

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

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Introduction

The National homelessness strategy in Portugal has been launched on the 14th march 2009 and was adopted for 2009 to 2015. The strategy was in part inspired by some other already existent strategies around Europe, namely the Finish one, not only because of its obvious results (the previous one) but also because of some similarities concerning the need to target some specific cities and to develop local plans. This peer review is very important to us, concerning the learning opportunity in some issues like financial and logistical resources in the implementation stages of the strategy, due to the fact that we are in the process of implementation at this moment.

Background and objectives of the Portuguese strategy

The Portuguese Strategy holds on a rights-based approach, including the right to housing and equal opportunities as well as other basic rights. Its goals are framed upon two basis axes:

- 1- Information; combat against discrimination, education;
- 2- Qualification of intervention.

And it includes three specific areas to be tackled under these two axes of action:

- a) Preventive action in order to avoid situations of homelessness arising from eviction or discharge from institutions;
- b) Direct intervention in situations of homelessness, according to a integrated model of intervention with individual case managers;
- c) Follow-up support after resettlement.

Special importance is given to the implementation of local diagnosis including risk indicators and local homelessness plans within the *social network program*¹ and homelessness strategy's framework and to an integrated and client centred approach, with individual insertion contracts.

¹ SNP is a program to combat poverty and social exclusion and foster local social development (adopted territorialized strategic planning methodologies and aims at dynamising integrated support networks).

The involvement of social networks in implementing the national strategy is a prerequisite for its successful implementation in the country. Local social networks were invited to constitute homelessness thematic groups or NPISA Planning and Intervention with Homeless People, within the social network program framework.

According to the number of homelessness situations seven priority counties were identified – Braga, Porto, Aveiro, Coimbra, Lisboa, Setúbal and Faro.

The “building” of this strategy was a participative process, including a large group of stakeholders, public and private organizations who signed up a public commitment with its goals. In fact, the designing of the Strategy was based upon a high level of motivation and development of different activities that reinforced a cooperative dynamics and a consequent integration of shared goals from the entities of the group.

The Group reorganized itself and established a new structure for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy, both at national level and at local level. This group is responsible for disseminating the guidelines and for providing support to the local networks and units responsible for designing homelessness plans.

The “underlying philosophy” of the National Strategy can thus be summarized as follows (Baptista, 2009):

- strengthening the evidence base;
- enhancing interagency cooperation and mutual responsibility;
- improving staff training, including that of dedicated ‘case managers’ for homeless people;
- strengthening the focus on housing needs and responses;
- ensuring continuity and diversity of support; and
- shifting the state’s role towards more strategic control over the provision of services.

Specific projects - Within the framework of the strategy, two main projects are on development

- Housing first project, in Lisbon , accommodating 50 homeless with mental illness
- Pilot Project for the Treatment of Homeless people

Portugal has a National Mental Health Policy and Plan 2007-2015, and one of the major objectives is to guarantee to all persons with mental health problems access to quality care, including vulnerable groups such as homeless people. Regarding this particular objective, the Mental Health Department implemented a Pilot Project for the treatment oh Homeless people-through a protocol between the National Coordination Body for Mental Health and Psychiatric Hospital in Lisbon. This Project is addressed to those who suffer severe mental diseases –

psychotic disorders and to who have not psychiatric follow-up, disregarding the geographical area where the homeless might live and the time out in the streets.

The Scope is to ensure the access of homeless people to mental health care services, at regional level –Lisbon City. And, the aims are: 1) ensure psychiatric and psychological follow-up of homeless people coming from the referral of case managers, coach teams and other institutions that provide support.2) help the training of professionals that work in the Lisbon Platform. Based on an ambulatory care.

Transferability of knowledge and experience across countries

The Portuguese Strategy is a transitional and evolving approach with groundbreaking aspects. It has the merit of promoting agent qualification and empowering decision at local level, accepting the need to better understand causes and processes at diverse territorial scales and to measure the efficiency of projects addressing homelessness.

