



European Commission Synthesis Report on the JIMs *FEANTSA Reaction*

The Synthesis Report is an important instrument in the implementation of the EU strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion and should provide a strong position on behalf of the European Commission regarding the social inclusion policies presented by the new Member States. We believe the European Commission must play an important role in the identification of weak areas in the social inclusion policies of Member States and in the formulation of recommendations in order to strengthen them. However, the timing of the Synthesis Report on the Joint Inclusion Memoranda is unfortunate given that it was made available only 3 weeks before the deadline for submitting the NAPs Social Inclusion, which did not allow for effective integration of the recommendations made by the European Commission on the JIMs.

Housing exclusion and homelessness in the Enlarged EU: Taking stock

Homelessness and severe housing exclusion are important problems in **all** EU Member States. In several countries the problem of homelessness is growing and/or aggravating (e.g. growing number of homeless single mothers). In most of the new EU Member States homelessness and severe housing exclusion are relatively *new* phenomena, but the problems are of a much more serious scope and nature. With enlargement the EU has *imported* problems such as high numbers of rough sleepers and relatively unknown problems such as street children. The housing policies are often totally inadequate to address the problems of homelessness and severe housing exclusion. We believe that most of the new Member States will not be able to effectively address these problems without the support (both in terms of policy advice and financial support) of the EU.

We believe that with the enlargement of the EU, it is no longer possible to ignore the issues of homelessness and severe housing exclusion in the framework of the EU strategy and in particular the NAPsIncl.

The three aims of the JIM Synthesis Report

1. To highlight issues that need to be taken more into account in the further development of the EU social inclusion policy

Facilitate access by all to resources, rights, goods and services: Access to decent housing

FEANTSA is pleased to note that, among the main challenges the new Member States face to combat poverty and social exclusion, the Commission has highlighted the urgent need to develop adequate policies to improve access to decent housing, and the need for “well-defined nation-

wide housing strategies” in those new Member States which do not yet have such a strategy. Home ownership is generally high in most of the new Member States - even the poorest families are sometimes homeowners. However, the quality of housing is very poor and deteriorating rapidly due to bad maintenance. Indeed as a result of the high housing maintenance costs, large sectors of the population are now considered at risk of becoming homeless. The bad quality of housing in some of these countries can have potentially damaging effects on the education and health of children and adults living in such conditions. The issue of social housing appears to be urgent in most countries with long waiting lists contributing to the increasing numbers of homeless people.¹ FEANTSA cannot emphasise enough the urgent need to take action in this area.

Helping the most vulnerable: Homelessness

In the Synthesis Report, **the most excluded of excluded groups** - the homeless - does not figure as one of the main categories of priority vulnerable groups. This is a worrying trend. There are generally very few integrated homeless strategies referred to in the JIMs. The European Commission should bring this serious shortcoming to the attention of the new Member States and encourage them to draw up integrated strategies for this excluded group.

As the JIM synthesis report states, “it is generally recognized that there is a need to develop much more coordinated and integrated services for homeless people including a significant increase in rehabilitation services and more recognition of the particular needs of different groups of homeless, such as women and young people.”

FEANTSA agrees with this statement, but would stress the need to focus also on the prevention of homelessness (according to the common objectives of the Strategy), especially as such policies would be extremely timely. Homeless services in the new Member States are generally emergency social services and reintegration services, rather than prevention services - it is crucial at this stage to implement policies to prevent the homeless population from increasing, for instance by preventing the high number of orphans and street children from becoming homeless adults.

From our work with organisations in the new Member States, it can be said that governments and organisations are both keen to develop prevention strategies to avoid an increasing homeless population. In the new Member States, there are key areas in which well-timed and well-delivered prevention policies could make a dramatic impact. For example, the huge housing crisis in the new Member States means that a very large group of people are at risk of becoming homeless, therefore exchange of good practices on preventive strategies between the EU25 Member States could contribute to preventing an increase of the homeless population in the future.

2. “To provide a basis for promoting exchange and learning between all 25 Member States”

The report indeed provides an overview of policies in the new Member States. The Report refers to the current housing situation in the new Member States, and highlights some good housing policies. However, integrated and focused housing strategies are missing in several Member States, and integrated strategies for combating homelessness are clearly missing in most countries.

If the new Member States are to catch up with the situation in the current EU15, it is essential to widen the housing and homelessness chapter within the social inclusion strategy for it to have

¹ See FEANTSA National Mapping Reports from the new Member States

<http://feantsa.horus.be/code/en/pg.asp?Page=48>

See FEANTSA reaction report on the Joint Inclusion Memoranda

any effect at all at national, regional and local levels. Indeed, the strength of the Open Method of Coordination is to exchange and compare ideas on policies and practices – in order to carry this out, **the policies need to be developed and concrete enough to serve as examples of good practice.**

The common objectives remain quite general. This is positive since it enables Member States to adapt the objectives to their national situations and institutions. However, it also allows for considerable freedom of interpretation to ignore some pressing problems which will not have major electoral implications (homelessness is typically one of these). Consequently there is uneven focus on different vulnerable populations – namely the homeless. More targeted guidelines towards specific vulnerable groups like the homeless would ensure better policy measures and policy solutions. It is important to take into consideration the special situation of each group – a homeless strategy needs to deal with lack of housing, bad health conditions, alcohol addiction, long-term unemployment, professional unfitness to join the mainstream labour market, and other such situations related to homelessness.

3. To assist the new Member States in the further development of their social inclusion policies and the preparation of their first National Action Plan on poverty and social exclusion

The Synthesis Report could have been an extremely useful document for the development of policies in the first NAPs Inclusion of the new Member States, if the Report had been available earlier. FEANTSA relies on the Commission as evaluator of the content of the JIMs and NAPs. The Commission must make sure that the Member States respect the common objectives of the Strategy. In the new Member States, the most pressing problems should be tackled first – homelessness and housing exclusion are without a doubt two of the most pressing problems. As evaluator of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy, the Commission should support the development of monitoring tools. Effective **data collection systems** in the area of homelessness, as outlined in the Synthesis Report, should be developed through partnerships between public authorities (national, regional and local level) and NGOs. It is important to assign clear responsibilities in this area. Involvement of NGOs and local authorities in the EU Strategy could be an effective way of collecting data on different vulnerable groups and contribute to providing concrete solutions to concrete problems.

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