

WHAT SHOULD EUROPE DO?

The European Union has a responsibility towards people experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion. Dignity and human rights are fundamental values of the EU. The EU's commitment to social rights and objectives are at the heart of the European project, in parallel with its economic objectives. This commitment has been strengthened over the years and were enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. In light of repercussions from the 2008 economic crisis to the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalism, the European Union is trying to relaunch its social ambitions and to convince citizens that social progress is always possible. Jean-Claude Juncker's 'Social Triple A' commitment, the European Union's investment plan, which includes an increasingly important social dimension, the Sustainable Development Goals 1.1 and 11.1, and more recently the European Pillar of Social Rights, are all initiatives that provide the European institutions with powerful levers for contributing to the reduction in homelessness.



Renovation workshop as part of the 'Living in the dorm' action-research project, **Turin, Italy**
Department of Architecture and Design - Politecnico di Torino for Fondazione Progetto Arca onlus © Daniele Lazzaretto - Lilithphoto

However, there is a long way to go to prove to citizens that the European Union and its institutions can work together for social progress. The fact that homelessness not only persists but is rapidly increasing in the majority of EU countries is an alarming reminder: European integration has not eliminated poverty or provided a decent quality of life for all its people. Despite the 'leaving no one behind' pledge in the Sustainable Development Goals, a proportion of the European population has been abandoned to homelessness and unfit housing.

The European Pillar of Social Rights has raised new expectations with regard to the EU's role on this front.¹²⁶ It amounts to a political commitment, which establishes housing and assistance to homeless people as one of the 20 areas

in which Member States should concentrate their efforts. Announced in November 2017, it is non-binding on Member States and it has not yet led to a concrete implementation plan. Through Article 19 on housing and assistance for the homeless, the European Commission asserts the right of 'access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality' which 'shall be provided for those in need', 'appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction' for vulnerable people, and finally 'adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion'.

We have identified four levers through which European action can be structured and the right to housing for all can be implemented.

126

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_fr

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DEFENCE OF FUNDAMENTAL VALUES

The European Union has a unique role to play in protecting fundamental rights, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law: the EU must ensure that Member States' policies respect human rights and do not contribute to the criminalisation of homelessness. The banning of begging, or of sleeping or camping in public spaces must be strongly condemned. The European Commission's silence on the criminalisation of homelessness, which has existed in Hungary since 2018 - and is what's more enshrined in its Constitution - is a flagrant dereliction of the Commission's duty. We are calling for firm condemnation of this inhumane policy which has been instigated by the Hungarian government.

We are inviting European cities to sign the Homeless Bill of Rights¹²⁷ to reaffirm their commitment to fundamental human rights. In their capacity as guardians of the European Treaties, the European Commission is the Member States' guarantor for the obligations that stem from fundamental human rights. The unconditional right to emergency accommodation must be clearly asserted in order to end the arbitrary distribution of available places to various vulnerable groups.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Organisations that fight housing exclusion are fully aware of the importance of the principle of subsidiarity for the European Institutions and the European Union's lack of competency in the area of housing. Nonetheless, housing is not an island: homelessness stems from the failure of multiple public policies that do not protect their targeted demographic from the loss of housing. The EU must stop hiding behind the argument that it lacks competency in order justify its inaction. Instead, it must recognise the

impact of the European competencies on the issue of housing and act accordingly. European legislation on issues such as migration, free movement, discrimination, disability, taxation, consumer protection, competition, energy and macro-economic governance must take into consideration reducing homelessness and the rights of homeless people.

