



FEANTSA

Joint Inclusion Memoranda

FEANTSA Reaction Report

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¹ National Action Plans on Social Inclusion

Introduction

The aim of the Joint Inclusion Memoranda (JIM) is to prepare Accession Countries for full participation in the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy by identifying the principal challenges in relation to tackling poverty and exclusion. As well as a means for Accession Countries to start translating the Common Objectives into their national policies, the JIM was a means of mobilising all stakeholders active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion – national, regional and local authorities, social partners, NGOs and academics. The fight against homelessness should be an integral part of the EU Strategy. Two common objectives are of particular relevance: access to housing and the prevention of homelessness. Combating homelessness is especially a challenge for the Accession Countries since the scope and nature of the phenomenon are quite different to the current situation in EU15.

In Accession Countries, the role of the voluntary sector² is more important compared to EU 15 countries since public authorities do not always have a clear and official role in the field of homelessness. Services provided by NGOs tend to compensate for the lack of commitment from public authorities. NGOs working in the field of homelessness, the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion, are therefore crucial actors since they have the best practical experience in working closely with service users.

Given the fundamental role of NGOs in promoting social inclusion, FEANTSA has consulted its member organisations on the JIM process and its relevance for combating homelessness. This NGO/service provider perspective on the JIM process brings certain issues to the fore. The feedback used to prepare this Reaction Report has come directly from Accession Country NGOs working with the homeless and should offer useful input for the debate on the possible impact of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy in the New Member States.

FEANTSA Members have reacted on:

1. The involvement of NGOs in the preparation of the JIMs
2. The importance of the JIM/NAPs for their organisations
3. The quality of the JIM concerning housing and homelessness

² Voluntary sector: NGOs, Charities, etc, with paid and non-paid staff.

I. Involvement of NGOs in the preparation of the JIMs

Consultation methods

In most cases, national ministries made use of the knowledge and expertise of NGOs in poverty and exclusion.

In Estonia, consultation took place within the usual structures without setting up any specific bodies since the JIM process was strongly linked with the preparation of application for aid from the Structural funds – challenges and policy responses were discussed in different thematic working groups led by the Ministry of Social Affairs and involving relevant actors, including NGOs.

In the Czech Republic, a special preparation group of 41 members brought together a wide range of actors including a representative of NGO social service providers (Caritas), one from an NGO providing humanitarian aid abroad (“Člověk v tísní” – “People in need”), one from NROS (Phare implementation agency for NGOs), one representative from the Association of Regional Authorities, one representative of the Association of Local authorities (“sdružení měst a obcí”), a representative of the Economic chamber, and other civil servants from other ministries. The relevance of the organisation “People in need” is questionable since they mainly work on projects abroad. Moreover, this group met only once to draft the JIM – this raises questions as to the *quality* of the consultation and the real impact of the stakeholders on the content of the JIM.

In other countries the drafting of the JIM was not as transparent – this was the case in Lithuania where the biggest organisation for social services in combating poverty, Caritas Lithuania, was not informed and involved in preparing the JIM.

Involvement of the homeless sector

In Poland, a consultation body of 32 people was set up, including 11 from NGOs. The “Barka Foundation”, an important homeless NGO, was among the group members. In Hungary, no NGO homeless *service providers* were consulted. However, the *umbrella* organisation “Hajszolt” (working on homelessness issues) was involved in the drafting meeting of the JIM, and homelessness experts from the Ministry of Health, Social and Family Affairs were also present. Even the voices of homeless *service users* were indirectly represented in Estonia through the interviews carried out by NGOs within the framework of the national “Access to housing for vulnerable groups” project.

By contrast, key NGO homeless *service providers* were absent from the JIM process in the Czech Republic and in Latvia. In both cases the wide range of actors in the JIM preparation group did not include any of the key homeless *service providers*.

Future: consultation for the NAPs

Many representatives of the homeless NGO sector in the Accession Countries believe a number of lessons can be learned from the preparation of the JIM, which will be useful in the preparation of the upcoming NAPIncl after accession in 2004. The Open Method of Coordination of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy is new to many NGOs and is gradually developing.

In Hungary, the JIM is considered a good learning experience which has encouraged the homeless NGO sector to be more active.

In Latvia, the NGOs “So Sic Taka” and “So Gaisma Cela” (homeless NGOs which were not involved in the JIM process) contacted the relevant Ministry and have been invited to participate in the working groups for the NAPs.

