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Multiple barriers, multiple solutions: Employment for people who are homeless in the European Union

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Introduction

The EU is committed to helping people who are furthest away from the labour market to find work and income. It is assumed that, with a job, people will reintegrate into normal life and contribute to the social cohesion and growth of European societies.

Despite this commitment at EU level regarding the employment of disadvantaged people, the reality for these groups at national and local level is often different. Indeed, in many countries the most excluded groups, such as people who are homeless, have very little chances of finding a job or engaging in training initiatives with the help of the existing mainstream support. Faced with multiple barriers to work and employment, the majority of people who are homeless are unemployed or economically inactive. If homeless people are working, they are often employed under precarious conditions; often in the informal economy.

FEANTSA felt that there was a need to better understand the close link between employment - or rather the lack of employment - and homelessness and decided to dedicate its annual theme in 2007 to the topic "Multiple barriers, multiple solutions: Inclusion into and through employment for people who are homeless in Europe".¹

The key findings of the year have been drawn together in the FEANTSA Annual Report 2007² which is based on national reports from 16 EU countries³. The Annual Report provides an overview about barriers to employment for people who are homeless as well as employment initiatives for this group of people in the EU as a whole. This article takes up some of the key findings of these reports and discusses them in the framework of EU policies that aim to foster the labour market reintegration of the people furthest away from the labour market.

The definition of homelessness in this article is based on ETHOS - the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. ETHOS classifies people experiencing homelessness in four different conceptual categories⁴:

- Roofless: people sleeping rough or people sleeping in emergency night shelters
- Houseless: with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter

¹ More information about the Annual Theme 2007 is available at: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=36>

² FEANTSA Annual Report 2007 on employment and homelessness: http://www.feantsa.org/files/Employment_annual_theme/Annual_theme_documents/European_Report/European_report_FEANTSA_employment_EN_2007.pdf

³ National Reports are available from: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

⁴ More information about ETHOS on the FEANTSA website: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=48>



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- Living in insecure housing: threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence
- Living in inadequate housing: in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding

This article generally focuses on people who are houseless, and – to a minor extent – people who are roofless. However, many of the issues will be relevant for people living in insecure and inadequate accommodation.

The article first looks at the role of employment for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and refers to International Human Rights instruments that stipulate the Right to Work.

It further provides an overview of EU employment policies and critically assesses these regarding their aim to foster the inclusion of people who are furthest from the labour market.

The article describes the employment profiles of people who are homeless and their barriers to employment and analyses the difficulties of making mainstream employment policies effective for this group.

This is followed by an overview of services that aim to improve the employability of people who are homeless and help them on their pathway out of poverty and exclusion. Finally, the article looks at the added-value of the European level in relation to developing effective employment policies for people who are homeless.

Employment and its role for the social inclusion of people who are homeless

Work and employment play a key role for the social inclusion and personal fulfilment of an individual. Work can provide a person with a meaningful occupation in life and contribute to the person's self-confidence and recognition in society. This has positive effects on related areas, such as the health and housing situation of the individual. In addition, the inclusion of a person through employment positively impacts on the social cohesion and economy of society as a whole.

A positive notion of work is also reflected in various international human rights instruments that stipulate the Right to Work. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, for example, sets out in article 6 that the States Parties recognise the "right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right."⁵ The European Social Charter⁶ protects the Right to Work as well as a series of related rights, such as the Right to Safe and Healthy Working Conditions or the Right to Vocational Training.

What is more, many people experiencing homelessness attribute a high importance to work. Although they may have more urgent needs at the moment, people who are homeless indicate the wish to work or to engage in occupational activities.

A survey of participants of employment and training programmes of UK FEANTSA member St. Mungo's, for example, illustrates the mutual support between engagement in occupational activities and social inclusion.