With regard to free movement, for example, uncertainty about interpreting European law on the issue is leaving too much room for manoeuvre with regard to local policies which are more influenced by the local political climate than by an understanding of our common values. The European Commission must strengthen its control measures and its sanctions in relation to Member States who infringe European legislation on free movement. It should also establish a new legislative framework that would guarantee access to basic services, including accommodation, to mobile European citizens in order to protect their fundamental rights, similar to the directive on reception conditions for asylum applicants.¹²⁸

More generally speaking, regarding migration, the EU should consider homelessness amongst migrants as the result of structural factors, including inadequate reception facilities and an inability to deal with irregularly-residing migrants. The European Commission must guarantee continuity in housing for all people in the process of seeking asylum.¹²⁹ It should invest in housing and accommodation solutions to promote the integration of migrants. It should guarantee access to basic services (such as food, health-care and accommodation) regardless of administrative status and ensure that the necessary resources are allocated to the services who work with these people.

Other legislative powers, such as those that govern consumer protection or discrimination, for example, could be put to use in order

127

<https://www.housingrightswatch.org/fr/billofrights>

128

FEANTSA (2018), 'Effectively tackling homelessness amongst mobile EU citizens: the role of homelessness services, cities, Member States and the EU', available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/download/effectively-tackling-homelessness-amongst-mobile-eu-citizens7332890560782313964.pdf>

129

FEANTSA & Greek Network for the Right to Shelter and Housing (2019), 'A Home for Refugees: The Need for Housing Throughout Asylum Procedures and Beyond', available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/en/news/2019/02/01/news-feantsa-and>

to ensure that European legislation does not neglect people who are citizens with rights prior to becoming homeless. Legislative improvement in consumer protection could include rules protecting citizens from evictions and repossessions within the framework of the European banking union.

INVESTMENT

The European budget is one of the most important tools at the disposal of Member States to help them reduce homelessness. The European Union budget is set in a multiannual framework. In the current multiannual financial framework (2014-2020), structural funds and investment funds support initiatives in the fight against housing exclusion, particularly through the European Social Fund (at least 20% of the ESF in each Member State must be spent on promoting social inclusion, the fight against poverty and discrimination), the European Regional Development Fund and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. Furthermore, the 'Juncker' investment plan for Europe provides an EU guarantee to mobilise investment to relaunch growth. This instrument, launched in 2015, has the potential to mobilise investment that is earmarked for affordable housing in order to fight homelessness.

The future multiannual financial framework (2021-2027) currently being negotiated, opens up further possibilities for financing measures to reduce homelessness, both through structural funds and through the future investment programme that will follow the 'Juncker' plan: InvestEU. The draft regulation for the future ESF+ and ERDF is positive in terms of the simplified use of these instruments for the fight against homelessness. InvestEU envisages increased emphasis on social investment, in particular on social infrastructure, with affordable housing as a priority.

It is important to remember that the main responsibility for organising and financing measures to fight homelessness lies at local, regional and national level. The added value of European financing should be to improve policies and services. The best initiatives to combat housing deprivation financed by the EU support the transition from managing homelessness to eradicating homelessness. Unfortunately, investment in homelessness, whether from national or European funds, focuses on short-termist measures to manage the issue rather than strategic approaches that aim to end homelessness. So far, we have, for example, noted a very small proportion of European funds being invested in housing infrastructure to provide a permanent home for homeless people. Generally speaking, European structural and investment funds very rarely reach the most vulnerable people. There are, however, examples of best practice that are paving the way: the role of European funds is to support stakeholders who want to transform their practices and to encourage the transition from emergency-based systems towards strategic policies that will prevent and reduce homelessness through housing.¹³⁰

Structural funds and the investment programme must both be used to promote the reduction of homelessness. Mobilising traditional subsidies and investment instruments is required. The challenge lies in ensuring that these instruments reach the most excluded people in our society, by for example financing 'very affordable' housing and Housing First policies. This will bring real added value and will serve to compensate for the failures of the housing market. Housing people who are most in need offers an excellent return on investment for Europe, because housing exclusion has a very high human and economic cost. It is now up to decision-makers and stakehold-

130

See FEANTSA (2017), 'FEANTSA Ending homelessness Awards 2017 – A handbook on using the European Social Fund to fight homelessness', available at: https://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-007-17-eu-funding_ok_7885765817773537732.pdf et <https://www.feantsa.org/en/event/2018/11/05/feantsa-ending-homelessness-awards-2018>.

ers at European, national and regional level to seize these opportunities and to use the European budget to eradicate homelessness. The Commission should explore the possibility of developing specific instruments for the eradication of homelessness in the framework of the InvestEU programme, such as an investment platform or a dedicated fund.

