



Homelessness and housing exclusion across EU Member States

Analysis and suggestions on the way forward by the EU Network of independent experts on social inclusion

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Disclaimer: This report reflects the views of its authors and these are not necessarily those of either the European Commission or the Member States. The original language of the report is English.

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1. Context

This short report was produced in the context of the European Union (EU) Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The Social OMC covers three main strands (social inclusion, pensions and healthcare and long-term care), and also addresses “making work pay” issues.¹ Two important instruments which are used to support the social inclusion strand of the Social OMC are the peer reviews of good practices and the regular reports drafted by the EU Network of independent experts on social inclusion. The latter reports are intended to support the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission in its task of assessing independently the implementation of the Social Inclusion Process.² The Network consists of independent experts from each of the 27 Member States as well as from Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Turkey.

This report summarises the main findings from an analysis undertaken by the Network of experts in 2009; it covers the 27 EU countries. The experts analysed the “social and economic inclusion of homeless people” and the “access to adequate housing” in their respective country. Drawing on both the national experts’ analysis and the Network Core Team’s assessment of the Social OMC, it also puts forward 15 concrete suggestions for addressing the key barriers to making progress at both national and EU levels in the fight against homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) – i.e., insufficient political commitment, lack of understanding of HHE and lack of agreement on definitions and appropriate indicators, absence of or inadequate data sources, and inadequate (if any) monitoring and reporting.

2. Summary

Definitions

Definitions of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) vary widely across Member States. Indeed, almost half the Member States lack any official definition of HHE. Only a small number of countries adopt broad definitions that either relate directly to the ETHOS definition³ or cover very similar categories. Many countries have adopted a narrower definition than the full ETHOS definition and tend to give more attention to homelessness than to housing exclusion. While the official definition and measurement of HHE is generally narrower than the ETHOS definition, the need for a more broadly based approach, which takes into account housing exclusion as well as “rooflessness” and “houselessness”, is gaining ground amongst researchers and organisations on

¹ For detailed information on the EU Social OMC and in particular on the social inclusion strand, see the European Commission’s website:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=751&langId=en>.

² For more information on the Commission’s programme on “Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion and Assessment in Social Inclusion”, including the list of independent experts, see:

<http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/>.

³ The ETHOS typology classifies homeless people according to their living situation. There are four conceptual categories: *rooflessness* (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough); *houselessness* (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter); living in *insecure housing* (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence); and living in *inadequate housing* (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding). These in turn are broken down into 13 operational categories. These can be found on the FEANTSA web site at: <http://www.feantsa.org/files/freshstart/Toolkits/Ethos/Leaflet/EN.pdf>.

the ground. A more systematic and consistent use of the ETHOS definition across the EU would improve understanding of HHE and allow for more in-depth international comparisons. However, some consider that the ETHOS framework provides too broad an approach for practical policy purposes.

Data and monitoring limitations

Due to limitations of data and analysis as well problems of definition, it is impossible to get a clear and accurate picture across the EU of the extent of HHE and the main trends. In a few Member States, there is fairly extensive collection of data and reporting on HHE. In a significant number of countries there are data but these cover only some aspects of HHE, whereas in an equally large number there are no or only very limited and uneven data.

In only a few Member States is there fairly extensive monitoring and evaluation of HHE policies and programmes.

Extent and trends

In spite of the serious limitations in data and monitoring, it is clear that HHE represent real challenges in most Member States and that while in some countries there have been significant improvements in recent years in others things are getting worse. Where data are available, there are early signs that the current economic and financial crisis is having a negative impact. There is also some evidence that the composition of the homeless population is changing - with increasing numbers of younger homeless, more women, more victims of family breakdown and more immigrants and asylum seekers.

Causes

Five different groups of causes of HHE stand out:

1. structural reasons such as the state and nature of the housing market (in particular: the shortages of adequate accommodation and the non affordability of housing), the impact of joblessness and the effects of poverty and indebtedness;
2. transition from institutional living (such as children leaving care institutions or people leaving prisons);
3. personal factors (such as mental illness or substance abuse);
4. family and relationship breakdown; and
5. discrimination and lack of (legal) status (which can affect, in particular, migrants and some ethnic minorities such as the Roma). It is important also to recognise that homelessness is often due to multiple reasons. In several Member States there is a danger of focussing too much on individual reasons for homelessness while neglecting more structural explanations.