The findings show that:

- 4 in 5 felt they were learning new skills by being linked into the service;

⁵ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm

⁶ European Social Charter (1961) and the revised European Social Charter (1996): http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/esc/



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- 4 in 5 felt their confidence and self-esteem had increased since linking into the service;
- 2 in 3 were positive that their involvement would lead to them getting work;
- 1 in 2 said their housing situation had improved since coming to the service;
- 1 in 2 felt their health had improved.⁷

European Employment Policies for Disadvantaged Groups

The European Union also promotes employment as a means of fostering social cohesion in Europe. While Member States still have the main responsibility for employment policies, EU countries agree on common objectives, priorities and targets and coordinate their efforts to reach these at European level. This policy-making process is called the Open-Method of Coordination. It is the result of the common understanding that in a context of European economic integration, there is a greater need for governments to act collectively at EU level through greater coordination of policies in areas such as employment but also social protection and social inclusion or education.

Today the European Employment Strategy is a key element of the overall European Strategy, which became known as the “Lisbon Strategy for Jobs and Growth”. One of the overarching objectives of the Lisbon Strategy is full employment. The target is to reach an overall employment rate in the European Union of 70 % by 2010.

European Head of States have adopted a set of Employment Guidelines in order to reach this target. One of the guidelines (Guideline 19) specifically focuses on the “activation” of disadvantaged people. It calls on Member States “to ensure inclusive labour markets, enhance work attractiveness, and make work pay for job-seekers, including disadvantaged people, and the inactive”.⁸

More specifically it asks member states to develop active and preventative labour market measures including personalised action plans and the provision of necessary social services to support the inclusion of those furthest away from the labour market.⁹

In addition, the importance of employment as a means to fighting poverty is being highlighted in the area of European social inclusion policies. The EU is promoting the Active Inclusion of people who are furthest away from the labour market.¹⁰ Active Inclusion is based on three pillars: access to the labour market, minimum income and access to services.

While Active Inclusion could become a useful framework for the promotion of employment for disadvantaged groups in working age, questions remain about the translation of the concept in national and local policies and the design and interaction of the different pillars.

Moreover, the dominance of a “work first” approach to the inclusion of people affected by poverty and social inclusion at European level risk to sideline important policy initiatives in other areas of social inclusion. Access to social services, for example, is about respecting the fundamental rights of people and cannot be made conditional upon participation in activation measures. While labour market

⁷ National Report: United Kingdom, 22.

⁸ See adopted European Employment Guidelines 2005-2008:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/prop_2005/adopted_guidelines_2005_en.htm and draft Integrated Guidelines 2008-2010: http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/european-dimension-200712-annual-progress-report/200712-annual-report-integrated-guidelines_en.pdf

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See European Commission Communications on active inclusion 2006 and 2007.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/active_inclusion_en.htm



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reintegration is an important element of the social inclusion of many people, it plays less of a role for other groups such as children or older people.¹¹

Despite the clear commitment at European level to promote employment for disadvantaged people, the employment situation of these groups remains difficult and precarious, in particular for people experiencing homelessness.

Employment profiles of people experiencing homelessness in Europe

The findings of the FEANTSA European Report 2007 clearly demonstrate that for the majority of people experiencing homelessness, employment in the mainstream labour market is not an option, at least not in the near future.

In all EU countries, the majority of people who are homeless are **unemployed and economically inactive**. Many people belong to the long term unemployed. In addition, some are also not working because of illness or a disability and are not included in national unemployment figures.

Unemployment is particularly prevalent amongst people who are roofless. However, people who are houseless and people living in insecure or inadequate housing are often unemployed. A study by Shelter UK found, for instance, that 77 % of (homeless) households in temporary accommodation are without employment.¹²

However, the available figures¹³ also show that there are still a significant proportion of people who are homeless in many countries who are currently working or have recently been in some form of **paid employment**:

In Spain, for example, a national study indicates that 11,8% of the overall homeless population have a job.¹⁴ And around 10 % of people who are homeless in the Netherlands have a paid job.¹⁵

Nevertheless, only a small group work under regular employment contracts in the mainstream labour market. In a number of countries, many people that indicate they have an employment contract are participating in special employment initiatives for disadvantaged people. In these **supported employment** schemes, participants receive ongoing financial support. Other forms of support can be ongoing training, mentoring or social support. In Belgium for example, 33% of houseless workers in the Flemish region are employed in supported employment.¹⁶

Many of the employment contracts in the mainstream labour market as well as in the social economy are temporary or only occasional. For some people, short-term supported employment contracts will allow them to move on into more stable contracts in the mainstream labour market. This can be very

¹¹ FEANTSA response to the 2007 European Commission Communication on active inclusion, February 2008: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52007dc0620:EN:NOT>

¹² National Report : United Kingdom, 4.

