

National Action Plan against Substandard Housing

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As the thematic expert, Iskra Dandolova, has written in the discussion paper about the French National Plan against substandard housing, social exclusion has different dimensions. One of them is housing exclusion. Taking the ETHOS (European Typology of Homeless and Housing Exclusion) typology that classifies homeless people according to their living situation: *rooflessness* (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough), *houselessness* (with a place to sleep but temporarily in institutions or shelter), living in *insecure housing* (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence), living in *inadequate housing* (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding), substandard housing, despite the difficulties to define it, belongs indisputably to housing exclusion.

Taking the French national plan against substandard housing as basis of the discussion paper, the thematic expert raises a lot of questions concerning substandard housing, going from the political debate of this question to the definition and measure of it and giving us a good description of how France has implemented or is on going to implement a policy against substandard housing.

What do we know about substandard housing in Luxembourg and more generally about housing in Luxembourg? What type of tools do exist to fight against substandard housing in Luxembourg (legal, financial provisions...)? What sort of comments and questions does SSH bring?

1. The situation of housing in Luxembourg

1.1 A description of housing in Luxembourg

Census (2001, for the last one) and surveys on living conditions (SILC, since 2002) are the two main sources which offer an overview of the situation of housing in Luxembourg.

A bit less than 70% of the households are homeowners. Concerning the 30% of tenants, around 5% are in the public housing sector.

Due to the fact that the growth of the population has been very important during the last 25 years (from 364 000 in 1981 to 470 000 in 2007, that means + 30%), the housing stock is quite new: in 2001, 30% of the housing had less than 20 years.

Most of the households (68%) live in a house and for them who live in a flat, 45% live in a building with less than 5 flats, 25% in a building with 5 to 9 flats and 30% in a building with more than 9 flats. Huge buildings do not exist in Luxembourg.

According to the data from the survey on living conditions, 99% of the dwellings have a bathroom, a toilet, hot running water and a heating system (95% have a central heating system) and 80% of the dwellings have double-glazing on all or on most of the windows. The technical equipment of the dwellings is quite high but it doesn't mean, even if there is no official definition of a standard dwelling in Luxembourg, that all the criteria of a "standard dwelling" are satisfied. For example,

11% of the households indicate that the dwelling is too small with respect to the size of the household, 14% judge that the dwelling has a problem with a leaking roof, damp ceilings, dampness in the walls, floors or foundation or rot in window frames and doors, 6% estimate that the dwelling is too dark, 25% of the households suffer from the noise of the neighbourhood, 2% indicate that the electricity system needs big repairing and the same percentage for the plumbing.

Even if this image of the conditions of housing in Luxembourg is issued from the self-evaluation of the owners or tenants, and not evaluated by an architect or an engineer, and although there is no official definition on substandard housing, we can not reject the idea that substandard housing does not exist in Luxembourg.

We can add that households who live in substandard housing are certainly underrepresented in a survey on living conditions, because it is well known that the response rate of households with low living conditions (monetary, housing....) is lower than the response rate of the other households.

This assessment leads to a first question: how to evaluate and define SSH?

1.2 Characteristics of households who live in substandard housing

We have no precise idea of the characteristics of households who live in SSH, but we can make the hypothesis that households with low income, households who received social assistance benefits, immigrants, refugees, asylum-seeker, single-parent families, tenants have a higher risk to live in a SSH.

1.3 Housing shortage

Due to the development of the economy these last twenty-five years which has led to an extraordinary growth of the population (+30%), essentially through immigration, Luxembourg is confronted with a housing shortage that has caused an explosion in housing prices. Even though it is not possible to measure the effect of this housing shortage on the subject that is our interest, the substandard housing, we can suppose that the tension that is present on the housing market could lead owners to rent accommodations that do not respect the standard housing. On the other side, the housing shortage leads owners to buy old buildings and to renovate them. So, on one hand the tension on the housing market has partially participated to eradicate substandard housing and on the other hand it could participate to maintain a pocket of SSH.

