The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness: Process and Methodology

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Introduction

The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness (ECCH) was the first consensus conference on a social issue at EU level. The event in Brussels on the 9th and 10th of December was the most visible part of a longer process; it was preceded by a year of preparation, and followed by deliberation and the drafting of conclusions by the Jury, and finally by the dissemination of outcomes. This article will briefly present the context for the ECCH before describing the methodology underpinning the process. In the spirit of reflective practice, it will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the process from my subjective perspective as a key participant in the process.

Context for the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness

The ECCH was an official event of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, co-organized with the European Commission and FEANTSA, and supported by the French government. In 2008, the annual Round Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion (now the Annual Convention of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion) called for a European consensus conference on homelessness, supported by the conclusions of the 2008 Informal Meeting of EU Housing Ministers, which stated that "a consensus conference should be organised at EU level to generate a shared comprehension and common diagnostic of the situation" (EU Housing Ministers, 2008). The French Presidency therefore requested that the European Commission organise a consensus conference, and Vladimír Špidla, then Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, granted the necessary support and funding in 2010 during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The precedent of "Off the Streets", Paris 2007

An important precedent to the ECCH was "Off the Streets" (*Sortir de la Rue),* a consensus conference on homelessness in France that took place in Paris in November 2007. The aim was to move beyond the "myriad [of] different and sometimes inconsistent views competing with each other" (Loison-Leruste, 2008, p.143) in order to arrive at a more dispassionate understanding of homelessness informed by evidence. Consensus conferencing, which had been developed by the French National Authority for Health, was identified as an appropriate tool. "Sortir de la Rue" was the first application of the methodology to homelessness, and one of its first applications to a social issue. The conference's recommendations (Rapport du Jury, 2007) contributed to the establishment of the national Priority Agenda 2008-2012 for Shelter and Access to Housing for Homeless People, and to the elaboration of a national strategy focusing on service reform (CNPHL, 2009). This provided an example of how a consensus conference on homelessness could be organised and what it might achieve.

Homelessness on the EU policy agenda

The decision to organise the ECCH represented a tipping point in the evolution of homelessness on the EU agenda. Demonstrable momentum had been developed on the issue, yet there was a lack of clarity about how to build on this to advance co-ordination and support effective strategies within Member States. Since 2000, the EU has supported and coordinated Member States' policies to combat poverty and social exclusion through the Social Open Method of Coordination (Social OMC). This involves shared objectives, a reporting mechanism, agreed indicators, and reports on social protection and social inclusion adopted jointly by the European Commission and the Council. Between 2000 and 2010, homelessness emerged as a thematic priority in this framework. This culminated in the 2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2010a), which called on Member States to develop integrated homelessness strategies, as well as suggesting some key elements in these strategies. A central objective of the ECCH was to provide a basis from which to develop adequate follow-up of the 2010 Joint Report.

By 2010, a number of EU institutions and bodies had called for enhanced European-level action on homelessness. In 2008, the European Parliament adopted a written declaration on ending street homelessness (European Parliament, 2008). In October 2010 an own-initiative opinion by the Committee of the Regions also called on the EU to develop a homelessness strategy, and the Informal Meeting of EU Housing Ministers had repeatedly called for strengthened EU ambition on the matter. 2010 was also the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion; the Council's final declaration of the year stated

that "particular attention should be given… to extreme forms of poverty such as homelessness" (Council of the European Union, 2010b). The ECCH aimed to provide a framework to respond to these calls.

The ECCH also came at a moment of transition within the EU policy cycle. On 17 June 2010, the new Europe 2020 Strategy was adopted (European Commission, 2010a). It was therefore important that this emerging policy context could deliver on the momentum that had been developed on homelessness. The ECCH sought to provide a foundation for addressing homelessness in this post-2010 social inclusion context.