¹³ Please note that the quoted figure are taken from the different national reports and are not comparable.

¹⁴ National Report: Spain, 4.

¹⁵ National Report: Netherlands, 2.

¹⁶ National Report: Belgium (Flanders), 4.



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beneficial for people with multiple needs, especially if it is combined with ongoing housing, health and social support.

However, for many people experiencing homelessness, work itself risk to become a means of exclusion. These people are trapped in a situation of precarious and often low-paid jobs that further contribute to their vulnerability.

Many people experiencing homelessness who are officially registered as unemployed or economically inactive are also generating an (additional) income through working in the **informal economy**.

In some countries, minimum income or social benefits will not be enough to make a living. Due to their limited chances to find equally paid jobs in the mainstream labour market, many people experiencing homelessness in these countries earn an additional income in the informal economy.

In other countries, it does not pay for people who are homeless to seek a job in the mainstream labour market. If they take up mainstream employment, they risk losing their social benefits and would see their overall income reduced.

The Portuguese report highlights that people who are roofless often do not receive social benefits and depend on work in the informal economy. Many of the jobs are offered in cleaning, construction and in the hotel and restaurant sector.¹⁷

In Hungary, according to figures from a job centre for people who are homeless, 30% have worked in the informal economy without contracts or any form of security in the recent two years.¹⁸

The Czech report describes the most common employment profile of a person who is roofless as the following: unemployed, middle-aged, with primary education or apprenticeship who is at least occasionally working in the informal economy.¹⁹

The most vulnerable groups of people who are homeless may even have difficulties to find a job in the informal economy. Instead, they may engage in a range of **income generating activities**, such as collecting rubbish or begging in order to earn some money.

According to a study from Spain, in addition to 19,9 % of people who are homeless who lived on their wage and 17,5% who live on public benefits, 7,4% lived from the profits of offering services or selling objects, 14,2% on the money given by people in the street and others, 16,4% lived on the money given by family and friends and the rest did not know or answer the question.²⁰

The FEANTA European Report also demonstrates that a significant portion of people experiencing homelessness are taking part in **vocational training** or other forms of **education**. In addition, people who are unemployed may also engage in different forms of **occupational activities**, such as volunteering in the homeless shelter or participating in meaningful occupation.

Most reports do not state **gender differences** regarding the employment profile between women and men. There are, however, several reports that specifically mention gender differences.

¹⁷ National Report: Portugal, 3.

¹⁸ National Report: Hungary, 4.

¹⁹ National Report: Czech Republic, 3.

²⁰ National Report: Spain, 4.



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According to a study from Luxembourg, only 32% of the men who are employed indicate that they have a work contract while 55% are participating in an employment measure from the employment office or the social services. Of the women, 50% say that they have a work contract and 40% are participating in a supported employment measure. This is explained by the fact that a higher percentage of women lived in supported housing while the majority of men surveyed were sleeping in night shelters. An additional explanation is that there are more low-skilled jobs available that are traditionally taken by women, such as in retail and the restaurant and hotel sector.²¹

The Portuguese report states that it is easier for women, including undocumented migrant women, to find work outside of the mainstream labour market, as many have the possibility of being employed in private households. Despite precarious employment conditions and a high vulnerability to exploitation, this has helped some women to escape from a life on the streets. Women, in particular women suffering from drug addiction, are also more likely to work as sex workers in order to ensure an income.²²

Barriers to employment of people who are homeless

Long-term unemployment, social benefits dependency and work in the informal economy contribute to the disempowerment and disengagement of people who are homeless. There is evidence that many people who are homeless have difficulties to actively seek work in the mainstream labour market, i.e. to write applications or to register with the employment office for example.