Governance

Responsibility for policies in relation to HHE rests most commonly at central government level, with responsibility for delivery most often devolved to regional and/or local levels. However, in a significant number of Member States, policy responsibility is also largely devolved.

Two important difficulties that frequently need to be better addressed are:

- the fragmentation of responsibility for housing issues and HHE across a number of different ministries and agencies and insufficient coordination between ministries;
- the lack of capacity and resources at local level to actually deliver policies and programmes effectively.

It is worth emphasising that in several Member States, mainly those with clear strategies, there appears to be a strong or increasing tendency to involve key stakeholders in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services. However, there remain a significant number of countries where the involvement of stakeholders in the development and delivery of HHE policies is either very limited or non-existent. The direct involvement of people experiencing HHE is evident in only a very small number of countries. In many countries, experts emphasise the key role played by NGOs.

Strategic approaches

There is clear evidence of more Member States giving attention to issues of HHE and a relatively small number (6 or 7) have developed overall national strategies with clear objectives and specific targets while in a few others there are significant regional strategies. A number of others are moving in the direction of developing strategies or at least more comprehensive and integrated approaches. However, nearly half of the Member States still have very narrow and piecemeal approaches or, in a few cases, seem to scarcely acknowledge HHE issues at all. There is also a tendency in some countries to only focus on some groups of homeless and to ignore others such as migrants and refugees. The gender dimension is often not given sufficient attention.

In many of those Member States who have developed national or regional/local strategies, there seems to be a general trend to gradually expand the strategies to encompass both prevention and amelioration and to set efforts in a broader social inclusion perspective. This means both taking measures to prevent homelessness arising and developing programmes to eliminate the number of people experiencing rooflessness or houselessness. In terms of preventing homelessness, two approaches are particularly evident: developing initiatives to reduce the number of evictions and increasing support for people leaving institutions to access suitable housing. Increasing the supply of housing and increasing its affordability is also seen as being key to preventing HHE.

Rights

The existence of legal and enforceable rights to housing is uneven. Even when they do exist it is often more in theory than in practice. In some cases, the existence of a legal right seems to provide a good basis for developing effective policies and in others the lack of such guarantees is a factor in their weak development. However, it is evident that the lack of such guarantees does not necessarily result in a poor national performance in relation to HHE.

Policies

In several Member States there is more emphasis on the development of temporary accommodation than on actual prevention. There is also a trend to building other support services around the provision of temporary accommodation. The range of accommodation types for the homeless varies widely from Member State to Member State. In general, Member States that are most successful in addressing homelessness provide quite a wide variety of different types of accommodation involving a continuum of support. Encouragingly there is a growing emphasis in several Member States on improving regulation and oversight of temporary accommodation with a view to increasing standards though several Member States still lag well behind in this respect.

The more successful countries move beyond temporary/crisis accommodation to developing more comprehensive progression policies to help people move from temporary accommodation to supported accommodation and/or into more permanent housing such as social housing.

Social housing emerges as a key element in HHE strategies and is often the most important solution for homeless, especially for persons and families who can manage their housing with normal economic and social support. However, a very widespread problem is that there is excess demand for public housing and relatively long waiting lists. In some cases, this has been because of the sell off of public existing stock and/or because of the priority being given to private housing and deregulation of the housing market.

There are several interesting examples of policies to increase social mix on housing estates to avoid developing high concentrations of disadvantaged residents. However, there are as many examples of concentrations of HHE problems in particular areas and the failure of authorities to address these.

There are considerable efforts in a number of Member States to develop or extend instruments to improve the affordability of housing. These include: rent subsidy systems, rent allowance guarantees, regulations regarding maximum rents, indicative grids for recommended rental prices, mortgage tax reliefs, sales of houses under the market value, fixing rent levels exclusively on the household's income, housing benefit/ means-tested housing allowance.