The consensus conference methodology

Consensus conferences have mostly addressed issues of health, science and technology. The basic methodology was developed in the 1970s by the American National Institutes for Health in response to the need to assess the safety and efficacy of new technologies (Jakoby, 1990, p.7). Open to a targeted audience, these consensus conferences are designed to bring together experts to present evidence on a particular topic to a panel of clinicians, public representatives and other practitioners. The panel assesses the evidence and arrives at conclusions regarding practice. The tool has been widely used in different European and international contexts, and has evolved to suit different purposes. It was adopted in the 1980s by the Danish Board of Technology (a Parliamentary office for technology assessment), and the Danish approach is the most well-known in Europe today. Here, the Jury is made up of lay people, the idea being to bridge the gaps between scientists, members of the public and politicians in relation to new technologies. While the consensus conference model is not a fixed entity, it is defined by a combination of the following elements:

- judicial process with a Jury;

- scientific meeting between peers;

- town hall type meeting involving democratic debate and collective bargaining (Jakoby, 1990; Jorgenson, 1995).

Homelessness as a topic for a European-level consensus conference

Consensus conferencing is a 'conflict resolution' tool (Jakoby, 1990, p.8). Appropriate topics for such conferences are controversial issues, on which there are diverging points of view, and where the way forward is unclear; this was the case with homelessness at EU level in 2010. Grundahl (1995) identifies the following criteria for appropriate topics of consensus conferences:

- topical

- not too abstract/can be delimited

- contains conflict

- there is a call for the clarification of objectives and attitudes

- depends on an expert contribution for clarification

- the necessary expertise and knowledge are available

Homelessness had risen up the EU's social inclusion agenda, and there was interest from Member States in enhancing the effectiveness of EU support and co-ordination. A body of work, including the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), showed that homelessness could be delimited, even if formal agreement on a definition was lacking. There was conflict surrounding fundamental questions about the nature and causes of homelessness, as well as effective responses; as mentioned, the Member States' Housing Ministers had made an explicit call for clarification. It was also apparent that adequate follow-up of the 2010 Joint Report necessitated more clarity. Expert input was required to move beyond 'in-house' debate between practitioners, and to strengthen evidence-based policy development. The infrastructure was in place to provide the necessary expertise: FEANTSA regroups the European homeless service sector; the European Observatory on Homelessness had been producing European-level research for twenty years; and the Social OMC (see below) had helped establish a network that could be called upon.

Preparatory Phase

Preparatory committee

Consensus conferences require extensive preparation. A preparatory committee is usually established to guide this over the course of six months to a year. The committee "should represent all aspects of knowledge and a diversity of viewpoints concerning the topic" (Nielsen *et al*., 2006). Chaired by Robert Aldridge (Chief Executive of the Scottish Council for Single Homeless), the committee of twenty involved NGOs, researchers, public authorities, the European Commission, (formerly) homeless people and representatives of related sectors such as social housing. Geographical balance was sought as far as possible, although there was some under-representation of Eastern and Southern European Member States. The preparatory committee met five times over one year to plan the ECCH, and once for a debriefing in May 2011. The diversity of perspectives created meaningful debate, which enhanced the quality of outcomes.

Selection of Jury members

The preparatory committee selected members of the Jury. These were 'wise people' who were independent from the homeless sector, but who had a profile and 'moral weight' in the social domain. Certain practical considerations were necessary, including proficiency in English or French, and availability and interest were often determining factors. The preparatory committee aimed to integrate a variety of fields of expertise, as well as to ensure geographical and gender balance.

Table 1: Composition of the Jury

Chair	**Frank Vandenbroucke**, a former Minister and member of the Belgian Senate who was involved in the development of the Social OMC and is a respected authority on EU social policy.
Vice-chair	**Alvaro Gil-Robles**, a well-known lawyer and Human Rights expert, both internationally and in Spain. He was the first Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.
Members	**Ruth Becker**, an economist and planner. She was formerly Professor of Women's Studies and Housing at Technische Universität Dortmund.
	Mary Daly, a member of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion who chaired the Council of Europe's High-Level Task Force on Social Cohesion and is a Professor at the School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.
	Máté Szabó, the Hungarian Ombudsman for Civil Rights who is also Professor at the Doctorate School of Political Science in the Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
	Matti Mikkola, a longstanding member of the European Committee of Social Rights of the Council of Europe, who has worked extensively on housing rights. Also Professor of Labour Law at the University of Helsinki, and Visiting Professor of Social Policy at the University of Tartu, Estonia.
	Barbara Wolf-Wicha, a freelance journalist involved in managing a range of cultural activities. Also formerly Professor at the Institute for Social Sciences, University of Salzburg where she was Head of the Department of History and Political Science.

