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FEANTSA IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE INCREASING LEVEL OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

As the economic crisis lasts, youth homelessness is increasing in many EU member states. Consequently the composition of the group of homeless population has been changing with young people representing a larger proportion than in the past. The lowest proportion is around 16% while the highest is 41% (respectively in Flanders and in Wales).

Youth homelessness is a complex subject as the young homeless population is not homogeneous. In addition, the definition of "youth" differs widely from one country to another¹. Also, the type of measures and the responsibility for their implementation may fall under the competences of different ministries or departments².

We notice that in many EU Member States, youth homelessness is increasing. This rise is generally underestimated as many homeless young people spend months or years sofa surfing with friends or relatives, or living in overcrowded or unfit housing.

The most significant increase in youth homelessness was in Denmark where 1,002 homeless people were aged between 18 and 24 in 2011³. This represents an increase of 58% compared to 2009. While the total number of homeless has risen slightly (from 4,998 in 2009 to 5,290 in 2011), the composition of the Danish homeless population has substantially changed as young people now account for 19% of the homeless (compared to 13% in 2009).

A recent count in England showed that there were 4,310 homeless people aged between 16 and 24 years who were rough sleepers or living in emergency shelters/temporary accommodation in autumn 2011⁴. This means 430 more homeless young people compared to autumn 2010. In the Netherlands, there were 9,000 homeless youngsters under 23 in 2010. This represents an increase of 50% compared to 2007 when there were 6,000 young homeless people. Although the increase may be over-estimated as the count was based on a new definition of youth homelessness, the increase in Dutch youth homelessness is a reality⁵.

It is common knowledge that young people have been the hardest hit by the present economic crisis: they have the highest unemployment rate (an EU average of 22.6%) and the lowest income. In some countries like Greece and Spain, the youth unemployment rate has reached an unprecedented high level: respectively 51.2 and 51.1%. This situation is alarming as there is a high risk that young people will face long term unemployment or inactivity, impacting negatively upon their whole career and livelihood perspectives.

¹ An appropriate description would be "with regards to youth homelessness, commentators have tended to focus on housing need as affecting those aged between 16 and 24 (inclusive), reflecting a raft of legislative and common understandings as to when a young person can potentially live independently from their parents, and welfare policy that provides reduced income related assistance until the age of 25", *Ending youth homelessness: Possibilities, challenges and practical solutions*, Deborah Quilgars, Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Nicholas Pleace, July 2011.

² See "Youth homelessness in the European Union", FEANTSA, 1998; "Child homelessness in Europe – an overview of emerging trends", FEANTSA, 2007; "Homelessness Research in Europe – Festschrift for Bill Edgar and Joe Doherty", FEANTSA 2010

³ The Danish National Centre for Social Research *Homelessness in Denmark 2011*.

⁴ Communities and Local Government, *Rough Sleeping Statistics England – Autumn 2011- Experimental statistics and Live tables on homelessness*.

⁵ The last count was carried out on the basis of a definition of youth homelessness agreed in May 2010: young people residentially or "literally" homeless under 23 years of age and with multiple problems. Source: adviesbureau HHM in opdracht van het ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport

EU Commissioner László Andor has warned of the danger of a 'lost generation'. In this context, a significant part of the increase in youth homelessness can be directly linked to the increase in youth unemployment. Indeed among the young homeless population there is a lower proportion with the problems traditionally associated with youth homelessness, namely family relationship breakdown or domestic violence⁶. The link with unemployment is that without stable jobs, young people are excluded from the regular housing market. And without previous work experience, most young people are not entitled to social benefits, resulting in them being left with no income at all.

FEANTSA welcomes EU initiatives taken to tackle youth unemployment and thus, youth precariousness: the Youth Opportunities Initiative and the proposal of a European Youth Guarantee scheme are helpful. However such an alarming youth situation is not surprising as for several years, youth unemployment has been tackled by increasing unstable employment. Indeed many young people have been given temporary, short-term and low paid employment contracts since years.