In Estonia, the JIM process has demonstrated the need for greater involvement of local authorities, and local actors in general, to ensure effective implementation of the policy measures outlined in the NAP.

II. Importance of the JIM/NAPs for NGOs

New initiatives

The Joint Inclusion Memorandum is perceived by some as a document which has positively promoted new strategies. Although the JIMs do not all provide concrete measures to combat homelessness, in some countries the completion of this document has contributed to the first steps of a common strategy for the fight against homelessness. It has been a driving force for bringing together the key actors (NGOs, governmental organisations, etc) in the field to think together and commit themselves to tackle homelessness. The complex and multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion (including homelessness) requires the adoption of an integrated approach, combining a wide range of policies in several domains. The JIMs should be an opportunity to reinforce co-ordination mechanisms in Accession Countries so as to improve synergies between different strands of policy. Indeed, the JIM process highlighted the need to mainstream the issue of poverty and exclusion in other policy domains than just those within the competence of the Ministry of Social Affairs (housing, education, health, etc).

Lack of information on the JIM process

There has been a general lack of information on the JIM process among NGOs, for various reasons.

In some cases, NGO service providers were completely unaware of the process. In Latvia, “So Sic Taka” visited almost all Latvian shelters, learned about the institutions and met their staff. They had informal discussions about the work and cooperation with municipalities as well as NGOs. When reference was made to the JIM, many shelter directors were unable to answer as they had not been informed about this document, even less read it or took part in the process of making the guidelines. In a country like Latvia, where national networking between homeless NGOs is weak, the views of local NGOs are all the more important.

In some cases, NGOs wished to participate but were not consulted for preparation of the JIMs. Some simply did not have access to the technology (internet/email) to participate in the consultation. Some local NGOs situated outside capital cities have less contact and less financial means than other NGOs based in the capital cities.

In other cases, NGOs were aware of the JIM process but had more immediate priorities with local level service provision - either they were unaware of the importance of the JIM or they simply could not afford to focus fully on the process due to staff shortages.

It is widely believed this EU process will be more relevant to the work of NGO service providers and motivate them to contribute to the drafting process more actively, if governments manage to implement what is included in the JIM/NAP.

Lack of implementation

The JIM/NAP can become a relevant policy tool, but only if measures are in place to monitor implementation at local and regional levels, since responsibilities in this area have been largely decentralised in Accession Countries.

There is a general feeling that the policy measures outlined in the JIMs are not implemented. Indeed, the very non-binding nature of the JIMs means that the policies proposed will not necessarily be enforced. Therefore, without the involvement of local service providers like municipalities and NGOs, the JIM will remain an empty exercise. NGOs and local authorities (and even the Church) are mentioned throughout all JIMs as the main bodies responsible for service provision – involvement of both in the preparation and implementation of the future NAP is therefore only logical. Moreover, it is important to involve local authorities to encourage them to provide the financial and human resources to implement policies (with the support of national authorities). From an NGO perspective, local authorities are generally the main partners in service provision, therefore a process which does not involve them is of little interest to NGO services providers. This is the case in countries like Poland where homeless NGOs work in local partnership within the “Gminas” (local administrative areas). The relevance of the JIMs will increase for Polish service providers if actors at “Gmina” level are fully represented in the process, which is not the case at the moment.

The less local actors are involved, the less scope there is to provide concrete solutions in the JIM document. This is another criticism of the JIM and its limited effect on the fight against homelessness, and even poverty and exclusion in general. It tends to highlight the problems of homelessness and housing without offering concrete solutions for the problems, which calls into question the Open Method of Coordination as an effective method of tackling poverty.

The general policy measures regarding education and employment offer preventive measures which may contribute to reducing homelessness. But such policies are not preventive measures specifically directed towards homeless populations (given the complex nature of homelessness, specific measures are needed) and fail to address the problems of currently homeless populations.

The Lithuanian JIM, for example, underlines the need to have data on the numbers of homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless, but the methods to be used are unclear.