The support funds for the European Commission's structural reforms must encourage the Member States to finance the scaling up of homeless reduction policies through housing. France's Interministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing, for example, has tendered a bid to receive this technical assistance in order to implement its national Housing First plan. The investment requirements are significant: transformation/creation of new infrastructure, training via ongoing educational material and job creation in the sector are all key to the plan.

FOLLOW-UP, COORDINATION AND GUIDANCE

With regard to homelessness, the European institutions have a role to play in guiding policies, sharing best practices and pooling know-how. While this role has already been endorsed by the institutions, it must now be strengthened and become more dynamic if it is to lead to concrete results, in particular given the dramatic deterioration of the situation. Eurobarometer surveys show that access to affordable housing is a major concern for EU citizens. The fight against homelessness is top of the political agenda in a growing number of Member States. This gives the EU a window of opportunity to step up its follow-up, coordination and direction of Member States' actions in this area. The establishment of a European strategy for eradicating homelessness by 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, would be

an opportunity to implement in practice principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights on housing exclusion.

At EU level, we still lack a robust mechanism to fully comprehend and monitor the extent of homelessness and housing exclusion. We also lack policies to address these issues. Homeless people are rendered invisible within European social statistics. Europe claims to monitor the social situation of Member States without knowing if citizens have a decent place to live. While efforts have been made to include, the effects of the housing crisis more systematically and rigorously in some European Semester documents¹³¹ and to trial a module on 'housing difficulties' via Eurostat-EUSILC, the EU's social dashboard still does not include adequate indicators on housing exclusion. A proper follow-up mechanism on homelessness in Europe must therefore be established as soon as possible, to enable data comparison of homelessness and housing exclusion and an evaluation of Member States' performance to be carried out.

“Every now and then I hear some cynical and sceptical comments claiming the idea of ending homelessness is a utopian ideology. But in a world where we see dystopia emerging around us each day, this is exactly what is needed: passion, solidarity and a lot of idealism.”¹³²}}

131

See FEANTSA (2018), 'Growing homelessness & housing exclusion flagged in the Autumn Package... but you'll have to read the small print!', available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/download/feantsa-position-2019-european-semester6924921379300054734.pdf>

132

Juha Kaakinen, CEO of the Y-Foundation – Finland, December 2018, in Y-Säätiö (2019), 'Homelessness in 2030: Essays on possible futures', p. 7, available at: <https://ysaatio.fi/assets/files/2019/01/Y-Foundation-Homelessness2030-Web.pdf>

The inability of emergency services to reduce homelessness is not simply the fault of the homeless support sector but rather it is a global failure of public policies to prevent situations of extreme insecurity and the loss of one's home. The general attitude towards people affected by housing exclusion and homelessness must change: we should stop pre-judging people's capacity to be housed or not. This does not work. Housing is a right, not a reward. Ending homelessness does not mean that nobody will ever be deprived of housing. This means that there will be rare situations, but that there will also be dignified, immediate and sustainable solutions available to resolve the problem. European citizens expect a fairer Europe, one that leaves no one behind. It is the very future of the European project that is at stake. Committing to putting an end to the scandal of homelessness would be the perfect way to invest in this future



Bedroom in an emergency shelter,
Dublin, Ireland - © Peter McVerry Trust



Double bedroom in an emergency shelter,
Genoa, Italy - © fio.PSD



Dormitory in an emergency shelter, Warsaw,
MONAR, Poland - © Sylwia Stefaniak