While for some people access to housing is the most important barrier to finding and sustaining a job, the majority of people experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to work and employment.²³

Lack of job opportunities: In almost all European countries changes in the labour market have made it more difficult for people with multiple needs to access employment. An important factor is the transition of industrial economies in need of a large number of workers, including low-skilled workers, to knowledge-based societies, where more jobs are created for high-skilled workers.

Even in countries with economic growth rates and high levels of employment, there are often less job opportunities for people who are homeless. Where jobs exist, for example, in the construction sector, they are often taken by higher-skilled migrant workers.

Personal barriers: Personal barriers directly relate to the life experience of each individual and include family related problems, debt problems, problems relating to physical appearance as well as the lack of core life-skills. Personal barriers are closely linked to and reinforced through structural and societal barriers, such as lack of adequate and affordable housing and stigmatisation.

Housing barriers: Without access to some form of housing stability it is almost impossible for people who are homeless to engage in education, training or employment. In most countries there is a lack of affordable housing in the private rental market as well as the lack of social housing that is accessible for people experiencing homelessness.

²¹ National Report: Luxembourg, 4.

²² National Report: Portugal, 5

²³ The multiple barriers to employment for people who are homeless are discussed in detail in the FEANTSA European Report 2007.



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For homeless people who are working, securing adequate and affordable accommodation is often a major challenge in order to sustain employment.

Health barriers: People who are homeless often suffer from an accumulation of health problems, ranging across mental health problems, substance abuse, general physical health problems and dental problems which affect their chances to participate in training or to gain employment.

Barriers related to education: Homeless people often have lower levels of education than the general population. They also tend to be over represented amongst people who lack basic skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Stigmatisation and discrimination: Many people experiencing homelessness are regularly confronted with discrimination and stigmatisation related to their living situation which can considerably reduce their chances of being considered for job vacancies.

Bureaucratic and financial barriers: In some countries, poorly structured welfare benefits which make it financially unattractive to seek employment are one of most important barriers to people finding a job in the mainstream labour market.

Barriers related to services: The lack or inadequacy of services (e.g. short opening hours of hostels and canteens which make it impossible for residents to do night shifts or the lack of a study room) can constitute a barrier for people who are homeless to actively seek employment or to engage in training and education. The lack of services affect in particular people experiencing homelessness and living in rural and more remote areas outside of city centres.

Barriers related to access to information: People who are homeless have difficulties accessing information about relevant training and job opportunities, due to limited access to employment services, Internet and telephone as well as their difficulties to use these tools with a view to searching for a job.

Gender specific barriers: The experience of domestic violence and the lack of childcare services are barriers that particularly affect women who are homeless.

Barriers for migrants who are homeless: For migrants who are homeless, their precarious legal status is often the most important barrier to find a job in the mainstream labour market.

This list of barriers to employment for people who are homeless is not exhaustive. What it indicates, however, is that for many people it is rather the accumulation of barriers that is the biggest hurdle than each of the barriers as such.

The lack of effective employment policies for homeless people

Employment policies for disadvantaged people exist in all member states. Usually these do not specifically target people experiencing homelessness but refer to groups of people such as people who are long-term unemployed or people with disabilities.

Many of the policies therefore fail to reach out to people experiencing homelessness; firstly, because they do not take into account barriers that are specific to the experience of homelessness, namely the



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absence of a home and secondly, because they do not provide a holistic support framework that caters for the multiple needs of a large proportion of homeless people.

In addition, the understanding of employment that underpin these policies may make it difficult for people experiencing homelessness to participate in activation measures for disadvantaged groups. Employment initiatives for disadvantaged groups in most countries focus on bringing people into a full-time job in the mainstream labour market.

The mainstream labour market may indeed be a realistic option for some people experiencing homelessness. These people are usually better qualified than others and do not need a wide range of support in order to find their way back into working life.

