Julien Damon (2009)

Policies on Provision for Homeless People in the European Union, Report to the Minister of Housing

http://www.logement.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/
RapportJDamonSansAbridansUnion_cle73a68a.pdf, 65pp.

The report written by Julien Damon for the French Housing Minister differs from the norm in several respects: a no-frills layout focused on carefully selected but only briefly commented upon landscape-format tables; its length, which, at 65 pages, is unusually short for such things; the decision to roadmap the subject by defining it through broad contextual factors (the measure of poverty and material deprivation, social welfare benefits and public spending, measures of personal feelings about poverty and homelessness, various European Union and even world housing indicators); a comparative approach using country studies to establish France's position in the EU and clarify what sets it apart; and finally, the broad-brush approach to provision strategies resulting in types of schemes and community recommendations. The report contains a wealth and variety of information presented almost in textbook form using figures and individual country 'pass notes'. Yet there is a feeling that big, relevant questions are asked, but not fully answered.

The arrangement is partly justified by the bigger picture. The stark truth of widespread homelessness in Europe can no longer be denied. Its appearance on policy agendas shows that it is now structural. The OMC[1] on Social Protection and Social Inclusion made homelessness and housing exclusion a priority for 2009. To mark the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Exclusion, the Belgian Presidency of the EU and the European Commission are jointly organising a consensus conference in Brussels on 9 and 10 December 2010. Its aims include harmonising the homeless count in the member states in 2011 and establishing a repository of 'good practices' for member states and stakeholders in the fight against housing exclusion. FEANTSA is co-ordinating the process and the French government, which has already organised a national consensus conference on

1 OMC: the open method of coordination used to promote cooperation between member states on issues that are not the exclusive competence of the EU.

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homelessness, is a key partner.[2] There is, therefore, not just a French but an institutional and EU 'homelessness issue' that, Damon explains, 'is a complicated and politically sensitive matter of human hardship', for which solutions must be found.

The report comprises three parts plus an introductory section. The introduction describes the context and aims and calls attention to the limits of the exercise in three caveats: the unreliable or somewhat 'outdated' nature of the statistics used from various EU-level surveys (ESSPROS, EU-SILC, Eurobarometer); the 'arbitrary' and therefore debatable nature of the variables chosen to make international comparisons; and the ambitious and therefore equally debatable nature of the recommendations made. Crucially, the report deals with 'homeless people meaning street homeless and/or those in homeless provision. It does not address the wider issue of housing deprivation.' Leaving aside the somewhat daunting problems raised on the relevance and compatibility of the statistics, this final limitation, while understandable where policy recommendations at EU level are to be formulated, nevertheless makes it difficult to get an overall view of the issue.

Damon first seeks to set 'French homelessness' in its EU context, positioning France's homelessness problem in relation to issues such as poverty, social spending, housing, feelings about exclusion and homelessness, asylum and Roma communities. As the author says, some facts tell us nothing about homeless people: for instance, the homeownership rate, size of the social housing stock, housing consumption by household. While the tables may be used only to illustrate the diversity of Europe and France's place within it, each implicitly introduces a suggested link with the 'homelessness issue'. But since no linkage is made between the variables chosen and the rate of homelessness, or preferably the ten-year trend in it, for example, the reader is reduced to imagining what they might be.

The impossible task of counting the number of homeless people in Europe remains unsolved, and each table suggests an option that is only outlined here. More fundamentally, the choices made by the author strongly suggest a link between homelessness and three types of variable: policies (levels of protection, asylum requests); individual opinions and practices (how people feel and act in relation to the various forms of exclusion, relationship to housing); and geographical 'mapping' (the distribution of Roma in Europe or slums in the world).

The comparative measure of social protection spending, either as a share of GDP (p.7) or as a share of public expenditure (p.16), seems particularly shaky. While there is no doubt that, one way or another, the level of public spending on housing and social exclusion influences homelessness, Damon notes (expressing the view of

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2 FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless): www.feantsa.org/files/freshstart/Consensus_Conference/Leaflets/FEA%20014-09_EN.pdf.

most European experts, see CS-HO, 2008), 'it is extremely difficult and at present totally impossible to systematically distinguish in different countries' public accounts the share of spending on provision for the homeless community'. Also, such an approach blurs the boundaries of issues in housing (versus shelter) and therefore the budgets and stakeholders in provision in both areas – which although not addressed in the report is a particularly vexed issue in France (Ballain and Maurel, 2002) – but also more generally in connection with changes in scale of tasks and responsibilities. The question of 'who pays for what' in housing and shelter is not only unresolved but still in flux for the time being, if only from the changing European definition of services of general interest. Damon does not explore these considerations in detail, meaning that the diversity of public and private players (which nevertheless appear in the short country 'pass notes'), as well as the sources and amounts of direct and indirect funding, remain largely neglected.

Part two of the report is a series of country studies on national policies. They yield much interesting and nuanced information on individual countries in a standardised format: general observations, number counts, notes (on policies). Estimates of the number of homeless people are given in most cases, but the focus is information on the players, principles and instruments of national homelessness policies. This information is then used to inform the final summary, which offers up a typology of individual situations (people) and provision strategies (policies). This analysis is layered onto existing typologies: for the homeless community, it relies on FEANTSA's ETHOS or revamped typologies (analytical model of three types of homelessness created from observations over a one month period, pp.48-49); while for policies, there is 'a rough consolidation into five groups that meet specific geographic, historical and political characteristics', distinguishing them by their respective manner of providing for homeless people. Based on a preliminary distinction between so-called 'Anglo-Saxon', 'Continental', 'Eastern European', 'Southern European' and 'Nordic' systems, the relationship between assistance and insurance, individual and universal protection and rights, local and national players, the family and the state are brought into play to explain the differences that exist in provision for homeless people in the EU. A further frame of reference is provided by a series of variables for at least possible strategic action, such as whether there is an inventory of services, a specialised public body or specific budgets. A summary table provides a final indicator by country (on a scale of 0 to 8).