The standard of housing stock varies widely across the EU. Inadequate housing standards are an issue for a significant number of Member States, especially several of the newer Member States. Measures used by Member States to improve standards include: financial bonuses, advantageous loans or advances and tax deductions to owners of property; increased monitoring and regulation of the privately rented sector; setting minimum standard requirements for the quality of housing (e.g. safety, health, energy saving); setting minimum space standards; providing loans for modernisation and renovation; subsidising interest re-payments; setting obligatory standards for social services including temporary housing for the homeless.

Integrated approaches

There is a growing emphasis in several Member States on developing integrated approaches to homelessness which go beyond just issues of accommodation and look at access to employment, income support and access to services such as health and social services – in other words, approaches that adopt an “active inclusion approach”. However, in several countries there appears to be a complete absence of any integrated approach.

Likewise, several Member States emphasise that the homeless can benefit from services such as employment, health and care, social assistance and social services on the same basis as other vulnerable groups. However, this is often not sufficient as there can be several obstacles which in practice impede their actual access. Also, in a significant minority of Member States homeless people appear to have very limited access to such services.

Resources

While in a number of countries there is clear evidence of significant and often steadily increasing resources being devoted to HHE issues, there are a significant number of countries where the information supplied on this is very limited or else very few resources are allocated. In several countries, especially the newer Member States, EU Structural Funds play an important role in encouraging and supporting new initiatives.

3. Suggestions on way forward

The increasing focus that has been given to the issue of HHE in recent years by the Social OMC has led to greater awareness amongst Member States.⁴ The benefit of transnational studies and exchanges has obviously contributed to enhance mutual learning and has been helpful in encouraging increased effort in a number of countries. It is clear that the best performing Member States provide a wealth of good practices that can only be helpful to those lagging behind. Unfortunately, in spite of the progress, there are still too many countries which lack a coherent and consistent focus on HHE. The key barriers to making progress at both national and European levels seem to include: insufficient political commitment; lack of understanding of HHE and lack of agreement on definitions and appropriate indicators; absence of or inadequate data sources; and inadequate (if any) monitoring and reporting. To address these issues, the following suggestions are made.

Political priority

- In the light of both the progress that has been made and the continuing weakness in too many countries and in order to ensure continued linkages with the wider struggle against poverty and social exclusion, it is essential that HHE issues be considered an integral part of the Social OMC and be consolidated and continued post 2010.

Definition

- To enhance the EU involvement in HHE issues, there is an urgent need to arrive at a formally agreed definition. To this end, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and its Indicators Sub-Group (ISG) have a key role to play in promoting agreement amongst Member States to apply

⁴ The issue has also been increasingly highlighted by the European Parliament. For instance, in the “*Declaration of the EP on ending street homelessness*” (adopted on 22 April 2008), the Parliament:

1. calls on the Council to agree on an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015;
2. calls on the Commission to develop an EU framework definition of homelessness, gather comparable and reliable statistical data, and provide annual updates on action taken and progress made in Member States towards ending homelessness; and
3. urges Member States to devise winter emergency plans as part of a wider homelessness strategy (...).”

a consistent official definition of homelessness. The ETHOS definition or, initially, a “reduced” version of ETHOS, could provide an appropriate starting point.

- Member States where responsibility for HHE is devolved need to encourage a consistent approach to definition.

Development of integrated strategies

- Member States who have not already done so should consider developing integrated strategies to prevent and reduce HHE. Such strategies need to be comprehensive and to address structural factors (e.g. problems in the housing market including in particular shortages of adequate accommodation and the non affordability of housing, the impact of joblessness and the effects of poverty and indebtedness), institutional factors (e.g. the risks facing people leaving institutions), family and personal problems (e.g. family breakdown, mental illness and drug abuse), as well as discrimination and the lack of legal status (e.g. the position of migrants and of ethnic minorities such as the Roma). Strategies should be concerned with both preventing HHE arising and reintegrating those already experiencing HHE. To be effective, strategies should:
 - include clear objectives and quantified targets for the reduction of HHE as this will assist in the development of more efficient and focussed policies and of more regular monitoring and reporting on progress;
 - be multi-dimensional and adopt a balanced “active inclusion approach” aimed at not only increasing access to employment, but also ensuring an adequate income and ensuring access to quality services.
- Member States who have not yet done so could consider strengthening their governance arrangements in relation to HHE. This could include: establishing arrangements for ensuring effective coordination and integration of policies relating to HHE; creating efficient systems for the ongoing involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies; ensuring effective links between the different levels of governance (national, regional and local) on HHE issues; and promoting partnerships at local level to ensure the coordinated and integrated delivery of policies and programmes on the ground in a flexible manner which is tailored to the needs of individuals.
- Member States should ensure that there is a clear allocation of resources to support the implementation of integrated strategies. In particular, ensuring the allocation of sufficient resources to support implementation at local level is essential. In this regard, the EU Structural Funds can play an increasingly important role in supporting efforts to address HHE.⁵