However, most people who are homeless have multiple needs and are not – or not yet – in a position to take up a job in the mainstream labour market. Instead, they require employment arrangements and trainings that are tailored to their individual needs and aspirations and thus more flexible in relation to working time, working environment, personal support etc.

While in many countries, at least some forms of these employment opportunities exist for people who are homeless, the different services are usually not part of overall employment policies for disadvantaged groups. They are also not spread throughout the whole country and very much depend on the initiatives of single homeless organisations.

In order to make employment policies effective for people who are homeless, they need to be based on a broader understanding of employment. Employment for people who are homeless is therefore closely connected with occupational initiatives that aim to improve the employability of people, i.e. the skills and competencies of a person, and help the individual to connect with the labour market.

The difference regarding the understanding of employment is very important. While a narrow understanding of employment will lead to measures that purely focus on the mainstream labour market, an employability approach adapts measures to the specific needs and aspirations of a person and is therefore more likely to provide a sustainable solution for the person.

Some countries have started recognising the need to develop employment policies for those categories who are the furthest away from the labour market and face multiple barriers to work. In addition, more countries and local authorities are integrating an employment dimension into their homelessness strategies.

The Irish homelessness strategy, for example, includes a strand that deals with work education and training. Three specific actions are defined:

- the assessment of skills and training needs of people who are homeless,
 - the integration of literacy skills in forms of vocational training provided by the National Training and Employment Organisation (FAS),
- the provision of outreach tutors.²⁴

In the UK, the national homelessness strategies in England and in Scotland make some reference to the importance of training, education and employment.²⁵

²⁴ National Report: Ireland, 13.

²⁵ National Report: United Kingdom, 12.



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Employment services for people who are homeless

Despite the lack of an explicit policy framework for the employment of people with multiple needs, in most member states some form of specific employment services for people who are homeless exist. These range from advice and job search assistance, life skills and vocational training to supported employment and in-work support.

Advice and counselling

Most homeless organisations provide at least some form of advice and counselling for people to find work or access training. Employment services that are widespread include access to Internet, assistance with CV writing and access to telephone and help to make phone calls.

In addition, many organisations provide information regarding vacancies and training opportunities that are likely to be of interest for people who are homeless, practice of interview skills, and help to set up a bank account.

In a number of countries, homeless organisations closely work together with mainstream employment services in order to help their residents to gain employment or access training and education. In some countries special job centres for people experiencing homelessness have been established:

In England, for example, the homeless charity St. Mungo's has provided a job club to its residents since 1991 and reports that this has been an effective way to help people who are homeless to find work.²⁶

In Hungary, the Shelter Foundation in Budapest and BMSZKI in cooperation with the employment office established two job centres for people experiencing homelessness. The staff consists of specially trained social workers. The job centre offers specific job search, individual counselling and job search trainings for people who are homeless. In addition, the job centre tries to establish contacts with potential employers and has close links with related support services in the area of housing, employment and addiction.²⁷

Vocational Training

Vocational training aims to support a person to develop essential job skills that will help the individual to find a paid job in the mainstream labour market or in the social economy. Vocational training may include: CV writing, personal development, IT training, office administration and more specialised vocational trainings. Education in this context often refers to basic skills training, such as literary and numeracy.

One can distinguish between general programmes for disadvantaged groups and special initiatives for people experiencing homelessness. While the general programmes usually take place outside of the homeless services, the specialised programmes often constitute an integral part of service provision of homeless organisations.

²⁶ National Report: United Kingdom, 21.

²⁷ National Report: Hungary, 15.



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In most countries, vocational training and education constitute an important part of the available support for people experiencing homelessness to move closer to employment.

