



Policy Paper on Food, Nutrition and Homelessness

An estimated 43 million people in the EU are at risk of food poverty¹. People at risk of food poverty are defined as those who cannot afford a meal with meat, poultry or fish every second day.² Within the social exclusion framework, food poverty refers to the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to the affordability of and to the access to food.³ Evidence shows that inadequate food and nutrition intake is a contributory factor to ill-health and to a number of chronic health conditions and to premature death.

Homeless people are more vulnerable to poor diet and inadequate nutrition. Due to their living conditions, they are faced with constraints preventing them from affording and accessing healthy and nutritious diets on a regular basis. Difficulties in accessing a healthy and balanced diet may be linked among others to inadequacy of income, lack of choice, lack of storage and cooking facilities. In general the cost of goods and services appears to be the key obstacle.⁴

FEANTSA welcomes the commitment of the European Commission and the European Parliament to the effective continuation of the European Union Food Aid for Deprived Persons programme. In this context, we would like to raise a number of issues, which need to be taken into account, if food deprivation and homelessness is to be tackled effectively:

- Ensuring access to food is a fundamental human right

When designing measures to tackle food poverty, policy makers should keep in mind that access to food goes far beyond freedom from hunger. Access to standard and safe diets that covers the overall nutritious needs is not a privilege, but a basic human right held by all and therefore governments have an obligation to guarantee food security for the whole of society. Ensuring the right to adequate food is vital to the realization of the right to adequate standard of living and to the full participation in society.

- Health inequalities

Evidence indicates that that socio-economic status is a strong predictor of health. Homeless people are a disadvantaged group for whom health and food inequalities are a key issue. Homelessness has an unquestionable impact on people's state of health and yet there are a number of barriers that homeless people face in accessing quality health care. Lack of access to healthy food further aggravates health inequalities. Access to healthy food would not only improve the health of homeless people, but would also contribute to reducing health inequalities.

- Free food distribution

¹ See EC press release „Commission adopts amended proposal for the food programme for the most deprived persons in the EU“ of 17 September 2010.

² FAO definition

³ Dowler, 1998

⁴ See Claire Hickey and Daithi Downey, Hungry for Change, Focus Ireland, 2003.

There is a clear need for food distribution for deprived people. It cannot, however, contribute to the long-term commitment to reduce food poverty and therefore should be regarded as an emergency measure rather than an aim *per se*. Food distribution can have reverse effect. By stigmatizing its recipients, by creating a sense of dependence and by removing power and autonomy from people already socially marginalized, it can contribute to their further exclusion from society. Such an emergency and temporary measure as food distribution has to be underpinned by a more comprehensive approach to food poverty⁵ and should go beyond the surface tackling its root causes such as inadequate housing, unemployment and health inequalities. Adequate income should be granted, thus enabling anyone to buy the food they need without being dependant on donations⁶. Also, food distribution should follow basic requirements in terms of balance and quality of the food provided, with attention to people with specific diets and serious health issues.

- Responsibility of service providers

Homeless service providers should take on board health related considerations when preparing meals for users and when designing and implementing food-related activities in their services. They should also make relevant information on nutrition available to users. There are an increasing number of examples of good practices across Europe of healthy eating initiatives in low-income communities and of provision of healthy food within homeless services⁷.

- Social dimension, training and reintegration

Food poverty has an impact not only on health but on social participation. The social value of food has to be stressed as sharing a meal is also about enjoying social life. People who are homeless are often denied the social aspects of food consumption. Food can be a powerful tool to promote the health and well-being and social inclusion of people who are homeless. When possible, hostel users should be encouraged to share meals and where appropriate be given opportunities of training on how to purchase, prepare and cook healthy food. Some organizations go a step further and provide training opportunities allowing for people to acquire skills in view of further reintegration on the labour market. These skills can help people to feel more self-confident while healthy food can contribute to gaining more control over their health and lives. While there are limits to what can be achieved within the services, it is clear that inclusion of a healthy diet among feasible health promotion goals and services can contribute to the overall health and social inclusion of homeless people.

⁵ See FEANTSA contribution on food programme for the most deprived persons in the EU

⁶ See Elfriede Feichtinger, *Armut und Ernährung*, 1996.

⁷ One example is the Cyrenian Good Food Programme, which includes food distribution, food education and traineeship opportunities. http://www.cyreniansgoodfood.org.uk/about_us



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European Union Food Aid for Deprived Persons scheme is of great importance that has benefited millions across Europe over the past decades. In the context of its review, it is useful to shed light on how its impact could be increased.

The programme, set up in 1987, aimed utilizing food surpluses by providing Europe's deprived persons with food. As a result of the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, surplus stocks have been reduced to almost zero and today the bulk of the products for distribution is purchased on the market. Therefore the programme needs to be reestablished on a new basis. The foreseen transfer of the scheme to the European Social Fund is a good opportunity to structurally link it to a broader social policy framework, both at EU level and Member State level. It can only be successful if appropriate funding is ensured and the transfer does not result in less money available for other ESF priorities.

The impact of the programme on the situation of individual deprived persons is limited, offering on average the equivalent of one meal per month to its recipients.⁸ To enhance its effectiveness it is necessary to embed the programme in a wider strategy to address extreme poverty and exclusion and improve coordination and cross-sectoral co-operation with key actors and increase synergies with existing priorities.

Poverty reduction and fighting social exclusion in the EU are key priorities of the EU 2020 Strategy. The food aid programme has to be reinterpreted in this context taking into account the considerations set out in this paper and in the recommendations prepared by the European Court of Audits.

⁸ Special report No 6/2009 – EU food aid for deprived persons: an assessment of the objectives, the means and the methods employed – European Court of Audits