

Some reflections on the Portuguese homelessness strategy

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Some general comment

The Portuguese strategy just entered into the stage of implementation at grass-root level. That is why our comments focus on the strategy information provided.

- Portugal is one of the first European countries with a *weaker* social welfare system that developed a comprehensive homelessness strategy. It can be an inspiring example for countries with similar social infrastructures. The initial positive results of the Portuguese strategy confirm the finding of a recent European research carried out by the University of York and funded by the European Commission that progress on homelessness is also possible in an unfavourable structural and welfare context.¹
- The need for a common definition of homelessness is a precondition for effective policy intervention. The agreed definition of homelessness is rather narrow and focuses on street homelessness and people living in short-stay/direct access hostels. It could be a useful pragmatic choice of the Portuguese stakeholders to focus to the most excluded amongst the homeless. We believe that it is quite likely that the focus will be broadened later on in the strategy since there seems to be a general consensus that homelessness is a process/pathway (see references to FEANTSA's ETHOS definition) and that there is a need to also include preventative measures in the strategy. Examples from other countries prove that an initial focus on the most marginalised homeless can lead to a comprehensive homelessness strategy (see UK for instance). But there is some concern amongst NGOs that the focus might remain on street homelessness - certainly if the crisis further limits access to public budgets for the fight against homelessness.
- The involvement of different stakeholders in the design and in the implementation of the strategy is certainly a key element of the (future) success of the Portuguese strategy. Equally important is the strong leadership of the Institute of Social Security in the whole process. It seems that robust structures have been put in place at local and national level, but it might be difficult to keep these structures as active during the phase of implementation of the strategy when budgetary issues and issues related to competence and responsibility of the different actors will become more prominent. It might be interesting to discuss how the ISS see its leadership role develop in the future years. Even if an important number of NGOs working on homelessness were involved in the design of the strategy, some were excluded. It was not clear on what basis NGO partners/stakeholders were selected, and this unclarity might have been an issue with the other sectors.

¹ European Commission - Study on Housing Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Housing Provision and Labour Markets - April 2010.

- We believe that it was a good decision to rally support for the development of a strategy on homelessness with some in depth research on the issue. Research helps to better understand the scope and nature of homelessness and to create awareness on the urgency of the problem amongst the relevant stakeholders. It also provides a solid basis for factual discussion on how the strategy should look like and helps to overcome overly ideological or corporatist positions of the stakeholders.
- It seems that the design and implementation of the strategy is very much centred around knowledge and evaluation. It is obviously very important that the strategy creates the right context for the stakeholders to deliver progress. If not data collection and evaluation will become mere paper exercises. There is little detail about the data collection system that is put in place, but it is clear that regular data on a wide variety of indicators (such as causes of homelessness, time spent on street or in shelter) or essential for timely and effective policy intervention. It seems that the system is not yet fully computerised and that there is some resistance from local services to join the system. These obstacles can be quite easily overcome. We would like to refer to some practical solutions described in the EU Mphasis project.
- One of the key priorities of the Portuguese homelessness strategy is the quality of services for homeless people (mainly hostel accommodation). From the limited knowledge we have on the Portuguese situation and some feedback from our members, the poor quality of the services seems to be indeed a major concern. It is not entirely clear from the documents what is understood by quality of homeless services. It will probably be a gradual process but it might be useful to look at countries with strongly developed quality guarantee systems and/or accreditation systems for the homeless sector such as The Netherlands, UK, France... A recent European project on quality assurance - Prometheus - came to the conclusion that quality in the homeless sector is because of its temporary/emergency nature substantially different from many other social services. It might be useful to have a Peer Review in the future focused on quality of homeless services to get a better understanding on how quality is understood and managed in the different countries.
- The Portuguese authorities have used the EU context to progress on the issue of homelessness. The focus on homelessness in the Inclusion OMC has been helpful and several tools (e.g. ETHOS definition) developed by FEANTSA have been used. It proves that the EU policies in the area of social inclusion can have a direct impact on policy development in EU Member States on the condition they are focused enough.
- There is very little reference to the budgetary implications of the launch of the homeless strategy. When the strategy was launched a relatively high budget was promised by the responsible Minister, but it remains unclear if that budget has been made available and whether it is sufficient to deliver results. In our view it is important that a homeless strategy (both at national and local levels) has its own distinct budget. The feedback of FEANTSA's members on the Portuguese strategy against homelessness is generally quite positive, but there is much concern about the lack of public resources being made available.
- The Portuguese strategy puts a lot of emphasis on case management. Many studies have proven that case management delivers results - especially when it is combined with quick and unconditional access to stable housing. There seems to be attempts to develop the

housing dimension of the homeless strategy (see housing first projects in Lisbon), but it remains unclear where the housing will be found/who will provide the housing for homeless people. There is some frustration with NGOs that there is not sufficient funding to mainstream the *housing first* approach across Portugal.

