they are entitled to as citizens of this country. They need at least some form of documents identifying who they are and stating that they are citizens of this country. Obtaining these documents should be easy and not involve numerous visits to various places. There should be clear explanations as to what to expect from the person you are going to and to what rights you are entitled and how you can use them. I am tired of dealing with it. I will give you an example. One of the homeless wanted to live a normal life, so as a first step we decided to replace his lost passport. He grew up in an orphanage in Kara Balta but later lived in Tokmok. We went first to the passport office in Kara Balta, but we were told that we needed to get it in Tokmok, since he had been living there for the last 3-4 years. When we went to Tokmok we were told to go to Kara Balta, where he received his passport. This takes a lot of time and resources and destroys the morale of the person trying to get back to normal.

(Rehabilitation center worker, 28th May 2011)

The document issue is one of the main parts in this vicious circle of homelessness. Because they do not have passports, homeless people cannot get work, social benefits (pensioners) and hospitals and even get exploited by the police.

The police deliberately pick up homeless people and send them to work for free in different places. I was one of 5 people a policeman took to Novopokrovka to build his house, but I ran away. Most of the homeless I know are working in militia officers' houses: taking care of cattle, cleaning the yard and so on. Deputies have lots of Jailoos (pastures) in Naryn and they are working there. They are told that after working for a number of years they will help them get their documents, but never do it, unless you meet a good person.

(Homeless#9, 18th June 2011)

Another respondent says:

Once I was sleeping in Fuchika and I was woken up by 3 police officers. They told me to get up and go with them, but I could not walk. They searched my pockets and didn't find anything and left. They check documents and if you do not have them they take you to the police station, where you are kept in a cage. After being kept there 1-2 days, sometimes they take you to their homes and make you do construction work for a week, two and sometimes even more. Many homeless and people with no documents are used like that. We know that getting a passport is difficult. Sometimes we hear that it is possible to get it done quickly for 5000 soms, the question is where to get the money, if nobody wants to hire us and the police use us to repair their houses for free. It is like slavery. If you do not believe me, ask the others.

(Homeless Res.#3, 18th August 2011)

There are lots of cases of homeless being forced to do unpaid work by the police or criminals. They can force anyone to be a slave, but know that nobody is going to protect the homeless and they will not be punished. They choose those who are fittest so they can do construction work, clean or herd livestock.

Our interviewees also reported mass arrests during police roundups before important foreign visitors come to the city on official visits and also mass document checks. In such cases

the homeless are simply taken to police stations where they can be kept for up to 30 days in appalling conditions.

How homeless people view their situation

Among our respondents there were people who had earlier held prestigious jobs, but had lost them after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Data also shows that loosening family ties is an important factor in ending up homeless. Older homeless people are no longer employable and have turned to drink to try and escape depression and stress.

What kind of person do you think I am? I was a school administrator in the past. I had my family and children. Everybody has a breaking point. There are strong-willed and weak-willed people. If a person is weak, she/he tries to find solace in drinking. You become a friend of this evil. You forget everything, wake up the next morning and drink more to forget. This is how it starts and one does not realize he/she has become an alcoholic.
(Homeless Res.#9, 20th June 2011)

From our experience of approaching homeless people, we can say they are afraid of and aggressive to the people around them. It was difficult to get them to talk but when they did they would just talk a lot about their past lives, just as if they were not homeless.

I had a house and a good job and have two degrees and almost 30 years work experience. I used to work as a product distributor in Soviet times. I would issue talons/vouchers for food at the regional level. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the food voucher distribution system changed and I lost my job. Times were hard and people started to migrate. I also went to Russia in search of a better life, but things were not easy as I expected. My brother wanted to take out a loan to start a business so I let him use my house as collateral, but my own brother sold my house when I was in Russia. I only came back when my mother died and found out about it. I lived in this neighborhood before and people, usually babushkas/elderly women who know me sometimes put me up. I get a pension, so from my pension I buy food for them, because I can't stand being cold in winter. I started to drink recently, because life is very cruel. I come here to see children, young girls and boys and the elderly and I ask myself what are our parliamentary deputies doing?. Why are they so concerned about changing statues when kids are ending up on the streets. You do not know, how cruel and exploitative these kids are. I worked almost 30 years and what the government gives me as a pension is not enough to rent a place. I wish that instead of building mosques in every village that are not used except on Fridays, they would build shelters for people, for the elderly and children and rehabilitation centers and start to really work...