In Ireland, for example, a variety of training and education initiatives are provided by different homeless organisations and agencies. These include:

- The Spokes programme run by Focus Ireland which provides accredited training programmes in IT, photography, maths, preparation to work and childcare. There are also one-to-one classes focusing on Computers, maths and English.
- Two stand-alone initiatives of Cork Simon Community: The Parks and Gardens Work Scheme, which offers a wide range of certified trainings, including Amenity Horticulture and Meitheal Mara, a cooperation with a community maritime boat building organisation.²⁸

Supported employment in the social economy

In a number of countries, it is traditionally the social economy sector which offers supported employment schemes to disadvantaged groups, including for people experiencing homelessness. For some, employment in this sector can be a stepping stone into the mainstream labour market. In these cases, the social economy serves as a transitional labour market. The supportive environment of a social enterprise allows people to develop their skills and competencies and gain the necessary self-confidence and work experience that will allow them to move on into jobs in the mainstream labour market.

Evidence from several European countries shows, however, that there are also limits to the social economy as an employer for people who are homeless. Many social economy employers tend to choose and stick to those who have the least problems among the people furthest away from the labour market in order to fulfil obligations linked to their funding. If social enterprises employ people with multiple needs it is more difficult to comply with criteria such as an increase in productivity of the workers, for instance.

People who are homeless may also have difficulties in qualifying for employment in the social economy. In Italy, for example, people who are homeless have problems to access supported employment in so-called type B social cooperatives. In order to qualify as a disadvantaged worker, the person needs to have a certificate of their “disadvantage”. In most cases these certificates are accredited by the health services while the social services only rarely certify a “social disadvantage”. A particular group who are at risk of being excluded from supported employment in Italy are also ex-prisoners. While many prisoners are working during their custody, they lose their right to benefit from supported employment schemes for people with disadvantages on their release, which is precisely one of the most vulnerable points during their inclusion process.²⁹

In addition, there is also the risk that people experiencing homelessness are “blocked” in the social economy. There are people who have the skills and competencies to find work in the mainstream labour market but their potential is not always seen by the responsible social workers.

²⁸ National Report: Ireland, 18.

²⁹ National Report: Italy, 16.



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In Belgium, a cost-benefit analysis of the social economy in Flanders has shown that while in the medium-term supported employment has had a very positive effect on the people, there is some evidence that in the long term people are at risk of becoming homeless again.³⁰

It becomes clear that social economy will only be able to play its role for the employment of people who are homeless, if access criteria are revised. In addition, incitements for employers should be created to actually target those who have the most difficulties to engage in training or employment. For people who are not likely to find their way back into the mainstream labour market again, the social economy should also be able to provide long-term supported employment solutions. At the same time employers should be encouraged to promote the transition into the mainstream labour market for those people who are ready to do so.

Another element to strengthen the role of the social economy in the area of supported employment is to make sure that qualitative indicators are used to measure the outcomes of schemes. Many evaluations still focus on hard outcomes such as the number of people who have moved on into the mainstream labour market. These should be complemented by indicators that are mindful to the overall situation of an individual and therefore also take improvements regarding the health or housing situation of a person into account.

Flexible work arrangements for people with multiple needs should also not be left alone to the responsibility of the social economy. There is evidence from several countries that also private companies are interested in employing people who are homeless or who have experienced homelessness.

Supported employment in the mainstream labour market

In most countries supported employment schemes also include job placements in the mainstream labour market. A large part of these schemes target people with disabilities. The employer receives financial support to adapt the workplace to the special needs of the person. In addition, (parts of) the salary is paid by a third party, in most cases public authorities. People experiencing homelessness can benefit from these job placements if they qualify as mentally or physically disabled.

Moreover, in some countries specific programmes for people experiencing homelessness organise job placements in the mainstream labour market.

One example is the Ready for Work programme in Ireland. Since 2002, people who are homeless can follow two days of training and a two-week placement within a company. This is followed by a period of ongoing support.³¹

A similar scheme in Wales is provided through the programme Business Action on Homelessness. It is running in Cardiff and includes 2-week work placements for people who are homeless as well as job coaching.³²

In-work support

³⁰ National Report: Belgium (Flanders), 16- 17.

³¹ National Report: Ireland, 21.

³² National Report: United Kingdom, 16.



