

Boróka Fehér, Eszter Somogyi and Nóra Teller (2011)

Támogatott lakhatási programok kiterjesztésének és más lakástámogatásokkal való összehangolásának lehetőségei
[Supported housing programmes for homeless people: possibilities for extension and harmonisation with other housing support schemes in Hungary]

Budapest: FOGLAK project, pp.120

After a long preparation period, the EU-funded project FOGLAK (literally ‘I hold you’, with the acronym implying ‘employment and housing’) was launched in Hungary in 2008. According to its title, the aim of the project is “to support the social and labour market integration of homeless people” – more precisely, to provide homeless people with supported housing and access to labour. Up until the end of the project in mid-2011, those homeless service providers that participated in the project helped a few hundred homeless people to acquire jobs and housing with the use of allowances. In the framework of the FOGLAK project, the authors were commissioned to examine how the supported housing programmes implemented so far in the framework of the project, and operated by the mainstream homeless service provision system, could be further improved and extended to exceed the scope of the current project. In addition, the research explored how these special homeless provision programmes could be linked to national and local housing schemes that target non-homeless groups.

The report offers a broad summary of issues that are highly significant to experts and decision-makers in the field of housing and homeless policies. The authors present and analyse the main elements of national housing policies from the last twenty years, and of housing schemes at municipal level, and they describe special initiatives developed in the homeless provision system in recent years.

First, the authors deal with roofless and houseless people. As they are concerned with the margins of the housing sector, they attempt to uncover reasons for not only chronic, but also episodic homelessness, and to connect these to the homeless and housing policy framework. Based on recent housing survey data, they claim

that there are large groups living in Hungary whose physical housing conditions are basically of the same severity as those of houseless people, and who also lack the legal titles to their houses. The authors' intention is to give evidence as to why there is a need in Hungary to restructure the institutional setting of provision for homeless people that was basically established during the housing crises of the transition, to establish connections with (social) housing policy, and to support the integration of homeless people, as well as tackling new forms of homelessness that arose in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Based on documentary analysis and summarizing policy analyses of various sectors, they explore national and local housing policy developments, paying special attention to how these take the needs of marginalised groups into consideration, and to the services available to homeless persons and their families.

In the next section, they explore housing interventions specially designed for homeless people based on experience gained from involvement in the implementation of the FOGLAK project and on reviews of monitoring documents. This section of the report summarizes international best practice for the development of policy and programmes. The authors conclude by drawing on each of the analysed fields to create a set of policy recommendations for the harmonisation and extension of housing programmes for homeless people in Hungary.

Their starting point is that there are approximately 15000 homeless persons in Hungary, who come from various backgrounds and who need a variety of interventions to exit homelessness. In addition, there are 'missing figures' – those who are not included in surveys and other statistics - which means that the number of those with acute housing needs (hidden homelessness) may be a lot greater.

However, neither social policy intervention nor housing policy instruments facilitate exiting homelessness, or prevent the loss of one's home where breadwinners lose their jobs and income. Homeless housing programmes usually last for a maximum of 12 months, which means that after a year one returns to an inadequately functioning social safety net and there are no programmes offered to roofless or houseless people to facilitate entering either the private or the social rental sector, or to promote integration by any other means. The social housing sector is small and mainly targeted at the 'deserving poor', such that housing- and rent allowance schemes are inaccessible for most homeless people (title and eligibility issues stem from informal rental agreements and the lack of a registered address). Homeless people therefore remain trapped in institutional provision – if they have managed to access it. The authors emphasize that those at the margins of the housing sector can easily slip through the social safety net as debt and arrears are also not effectively tackled by mainstream service delivery. Those who lose their homes are basically forced to lodge with friends or family members and to make private rental

arrangements, which can be a very insecure situation in Hungary; it is not easy to get into transitory accommodation and there is no way to get public housing even where the need is acute due to long waiting lists and complicated allocation systems. Many homeless people therefore return to homeless institutions after having spent some months or years in mainstream housing – mostly privately rented accommodation.

The authors present a critical review of institutions for homeless people, claiming that despite a twenty-year history, the Hungarian homeless provision system is still not able to handle anything more than the most acute situations. It functions within the framework of a 'staircase' model which, as has become clear in recent years, does not seem to be working for various reasons: rough sleepers are often unable to access shelters, fee-paying transitory accommodation is not popular as it does not offer any better services than free shelters, and it is all but impossible for people with a history of homelessness to enter the regular housing market as the 'highest stairs' are missing.