The Strategy is challenged by some of the objectives drawn, like the promotion of participation or the role of the caseworker, both requiring an adequate social worker-client ratio and advanced competencies and qualification on the part of social workers and service provider workers. Underlying the strategy is a challenge to review the efficiency of its traditional staircase approach and rethink the assistentialist mentality transversal to many agents and municipal policies. Considering sustainability on the long run and innovation acceptance by all agents, significant efforts are being made to increase knowledge and reflection about approaches and, unavoidably, to better emergency services and reinforce partnerships and collaboration. The Portuguese Strategy has to deal simultaneously with the reform of traditional approaches and the optimization of resources and services, and the endorsement and methodological and financial encouragement of the adoption of new state-of-the-art approaches. New pilot-projects are being considered and implemented under the Strategy, their demonstrative effects fundamental to consideration of new ways of understanding and managing the phenomenon. With all that is at stake, pilot-experiences with transitional or individual housing must be met by sound social support methodologies that seek the sustainability of the process. The strategy puts emphasis on a more holistic approach that acts on multidimensional levels and considers causal processes in their complexity.

The Finnish program is a reference defining the ambitious change of paradigm addressing homeless issues, but the progressive work done in the last decades and the allocation of more than 200M€ might inspire other countries but relativize application to different cultural, social and economical contexts. The funds are mainly public but also private and are used to reshape services, to provide housing units, invest on support services and qualify human resources. In the Portuguese Strategy, State intervention through municipalities' cooperation with Social Security and Housing Institutes is encouraged to enable projects that promote housing approaches. However, without the massive funding the risk of housing unit's scarcity for these pilot-projects might mold social agent's interpretations of a scale of progression from emergency to transitional to independent housing. Experiences have shown that the delivery of new or rented houses from the private market raises questions on the markets' capacity to produce and sustain these solutions. Given the current socio-economic context, it is fundamental to follow the market

behavior and the way landlords and neighbors react to pilot-experiences, as other experiences reported challenges.

Under the housing first principle, emergency services are being converted into serviced housing and a substantial investment is being made on transitional and individual housing and support services. Efforts are made to address long-term homeless persons with multiple problems, who were not a priority of past programs, which focused on diminishing overall cases and reducing new entries. The program as a set of preventive measures to meet needs of young people, former prisoners and people vulnerable to eviction, also through the housing first approach. It definitively contributes to strengthen the exchange of perspectives on homelessness and feeds best-practices' adaptation to other contexts, even in countries with a mixed intervention approach, like Portugal, where housing first pilot-experiences are being followed with close interest and, at the same time, the emergency service sector is under a profound multidimensional qualification. Following Finnish strategy, in the preventive domain the Portuguese should consider counseling as a proven effective way to prevent evictions, particularly important in the present context of increased vulnerability to HHE.

The pioneer Finnish annual survey contributes to model the monitoring of homelessness in other contexts, even if it needs a standardized operative definition and shared methodological definitions for data collecting and treatment. The integration of homelessness categories in the annual housing market survey means that homeless numbers can be pictured on a wide context, risk groups identified and followed, and policies reviewed in real-time. In Portugal homeless numbers are estimated through different operative definitions and fundamentally rely on emergency services numbers and estimates. Data is not produced regularly (just once was made a national count), and different researches have used methodologies that make comparisons and longitudinal monitoring impossible. An intensive method of research like the one fostered by the Municipality of Lisbon in late 90's could give the monitoring process better capacity to support decision-making. The Strategy contributes to the improvement of a fragmented concept vulnerable to political manipulation: adoption of a shared operative definition; the endorsement of think tanks with city and local level agents and academic community to help support evaluating and monitoring practices; or the role of the caseworker that will enable longitudinal work and help account for hidden situations.

Targeting long-term homelessness, Finland adopted some of the most advanced interventions but still has challenges to meet. Measuring long-term homelessness is not easy, as night services' data can be misleading and miss hidden cases. Because statistical categories can be inadequate for social intervention, the Finnish program has chosen a more flexible approach with a rather vague definition of long-term homelessness. But the lack of a conceptual framework shared by all agents makes the intervention vulnerable to interpretations when choosing clients and will difficult monitoring, particularly since the long-term category covers a considerable proportion of people with multiple problems and deep affiliation to social street and resource networks. Specialized social support differentiating homeless persons by degree of affiliation allows a more adequate and therefore rational use of resources, but the way client needs are addressed during the housing process is not described in detail and would be important to know the additional support methodologies used in transition or individual housing.