(Homeless Res.#3, August 18th 2011)

Many homeless people prefer not to go to the shelters. Many of them prefer to sleep in the stairwells of apartment blocks and basements and next to heating pipes. They usually go to the shelters only when it gets very cold and they have no place to sleep.

Shelters never accept seriously ill people who are going to die, because they think it will create more problems for them. If a person is dying the hospitals will not accept

them either. I have been homeless in Bishkek for 2 years, but did not go to hospital even when I was very sick, as I do not trust them. More than 10 people with whom I have lived, have died in my arms. Seeing that they were dying, I went to the hospitals and pleaded with the doctors to help them, but nobody came to help. They said he would die so take them away. the police said the same. I cannot say anything about the government, but ordinary people, people who cross the streets... We have changed so much and lost our human values. Passers-by react as if a dead dog is lying in the street and if a homeless person lies on street and asks for help, they don't even look at you. We are all the same before God. This could happen to each and every one of you. There are many young girls among the homeless. Do you think they knew that they would end up like this on the street? (Res.#12, 11Jule, 2011)

Another respondent says:

Shelters are not equipped to look after you there. One woman was so ill she could not stand or go to the toilet and cried all the time. She asked me once to empty the bottle she urinated in and I helped her. Living outside is better than living in those shelters. People die there but I do not know what they do with the bodies. (Res.#13, 7th July 2011)

Data indicates that homeless people get used by shelter workers as well.

Last winter I stayed in a shelter in Fuchik Park. They feed you once a day and give you shelter. But it is cold in winter and sometimes people staying there burn plastic to get warm and it produces a lot of smoke, but they do it because it is very cold. They put wood and mattresses on concrete floors. The mattresses are usually wet and cold and stink. I asked the boss if he could give us better mattresses, but he kicked my leg and said that in the beginning they gave out mattresses, sheets and blankets but the residents took it all and exchanged it for vodka. They said there was a water pipe but homeless people broke it when they were fighting. I lived there for 5 days and the boss who comes from Chon Kemin said he needed a man to look after his cattle. I said I would do it and spent the next half of the winter there. Then they asked me to build a sewing workshop but didn't give me any money. I left in spring and walked all the way back to Bishkek. It took me two days.

Regarding their survival strategies and life in general, homeless people talked about several ways of earning a living. They confessed that all their money goes to buy alcohol since it is the "way of keeping alive".

Homeless men collect bottles and cardboard and then buy drink girls prostitute themselves. This is how they feed themselves. People have become cruel and even homeless people become cruel after not getting any help from others. Nobody wants to live this way, but you accept it gradually. There are times when you want to go back. But if you want to work, nobody hires you. We do not have documents and we aren't fit enough to work in construction. Where else can we look for work? We cannot go to our relatives, as we are ashamed and they are ashamed of us. When you are 30-40 you cannot fit into your family. I wanted to die but could not. (Res.#12, 11th July 2011)

There is one rehabilitation center for homeless people. The person who runs it had himself been homeless in the past.

It is very difficult to pull a person back but it is possible. It is difficult for an alcoholic to find enough willpower. There is a constant need for social workers who could deal with them individually. They need love and understanding and they need somebody who trusts them. Every person needs this and they are also people like everybody else, but have lost their way.

(Res.#14, 11th July 2011)

Not an individual problem but a systemic one

NGO and Rehabilitation Center workers approach the issue of homelessness not as an individual problem but rather more from the perspective of relationships. The fact there were virtually no homeless people during Soviet times says a lot about the good welfare conditions and strong state control of social problems. After the Soviet Union collapsed, numerous changes and transformations occurred in the lives of ordinary people, including high unemployment, difficulties finding jobs they were qualified to do, mass emigration and internal labour migration. unemployment is quoted as one of the main reasons for homelessness, followed by family disputes and break ups and alcohol abuse.