The authors point out that after 1990 national housing policy in Hungary was targeted almost exclusively at owner-occupation and new private housing construction. Only small-scale and ultimately unsuccessful measures were made to strengthen and increase the rental sector. Most national resources (60-70%) went to support the middle-classes in acquiring owner-occupied housing, while low-income and poor families were unable to gain access to national housing schemes. A similar conclusion is drawn in relation to the housing allowance scheme introduced in 2003; this scheme does not reach out to the poorest families, and subsidies are insufficient to prevent the accumulation of arrears and the loss of housing.

A debt management scheme for housing-related costs was introduced parallel to the housing allowance scheme, and it was aimed at helping families with rent and utility debts. This scheme is also criticised for being on too small a scale and not reaching out to low-income households. The authors argue that none of the housing support schemes reach homeless people or in any way contribute to the reintegration of homeless people to the housing market. However, the authors do not discuss how the deficiencies of national schemes affect the process of becoming homeless. They could also have dedicated more attention to an analysis of how mainstream housing policies affect those belonging to ETHOS homeless categories other than rough sleepers and houseless people.

The authors historical overview of the development of national housing schemes also fails to explain that the timing of the launch of housing and homeless schemes significantly influenced the appearance of large-scale homelessness. The housing schemes described by the authors were launched 10-15 years after large-scale housing problems had evolved; because of the lack of housing subsidies during

these 10-15 years, families accumulated debts on a large scale as they were unable to pay their housing costs, and many of them therefore lost their homes and became long-term homeless.

In Hungary, municipalities have a decisive role in the allocation of municipal (public) rental housing. In the 1990s the public rental sector was privatised at a forced pace as the Housing Law gave sitting tenants right-to-buy options. The number of public rental units decreased from 720 000 to 140 000, which at only 2-3% of the total housing sector is the lowest proportion in Europe. The authors do not point out that housing privatisation has effectively resulted in people becoming homeless. Nor do they elaborate on the increasing risk of becoming homeless because of privatisation. They do, however, draw attention to the fact that the very small public rental sector drastically decreases the potential of municipal social housing policies; none of the 16 city municipalities examined has a local housing policy or housing strategy, and this is also true for other municipalities. Analysis of the housing management practices of the examined municipalities shows that these exclude poorer and lower income households rather than letting them enter the local public rental sector.

The capital city of Budapest has a special position in its role as a provider of social housing. The 23 district governments and the Budapest local government, as the 24th independent local administration, manage their housing independently; as Budapest is the only local government that has adopted a housing and homelessness strategy in the last 10 years or more, it would have been useful for the authors to say more about this strategy and to address it through critical analysis and evaluation.

Rough sleepers and those who live in institutions for homeless people are either completely excluded from, or have severely limited access to government and/or local level housing benefits and housing services. This is a paradoxical situation, as it is these people in particular that should be assisted by such housing schemes. For this reason, it was perceived as a major development by professionals active in the field when, a couple of years ago through the reduction of the crisis intervention budget (for food, medication, therapy, etc.), unprecedented new resources became available to assist the 'housing and integration' of homeless persons. The research deals with the operation and effect of this new scheme in detail and points to its several drawbacks. One of the major challenges, as the authors point out, is that if a homeless person exits homelessness via this scheme and moves to assisted housing (whereby he or she receives a housing allowance and floating support), assistance will not be continued either by mainstream social services or by any housing support schemes after participation in the scheme ends. As a result, the integration process is interrupted and the formerly homeless people either have to arrange housing themselves, or become homeless again.

In the Hungarian context, that homeless service provision is poor on the whole is the straightforward consequence of the lack of social housing policy, or rather the lack of social aspects of housing policy. The Hungarian homeless service is a *substitute* for the social housing policy that has been absent for decades. There is not only a gap between housing policy and homeless policy, but more often than not no common language is spoken by stakeholders in the two sectors that would allow them to elaborate on problems that are common to both fields. The authors cite the document “‘Where to go from here...’: A Framework for a National Homeless Strategy’, which made an attempt to harmonize concrete housing policy measures and homeless provision measures, regulations and subsidies. The recommendations made in this document have still not been implemented, and as such the question remains as to how the assisted housing programmes in Hungary could be applied to a broader group of homeless people, and how better to harmonize and synchronize local and national housing policy tools and homeless services.

The measures included in the critical analysis demonstrate that in Hungary, there are plentiful institutions, tools and regulations focussing on housing issues. However, most of these are fragmented elements that are poor, inefficient, and lacking the synchronisation that could allow for a coherently functioning system. They may succeed in preventing homelessness on a case-by-case or individual level, and they may help selected persons out of homelessness, but they are not capable of preventing housing exclusion and ending homelessness on a larger scale.

Dr. Péter Győri

President, Shelter Foundation

Director, Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy and its Institutions (BMSZKI)

ELTE PhD