Although many of the Jury members were academics, this role was for most members one of several 'hats' they wore, and the jury had a collectively broad range of skills perspectives and expertise. The preparatory committee acknowledged difficulties in attracting very well-known European personalities to the jury. This reflects the challenges of working on poverty at European level, another example of which would be the difficulties experienced by the European Commission in engaging high profile 'ambassadors' for the 2010 European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion. It also reflects the fact that the task of the Jury demanded a considerable amount of work and a considerable time commitment, and that this work was done on a voluntary basis. Such a commitment was undoubtedly a barrier for some nominees.

Selection of key questions

The process of defining key questions began with identifying issues that should be addressed, using the following criteria:

- **Relevance to EU-level policy processes and competence:** as the ECCH aimed to establish a basis for future EU-level action on homelessness, the committee focused on areas most relevant to the EU's competences.

- **Relevance to tackling homelessness in Member States:** the committee identified contentious issues that were relevant to addressing homelessness in the Member States.

- **Lack of consensus:** the key questions had to address issues on which there was a *clear lack of consensus*. This principle allowed reflection to move beyond 'getting one's issue on the table' towards consideration of where the ECCH could most add value. For example, the committee found no debate on the principle that homeless people should have a say in decisions affecting their lives. However, there was conflict on what meaningful participation in policy development might look like, and a key question was therefore formulated on this specific aspect.

- **Availability of expertise and knowledge:** on some issues, for example the definition of homelessness, there was a wealth of expertise available. On these issues, the aim of posing a question was to create better links between policy and expertise. For other questions there was less established expertise, and the committee had to consider whether the expertise available would be sufficient. The urgency of addressing some issues was considered an adequate basis on which to table some questions where less expertise was available.

Through discussion, a list of issues was gradually refined into six key questions:

1. What does homelessness mean?

2. Ending homelessness: a realistic objective?

3. Are 'housing-led' policy approaches the most effective methods of preventing and tackling homelessness?

4. How can meaningful participation of homeless people in the development of homelessness policies be assured?

5. To what extent should people be able to access homeless services irrespective of their legal status and citizenship?

6. What should be the elements of an EU strategy on homelessness?

Expertise and Evidence

A study, *Homelessness and Homelessness Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research* (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010), was carried out to summarise the academic literature for the Jury. In addition, a transnational consultation of homeless people was carried out by the *Front Commun des SDF* (a national platform of homeless and formerly homeless people in Belgium), which aimed to present the views of people with experience of homelessness; constraints of time, budget and capacity meant that the consultation was somewhat limited in scope, and whilst it clearly influenced the Jury's deliberations, a broader consultation would have been desirable.

Three experts were selected per key question. The aim was that they would present contrasting perspectives, and balance was sought between different types of experts, e.g. researchers, public authorities, NGOs and people with experience of homelessness. Other considerations included geographical and gender balance. Experts submitted written responses to the Jury before the conference. A ten-minute summary was then presented at the conference, and experts responded to questions from the Jury and the floor. There was considerable variety in the quality of written responses and presentations; whilst the majority were of high quality, some contributions were of limited added value to the Jury's work. Naturally, the ECCH also experienced standard problems involving lack of availability or cancellations by experts. Within the preparatory committee, compromises were sometimes made without a full understanding of the suitability of particular experts. This is an area that could be improved upon.

