



## Background Note: European Consensus Conference on Homelessness

*The purpose of this document is to provide contextual information about the **European Consensus Conference on Homelessness**, which will take place in Brussels on 9 and 10 December 2010. Please also refer to the diary note and the press release on the same event.*

### 1. Homelessness in Europe

**Nature of homelessness in Europe:** Whilst there have been significant improvements in recent years in some EU countries, homelessness is getting worse in others. Homelessness is complex and multifaceted; affecting individuals and households at different points in their lives, for different lengths of time and in different ways. Street homelessness is the most visible and extreme form of poverty and exclusion, but homelessness can also include a range of other situations, such as people staying in emergency, temporary or transitional accommodation, people staying temporarily with family and friends, people threatened with eviction, or people living in inadequate and insecure accommodation.

**Profiles of people experiencing homelessness in Europe:** The stereotype of a homeless person is that of a single, middle-aged man sleeping outside in the park. However, that does not reflect the changing face of the homeless population with increasing numbers of younger people, women, victims of family breakdown, immigrants and asylum seekers becoming homeless.

**Causes of homelessness in Europe:** The causes are often complex and interrelated. It is usually a combination of factors that lead to a person being homeless. They include:

1. Personal factors: relationship breakdown, domestic violence, death of a partner, loss of a job, substance abuse
2. Institutional factors: lack of adequate support services such as after release from prison or mental hospital
3. Structural factors: lack of adequate and affordable accommodations, high unemployment rates, social impact of homelessness in Europe: Homelessness has far-reaching implications, both for individuals and for society. Homeless has a negative effect on people's lives in a range of areas, including mental and physical well being. Homelessness is also damaging to society, both in terms of social cohesion and expense.

**Data on homelessness in Europe:** It is impossible to get an accurate measurement of the extent of homelessness in the EU. Not only does the definition of homelessness vary widely across Member States, but there is also no common working definition of homelessness at the EU level. The problem of getting an accurate picture is compounded further by the fact that while in some Member States there is extensive data collection and reporting on homelessness, in a significant number of other countries the data only covers some aspects of homelessness. There are even those countries where there is no data or very limited and inconsistent reporting exists. To develop effective policies, it is vital to have comparable and reliable data and information on homelessness.



Some progress has been made at the European level, specifically through the EU study on Measurement of Homelessness (Edgar et al, 2007)<sup>1</sup> and the MPHASIS (Mutual Progress on Homelessness Through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems)<sup>2</sup> project, which aimed to improve monitoring information on homelessness and housing exclusion in 20 European countries on the basis of the recommendations of the EU study.

**Progress in tackling homelessness in Europe:** In recent years a growing number of national, regional and local strategies with clear objectives and specific targets have been developed across Europe with the aim of reducing, and even ending, homelessness<sup>3</sup>. Many are making impressive progress, both in terms of preventing homelessness and in facilitating the exit from homelessness when it does arise.

## 2. European policy context

### EU Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion

Tackling homelessness has become a priority as it is an important part of the EU Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. It has gradually risen up the ranks in the agenda through the reporting mechanism of National Strategy Reports for Social Protection and Social Inclusion.

Through the EU Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (also referred to as the "Social Open Method of Coordination"), the European Union coordinates and encourages national actions and policy development to combat poverty and social exclusion on the basis of shared European objectives. They also share a reporting mechanism, agreed indicators and final policy conclusions adopted jointly by the European Commission and the Council of Ministers of the EU.

The Consensus Conference represents a valuable opportunity to establish the role of the EU in facilitating and supporting the development of effective strategies to combat homelessness. It will help to define what needs to be done to ensure proper follow up of the 2010 Joint Report at EU level, and to allow the momentum that has been developed on homelessness at the EU level to be transformed into more effective policy co-ordination and support. The annual Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion is published by the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee of the European Council. It is the final policy conclusion resulting from the reporting mechanisms within the EU Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Homelessness was first listed as a priority issue in The 2005 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. By 2009 the Joint Report stated that 'sustained work is required to tackle homelessness as an extremely serious form of exclusion.' and Member States submitted national reports on the issue.

The 2010 Joint Report of the Commission and the Council on Social Protection and Social Inclusion<sup>4</sup> calls on Member States to develop strategies which focus on:

- Prevention as the most cost-effective way of combating homelessness. There is a particular emphasis on reducing evictions, and on minimising the instances of people leaving institutions with no home to go to.
- Moving beyond the provision of simply temporary/crisis accommodation, to more comprehensive progression policies designed to help people move on to supported and/or permanent accommodation.
- A 'housing first' approach, which offers individuals stable accommodation as a first priority, though it cautions that this should not be a 'housing only' approach in circumstances where people have additional support needs.
- Improved governance, with key elements likely to include: strong leadership by the main relevant public authority; effective participation of all key stakeholders; and consensus on the agreed strategy.

