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Untapped potential: *Using the full potential of the OMC to address poverty in Europe*

FEANTSA recommendations for the 2007 European Round Table on poverty and social exclusion

October 2007



Introduction

FEANTSA, the European federation of national organisations working with homeless people, has followed the EU social inclusion strategy since the beginning (2001-2007), has participated in evaluations of the EU social inclusion process (namely the OMC), has been invited to actively participate in all six Round Tables, and has seen the emergence of tackling homelessness and improving access to decent housing as **key priorities** for anti-poverty policy at EU level.

This short statement makes recommendations to experts on poverty and social exclusion involved in the OMC process on how to use the full potential of this European tool for the eradication of poverty.

This statement **examines**:

- The OMC *process*, clarifying the different objectives and tools used at different levels of the process (political level and mutual learning level);
- The OMC *content*, clarifying the place of homelessness and housing exclusion in the overall process.

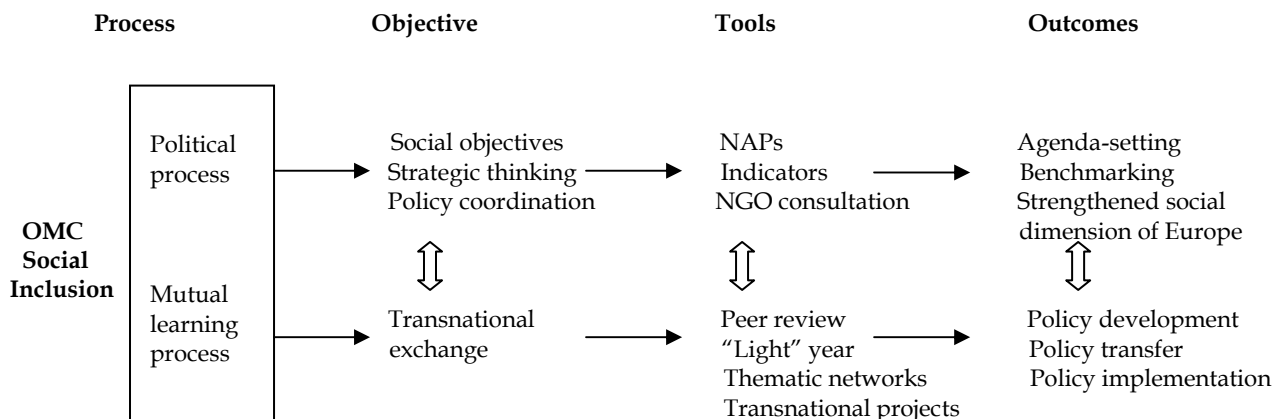
This statement generally **recommends** that:

- Action be taken to strengthen the *mutual learning* component of the OMC social inclusion as a means of better making use of the National social inclusion strategies, and ensuring a lasting impact of EU work on reducing poverty;
- European thematic networks (like FEANTSA) extend their transnational exchanges to other partners and different levels of government interested in cooperating and developing policy on different thematic areas;
- Homelessness be the theme of the 2009 Light year given the huge demand and potential for learning from different levels of government (national, regional, local).

OMC Process from a homeless service providers perspective

FEANTSA is the main representative European network on homelessness and housing exclusion issues at EU level working actively in the OMC social inclusion process. FEANTSA provides a voice for homeless service providers and housing associations in the EU political arena, and is regularly consulted by the European Commission in the framework of the EU social inclusion strategy for policy development on issues related to homelessness. FEANTSA provides expertise by carrying out research (see FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness at www.feantsa.org), and by linking the work of FEANTSA members (more than 100 homeless service providers in 29 European countries) to European and national debates on homelessness, namely through the OMC social inclusion.

The social inclusion OMC process is perceived by FEANTSA as a two-fold process:



Clarification

The diagram above represents the two levels of the OMC social inclusion process (“political” and “mutual learning”) which naturally both feed into and reinforce each other. For example, the NAPs set the agenda for the mutual learning in the peer reviews and light years, while mutual learning and policy exchange can lead to the emergence of new issues which can be highlighted as key priorities in new NAP cycles.

It could be argued that the immediate outcomes of the *political* process are to be found more at the European level, while the outcomes of the *mutual learning* process are rather to be found at national level:

- The political process is about national administrations coming together (through the facilitation of the European Commission) to coordinate their policies at EU level through benchmarking, and to make strategic decisions which will set the EU social inclusion agenda and strengthen the social dimension of Europe;
- The mutual learning process is more about bringing together national and local experts to exchange practical information on how to develop and implement policy in specific areas of the multi-dimensional strategies outlined in the NAPs.

Indeed, the OMC is not only a tool to develop the social dimension of the Lisbon strategy at *European* level. The potential impact of the OMC on policy change at *national* level is also important. FEANTSA believes that progress is still possible - even if the wider political context (i.e. Lisbon) is not entirely favorable - through exploiting the full potential of the mutual learning pillar of the OMC process.