Role of FEANTSA

FEANTSA, being an umbrella organisation, contributes to the strengthening of the open method of co-ordination and thus supports consultation and coordination between local, regional and national authorities in the fight against homelessness. Although no European country has the perfect approach to solving the problem of homelessness, transnational cooperation is essential to make the fight against homelessness more effective. Thus it is very useful to promote and facilitate this cooperation between NGOs, public authorities and other partners. FEANTSA can moreover increase the relevance of the EU Strategy against poverty and social exclusion at national, regional and local level by encouraging national ministries to provide a framework for systematic consultation of stakeholders and especially service providers like NGOs. This would ensure legitimacy and better implementation of the JIM measures. FEANTSA can play an important role as long as the content of the EU Strategy is relevant to its members i.e. if homelessness has a prominent place among the common objectives.

III. The Quality of the JIM in tackling housing and homelessness

New countries, new challenges

The failure to adapt to the transition to a market economy in these countries has greatly contributed to increasing the extent of homelessness in these countries. The number of rough sleepers in these countries is much higher than in EU15 – up to an estimated 15.000 in Hungary compared to 1850 people in England.

The size and nature of homelessness in the Accession Countries present new characteristics compared to the situation in EU15 countries.³

A new phenomenon is the increasing presence of street children – the number of orphans and abandoned children is alarmingly high.

Another difference is the extent of the Roma problem compared to EU15. The Roma population in the Accession Countries has high rates of unemployment and poverty, and the housing situation is particularly alarming in countries like Slovakia. The high number of ethnic minorities also contributes to homelessness due to cultural and linguistic factors. Lack of knowledge of the official language of the country causes problems when job searching or when dealing with registration forms for social assistance, etc (as is the case in Slovenia and the Baltic countries).

Access to healthcare for rough sleepers is problematic in Accession Countries due to lack of an ID document, and therefore lack of social insurance, which means the most excluded (who generally suffer from bad health) have little access to medical care or are simply denied access altogether.

House ownership is generally high in most Accession countries - even the poorest families are often home owners. 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 “risk groups”. The issue of social housing appears to be urgent in most countries with long waiting lists contributing to the increasing numbers of homeless people.

The housing and homelessness situation in the New Member States presents a series of new challenges – **immediate action** is needed to address these problems.

Policy Measures

❖ Employment

In some JIMs, it is recognised that homeless people often face barriers in their integration in the labour market, and the need to involve more excluded groups by special training programmes. However, very few specific measures are put forward. Employment is generally perceived as the key to social inclusion, but can only be effective if the problem of access to decent housing has been addressed in the first place.

❖ Housing

The housing policy trend in the JIMs generally focuses on the need to renovate housing, given the deteriorating quality of housing in the Accession Countries, and the need to provide more social

³ See FEANTSA National Mapping Reports <http://www.feantsa.org/enlargement/mapping.htm#research> and the recent FEANTSA report: *Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in the New Member States*

housing facilities to address and prevent further homelessness. An integrated approach is presented in the Estonian JIM. The *Housing Development Strategy for 2003-2008* prioritises three areas: subsidising renovation of apartment buildings, subsidising construction, purchase or renovation of municipal rental housing, and guaranteed loans for young families, home-owners' associations and tenants in restituted housing for purchase or renovation of dwellings.

❖ Debt prevention programmes

Most JIMs contain measures to help persons and families in need to cover the housing costs and prevent indebtedness. A positive element in the Hungarian JIM is the plan to launch "a model programme aimed at reviewing the conditions for prevention of homelessness and supporting reintegration" as well as the preparation of an "action programme for the prevention of families from becoming homeless". One of the prevention areas outlined in the JIM is indeed management of household debts and arrears. The success of the latter is expected to have a significant effect on preventing evictions.

❖ Data collection on homeless populations

The Czech JIM provides no measures for addressing homelessness in the Czech Republic. However, the document mentions the need to develop a better understanding of the extent and nature of the problem. The Lithuanian JIM highlights the need to find adequate methods of counting the number of homeless people or those who are at the risk of becoming homeless, in order to measure the extent of the phenomenon and develop appropriate services to address the situation. FEANTSA can offer its expertise in this area.

Shortcomings in the JIMs

In some cases, there is a lack of coherence between the JIM policies and existing national policies. In Hungary, the present housing policy reflects the exact opposite of the measures proposed (offering incentives for construction and for investment in construction; and the extension of support for home purchases and other social support) since the government recently drastically reduced the grantable amount of state supported bank-loans for housing.

In the Latvian JIM, the housing and homeless policy measures are very ambitious (providing more decent housing, social housing, cheaper housing, and various support programmes), but do not provide for adequate cooperation and coordination structures between different actors working in the field of homelessness.