<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=1998&langId=en>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> See [dedicated web page](#) on FEANTSA website and 'Ending Homelessness: A Handbook for Policy Makers', a FEANTSA resource that brings together examples of successful approaches in tackling homelessness.

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=4665&langId=en>



### The Europe 2020 Strategy: a target to reduce poverty and exclusion

On 17 June 2010, the European Council adopted the new Europe 2020 strategy which sets out priorities for the next decade including promoting social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty. By 2020 The EU aims to lift at least 20 million people from the risk of poverty and exclusion. To achieve this, EU Member States will need to translate the target into concrete and achievable national targets in combating social exclusion and poverty. The Commission's proposal for 2020 includes a European Platform against Poverty, to 'define and implement measures addressing the specific circumstances of groups at particular risk such as... the homeless'<sup>5</sup>.

The Consensus Conference will provide a starting point for the development of a more systematic monitoring and mutual learning approach across Member States in fighting priority issues such as homelessness.

### The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Consensus Conference is taking place during the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion<sup>6</sup>. The key objectives of the year are to raise public awareness and renew the political commitment of the EU and its Member States to combating poverty and social exclusion. Homelessness is a priority policy area within the framework of the year.

### Policy co-ordination on homelessness at EU level

The European Parliament has taken a number of important initiatives on homelessness, including a Written Declaration on Ending Street Homelessness adopted in 2008. The Declaration calls on the Council to agree to an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015; calls on the Commission to provide annual updates on action taken and progress made in EU Member States towards ending homelessness; and urges Member States to devise "winter emergency plans" as part of wider homelessness strategies.

At the end of 2009, the *EU Network of independent experts on social inclusion* produced a report<sup>7</sup> on homelessness and housing exclusion in the EU Member States, providing concrete recommendations on the way forward for homelessness policy development at EU level. The report called for homelessness to be an integrated part of the Social OMC and to be consolidated and continued post- 2010. It highlighted the need to arrive at a formally agreed definition and for the European Commission and Member States to agree to a common framework and uniform guidelines for measuring, monitoring and reporting on homelessness and anti-homelessness strategies. The Consensus Conference could help transform these recommendations into effective action within the emerging Europe 2020 framework.

A new cross-party Written Declaration on the need for an EU homelessness strategy was launched by five MEPs on 6 September 2010. It has already been signed by more than 200 MEPs. The Consensus Conference could help to make progress on these clear requests from the only directly-elected body of the European Union for more strategic EU-level policy co-ordination in the field of homelessness.

In October 2010, the Committee of the Regions published an own initiative opinion on homelessness, stating that the EU must do more to combat homelessness.

<sup>5</sup> [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Notice.do?mode=dbl&lang=en&ihmlang=en&lng1=en\\_fr&lng2=bq.cs.da.de.el.en.es.et.fi.fr.hu.it.lt.lv.mt.nl.pl.pt.ro.sk.sl.sv.&val=509103:cs&page=](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Notice.do?mode=dbl&lang=en&ihmlang=en&lng1=en_fr&lng2=bq.cs.da.de.el.en.es.et.fi.fr.hu.it.lt.lv.mt.nl.pl.pt.ro.sk.sl.sv.&val=509103:cs&page=)

<sup>6</sup> [www.2010againstopoverty.eu](http://www.2010againstopoverty.eu)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts/2009/homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>



### 3. The methodology of the Consensus Conference

The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness is an innovative process especially designed for making progress on complex issues. This is its first application in the field of social policy at European level.

#### A specific tool

A “consensus conference” may be described as a public enquiry at the centre of which a jury is charged with the assessment of a socially controversial topic. Experts in the field provide the jury with evidence and the jury has the opportunity to ask questions before assessing the evidence in private and delivering an outcome report. The intention is to move debate on a contentious issue beyond the realm of specific experts and interest groups, in order to facilitate progress in the assessment of the topic for decision-making purposes. According to Jorgenson (1995)<sup>8</sup>, the consensus conference can be seen to combine elements of the following models:

- judicial process with a jury
- scientific meeting between peers
- town hall-type meeting with public participation

Consensus conferences initially emerged in the 1970s as a tool in relation to medical technology in the USA. The methodology has since been adapted and applied in a variety of contexts. During the 1980s, it was extensively adopted by the Danish Board of Technology in the area of technology assessment. In this particular model, the jury is always made up of lay people and the consensus conference is seen as a tool for public participation in science. The consensus conference is a flexible tool; transferable to a broad range of contexts and purposes. Consensus conferencing has only recently been applied to social policy and to homelessness in particular. The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness is the first European-level consensus conference in the social domain. An important precedent was the French national-level consensus conference on homelessness “Sortir de la Rue”, which took place in Paris in 2007<sup>9</sup>.