2. Luxembourg's ways to fight against substandard housing

The main objectives of the housing policy are home-buying, fighting against housing shortage and against the explosion of the prices. Nevertheless, tools (legal, financial) to avoid substandard housing and to renovate substandard housing do exist.

2.1 The protection of the tenants

The modified grand-ducal regulation of the 25 February 1979 is the main tool to fight against substandard housing. It defines the criteria of rent, of healthy (salubrité) and hygiene for the accommodations intended to be rented. These criteria concern the material aspects of the accommodation (type of equipment, respect of the security norms against fire risk, gas, electricity, size of the windows, size and height of the rooms, toilets, bathroom...).

2.2 Fonds d'assainissement

The "fonds d'assainissement" (cleaning up fund) is a fund intended to renovate a district on which the living conditions (quality of the housing, quality of the district...) need to be improved. In 2007, one district is concerned by a "fonds d'assainissement": the « fonds d'assainissement » of the "Cité Syrdall".

Such an operation is usually initiated by a Commune with the support of the Ministry of Housing. Since the law of the 25 February 1979 has been voted (who has been modified several times), the main law concerning housing, two districts have been declared as "zone d'assainissement".

2.3 The "Carnet de l'habitat" (the housing book)

The "carnet de l'habitat" (housing book) is a recent measure (grand-ducal regulation of the 25 may 2005) concerning the owners of buildings that are more than 15 years old. Each owner of a building can ask the establishment of a housing book. This housing book contains data collected by an expert for an evaluation of the structure and quality of the building under the criteria of health, security, energy, technical and social aspects. The aim of this housing book is to detect eventual problems and make recommendations to improve the quality of the housing. The Ministry of Housing offers a financial participation for the establishment of this book.

2.4 Individual subsidy to renovate old buildings (Prime d'amélioration de logements anciens)

It is an individual subsidy offered by the Ministry of Housing to improve the health and security conditions for buildings that are more than 30 years old. The Ministry of Housing also grants this subsidy to owners who want to extend the number of rooms without taking into account the age of the building.

2.5 Housing: a competence shared between the State and the Communes

At the State level, housing is mainly the competence of the Ministry of Housing. The Communes and the "Commissariat au Gouvernement des Etrangers" under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Family and the Integration have the competences to control the quality of the accommodation intended to rent. Most of the controls concern furnished rooms. That also means that the Commune can oblige to close the buildings if the landlords do not respect the quality norms. If this happens, the Communes have to rehouse the households. Knowing that Luxembourg suffers from housing shortage, the possibilities of rehousing are limited and this situation could slow down such initiatives.

3. Comments and questions

The French national action plan against Substandard Housing, that is part of the French national plan against exclusion, is an ambitious and complex plan that is based on a political will with legal and financial provisions, institutional arrangements and innovative methods of work.

The description of the French national action plan by the thematic expert is clear even though the administrative structure of France is quite complex for a non-initiated.

3.1 Questions addressed to the actors of the French national action plan

Does the national action plan contain quantitative objectives (for example: reduction of the number of substandard housing by half in the next 5 years or eradicating the SSH in 2015...)?
How do you manage the rehousing of the households during the exercise?

3.2 General comments or questions concerning SSH

Beyond the question of transferability, that is usually complex, the French national action plan brings many questions:

Definition of SSH: Should this definition vary with respect to the geographical location (north of Europe, south of Europe)? Next to the material and physical criteria of the building, do criteria of the environment (district, public transport, public services...) also have to be taken into account for qualifying as substandard versus standard housing?

What kind of tools do exist to identify Substandard Housing? Who are the persons authorized to identify substandard housing (architects, technicians...)?

Considering the depreciation process of a building, a detailed check-up (every 15 or 20 years) could help to prevent SSH.

Is there a relation between the offer of the public or social housing and the extent of the SSH?