

Strategic approach of homelessness in Hungary

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Introduction

In Hungary a comprehensive, national strategy proposal on tackling homelessness as well as reforming the present system of homeless service provision and its service and financing structure was developed in 2008. It has been the first document attempting to address the phenomenon of homelessness in a complex way. Containing comprehensive national strategic elements the document can serve as a starting point for a series of governmental measures to tackle homelessness. The development of the strategy proposal was drafted by two well-known and acknowledged experts in the field of homelessness after they were commissioned by the then ministerial commissioner for homeless affairs (Miklós Vecsei) under the previous Government in 2007. The strategy proposal first was presented at the national conference of homeless service providers in the autumn of 2008 to representatives of the Government and the relevant ministry as well as homeless service providers, then after a relatively short period of discussion it was formally sent to the Government.

The strategy proposal refers to a Government resolution several times which was adopted in 2007 and lists a series of measures concerning the improvement of the homeless sector between the periods of 2007-2013 indicating partially national and EU resources. Some of the major implemented measures of this resolution relevant for this Peer Review will be mentioned below.

Objectives of the Hungarian strategy

The document covers three strategic objectives:

The first strategic objective is about access to housing as well as sustaining housing. Its major points are as follows¹

- Instead of supporting housing purchase and homeowner centred support of access to housing rental subsidies should be provided
- Increase the number of social rented housings by introducing housing associations for building and operating rented housings and also by supporting private rentals
- Harmonizing and enlarging the current housing subsidies
- Strengthening the security of housing in the rental sector, reducing rent and public utility arrears by regulating the debt management procedures of local governments and public utility service providers, making evictions procedures more difficult for local authorities to enforce

¹ Györi-Maróthy: 'Which Way to Go On? Potential Framework of a National Homelessness Strategy', Budapest, 2008 p.6-7

The second strategic area aims at the re-organization of homeless service regulation and its main elements are as follows:

- To replace the present definition of 'homeless' by introducing the definition of 'houseless'
- Examination of eligibility for social assistance
- Transformation of the current normative financing of institutions into service financing
- Integration of the supported housing programmes currently operated by periodic project funding into the system of housing subsidies as reintegration support for homeless people
- Establishment of a Homeless Program Office (Agency) responsible for the implementation of homeless policies

The third strategic element sets the target of reducing the number of rough sleepers with the following elements:

- Introducing the practice of the so called 'positive zero tolerance' in order to define the conditions threatening the lives of rough sleepers in such a fatal way that people can not be left in the street any longer
- Partnership agreement and monitoring system should be developed with the family support services, childcare institutions, mental health institutions, addiction treatment centres as well as prisons in order to prevent people from relapsing
- Low threshold night shelters and temporary hostels should be introduced in order to facilitate access for rough sleepers
- Operation of day centres for active daytime assistance

Similarities and differences of the Portugal Strategy on Homelessness

Strategy development

While the strategy proposal was developed and it was acknowledged by homeless service providers, it has not been adopted at governmental level so far. Although some elements of the proposal appears in certain initiatives, the development of a comprehensive action plan based on broad cooperation of the relevant stakeholders has not been initiated and the partially implemented elements of the strategy proposal do not seem to have significant impact at the national level.

The greatest challenge for Hungary is the mobilization and involvement of all relevant actors as well as achieving the willingness of their cooperation, which among other elements played a key role in the development of the Portuguese strategy.

As the experience of Portugal and the other European countries - where homelessness strategies exist - shows, the effective solution of the phenomenon of homelessness is not realizable without the joint commitment and responsible act of all the relevant stakeholders.

It is also true for Hungary that this very first step can not be neglected in the process of building an effective strategy needing cross-sectoral cooperation. So far the conditions needed for the implementation of the strategy proposal have not come into existence in Hungary. The recommendations were only partially strengthened by the Government selecting some of its elements. The necessary resources needed for the overall implementation of the strategy were not – or only partially were – allocated, the national and local media did not generate public discussion, the dialogue between the sectors concerned did not start, the elements of the strategy, the roles and responsibilities as well as monitoring and deadlines were not defined. Although the strategy also includes a so called Local Authority Charta which was supposed to achieve better involvement and mobilization of key local decision makers, due to the lack of governmental support the commitment of local stakeholders also failed.

The lack of the above mentioned key indicators has resulted the current segmental and partially implemented feature of the Hungarian strategy proposal.

Co-ordination

²In order to ensure the organizational requirements for the implementation of the Hungarian strategy the authors made a proposal for the establishment of a National Homeless Program Office (Agency). The Agency would ensure the scheduled implementation of each element in due course in a transparent and responsible way. It would also manage all the government resources earmarked for the issue of homelessness. In this sense the Agency would be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the strategy.

Definitional issues

The common agreement upon the definition of homelessness as well as the wide dissemination of commonly agreed definition serves as a starting point for the Portuguese strategy. In Hungary the Act III of 1993 on social administration and social services defines the definition of homelessness as follows: 'a person is homeless if he or she does not have a registered place of residence except for those whose registered place of residence is a homeless institution'. Under the second definition of the same law 'any person shall be considered homeless who spends nights in public places or other kind of places unfit for human habitation.'

The authors of the strategy recommend a new definition instead of the present one, according to which the present definition will be replaced by the definition of the 'houseless'³:

² Györi-Maróthy: 'Which Way to Go On? Potential Framework of a National Homelessness Strategy', Budapest, 2008 p.54

³ Györi-Maróthy: 'Which Way to Go On? Potential Framework of a National Homelessness Strategy', Budapest, 2008 p.42

‘Any person shall be considered as houseless who is unable to ensure an (independent) housing of minimum adequacy by his self-effort for himself or his family.’