In the field of homelessness, the consensus conference and its outcomes could provide a basis from which to make the EU framework for transnational support, monitoring and mutual learning more effective. Despite considerable progress in recent years, further progress on homelessness at the EU level is hindered by a lack of consensus on key aspects of the issue. The broad range of perspectives, realities and understandings of homelessness and homeless policies makes policy support and co-ordination at European level a real challenge. There is therefore a need to establish a consensual basis from which to move forward.

The European Union currently provides a framework for policy development and coordination between the Member States on issues relating to poverty and social exclusion through the Social OMC. Consensus conferencing is consistent with the principles of the OMC in that it is an innovative, action-orientated and participatory tool, which actively incorporates diverse stakeholders and on-the-ground realities and is consistent with the subsidiarity principle.

#### Setting the stage: Preparatory Committee

A thorough preparatory phase is essential for a consensus conference. In this case, a Preparatory Committee including 20 diverse stakeholders in the field of homelessness - NGOs, researchers, public authorities, people with experience of homelessness and representatives of neighbouring sectors such as social housing – were responsible for the planning phase. The Preparatory Committee was geographically balanced, integrating representation of diverse Member States within the EU. Its principal tasks were:

<sup>8</sup> Jorgensen, Torben (1995) ‘Consensus conferences in the health sector’ 17 – 31 in Public Participation in Science: the Role of the CC in Europe, Joss Simon and Durant John (Eds) , Science Museum, London

<sup>9</sup> See <http://sans-abri.typepad.fr/>



- to identify the key questions to be addressed by the consensus conference;
- to select the members of the jury who would be responsible for establishing the consensus;
- to select the experts who would provide evidence to the jury on the key questions

Prior to the consensus conference the Preparatory Committee selected questions on which a lack of consensus currently impedes policy progress at EU level. They also identified three experts to provide evidence on each key question. The Preparatory Committee tried to ensure a range of different perspectives with different types of expertise were present, and that diverging perspectives on the key questions were integrated. The experts were asked to submit written evidence at the consensus conference. The members of the jury and the participants at the consensus conference (approximately 400 people) will have the opportunity to question the experts on their evidence in order to arrive at conclusions.

### The jury

The Preparatory Committee selected seven members of the jury. The jury is composed of experts in the social domain who are independent from the homelessness sector, and who have recognised authority on social issues.

The Chair of the jury is **Frank Vandenbroucke**, Member of the Senate in Belgium. He has served as both Minister for Social Affairs and Pensions and Minister for Employment and Pensions in the Belgian Federal Government. He also has considerable experience in the field of European Social Policy, having played a key role in the development of the Social OMC.

The Vice-Chair of the jury is the Spanish lawyer and Human Rights activist **Álvaro Gil-Robles**, who was the first Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe from 1999 to 2009.

The other members of the jury are:

- **Máté Szabó**, Parliamentary Commissioner for Civic Rights (Ombudsman), Hungary
- **Barbara Wolf-Wicha**, Professor at the Institute for Social Sciences, University of Salzburg
- **Matti Mikkola**, Professor of Labour Law at the University of Helsinki and longstanding member of European Committee of Social Rights of the Council of Europe
- **Mary Daly**, Professor at the School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work, Queen's University Belfast and member of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion.
- **Ruth Becker**, Head of Women's Studies and Housing in the Urban Planning Department of the Technische Universität Dortmund

The jury is responsible for establishing a consensus on the key questions which will be published as a report. The members of the jury will meet behind closed doors just after the Consensus Conference, on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of December, in order to arrive at their conclusions. These conclusions will be finalised as a report in the weeks following the consensus conference. The report will provide a basis for future policy development on homelessness at European level.

As well as the experts' evidence, the jury will use two pieces of research commissioned in the framework of the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness to arrive at their conclusions:



The Front Commun des SDF (a national platform of homeless and formerly homeless people in Belgium) has coordinated this consultation. The aim of the consultation is to ensure that the views of people with experience of homelessness are presented to the jury and integrated into the conclusions on the key questions.

A report has been prepared by an international team of four researchers involved in the European Observatory on Homelessness. The aim of the research, entitled '*Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research*' is to provide a strong basis for the jury's recommendations by summarising the state of existing knowledge on homelessness and homelessness policies in Europe.

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