⁵ If adopted, the recent Commission proposal (COM(2009) 382 final) to amend the regulations of the European Regional Development Fund to increase the eligibility of housing interventions in favour of marginalised communities in the newer Member States could play an important role in increasing resources for initiatives in these countries.

Measurement, monitoring and reporting

- It would be very helpful if the European Commission and Member States could, in the context of the SPC, agree a common framework and common guidelines for measuring, monitoring and reporting on HHE.
- In the light of such agreement and as an integral part of the future development of the Social OMC, there should be a regular EU report on Member States' strategies to fight against HHE and on progress made in these fields, for instance as part of the annual Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Such a report should:
 - use to the full the recently agreed EU indicators on housing (covering overcrowded households and households with high housing costs); and
 - include regularly collected national HHE indicators that ought to be developed according to these common framework and guidelines. As a minimum, these national indicators should include measures derived from the ETHOS categories 1 and 2 (i.e., Rough sleepers and People in emergency hostels).
- In the short/medium term the impact of the economic and financial crisis on HHE should be a key part of EU level reporting on the social impact of the crisis.
- Member States who have not already done so should put in place a system for regularly collecting data on HHE and, as necessary, collating data from the regional and local levels. Given that a single data source will not be enough for a proper count and monitoring of HHE, each country will need to identify a good national "package" of available data sources (e.g. surveys, registers, clients' record data) and develop its statistical capacity as required.
- In the next Census, which will be carried out in 2011, for the first time it will be compulsory for all EU countries to collect information on homelessness. Therefore, the Commission and Member States, in the context of the SPC, might consider taking an initiative in consultation with all key stakeholders (i.e. Ministries and other public bodies in charge of HHE, statistical institutes, service providers, academics and people having experience of HHE) to develop broad guidelines with a view to ensuring that data on at least ETHOS categories 1 and 2 be collected in an effective and (reasonably) consistent way.⁶
- The ISG should continue to enrich the new indicators on housing deprivation (especially in the field of poor quality housing) and should work towards common EU indicator(s) on homelessness.

⁶ Independent of this possible initiative, most important is that the National Statistical Institutes publish their methodology or plans to count primary homelessness (i.e., ETHOS 1). EU comparative data on some aspects of HHE could also usefully be collected through: a) questions on "hidden homelessness" that could be included in a module in the *Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* (EU-SILC) instrument - i.e. questions aimed at identifying people living with family and friends due to a lack of housing (e.g. parents and married children sharing a dwelling), people living temporarily with family and friends due to homelessness (e.g. young people 'sofa surfing', homeless who move from hostel to friends to hostel...), etc.; and b) a comparative research project using consistent methodology in the capital/ main cities of each Member State to document the extent of and reasons for ETHOS 1 homelessness.

Exchange and learning

- Supporting transnational exchange and learning through peer reviews, studies, networks, improved data collection and conferences should continue to be a key priority under the Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (PROGRESS). This could be enhanced by a greater clustering of stakeholders and different activities concerned with HHE in line with what was achieved in the context of the MPHASIS project (Mutual Progress on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems)⁷.
- HHE issues should be one of the key themes in the 2010 European Year.
- Making more widely available Member States' responses to the Commission/SPC questionnaire on HHE would highlight the wealth of information on policies and programmes to combat and prevent HHE in the different countries and would usefully contribute to the exchange of learning.

⁷ For more information on the MPHASIS project go to: <http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/>.
And for the concluding statements of the final project conference:
<http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/papers/HomelessnessFinalconclusions170909conference-final-021.pdf>.