Reducing the number of rough sleepers

The reduction of the number of rough sleepers is a key objective of the Hungarian homeless strategy proposal in accordance with many other countries’ objectives. In connection with this the authors of the document recommend the introduction of ‘positive zero tolerance’. While the Portuguese strategy applies a right based approach and intervention within 24 hours, the Hungarian proposal conditions the interventions by weather circumstances and individual conditions such as age, pregnancy, disability of the individual.

Elements of the strategy financed by EU resources

Although the strategy itself was not strengthened at governmental level, the former Hungarian Government made some efforts to implement certain elements of it. One of the most important example of them are the programmes aiming at the social and labour market reintegration of homeless people funded by the European Union and co-funded by the European Social Fund.

One of the programmes provides the opportunity for homeless service providers to offer employment, training and a supplementary housing support to homeless people. According to the Government resolution in 2007 referred to in the introduction, the Government’s objective was to promote the labour market reintegration of 3500 homeless persons between the periods of 2007-2013 by partially taking over their housing, tenancy as well as employment expenses.

Also implemented by EU and ESF resources another project aims at the development of networking, sensitization, activation and involvement of actors working outside the homeless sector but having a key role in defining the framework of social integration.

The project ensures mutual learning and exchange of experience in regular regional workshops organized on a monthly basis for homeless service providers implementing projects on the labour market and social reintegration of homeless people.

Similarly to the Local Social Networks in the Portuguese strategy other workshops organized in the framework of local coordination attempt to involve the representatives of local authorities, local employers, job centres, health service providers, prisons, child care institutions and other social institutions as well as relevant NGOs in the dialogue on homelessness.

In addition to the above mentioned workshops two regional seminars are organized in each region of the country on the conditions and problematic elements of the social integration of homeless people by involving key regional actors.

The aim of these seminars is to initiate and sustain common thinking, dialogue and action on social integration.

Potential transferability of the good practices

The process of building a comprehensive strategy on homelessness presented by Portugal could be transferable to Hungary as well, since it is based on the involvement of the broadest scale of the relevant stakeholders, ensuring effective cooperation and dialogue between the parties concerned.

One of the most important elements of the Portuguese strategy that is worth considering for Hungary are the initiation of public discussion, the extensive dissemination and accessibility of information related to the strategy as well as providing professional and well organized trainings for frontline workers and other actors responsible for the implementation of the strategy. Changing the attitude towards homelessness of the relevant actors is a crucial element of successful implementation. This is one of the most important elements of the Portuguese example for Hungary, since any change can only be implemented successfully if the actors involved have access to the necessary information and are clearly aware of the importance of the objectives as well as their role in the whole process. The greatest challenge for Hungary in order to successfully adopt the good practice of the Portuguese strategy building is the motivation and involvement of experts working in bordering areas of homelessness. This process could be promoted by legislative instruments on developing the framework of cross-sectoral cooperation.

Monitoring the impact of the strategy

In order to monitor the impacts of homeless strategies reliable baseline data and clear indicators are of crucial importance in the fields covered by the measures. If the strategy follows a comprehensive approach covering most of the ETHOS categories the list of indicators can vary from the number of rough sleepers to the number of prevented evictions. Most homeless strategies set the objective of reducing the number of rough sleepers. This objective has particular relevance in countries developing or implementing their first strategy on homelessness such as Portugal, Poland and Hungary. In these cases a well-organized rough sleepers' count is required to monitor the impact of the measures. In Hungary annual homeless counts have been conducted since 3 February 1999, which provides an opportunity for annual comparison. When monitoring a comprehensive strategy the data and indicators concern and cover several areas. Therefore it is important that the monitoring team have guaranteed access to all the necessary data which are sometimes hard to get such as the number of pending evictions or repossessions. However, access to data can be ensured by building partnerships with all the stakeholders concerned as presented in the Portuguese strategy.

Current measures related to the national strategy

The new Hungarian Government formed in 2010 May promised explicit measures concerning the issue of homelessness particularly rough sleeping. The bill - presented by the Ministry of Interior in September 2010 - that would allow local authorities to expel homeless people from public places banning even silent begging, resulted on the one hand the objection of homeless service providers but on the other hand it initiated the dialogue between the Government and homeless service providers. On 19 October 2010 the Government adopted a resolution on the tasks to be done in connection with the legislative changes related to the appropriate use of public places. In

order to prevent disproportionate breach of social rights and solidarity when regulating the appropriate use of public place the Government calls upon the ministers concerned to

1. “develop a midterm action plan aiming at the reduction of the number of rough sleepers as well as the reform of service provision for homeless people,
2. ensure the financial condition of the midterm action plan with special regards to the use of EU resources.”⁴

As it shows from the Government resolution it includes two of the three objectives of the Hungarian homeless strategy proposal, while the first objective on strengthening the security of housing is not mentioned here. Although some recent measures of the new Government attempts to address the issue of prevention and the security of housing by prolonging the moratorium on evictions as well as introducing a moratorium on the rise of public utility fees. Nevertheless, the comprehensive implementation of the Hungarian strategy proposal as well as a broader understanding of the prevention of homelessness would be timely and more effective in the fight against homelessness.

⁴ 1217/2010. (X. 19.) Government resolution on the tasks to be done in connection with the legislative changes related to the appropriate use of public places