- The focus on local involvement and action seems to deliver results. Several cities have already developed local homeless strategies. The involvement of the cities seems to be entirely voluntary and this raises questions about its sustainability. In some countries local strategies on homelessness/housing exclusion are a legal obligation (France, Scotland...) or local authorities are encouraged by means of additional funding to develop strategies (Norway, The Netherlands). We fear that it is not possible to count simply on political will to progress on homelessness.
- The country paper emphasises that the strategy in Portugal is based on a housing rights approach and that it wants to empower homeless people by securing access to other human rights. As far as we know the right to housing in Portugal is a constitutional right and as such not enforceable for the individual homeless person. So, it is not entirely clear to us in what way the housing/human rights approach makes the Portuguese strategy different. Or does the Portuguese government have the intention to make the right to housing justiciable for homeless people as in France (see Loi Dalo).

Some recommendations for the EU

The background to the Portuguese homelessness strategy shows that EU intervention on homelessness matters. Several tools developed in the framework of the Inclusion OMC were a source of inspiration for the Portuguese strategy such as ETHOS definition of homelessness developed by FEANTSA, the toolkit for an efficient data collection system developed under the EU-funded Mphasis project, a toolkit for effective homelessness strategies developed by FEANTSA, the call in several Joint Reports Social Protection and Social Inclusion to step up efforts to address/solve homelessness.

The EU should do more to support Member States to (further) develop homeless strategies. At least half of EU Member States have no or underdeveloped policies on homelessness. So, there is plenty of room for progress. The current EU context is ideal for an ambitious EU action plan on homelessness. The European Parliament called for a EU strategy with a focus on data collection and mutual learning in 2008; the network of independent experts on social inclusion of the European Commission asked for an EU strategy which concentrates on data collection and monitoring in 2009 - this request was based on a thorough analysis of thematic reports on homelessness from all EU Member States; the Council agreed to be more ambitious on homelessness and called upon all Member States to develop national homeless strategies following a number of key guidelines in March 2010; the Committee of the Regions adopted an own initiative report in October 2010 in which it called for an EU homelessness strategy in which there would be an emphasis on the role of local and regional authorities in 2010, the conclusions of an important European Commission conference on active inclusion and homelessness in May 2010 included a call for an EU homelessness strategy with more research, EU monitoring of progress Member States make in combating homelessness, and mobilisation of all key actors; the Commissioner Laszlo Andor confirmed several times that homelessness should be a priority in

the future European Platform against Poverty; the Belgian Presidency of the EU made homelessness one of its three social inclusion priorities; and the European Year against Poverty raised awareness on the urgency of the problem of homelessness which will probably be reflected in the Final Declaration of the European Year; and finally the Commissioner .

Also at national level there is a demand for more EU cooperation. The number of Peer Reviews on homelessness under the Inclusion OMC amounts up till now amounts to 5. This year there are 2 Peer Reviews on homelessness - in Portugal and in Finland. It proves that even with the SPC there is a great interest in transnational cooperation on homelessness.

All this requires an EU action plan/strategy on homelessness to be developed under the European Platform against Poverty. Building on the information we received on the Portuguese homelessness strategy and the role the EU therein, we think an EU strategy should have at least the following elements:

- **EU definition of homelessness** on the basis of ETHOS. The Social Protection Committee could decide on a definition on homelessness on the basis of earlier discussions/preliminary decisions in the Indicators Sub-Group.
- **EU data collection** system on homelessness. The integration of a question on past experiences of homelessness in EU-SILC as a proxy of the nature and scope of current homelessness should be considered. Such data would be of great value for countries where data collection systems are still rather weak.
- **EU target** on homelessness that can be used by Member States as a framework/reference for their homeless policies. This is probably one of the weaker elements of the Portuguese strategy, but an EU framework target could have helped to agree on clear targets for Portugal as well.
- **EU monitoring/evaluation of progress** of Member States towards the development of national strategies as outlined in the Joint Report 2010. The Portuguese example shows how important monitoring and evaluation are from the outset of a strategy.
- A focus **on quality of services** for the homeless. As in Portugal, the quality of services for the homelessness is an issue of concern. There is room for progress regarding the physical quality, the social support available, and the cooperation with other (mainstream) services. The EU should consider a specific initiative to improve quality of services for the homeless after the adoption of the EU voluntary quality framework for social services. An initial focus could be emergency/night hostels.
- A focus **on training of staff** (inside and outside homelessness sector) as a key element of quality of services. Cedefop, the EU vocational training body, should consider a training programme in the area of homelessness as a follow up of the recent Cedefop-funded study on skill gaps in social services and in the context of the focus on *skills* in the Europe2020 Agenda.
- A focus **on proper governance** by promoting the participation of all relevant sectors (maybe the Portuguese model can be used as an example?!) in the EU strategy on homelessness.

Transsectoral and interdepartmental cooperation is often *easier* at EU level (*save places* of exchange can be easily created) and could facilitate better governance at country level.

- **Social experimentation/innovation** should be a key focus in an EU homelessness strategy. Also in Portugal there is the will to innovate (see housing first project in Lisbon), but support from the EU could help to make genuine change and innovation a reality.
- **Mutual learning and research** are very useful. As said before several of the researches, toolkits, and other knowledge instruments developed at EU level have been used in the Portuguese homeless strategy. A strategic mutual learning and research action plan should be developed at EU level which reflects the gaps in knowledge in the different countries.
- **Budgets** should be made available. One of the key determinants of the success of the Portuguese strategy will be the level of funding that is made available for the implementation of the strategy. The current crisis will make the budgetary situation probably worse. The current possibility to use up to 3% of the ERDF for housing intervention for the homeless should be continued in the new ERDF funding period.