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Supported employment helps to facilitate the transition to a job in the mainstream labour market. Evidence from the different European countries has shown that this step is a particularly difficult one. People tend to lose their employment after a short period of time.

To avoid high drop-out rates, in-work support is a crucial support service. It means that a person receives ongoing personalised support. This support can include help to open a bank account or to organise the transport to and from the new working place or just the security to know that there is someone to talk to in case problems emerge.

Despite its crucial role for sustaining employment, in-work support is an underdeveloped service in most EU countries. Homeless organisations report that they have difficulties to find funding for these kinds of services and often lose contact with their clients once these have progressed to mainstream employment.

Life-skills training and meaningful occupation

Another area of services which remains underdeveloped in many EU countries are low threshold services such as life skills training and meaningful occupation.

Life skills describe the knowledge, experience and skills necessary to live independently. Life-skills training aims to equip people with necessary skills to function in society, to keep a tenancy or a job. One can distinguish three broad categories of life skills:

- Core or basic skills (e.g. numeracy, literacy and information technology);
- Independent living skills (e.g. managing a household, budgeting, appointment keeping and contacting services) and;
- Social skills (e.g. inter-personal skills, avoiding and/or dealing with neighbour disputes, and developing social networks).³³

Although the main aim of life skills training is not to improve the employability of a person, it is clear that good life skills will also be important soft skills for employment.

Life-skills training is often a prerequisite before a person can participate in ongoing training, education or supported employment. Life-skills training is particularly important for the most vulnerable groups of people, including people with long term experience of street homelessness.

Meaningful occupation is closely related to life skills training. Meaningful occupation helps a person to move away from a homeless lifestyle and to rejoin the wider community through finding something purposeful to do. Although some people participating in meaningful occupation might receive a financial compensation, the main aims of these activities are.

- Building self-esteem;
- Developing skills; and
- Reconnecting people into social networks away from the streets.

Another important issue is preventing the boredom that may lead people to turn back to the streets, or to alcohol or drugs. Meaningful occupation may constitute an important step on a person's pathway into employment. In addition, it is also a longer-term solution for people that have no or little chances to reintegrate into paid employment in the mainstream labour market or in the social economy.

³³ Scottish Homes: Life Skills Training for Homeless People – A Review of the Evidence, 2001.



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Several small projects from the Netherlands may serve as an example. In Amsterdam, people who are homeless can work in furniture recycling or a clothing and music project. In Helmond, service users can work in a biological garden, in a social restaurant, a bicycle repair shop, arts and crafts workshop etc.³⁴

In Ireland, the Dun Laoghaire Step Up Project provides a range of courses for homeless adults, including Cookery, Positive Thinking and Motivation, Literacy and Computer Skills. A summer programme has been recently launched delivering 'softer' courses such as reflexology and music skills.³⁵

The importance of a holistic and individualised support framework

The overview about employment services for people who are homeless makes it clear that this group require a variety of training, education and employment opportunities that are adapted to their individual needs and aspirations and that allow people to make progress on their own pace.

In addition, a holistic and individualised support framework in areas that are closely related to employment is needed in order to create an effective inclusion pathway for this group.

This support framework should offer support in a range of areas, including:

Housing support: People who are homeless need help to access adequate and affordable housing. In addition, some people may require ongoing support to keep a tenancy.

Health and psychological support: Many people experiencing homelessness suffer from mental health problems, alcohol or substance abuse and/or an overall bad health situation. They need access to adequate treatment as well as the possibility to participate in rehabilitation programmes and therapies.

Counselling: People who are homeless often need support to deal with mainstream social and employment services and to apply for social or unemployment benefits. In addition, people experiencing homelessness might require debt counselling, assistance to set up a bank account or to register an address.

Emotional/motivational support: Homelessness is an extreme and very stressful experience that affects and destabilises the whole life of a person. Homelessness often results in the social isolation of a person and affects the person's self-confidence. Emotional support such as buddying or mentoring schemes can help a person to establish new social contacts and to regain motivation and a positive self-image.