An effective mutual learning process should bring experts more frequently together to gain practical knowledge on how to tackle different forms of poverty (child poverty, homelessness, poverty of migrants, etc). This should allow focal points from different parts of the social affairs (and other relevant) administrations at national and local level to benefit from the OMC mutual learning tools:

- Peer reviews: The current peer review programme allows for this to happen to a certain extent, however these peer review seminars are open to only few countries (7-9) while there may be a demand for information from many more countries on a given issue, and local level civil servants do not really benefit from such mutual learning tools at the present time;
- European networks: Thematic networks which have developed considerable expertise on different forms of poverty can also be facilitators of targeted policy exchanges (and this is already happening *de facto* in networks like FEANTSA). However, this role has to be better recognised by all and better use has to be made of this potential;
- Light Year: This OMC thematic year can have much potential as a mutual learning tool as long as the relevant networks are involved, and the relevant level of administration is involved. While the EU Social Protection Committee delegates deal with the more strategic agenda-setting and NAP coordination, we would expect relevant thematic focal points from national or local administrations to be involved in the activities of the Light Year.

Recommendations

In order to preserve the value of the EU social inclusion pillar of the streamlined strategy, FEANTSA would suggest the following:

- FEANTSA calls on all representatives involved in the EU social inclusion process to fully acknowledge the two levels of the OMC process - both the political process which serves to push the social agenda at EU level and the mutual learning process which serves to promote policy transfer and implementation of relevant policy measures at national and local level – and hence the double role of the OMC in this respect;
- In order to take the EU Social Inclusion process forward until 2010, it is important to further develop mutual learning processes around the different societal problems related to poverty if the EU is to have a genuine impact on alleviating poverty. It is now time to make full use of the potential of the

mutual learning tools (peer review, European networks, light years, transnational projects) to make visible policy progress in priority areas

- Targeted mutual learning processes should always be set in the general strategic framework of the OMC without losing sight of the multi-dimensional approach of the EU social inclusion objectives, the different forms of poverty, and the different approaches to breaking the cycle of poverty;
- FEANTSA proposes to facilitate transnational exchanges between different actors on one of the societal problems dealt with under the Social Inclusion process - homelessness - by using its expertise and contacts to foster cooperation between different levels of government (from local to international) and different partners involved in the fight against homelessness. FEANTSA calls on other thematic networks to follow suit.

OMC Content from a homelessness perspective

The EU social inclusion strategy covers a wide range of policy areas related to housing, health, and employment. Homelessness and housing exclusion are priority issues given that people without a home suffer severe forms of poverty requiring urgent action. For each priority issue under the OMC, there are different actors, different weaknesses and different levels of progress. FEANTSA has been working with the European Commission, national ministries, local authorities and health professionals, to improve specific policy development on homelessness and housing exclusion.

Clarification of the definition of homelessness

Homelessness has often been referred to as possibly the most extreme form of poverty. Homelessness can be defined narrowly to include only people without a roof over their heads or it can be defined more broadly to include people in temporary living arrangements such as staying with family and friends, in makeshift dwellings or in night shelters and temporary institutional accommodation.¹ The dividing line between homelessness and housing exclusion naturally varies from country to country.

No definition of homelessness has yet been agreed at European level, however a few international or European definitions have emerged over the past few years, including the recent definition proposed in the European Commission study on the measurement of homelessness at EU level or FEANTSA's ETHOS typology of homelessness *and housing exclusion* (see Annex and FEANTSA [website](#)).

Although there are different approaches to defining homelessness, there is **general consensus** that consideration needs to be given to a continuum of living situations - ranging from living on the streets with no roof, to living in shelters to living with friends - when seeking to understand the nature and scope of homelessness. This approach confirms that homelessness is a process (rather than a static phenomenon) that affects many vulnerable households at different points in their lives.

Joint report on social protection and social inclusion (2001-2007)²: homelessness as a key European challenge

Awareness of homelessness and housing exclusion, and the urgent need for action to tackle these phenomena, has improved over the last 5 years through the EU social inclusion strategy. Since the launch of this strategy in 2001, there has been a clear change in the importance attached to homelessness and housing exclusion in the different EU countries as indicated in the evaluation reports produced by the European Commission: from homelessness and housing as urgent policy issues for *some* Member States (1st Joint Inclusion Report [2001](#)), for *most* Member States (2nd Joint Inclusion report [2004](#)), for *all* new Member States (Report on NAPsIncl of new Member States [2005](#)), to homelessness as one of the 7 key priorities for all 25 Member States (1st Joint Report Social Protection & Social Inclusion [2005](#)).