Grundahl (1995) distinguishes between 'scientific experts' and 'opinion-forming experts' at consensus conferences. The ECCH relied on both, with scientific experts providing more technical expertise, and opinion-forming experts advocating a position. Both were necessary, given that homelessness is a social issue rather than a topic of hard science. However, over-reliance on opinion-forming experts posed a problem for some key questions (namely 4 and 5) when the lack of consensus was not sufficiently apparent. This is partly attributable to a reluctance to defend controversial positions at the ECCH. For example, despite public debates about access to shelter in some Member States, it proved impossible to secure a speaker to advocate restricted access on the basis of legal status due to the political sensitivity of this position.

The Work of the Jury

The work of the jury involved four main stages:

- **Preparation**: the Jury read the extensive literature and attended a briefing meeting before the ECCH. This enabled them to understand their role and the main issues, and to plan questioning.

- **Evaluation of evidence:** this involved both analysing written contributions and questioning experts at the public conference.

- **Deliberation and consensus-building:** the Jury met in a hotel over two days following the ECCH. They were supported by a small secretariat to record a summary of their conclusions.

- **Drafting and finalisation of recommendations:** a first report was drafted from the summary of conclusions. Re-drafting on the basis of email consultation was led by the Chair in order to arrive at final recommendations subscribed to by all Jury members.

During the conference, some Jury members took a position on certain issues, rather than going through the process of questioning experts. This prohibited them from taking full advantage of the experts, especially early in the proceedings before they settled into their role. More focus on questioning techniques at the briefing stage could avoid this.

At the deliberation stage the Jury proved to be an extremely effective working group. The members engaged critically with expert contributions, allowing rigorous analysis, debate, and forthright, credible conclusions. A well-prepared Chair with a thorough understanding of consensus-building proved essential. The Jury agreed on conclusions during their meeting, but did not focus on the precise wording of recommendations. This enabled them to get to the bottom of disagreements and reach consensus without losing time on editorial work. Drafting took place over the following weeks. The secretariat provided a first draft on the basis of the Jury's conclusions, and this was collectively revised through several rounds of amend-ments before being adopted by the entire jury. The resulting recommendations were both genuinely consensual and sufficiently in-depth to be a useful policy reference. They put forward solid principles for future progress on homelessness at EU level, and the recommendations have been well-received.

The Public Conference

The Danish Board of Technology emphasizes the need for agreeable, comfortable surroundings for a consensus conference (Nielson *et al*., 2006). Although the National Theatre provided an attractive setting, the auditorium isolated the audience from the 'action' on stage. The original plan was to hold the conference in a Commission building that would have provided a more appropriate setting. The programme was demanding of participants, requiring long periods of active listening; whilst this feature of the methodology cannot be completely overcome, more dynamic chairing and a lighter programme would have improved the level of participation. Approximately 350 people attended the ECCH. Participation was by invitation only, and different stakeholders were targeted. The preparatory committee wished to maximize participation of public authorities in order to increase policy impact. Whilst this was successful, the closed nature of the conference meant that not everyone wishing to participate was able to, even though the venue was not at capacity.

Presentation of Outcomes

The dissemination and promotion of outcomes is an integral part of consensus conferencing. The Jury's recommendations were disseminated to policy-makers and other stakeholders, and press work enabled the recommendations to achieve visibility; the Chair of the Jury presented the recommendations to the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and to the Belgian Secretary of State for Social Integration and Combating Poverty at a press conference in Brussels in February. The Chair has played an ambassadorial role since the ECCH, presenting the recommendations to key EU bodies and at Member State level. This is undoubtedly extremely valuable for ensuring follow-up.

Conclusion

The post-2010 policy context remains in a state of transition and it is uncertain what concrete follow-up of the ECCH there will be. Nonetheless, the Commission has committed to "identify methods and means to best continue the work it has started on homelessness… , taking into account the outcome of the consensus conference" (European Commission, 2010b). The ECCH can be considered a success based on the strength of the Jury's recommendations. An innovative tool that delivers concrete outcomes and yet actively incorporates diverse stakeholders and realities, consensus conferencing could enhance EU social policy support and co-ordination. As the first consensus conference on a social issue at EU level, the ECCH has demonstrated the potential of the methodology. It has also generated a number of lessons to be taken forward regarding its future use.

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