Although not all people will require support in all areas, many will need support in at least two or three of them. In order to ensure that the support is adapted to the person, an initial as well as ongoing assessment of the needs and aspirations of an individual is crucial. This needs assessment helps to develop a personalised action plan that is realistic and that the person can identify with.

The importance of effective cooperation and funding

³⁴ National Report: The Netherlands, 6.

³⁵ National Report: Ireland, 19.



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The FEANTSA European Report 2007 shows that the provision of an individualised and holistic support framework will require improved cooperation between the different stakeholders and in particular between employment offices and homeless organisations. In many countries, these forms of cooperation do not exist or are very underdeveloped.

Another major challenge cited in many reports is the lack of funding for employability services which are adapted to people who are homeless.

The inclusion process of a person experiencing homelessness may require several years. Homelessness is an extreme experience for the individual and not every attempt to move out of it will be an immediate success. In order to ensure adequate and professional support that goes beyond emergency services for this vulnerable group, funding needs to be adequate, stable and secure for several years.

Another problem is that donors do not necessarily recognise people experiencing homelessness as a target group for employability initiatives. Many services are not adapted to the multiple needs, including housing needs, of people who are homeless, which results in their de-facto exclusion from participation.

A quotation from the UK national report illustrates the funding challenges many organisations face: "It is intensively frustrating that these types of services that tick so many boxes of the government's agenda of social inclusion are continuously fighting for survival. They should not have to compete with mainstream education and employment advice providers but should be appropriately supported for the specialised provision they are and resourced accordingly."³⁶

The added-value of the European Union

Policy makers at national and local level have the main responsibility for promoting the inclusion of people who are homeless into and through employment. It is at these levels that employment policies and homeless strategies are designed and funded and that services to people who are homeless are delivered.

What is more, national and local policy makers have the main responsibility to tackle the structural causes of homelessness and unemployment, such as the lack of employment opportunities for low-skilled workers and the lack of adequate and affordable housing.

Nevertheless, the European level can also play an important role in supporting efforts at national and local level.

European Social Fund and Equal

One important tool is the European Social Fund. The European Social Fund is one of the European Structural Funds and devoted to promoting employment in the EU. In a number of EU countries at least parts of the ESF are used to fund employment services for people with multiple needs, such as people who are homeless.

The funding of the ESF is spread across the Member States and regions and in particular those areas where economic development is less advanced. Over the period 2007-2013 some €75 billion will be distributed to the EU Member States and regions to achieve its goals.

³⁶ Quotation from National Report: United Kingdom, 26.



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Another important initiative at European level has been the Community initiative Equal. Equal has been very successful in testing and exchanging innovative approaches to helping vulnerable groups to access employment. The success was partly related to the relatively flexible framework and funding that Equal provided and which allowed organisations to test and adapt their approaches to the changing needs of clients.

Despite their positive results, all Equal projects will end during the course of 2008. Instead, Member States are asked to mainstream the principles of Equal, such as transnationality and innovation, in the European Social Fund. There is evidence that not all countries followed through on this recommendation. Many organisations are therefore requesting a renewal of Equal or similar funding initiatives from the European Union. It seems unlikely, however, that this will happen in the near future.

A framework for the exchange of effective practices

What is more, European employment and social inclusion policies can constitute an effective framework for mutual learning amongst the different countries. This does not necessarily mean that member states will have to harmonise their policies. Softer policy making methods like the Open Method of Coordination allow member states to compare and analyse their different policies and exchange effective practices.

In this context, FEANTSA will build upon the findings of its Annual Theme 2007 and look into possibilities to develop a European employability and homelessness forum. This forum will aim to bring together homeless organisations, employers in and outside the social economy, trade unions as well as other relevant stakeholders for the employment of people experiencing homelessness. A central web page on the FEANTSA website will serve as a virtual meeting point for this forum.

A first step will be to establish a database with information about existing practices and information resources concerning the employment of people who are homeless across the European Union. More information about the employability and homelessness forum is available on www.feantsa.org.

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