The increased importance attached to homelessness under the EU social inclusion strategy is confirmed by the EPSCO Council³ March 2005. In the conclusions of the Council meeting, all EU25 Employment

¹ Study on measurement of homelessness at EU level, European Commission, 2007

² This is a report adopted jointly by the European Commission and the Council of Ministers on the key challenges for tackling poverty and social exclusion in Europe

and Social Affairs Ministers agreed that “treatment of the phenomenon of homelessness” was one of the key social inclusion priorities for the future (see [here](#)). Finally, three main key challenges have been highlighted in the recently adopted Joint Report 2007 in relation to “active inclusion”: homelessness and housing exclusion, social inclusion of ethnic minorities, and labour market integration of people with disabilities.

Homelessness and Active Inclusion – links with the wider Lisbon context

The Joint Report 2007 refers to the challenge of homelessness as linked to active inclusion and labour market integration which needs to be “joined up with a range of other services”, including housing, health, and social services. Support services for people experiencing homelessness is indeed fundamental for effective labour market integration of vulnerable groups. FEANTSA welcomes the active inclusion approach as a useful strategy for inclusion into occupational activities and employment of groups with very complex needs, including people who are homeless. Good practice exists in a number of countries (see upcoming 2007 FEANTSA report on employment and homelessness⁴). However there is a need for more in-depth analysis of the different pillars - minimum income, employment, and access to services - and to improve interaction between all 3 pillars.

FEANTSA recognises active inclusion as one strategy for promoting social inclusion which can be effective, but which is very much based on reintegration into the labour market only without focusing on other aspects of poverty which require equal focus (housing, health, education). People experiencing homelessness face various structural as well as personal barriers to employment and social inclusion. Improving the employability of people who are homeless is an important tool in their pathway out of homelessness. FEANTSA stresses, however, that effective inclusion policies must be based on a holistic approach that takes the multiple dimensions of social exclusion into account. Promoting the inclusion into the labour market therefore has to go hand in hand with other requirements enabling people to fully participate in society. For people experiencing homelessness securing access to adequate and affordable housing is a key element. In addition, access to education, physical and mental health care, substance misuse treatment as well as the promotion of social networks may be necessary.⁵

Recommendations

- FEANTSA calls for a Light Year 2009 on Homelessness to make policy progress at EU and national level to use the huge potential for learning on policies tackling homelessness and housing exclusion given that many EU countries are in the process of developing or revising policies in this area;
- Given that homeless policy is often developed through cooperation between different ministries (social affairs, housing, health, justice and home affairs, employment), it is crucial to involve *all* relevant ministries in the EU social inclusion process in order to optimise the value of the OMC in the area of homelessness policy-making;
- FEANTSA calls for urgent action to prevent different forms of homelessness and housing exclusion from increasing in Europe namely rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing (see [ETHOS](#));
- The key element in addressing rising homelessness in Europe is the presence of a distinct policy on homelessness - homelessness needs to be recognised as a distinct problem that needs distinct policy answers. It is clear that a good social protection systems alone cannot solve or prevent homelessness. In all countries, even the countries with more robust social protection systems, there are people experiencing homelessness (and not homeless through choice);
- FEANTSA calls on the European Commission and Member States to make homelessness a key priority of EU anti-poverty strategies in the next EU social policy agenda 2010-2015 to work towards ensuring no one in Europe will have to sleep rough because of lack of appropriate services.

³ The Employment and Social Affairs Ministers of EU25 convened on 3 and 4 March 2005 to discuss, *inter alia*, the future social inclusion priorities for the European Union.

⁴ Multiple barriers Multiple solutions : Inclusion into and through Employment for People who are Homeless in Europe (FEANTSA, 2007)

⁵ See FEANTSA’s response to the Commission Communication « Concerning a consultation on action at EU level to promote the active inclusion of the people furthest from the labour market » (2006)

Annex : ETHOS 2007- European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

	Operational Category		Living Situation		Generic Definition	
v Conceptual Category v	ROOFLESS	1	People Living Rough	1.1	Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2	People in emergency accommodation	2.1	Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1	Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
				3.2	Temporary Accommodation	
				3.3	Transitional supported accommodation	
		4	People in Women's Shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1	Temporary accommodation / reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
	5.2			Migrant workers accommodation		
	6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release	
			6.2	Medical institutions ⁹		
			6.3	Children's institutions / homes	No housing identified (e.g by 16th birthday)	
	7	People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1	Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)	
			7.2	Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people		
INSECURE	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1	Temporarily with family/friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing	
			8.2	No legal (sub)tenancy		
			8.3	Illegal occupation of land		
	9	People living under threat of eviction	9.1	Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative	
9.2			Re-possession orders (owned)	Where mortgagor has legal order to re-possess		
10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence		
INADEQUATE	11	People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1	Mobile homes	Not intended as place of usual residence	
			11.2	Non-conventional building	Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty	
			11.3	Temporary structure	Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin	
12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations		
13	People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms		