

Paving the way for a European consensual framework on homelessness

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FEANTSA, the European Federation of national organisations working with the homeless/Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri, is a European Non-Governmental Organisation committed to preventing and reducing homelessness with a view to its progressive elimination. FEANTSA has been monitoring the EU social inclusion strategy since 2001 and has seen significant policy progress on homelessness in many EU countries despite the unfavourable EU political context which tends to draw more attention to economic growth than to social inclusion. This is very telling of the potential of Open Method of Coordination (OMC) which can probably contribute to the building of a European consensus on how to tackle the phenomenon of homelessness.

Homelessness is a form of social exclusion which has been highlighted as a key priority in previous national reporting rounds (along with child poverty, financial exclusion, and other poverty-related phenomena). Homelessness is indeed a continuing public policy issue across all European countries. Many countries have developed integrated strategies to significantly reduce homelessness. In this context, reliable data are needed on the extent of homelessness, as well as information on the social characteristics, causes and geographical spread of the population. The European Commission is therefore facilitating exchanges and research on homelessness data collection and measurement (MPHASIS project), which would allow for more effective monitoring of progress on homelessness and homeless policy-making in the EU social inclusion strategy. Moreover, national statistics institutes will also collect data on homelessness in the framework of the 2011 round of population and housing censuses. All these initiatives should serve to develop appropriate action in response to the European Parliament call to end street homelessness by 2015 (see Written Declaration 111/2008).

FEANTSA strongly believes in the potential of the OMC social protection and inclusion as a means to support member states to strengthen their anti-poverty policies through more strategic mutual learning during the "light years". We believe there are enough reasons to take homelessness as an issue for *light year* 2009:

- Homelessness and housing exclusion are firmly on the EU agenda;
- Homelessness is on the political agenda of many EU member states - this is clear from the 2008-2010 round of national reporting;
- Homelessness has been effectively mainstreamed in other EU policy areas;
- The OMC can deliver visible progress towards reducing homelessness, even in the short run.

1. Homelessness and housing exclusion firmly on the EU agenda

Awareness of homelessness and housing exclusion, and the urgent need for action to tackle these, has improved over the last 5 years through the NAP process under the EU social inclusion strategy. Since the start of the social inclusion NAP process 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 finally confirmed by the EPSCO Council March 2005. In the conclusions of the Council meeting, all EU25 Employment and Social Affairs Ministers agreed that “treatment of the phenomenon of homelessness” is one of the key social inclusion priorities for the future. Finally, three main key challenges were 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.

In the Lynne Report on *Social protection and social inclusion* ([2007](#)), the European Parliament also recently called for “more attention to be paid to homeless people by Member States, especially in access to housing, health, education and employment”. This call was part of the EP’s evaluation of current social challenges in the framework of the Social reality stocktaking exercise carried out by the European Commission this year.

On 10 April 2008 the Written Declaration on ending street homelessness [111/2008](#) was adopted by the European Parliament: 438 signatures were collected from Members of the European Parliament (MEP’s) from all political groups and all European Member States. The European Parliament has called for an end to street homelessness in Europe by 2015.

The 2008 Seventh European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty under the Slovenian Presidency strongly highlighted one of the main concerns of people experiencing poverty: the importance of having a roof over their heads. Most delegations underlined that homelessness not only represents one of the most severe forms of deprivation, but it is also one of the main obstacles to full social integration and access to employment.

Finally, the Zimmer Report on *Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty, including child poverty, in the EU* adopted on 10 October 2008 by the European Parliament “Calls on the Council to agree an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015 and calls for the development by Member States of integrated policies to ensure access to affordable quality housing for all; urges the Member States to devise “winter emergency plans” as part of a wider homelessness strategy, as well as to establish agencies dedicated to enabling provision and access to housing for groups facing discrimination; suggests the collection of comparable data on the extent of homelessness and poor housing; calls on the Commission to develop an EU framework definition of homelessness and provide annual updates on action taken and progress made in the Member States towards ending homelessness”. Homelessness is one of the three key priorities outlined in this report, along with child poverty and adequate income.

► **Conclusion:** There is consensus on the need for EU concerted action on homelessness. The time is right for a thematic year on homelessness.

2. Political momentum at national level – huge potential for mutual learning

FEANTSA has carried out an initial stock-taking of the general policy trends on homelessness in the 2008-2010 National Strategic Reports on social protection and social inclusion looking more specifically at the following elements: homelessness policies/measures/programmes; existing data on homelessness in the NSR; the use of clear targets and objectives; and good practices outlined in the NSRs.

Policies: It is clear from the 2008-2010 NSRs that most countries are developing or consolidating actions to tackle homelessness (Finland, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, UK, Ireland, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovak republic, Czech republic, Hungary, Romania, Spain, Estonia), and homelessness is considered a priority area for many of these countries. The NSRs include two broad types of action on homelessness: 1. Clear-cut homeless strategies which tackle homelessness in a comprehensive and multi-dimensional way and 2. Measures on homelessness integrated in wider policy frameworks (such as housing, social, employment, and health frameworks) which generally deal only with one specific aspect of homelessness.

Data: Quantitative data is urgently required in order to develop indicators to monitor trends in the numbers and profiles of homeless people, to develop evidence-based policies to effectively tackle homelessness, and to measure the impact of homeless policies. In order to measure and monitor homelessness, it is fundamental to establish a clear working definition of homelessness. Homelessness can be defined narrowly to include only people without a roof over their heads or it can be defined more broadly. The 2007 European Commission study on measurement of homelessness at EU level recommended a harmonised classification of living situations (see Annex I). In the current round of national reporting, there is still no comparable data on homelessness. However, a number of countries refer in their NSR to numbers and profiles of homeless people. Other countries refer to the number and nature of homeless services. Finally, some countries have outlined plans to improve homelessness measurement.

Targets: The Written Declaration 111/2007 on ending street homelessness adopted signed by 438 Members of European Parliament from all political groups and all European Member States clearly calls for an end to street homelessness by 2015. Although very few countries have referred to this call in their NSR, it is clear from the content of the NSRs that countries are taking more ambitious measures aiming not only to “manage” homelessness but rather to significantly reduce or even end homelessness. To this end, different types of targets are used in the NSRs in accordance with the national context, financial means, and national ambitions on homelessness. Some targets relate to reducing the number of homeless people while other targets and objectives rather relate to the homeless service and housing support sector (increasing supply). On the whole however, targets on homelessness in the NSR are quite weak (apart from in a cluster of countries) most probably as a result of the lack data on homelessness, a crucial element for measuring whether a target has been achieved.

Good practices: In the NSRs, there are a number of “good practices” emerging from homeless policies/ programmes in Hungary, France, the UK, the Czech Republic and Belgium. In other countries, there are good practices which consist of programmes targeting a wider audience, including homeless people as is the case in Austria, Finland and again the UK. The good practices focusing specifically on homelessness in the NSR include strategies focusing on the resettlement of homeless people (Hungary and France), policies creating pathways out of homelessness through employment and training (the UK), practices in the homeless sector such as improvement of coordination and networking (Belgium), and research projects on homelessness (Czech republic).

Homelessness has clearly emerged as a priority at EU level reflecting the increasing awareness of this problem across Europe. All corners of the EU are having difficulties addressing the issue of homelessness effectively. None of the EU member states has managed to end homelessness until now, so the issue is an interesting focus for **all** countries. A focus on homeless during a *light year* will provide member states with much-needed access to expertise and knowledge abroad which will help them to build a solid basis for future homelessness policies. The focus on homelessness can also have spill-over effects to other policy areas, in terms of illustrating the strengths and shortcomings of public policies in important social policy areas such as health, housing, employment and immigration, or in terms of transferring successful homeless policies to vulnerable groups with less complex needs than homeless people.

► **Conclusion:** The OMC thematic year on homelessness and housing exclusion can be a great tool for national administrations responsible for solving the homelessness problem in their country.

3. Effective mainstreaming of homelessness and housing exclusion in other EU policy areas

Homelessness and housing exclusion are now firmly on the EU social inclusion agenda, and are being mainstreamed in other areas of EU policy. DG SANCO of the European Commission is working on reducing health inequalities in the framework of its Health Programme 2008-2013 and is developing its expertise on social exclusion and homelessness in relation to the Implementation of the European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being. Housing exclusion and homelessness are becoming increasingly issues of concern for DG REGIO in the framework of the EU urban and cohesion policy initiatives, and indicators on homelessness are included in the EU urban audit. Homelessness is also getting more attention from DG JUSTICE because of its links with immigration and human rights. DG INFOSOC is funding a project on e-governance and homelessness (McEgov). DG R&D is funding a 3-year project on youth homelessness. DG EAC is also increasingly focusing on young people experiencing homelessness, whereas DG AGRI published the results of a consultation on the future of the Food Distribution Programme for Europe's Most Deprived People highlighting that according to a great proportion of respondents the programme should be linked to other EU initiatives to combat social exclusion.