The Polish JIM includes a flat construction programme for people in need of social assistance where Gminas will receive subsidies representing 35% of total costs for building or converting structures into overnight shelters and social flats. However, the 15 Million PLN which has been allocated till the end of 2004 is considered insufficient to ensure effective implementation of this programme.

There are generally a number of policy measures on education and employment which may contribute to *preventing* homelessness in the JIMs, but a distinct lack of measures to help the existing homeless population to reintegrate society. EU Member States cannot afford to work only on preventive schemes – prevention of homelessness alone will never result in the eradication of the problem. The population which is currently homeless will not go away and will soon require even more help if adequate measures are not taken soon. In most of the JIMs, the section on access to employment does not even mention the word "homelessness". This effectively means that homeless people are not taken into account as useful members of the open and inclusive labour market.

Proposed measures for the NAPs

The Housing dimension in the JIMs is present, but clearly needs strengthening. Housing is a crucial first step for the reintegration of all socially excluded groups since it provides the stable environment needed for service users to benefit fully from reintegration services.

The definition of homelessness should be widened in order to acknowledge the sub-groups of homelessness (see below). By identifying the different groups affected by homelessness, preventive policy measures will be more tailored to specific needs and therefore more effective.

The future NAPs should also take into account access to health services for the homeless – at present, access to healthcare is very limited and the JIM has no particular policy measures to remedy this.

The future NAPs should first place emphasis on the need to involve homeless people in the labour market, even if they are employed in the framework of “protected employment” or in “meaningful occupation”.

Clear methods should be established regarding data collection systems in order to monitor progress in this area, namely monitoring the respect of the rights of the homeless population. It is essential that lessons be learnt from the JIM process so that the future NAPsIncl show improvements on the JIMs. If the future NAPsIncl simply reproduce the content of the JIM word for word, the JIM exercise could be considered worthless.

IV. Policy Recommendations for Homelessness in the EU Strategy

The Open method of co-ordination of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy helps fix common objectives in all countries in a given policy area, and exchange information on successes and failures across the EU. This new way of working – no longer through legislation only, but through a flexible yet structured co-operation among Member States – allows for continuous incorporation of new ideas, new guidelines, new indicators through on-going policy dialogues crossing national boundaries. The EU Strategy could be a valuable policy instrument to strengthen the fight against poverty in present and future Member States of the EU. However, important changes and adjustments are necessary in order to ensure that the strategy fully addresses the precarious situation of homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless. On the basis of reactions of Member organisations in the Accession Countries, FEANTSA would like to bring a number of issues to the attention of all actors working in the field of poverty and exclusion in the framework of the EU Strategy.

More Focus

If the new Member States are to catch up with the situation in the current EU15, it is essential to widen the homeless chapter within the social inclusion strategy for it to have any effect at all at national, regional and local levels. Indeed, the strength of the Open Method of Coordination is to exchange 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 practices.

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 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.

Special nature of homelessness

Homelessness is perceived as the most extreme form of exclusion compared to other vulnerable groups. It is a phenomenon which will persist and possibly have disastrous consequences in the future if ignored. Homelessness cannot be considered a situation occurring at one particular point in time. Rather it is the culmination of a combination of factors, a chain of events – unemployment which leads to loss of income, release from prison leading to lack of housing and a job due to lack of income, family rejection due to drug or alcohol abuse, escaping domestic violence, moving to new towns for employment but failing to find work, etc. To counter such a complex problem, only a multidimensional approach is appropriate. It is important to build a path to enable progression from shelter to rehabilitation, from rehabilitation center to supported living and then to independent living. This requires cooperation between a wide range of actors which target specific homeless groups. The JIMs consider the homeless as part of the most vulnerable, but fail to focus on the particular sub-groups affected by homelessness (rough sleepers, people in shelters or temporary accommodation, people living in inadequate housing, people at risk of becoming homeless, etc). The complex nature of homelessness can only effectively be addressed in the JIMs through a specific sub-paragraph on homelessness in the third common objective on “Helping Vulnerable Groups”.⁴