In such difficult times for young people, FEANTSA would like to raise a number of issues which need to be taken into account if youth homelessness is to be tackled efficiently:

1. Ensuring a decent income for young people and securing the use of internships:

In most EU countries, social benefits are paid only to those who previously worked a certain period of time. Most jobless young people are left with no income at all. Entitlement to social benefits should not be only granted according to age and professional experience. EU Member States could acknowledge the dramatic situation of youth unemployment by setting up social transfers for young people searching for their first job and by shortening the work period necessary to receive unemployment benefits.

Even when they evolve in the labour market, young people are not protected from social exclusion. There is a high level of precariousness in youth employment: low paid internships, short-term or part-time contracts do not allow to be financially independent. Such work contracts are often used in order to have cheap or even free labour. Young people are not given access to regular housing as all these types of contract are not seen as a guarantee of stable income. Many landlords just refuse access to rental housing.

While the European Commission is encouraging internships, traineeships and flexible labour market, the unstable situation of young people is not improving. Measures should be taken in order to avoid the excessive use of internships or short-term employment contracts. Member States should create real fiscal incentives to encourage the private sector to offer long term work contracts to young people.

2. Avoiding budget cuts in social services helping young people exiting social exclusion:

Youth homelessness will continue to increase if all the factors of homelessness are not taken into account. Improving the employment situation of young people is only one of the keys to bring them out of precariousness. While more funds are given to employment services, other important social services are facing significant budget cuts. The role of third or voluntary sector organisations in providing appropriate and effective services that prevent and tackle child and youth homelessness is vital: street outreach, counselling, psychological support and drop-in centres are the most utilized services among young people and are often provided by third sector organisations.

The financial viability of providers of social services for youth should be ensured. Funding constraints are making it more difficult for young people to exit social exclusion. Employment policies will not be efficient if the whole range of services cannot be provided. In addition Member States should constantly consult third and voluntary sector organisations and use their feedback when finalising and implementing the future structural fund programmes.

3. Adequate funding and reward for employment service organisations which help the homeless to find a job:

Reasons for becoming homeless and the consequences of homelessness are very complex. Finding a job is often not the first step in the reintegration of the homeless. Indeed when experiencing a period of homelessness, young people face high stress, low self-confidence and/or poor mental health such as depression. They can be very vulnerable and face many barriers to progressing to employment and successful independent living.

⁶ The factors which increase the risk of young people becoming homeless are also numerous and related to different issues: difficult family relationships; relationship breakdown with parents or step-parents; parents being unable to cope because of mental health or addiction problems; domestic violence; an unstable housing history; disengagement with school or poor career prospects and family poverty.

Costs in helping young homeless people to be fit for employment are largely underestimated. Building up their self-esteem, communication and life skills can take time. Some employment organisations do not want to deal with homeless people as they are not adequately resourced or structured to support them.

If European Governments really want to help people furthest away from employment, they need to acknowledge that it often takes more time and resources for young homeless people to be ready for work than their peers.

4. Making education mobility affordable and ensuring social protection abroad:

While the "Youth on the Move" and "Your first EURES Job" initiatives help concretely low-skilled and graduate youngsters to improve their qualifications, there is a need of more dedicated financial resources as mobility is costly and may not be possible for most disadvantaged young people. An additional obstacle to job mobility is the lack of social protection in the host country. Indeed youngsters become destitute once their work contract comes to an end. When promoting education mobility, the European Commission and the Member States should invest sufficient money to help the most disadvantaged young people to afford living abroad. Also job mobility initiatives should be combined with measures ensuring access to social protection for young people moving abroad when their work contract ends.

In conclusion, combating youth homelessness has never been as relevant as now. Although the increase in youth homelessness cannot only be explained by the increase in youth unemployment, EU Member States will reduce the risk of becoming homeless when tackling youth unemployment. In that sense actual employment measures need to be complemented with other supportive measures and to be given more financial resources. Young people are remarkably resilient and they work hard to pull themselves out of negative situations. In the current period of high youth unemployment and long-lasting crisis, it is essential that homeless young people are given all the support they need in order to give them a fair chance of escaping homelessness for good.