As well as the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, other EU institutions have initiated important debates and reports on homelessness and housing exclusion. The European Parliament calls to address homelessness as a matter of urgency (as is clear from above) gathering more and more momentum around this societal problem. The Committee of the Regions has also adopted a report on housing and regional policy emphasising the homelessness dimension, and has co-organised seminars on homelessness with FEANTSA to facilitate exchanges between local authorities on effective approaches to tackling homelessness.

The momentum on homelessness in EU institutions is present, but there is no strong leader. This might jeopardise the maximisation of the current attention and action in the different EU institution. The Social Protection Committee and the European Commission could take the lead on homelessness in the framework of the OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, and build on this momentum to enhance the necessary policy efforts at EU level.

► **Conclusion:** The EU social affairs ministries can take the lead on this problem, and build on the momentum at EU level through a thematic light year in order to reinforce their transnational work as well as cooperation with other sectors on this issue.

4. The OMC can deliver visible progress towards reducing homelessness

► Strategic mutual learning

Mutual learning is the very essence of the OMC which aims to coordinate and facilitate exchanges on social inclusion policies rather than to harmonise national social inclusion policies. The potential of mutual learning on homelessness is very high (this is clear from the impact of previous EU peer reviews on homelessness, for instance). The European Commission plays an important role in facilitating exchanges, but effective mutual learning needs a stronger basis to start from. A *light year* on homelessness in 2009 could provide this basis and lead to political consensus on what is homelessness, on the key elements of effective homeless strategies, on the key challenges for the future, which in turn would make the future EU work on homelessness much more effective. It would enable the European Union to be more proactive on the issue of homelessness (as is the case for action on child poverty, for instance). The mutual learning component of the OMC is 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 poverty strategies outlined in the National Strategic Reports. Mutual learning can therefore take place and allow for policy/political progress even if the wider political context (i.e. Lisbon) is not entirely favourable. To ensure real impact, it is crucial to work more closely with EU-funded European networks as potential drivers and facilitators of transnational mutual learning with the aim of building European resource/knowledge centres on specific priority themes and of reaching out to a much wider variety of stakeholders. European networks like FEANTSA can support implementation of the National reports by facilitating the exchange of expertise between NGOs, public authorities, researchers, and other relevant stakeholders.

► Consensus-building

As the 2008 *European Commission Communication on Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination* summarises: "Some of the [proposed] measures amount to a consolidation of existing practices. Others, in particular target setting, imply more substantial changes and will require consensus-building among Member States and stakeholders." In order to measure progress in social inclusion policies, it is crucial to build consensus on how to tackle social exclusion. Yet consensus does not yet exist in all areas of social inclusion. Homelessness is a case in point. Mutual learning is a crucial tool to build consensus among the 27 countries of the EU which all have different approaches to tackling poverty. A more strategic approach to mutual learning under the OMC is therefore needed so that it impacts more directly on policy change in the different member states – to this end, FEANTSA calls for clear consensual European policy frameworks on specific priority themes in order to enhance the impact of transnational mutual learning in the OMC.

► Paving the way for a European Consensus Conference on Homelessness

FEANTSA has proposed that the European Commission organise *European Consensus Conferences* around one or more of the priority themes of the EU social inclusion pillar during the European Year on Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010. A European OMC Light Year on Homelessness could culminate in a European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in 2010. The European *light year* 2009 for the OMC could be a useful framework to take stock of what has been achieved during the last 15-20 years in terms of building knowledge and understanding of homelessness, and actual policy development/impact. A Consensus Conference will then direct EU action and transnational cooperation toward commonly understood and agreed objectives.

**Annex: European definition of homelessness recommended in the
EC Study 2007 on Measurement of homelessness at EU level**

Operational Category		Living Situation		Definition
1	People Living Rough	1	Public space / 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	Overnight Shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	3 4 5 6	Homeless Hostels Temporary Accommodation Transitional Supported Accommodation Women's shelter or refuge accommodation	Where the period of stay is less than one year
4	People living in institutions	7 8	Health care institutions Penal institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9 10 11	Mobile homes Non-conventional building Temporary structure	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

Annex II : European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion – ETHOS

	Operational Category	Living Situation	Generic Definition	
Conceptual Category	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	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing	
		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	Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy	
		8.3 Illegal occupation of land	Illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights	
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		