Impact of stakeholder mobilisation

So far, the JIM process has been a fairly closed process where stakeholders are only *formally* involved, and where the homeless are not always represented. If the JIM cannot produce concrete solutions due to the wide range of fields of social inclusion, it can certainly serve as a framework for the exchange of ideas and bring together all the relevant actors working with, and on behalf of, socially excluded populations. Whereas the NAPs do not always offer concrete solutions, they

⁴ See Annex

can certainly prepare the ground for policy changes through the mobilisation of actors within a structured consultation framework, for instance by setting up a NAP coordination team within the relevant national ministries. The Czech Republic provides an interesting example whereby the JIM has contributed to widening the boundaries of political debate: the notion of “homelessness” in the JIM is the first time such a notion had been used in an official Czech document. The impact of systematic consultation and exchange of ideas within the EU Strategy can also help improve the political perception of vulnerable groups like the homeless by altering beliefs and expectations of certain domestic actors as well as public opinion. The impact would be even greater if local and regional governments were encouraged to draw up action plans based on the EU objectives in order to meet specific local needs.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The EU Social Inclusion Strategy does not involve legally binding methods– this would go against the soft law principles of the Open method of coordination. However, monitoring tools should still be used through effective data collection systems developed by 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 thereby contribute to providing concrete solutions to concrete problems.

Moreover, FEANTSA relies on the Commission as evaluator of the EU Strategy. The Commission must make sure that the Member States respect the common objectives of the Strategy. In Accession States the most pressing problems should be tackled first – homelessness and housing exclusion are without a doubt two of the most pressing problems.

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EU OBJECTIVES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

1. To facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services

1.1. Facilitating participation in employment

1.2.

In the context of the European employment strategy, and the implementation of the guidelines in particular:

(a) To promote access to stable and quality employment for all women and men who are capable of working, in particular:

- by putting in place, for those in the most vulnerable groups in society, pathways towards employment and by mobilising training policies to that end;
- by developing policies to promote the reconciliation of work and family life, including the issue of child- and dependent care;
- by using the opportunities for integration and employment provided by the social economy.

(b) To prevent the exclusion of people from the world of work by improving employability, through human resource management, organisation of work and life-long learning.

1.2. Facilitating access to resources, rights, goods and services for all

(a) To organise social protection systems in such a way that they help, in particular, to:

- guarantee that everyone has the resources necessary to live in accordance with human dignity;
- overcome obstacles to employment by ensuring that the take-up of employment results in increased income and by promoting employability.

(b) To implement policies which aim to provide access for all to decent and sanitary housing, as well as the basic services necessary to live normally having regard to local circumstances (electricity, water, heating etc.).

(c) To put in place policies which aim to provide access for all to healthcare appropriate to their situation, including situations of dependency.

(d) To develop, for the benefit of people at risk of exclusion, services and accompanying measures which will allow them effective access to education, justice and other public and private services, such as culture, sport and leisure.

2. To prevent the risks of exclusion

(a) To exploit fully the potential of the knowledge-based society and of new information and communication technologies and ensure that no-one is excluded, taking particular account of the needs of people with disabilities.

(b) To put in place policies which seek to prevent life crises which can lead to situations of social exclusion, such as indebtedness, exclusion from school and becoming homeless.

(c) To implement action to preserve family solidarity in all its forms.

3. To help the most vulnerable

(a) To promote the social integration of women and men at risk of facing persistent poverty, for example because they have a disability or belong to a group experiencing particular integration problems such as those affecting immigrants.

(b) To move towards the elimination of social exclusion among children and give them every opportunity for social integration.

(c) To develop comprehensive actions in favour of areas marked by exclusion.

These objectives may be pursued by incorporating them in all the other objectives and/or through specific policies or actions.

4. To mobilise all relevant bodies

(a) To promote, according to national practice, the participation and self-expression of people suffering exclusion, in particular in regard to their situation and the policies and measures affecting them.

(b) To mainstream the fight against exclusion into overall policy, in particular:

- by mobilising the public authorities at national, regional and local level, according to their respective areas of competence;
- by developing appropriate coordination procedures and structures;
- by adapting administrative and social services to the needs of people suffering exclusion and ensuring that front-line staff are sensitive to these needs.

(c) To promote dialogue and partnership between all relevant bodies, public and private, for example:

- by involving the social partners, NGOs and social service providers, according to their respective areas of competence, in the fight against the various forms of exclusion;
- by encouraging the social responsibility and active engagement of all citizens in the fight against social exclusion;
- by fostering the social responsibility of business.