

# National Action Plan against Substandard Housing

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Eurocities is the network of major European cities. Founded in 1986, the network brings together the local governments of more than 130 large cities in over 30 European countries. Eurocities provides a platform for its member cities to share knowledge and ideas, to exchange experiences, to analyse common problems and develop innovative solutions, through a wide range of Forums, Working Groups, Projects, activities and events.

The vice-mayor of Rotterdam chairs the Eurocities Social Affairs Forum, that supports exchanges of experience and know-how among cities working to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and to eradicate all forms of discrimination. The Forum has established several thematic working groups in the past, such as the working group on housing. I am Chief Advisor in the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal of the city of Rotterdam.

## 1. Relevance

The National action plan to combat substandard housing, that has been set up in France since 2001, combines clear choices regarding the institutional organisation and the division of responsibilities between central and local government with the introduction of interesting new instruments to combat substandard housing. All these are issues with which all European central and local governments wrestle, so they are highly relevant for others countries in the EU.

A major strong point of the National action plan is that it is a real program, it comprises all necessary ingredients for a coherent approach: a shared political basis and adequate legal, financial and organisational provisions. The program stands in a long tradition of developing adequate legal and financial instruments for dealing with substandard housing. The program itself is a response to the specific needs of that time.

The legal, financial and organisational instruments that are developed within the program, contain several specific strong points:

- The method of identifying the shortcomings of dwellings and making a prescript for eliminating these defects.
- The right of public authorities to directly intervene and oblige the owners to maintain their property and put it in a proper condition.
- The possibility of expropriation of houses, even in buildings with collective ownership.
- The role of information on the local level concerning the diagnosis of the housing market and in assessing the extent of the necessary measures and their financial consequences
- The PNLHI as an operational coordinating centre with local correspondents.

The National action plan seems to organize mainly the vertical cooperation of the various administrative levels in France, from the level of national politics and the State to the lowest level

of the implementation of the concrete projects. The horizontal cooperation of different policy-sectors (physical / spatial, social, economic, health, etc) does not get as much attention. The discussion paper makes clear that it is this vertical orientation, in combination with the strong role of the French State, that may be considered as a major success factor of the program.

Still unclear (to me) is where and how the programmatic approach of the National action plan to combat substandard housing meets the area specific approach of the National urban renewal plan (*Politique de la Ville*) that also got a considerable impuls in France in recent years. The riots in several *banlieus* of French cities in November 2005 play an important role in this impuls. The present course of action is to take more radical measures in reshaping the physical structure of the housing and living environment. Large-scale renovation and demolition/rebuilding of housing estates and restructuring the public space are part of this course. Social measures remain necessary, but it is thought that they are not enough to make the fundamental turn in the proces of urban renewal. This is in line with the clarification in the discussion paper, that it is conceivable to consider the social living conditions in the neighbourhood as a part of the notion 'substandard housing': quality of live, housing without dignity, l'habitat indigne.

Substandard housing often goes hand in hand with a bad position on the housing market. The substandard houses are not demanded by consumers who can choose (within certain limits) where to live, but only by people who do not have such opportunities. So the target groups that national and local governments would like to see more in the cities, middle class, with a job and the corresponding purchasing power, stay out of those neighbourhoods. But in some European countries and cities this applies not only to substandard housing, but also to some houses in good physical condition, due to a relatively unfavourable price-quality ratio. The fact that the houses are not demanded by the 'right' people then can create (in this view) a downward spiral, resulting in substandard physical conditions and bad social living conditions.

## 2. Transferability

Three main criteria for 'good practice', established in a comparative European study on good practices in housing stock policy<sup>1</sup>, are :

1. relevance and embeddedness in local and national systems
2. effectiveness for the set targets
3. efficiency for the organisations involved.

The National plan is obviously a good practice in the above sense. The transferability of a good practice depends on the existing framework conditions in the other countries and the perception of professionals in these countries of the possibility to fit in elements of the good practice in the framework of their own country. It is my belief that the specific strong points of the French plan, mentioned before, will be very interesting for several European countries.

In countries with a strong national government and weak local authorities it is logical that the leadership in housing policies rests with the central government. It would be unwise to transfer it to the local authorities, when they do not have the administrative and organisational power to

<sup>1</sup> How to help people excluded from decent housing, report on Good Practice in Cooperation and Transferable Lessons, based on the project Integrated forms of cooperation in housing stock policy for housing provision for risk groups, COOP Consortium, Vienna, November 2005

exercise this leadership effectively. But there are several European countries in which the local and regional authorities are quite capable to fulfil this role, provided that central government takes care of adequate legal and financial instruments. This certainly applies to the councils, executive boards and administrative departments of the major cities and urban regions in Europe.

### 3. Important questions

An important debate in Eurocities is the debate about reconciling diversity and social cohesion in the cities. Social cohesion is a fundamental dimension of the sustainable development of cities. But the European cities are currently faced with widening social and cultural divisions, fostered by a growing social-economic gap between population groups and the consequence of recent immigration flows.

The promotion of social cohesion has different practical aspects: education, employment, housing and integration.

In the field of housing the working groups of Eurocities have produced reports about:

- Integration through improved housing and empowerment.
- Cities' strategies against homelessness.

In April 2007 FEANTSA has organised for the European Housing Forum (hosted by the Irish Council for Social Housing) a seminar about: Building sustainable communities – Housing policies are the driving force. The conference brought together around 60 housing experts from different sectors from across Europe and was a good opportunity for transnational exchanges and mutual learning.

Leading notion in the debate seems to be that housing should be placed in a broader social and economic context. The question then is what the exact contribution of the combat against substandard housing to the urban regeneration and the development of more cohesive societies can be. Is it large or rather limited?

### 4. Key issues and main questions for debate

1. The relationship between a programmatic and an area specific approach: how can these two approaches reinforce each other?
2. The extent of the concept of substandard housing: should we also take into consideration the social living conditions in the neighbourhood and the relative position on the housing market?
3. The division of responsibilities in the combat against substandard housing between central and local government in the different types of European countries.
4. What is the exact contribution of the combat against substandard housing to the promotion of social cohesion in the cities: is it large or rather limited?