Three types of country are distinguished: those with no significant investment or integrated strategy; those that have no integrated strategy but have or are allocating resources; and those with an 'integrated, explicit and solid' strategy. The identification of five dimensions (level of centralisation; resources allocated; level of service provision; scale of national debate; degree of criminalisation and coercion) shows how France stands apart, and finally informs a 'policy radar' using

eleven indicators positioned on a ten-point radar map (a scale on which the values of the indicators are placed to profile each country) to ultimately enable a policy comparison to be made. Point time-series data (1999–2008) for Ireland and a German region showing homeless totals trending downwards suggest to the author that countries that take up precise means of counting also perform best.

These analyses lead on to findings and recommendations. The principles that justify these recommendations, while not always explicitly posited, appear to be of several orders. First, the idea that homelessness is primarily an act of personal agency and therefore susceptible to separate treatment. Evidence of this is afforded by a chart and table (pp.48–49) that posits an entry by the 'event' (entering the situation of homelessness) and mixes moral considerations ('irrational decision') with migration and asylum policies (refugees, 'immigrant labour'). This model is qualified by the somewhat different approach taken by INSEE statisticians in their most recent studies on the question: 'The popular image of a homeless person tends to be someone sleeping on the street or in a place not intended for human habitation. These so-called "homeless people" account for only 8% of homeless service users' (de Peretti, 2008). So, homeless people narrowly construed, Damon explains, 'include neither people who are houseless and so forced to stay in a B&B (at their own cost) or staying with someone else or in a squat. Likewise, people in particular types of shelter (temporary structures, improvised shelters, other locations) are not counted in this category.' This is anything but a residual clarification then, and establishing a continuum of situations from people in ordinary housing to 'homeless' rough sleepers could warrant a revisiting of the entire 'homelessness issue', this time including the home – as is also suggested by the author when discussing the right to housing.

The second principle comes in with the search for criteria by which to measure policy effectiveness. Damon argues that progress can be made through good governance of the issue: hard targets, rationalisation of the accommodation supply, supply-side reforms and training for actors in the supply chain to adjust to public service standards and standardised practices, raising the profile of and improving communication on European practices, including a specific part on homeless people in the national reports on social protection and social inclusion.

The terms of the debate that could be engaged based on Damon's report are becoming better documented, not least thanks to work on the changing faces of welfare and protection, on changes under way in the scope of housing and shelter policies, and on changes that have enabled a better assessment of exposure to risks (including loss of one's own home) and unequal positions. They show, among other things, that the general interest and national (and European) solidarity are anything

but in tune. Revision of the principles, means and scales of public policies complicates this issue to a particular degree. Going back to the French case to tie the 'homelessness issue' up with its extension to the 'housing issue' (Kamoun, 2005):

> Today, while much else – especially in social welfare – is being decentralised, housing remains a national government responsibility. Granted, it can farm out the financing of housing provision to local authority service, joint venture statutory bodies or departmental authorities. It can also transfer the departmental/regional chief executive's discretionary social housing quota to the municipal authority; but it still in theory retains overall control. The housing solidarity system itself is decentralised: the housing solidarity funds have been transferred to the departments. At the same time, the government has established a highly centralised system for financing urban policy (with the ANRU – national urban renewal agency) and a likewise centralised five-year statutory public investment programme to boost social housing construction (government programme framework act for social cohesion). But who will pay for the new construction push? The 1% housing loan mechanism will obviously be put to work. The State will also contribute. But the main funding will come from the social housing bodies and local authorities. The situation no doubt flies in the face of history. Social housing plays and will inevitably play in the years ahead an increasingly social role and will likely be increasingly less well-funded by national solidarity.

I have quoted this lengthy passage as aptly illustrating the difficulty of separating the issues while reflecting the urge that exists to open up the homelessness issue at European level.

The issue of homelessness, therefore, has not gone away but has acquired a European scale. For anthropologist Daniel Terrolle, this situation is a 'fudge' in a very particular sense. He argues that a very small proportion of homeless people get back into the market economy; a slightly larger number of others manage to fit into a sheltered environment. But the vast majority are left to their fate and 'return feet first'. So, 'what is disturbing is less the number of homeless people who die,' he argues, than the fact of concealing them. 'The deaths of homeless people cast a pall over the functioning of the reintegration market. They are discounted to maintain the illusion that it works,' Terrolle concludes (Bissuel, 2010).

Arguably, the simple conclusion is that the success of policies to reduce homelessness is fundamentally governed by: a policy sphere that is in the process of reorganisation between public and private sectors and local and national levels; a labour market whose global restructuring is just beginning to produce contradictory and rather negative effects; and state policies where – not least through migration, asylum and inclusion policies – a measure of leeway exists. National societies, too, contain wide regional and local differences, and some 'natural' or 'community'

regulators are visible and might be in politicians' interests to observe and preserve. Without an assessment of the respective capabilities of these various aspects, the let-downs that followed the consensus conference organised by France in 2009[3] could well be repeated.

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[3] See, for example, the proposals made by Martin Hirsch, former High Commissioner for Active Solidarity against Poverty and former President of Emmaüs France.