At the local level, the operationalization of the Portuguese Strategy, like the Finnish, targeted cities where the situation is more problematic. If Finnish municipalities and cities that implement

the program sign a letter of intent where contributions and responsibilities of the different parts are expressed, in Portugal the local intervention is possible through the promotion of public and private territorial partnerships and through the Local Councils of Social Action of the Social Network. These have to do a social diagnosis and a development plan, both considering homelessness and vulnerability to homelessness; each Social Network has a Homeless Planning and Intervention Group or at least a liaison agent to the National Strategy. Although local partnerships can be integrated in the national strategy and strengthened through the constitution of Social Parish Committees, these are decided at parish level by local Government and remain optional to a certain degree. Where this local partnership agreement was not signed, the territories were not left out of intervention efforts but their local representatives did not acknowledge the opportunity to have a say and represent local stakeholders in the network's decisions. Local Governments' more active role in the governance of the intervention would enable sparse efforts to be more integrated, and the lack of understanding of these calls for close sensibilization and for overall qualification of key decision makers, something the strategy is addressing. Public-private

The housing first approach has been increasingly considered as an alternative to massive emergency approaches. It has also proven to be more sustainable on the long-term and less expensive, and its results for sure have challenged the traditional way of looking at homeless persons through handicap focused lens, as housing first challenges the infantilization and the prison-like reception and rules of sub standardized shelters to which clients are submitted. The harm reduction philosophy of non-mandatory (but encouraged) treatment for substance abuse and other problems defies assumptions central to the classification of homeless people as incapable and lazy, readings used to deny and "protect" them from their choice as long as social workers do not find clients "housing ready". Participation, decision and the possibility of being in a better restarting point is proven to be life changing. In particular in contexts of criminalization of extreme poverty, this approach may be literally a "housing not jails" approach.

In Pathways to Housing, the housing first model developed a participatory forum where a Tenant Advisory Council gives input into the program and solicits ideas for changes to meet new needs. Finnish program supports participation and gives an important role to homeless and former homeless associations. In Portugal, participation emerges in the National Action Plan for Inclusion (2008-2010) as a means of making a decisive impact on eradicating poverty and social exclusion, considering the need to ensure that social inclusion policies should be drawn with the involvement of people living in poverty. The National Strategy 9th Guiding Principle promotes proactive participation and the empowerment of homeless people at all levels of the social integration process. Its 3rd good governance factor calls for strengthening the mobilization and participation of all actors at different levels of intervention, and its 4th to improve citizens' access to information on the process and the measures involved, a weak kind of citizen participation but nevertheless innovative in the context. The qualification of agents on participation issues, scales/degrees of participation, methodologies and best practices, will contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities and hopefully to the promotion of participatory spaces. Pilot-projects like client committees and forums of participation should be given adequate technical support. At the same time, manipulation and tokenism in participation must be closely monitored as participation in service evaluation encouraged. Good results must be shared within social networks and the debate on participation and empowerment fostered. The Portuguese Strategy has a group of independent researchers studying participation and its promotion on the national context.

In conclusion, considering the Portuguese traditionally fragmented, assistentialist and dependency promoting approach to homelessness, the National Strategy is innovative and brings a new paradigm of public intervention less centered on emergency help and built on stakeholders' involvement at various levels. The innovative character is evident in policies orientation, in experimentation and adaptation of best practices, in the model of governance and in the promotion of formal partnerships at diverse territorial scales. It brings forward national, city and local scale responsibility in the implementation of plans of intervention that contribute to projects' goal definition in accordance with the strategy, its Mission and Vision. The promotion of empowerment through participation, and of client consulting for evaluation and monitoring of service improvement, are challenges which might need incentives and a phased approach at National levels, because it clearly contrasts with centuries of criminalization of homelessness and misunderstanding of its causes and thirty years of emergency assistentialism. With some political discourses rebuilt on old prejudices on good vs. bad/lazy/shifty poor, and recent cuts on subsidies for unemployed and low-income households, the actual social and economical situation will put an extraordinary pressure on this transition. The increase of vulnerability to homelessness and of the number of people in that situation might defy the initial plans and has to be dealt considering the long-run National Strategy's commitment.