I think the main reasons for being homeless in Kyrgyzstan are: family breakups, alcohol and unemployment. Wives think that their husbands are not earning anything, which leads to endless arguments and thus many men leave their homes and end up on the streets.

(NGO worker, 15th March 2011)

Political, economic and social transformations have not been very successful. The large numbers of homeless are an obvious sign that society faces a new problem, caused by people not being strong enough to solve their own problems. Homeless people have many reasons for becoming homeless but why do they stay that way and not look to change it by being strong and persistent?

One of the NGOs we visited and interviewed has a staff member who has been abroad and visited shelters for homeless people. According to her, the centers are fully equipped, where homeless people can access a full range of services and can stay there until they recover. The centers have not only medical personnel, but also psychiatrists who provide advice and mental treatment for long-term alcoholics.

Conclusion

There are different forms of exclusion experienced by homeless people in Bishkek. The 3 city-run centers and NGOs helping the homeless and certain rehabilitation centers are not enough to deal with the problem of homelessness. The government should pay close attention to the problem and set up a designated government department to deal with the homeless that would collect general statistical data, supply their needs and simply take care of and lobby the interest of the homeless. State agencies tend to talk about the amount of money and shelters, but this is really not enough to overcome this growing issue.

In terms of getting social benefits, almost all the homeless fail. Because more than 3000 people are homeless, but the shelters can accommodate only 200, it is obvious that 90% of them are not

receiving help. The question of sanitary and basic medical help is not even discussed if they cannot pay for this service. In most cases access to hospital and other social benefits is via NGO workers, because NGOs can make co-payments for certain services for the homeless. It seems that only NGOs and international organizations are making an important contribution to helping the homeless survive the harsh conditions of city life.

This research tried to reveal coping strategies of the homeless. There are different coping strategies, be it collecting plastic bags, or metal from the garbage, but almost all their meager earnings are spent on alcohol. There are some successful examples of homeless people turning their lives around and actually using the experiences gained on the street in how the homeless survive to their advantage by opening their own rehabilitation centers.

Overall, by looking back on our research and posing the question “why are you homeless?”, first there came rapid changes and later adaptation skills to these changes, where some could accept the new rules and way of survival and some were unable to adapt.

The tendency for change in modern society and increasing rates of unemployment and migration will continue and be followed by negative consequences as the numbers of homeless people increase. There are no treatments for various diseases or drug addiction and no measures in place to solve the problem of homelessness and alcoholism. This huge issue is taking the lives of healthy people who are just too weak to deal with the larger economic and political problems that exist in today's world.

Appendix 1. Information about opening temporary shelters for homeless people in Bishkek

This appendix was received from a City administration worker who coordinates the work of shelters for homeless people

Информация по открытию временных приютов для бездомных людей в г. Бишкек

В целях организации временных приютов в г. Бишкек районными администрациями проводится следующая работа:

- в **Первомайском районе** функционирует благотворительный дом «Қоломто» с 1998 года, который оказывает помощь и поддержку бездомным людям. Данный благотворительный дом предоставляет временный ночлег 70 лицам без определенного места жительства, бесплатное питание в сумме 30 сомов (обед), медицинский осмотр. Из местного бюджета финансирование составляет в год 1413,2 тыс. сомов.

- в **Ленинском районе** проведен ремонт приюта для бездомных людей в парке им. Ю. Фучика на 80 человек (бывшая бильярдная завода им. Фрунзе). На сегодняшний день в приюте пребывает 43 человека. Питание 30 сом в день. Еда готовится в Центре милосердия по ул. Трудовая, 10.

Кроме того, для женщин с детьми в настоящее время по ул. Трудовая 10, в Центре милосердия функционирует приют проживает в нем 13 женщин без определенного места жительства с 17-ю детьми.

- в **Свердловском районе** приют для бездомных людей открыт по ул. Фере 32, пересекает ул. Орозбекова. Проведен косметический ремонт помещений.

- в **Октябрьском районе** приют для бездомных людей открыт по адресу ул. Фере 32, в настоящее время находится – 10 человек.

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