
The European Consensus Conference: The View of a Participating Practitioner

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Introduction

Having been part of the entire process leading to the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness (ECCH), from the time it was first suggested in FEANTSA's General Assembly in Paris approximately 4 years ago, I am delighted that it happened under my FEANTSA presidency, and that this crucial event for the homeless sector in Europe became a reality. Looking back at the often delicate discussions, or should I rather say disputes, that took place in FEANTSA's Administrative Council (AC) and Executive Council (EC) around the planning of the ECCH, I am extremely encouraged by its outcomes, and I am looking forward to the new perspectives and horizons that will undoubtedly result from the recommendations of the Jury. Of course, these perspectives will not become reality by themselves, but I am quite confident that they will materialise if all FEANTSA member associations subscribe to the outcomes of the ECCH.

Preparatory Stage

Let me start by talking about the preparatory meetings. During the first presentation at the General Assembly of FEANTSA in Paris, it became evident that not every representative of the member associations present was convinced that the very positive French experience with the Consensus Conference could be replicated on a larger European stage. Key concerns included how to gather sufficiently representative experts to give clear opinions on the most important questions in relation to homelessness in Europe, and how to ensure that appropriate expertise would be available to analyse crucial questions around homelessness in a constructive way.

Then there was the crucial question of how to select the jury members; jury members that were not directly involved in the domain of homelessness, but that had the professional expertise and open-mindedness to enable them to develop objective opinions on the questions to be determined by the preparatory committee. In addition to the question of who would be part of the preparatory committee (Prepcom), the question of geographical balance in the Jury also had to be addressed; how to avoid a situation where countries traditionally strong in the social domain, such as the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, might dominate the southern Latin countries and smaller countries, like the Benelux or the Baltic countries, or the new EU Member States.

Having defined a certain number of objective criteria that would enable FEANTSA's AC to make a wise, objective decision on the composition of the Prepcom as well as the Jury, and on the experts who would be invited to the ECCH, every member association was invited to propose candidates for the respective organs. In open discussions, every AC member had the opportunity to present his or her proposals, and although discussions were intense, most members managed to put aside personal or national preferences, and were open to convincing arguments.

A final crucial point in the organization of the ECCH was the decision on who to invite as participants for the event itself. As it was an event organized under the Belgian presidency of the EU, it was evident that the European Commission and the Belgian Presidency would have the final decision on how many people from different categories would be invited: official representatives of the Commission and its collaborators, official representatives of all member countries, representatives of FEANTSA's member associations, research experts on homelessness, representatives of people having experienced homelessness and so on.

Again it was important to have a good geographical balance, and FEANTSA's AC members were asked to source suitable representatives of the different categories from their respective countries. In my view, this was the most difficult and most delicate point in the whole process, but FEANTSA's AC nevertheless managed to come up with a well-balanced result, whereby even smaller countries such as Luxembourg could send an appropriate number of representatives. Of course, the outcome largely depended on how much energy had been invested by each AC member in contacting and motivating possible national, regional and even local authority representatives in their country. Unfortunately, this didn't work out in every case, and in the end quite a few seats were left vacant.

One negative point in relation to the organization of the ECCH was that it took place exclusively in one large plenary meeting. In my view it could have been more productive and lively if the six questions posed in the conference had been discussed more thoroughly in smaller discussion groups, where the different

categories of representatives would have been present, and would have had the opportunity to participate more directly. I am, of course, aware that this would also have meant having one (or more) specialized jury member(s) for each of the six questions, but I am quite convinced that this would have improved the balance of pro and con arguments in the discussions.

A further weakness was the under-representation of people having experienced homelessness, during both the preparation phase and the conference itself. Even though their actual representation was, in my view, of outstanding quality, I would have preferred if, within each country, there had been a more organized discussion forum for homeless people to express their opinions on the six questions posed by the Prepcom. The hope that this could be achieved by a single organization turned out to be futile due to the fact that there is still no European initiative that has the necessary contacts and links with the few existing national or regional homeless associations.

As a representative from Luxembourg on FEANTSA's AC, and like all other AC members, I had to take the initiative to propose and contact possible candidates to join the Prepcom and the Jury, as well as people who could be interviewed as experts by the Jury during the ECCH. In the end, the AC accepted the director of Caritas Luxembourg (the only FEANTSA member association from Luxembourg) and the president of Caritas Europe as members of the Prepcom. In regard to people who might participate in the ECCH, I contacted all those I thought could be interested: three civil servants from the Ministry of Family affairs; the civil servant with responsibility in the area of homelessness; the Luxembourg representative on the European Social Protection Committee; the social worker responsible for OLAI (Luxembourg's bureau for immigrants and refugees) as well as the civil servant of the Housing Ministry responsible for social housing. At the local authority level, the two civil servants in charge of services for homeless people in Luxembourg's two main cities – Luxembourg City and Esch-sur-Alzette – showed an interest in the ECCH. I was very glad that in the end all these people were accepted as participants. So, all in all, Luxembourg's delegation to the ECCH involved eight people who were directly involved in either policymaking or the implementation of policies in the domain of homelessness, and/or social housing.

Even while on the train from Luxembourg to Brussels, I had the feeling that bringing all these people together in the context of a conference that would highlight contradictory opinions on topics central to homelessness, could lead to interesting exchanges and to an emerging consensus on these topics among those responsible for homeless policies in Luxembourg – and maybe even on a wider European scale.

The Conference

Apart from some problems with the hotel reservations, the logistics (timing of different parts of the conference; meals and coffee breaks; evening events etc.) were quite well organized. Indeed, as quite often happens in this type of conference, exchanges between participants during the breaks – and in this instance especially among the participants from Luxembourg – were very positive and quite fruitful. Having listened to the interventions of the experts on different topics, and to the questions and remarks of the Jury and of other participants, discussions between the participants from Luxembourg continued beyond the conference room. These were not just theoretical discussions, however; as each of us is partly responsible for transposing theoretical concepts (such as the definition of homelessness, user participation, and emergency support for immigrants and refugees) into practical, everyday realities, we used this opportunity to exchange views on such concepts in light of the current reality of homelessness in Luxembourg.

But of course – and this is what I would call the European momentum of the conference – such discussions and exchanges did not only happen among participants from Luxembourg, but also with and among participants from other countries, giving all participants the possibility to discuss the extent to which newly presented concepts such as ‘Housing First’ and ‘National strategies to end homelessness’ are realistic alternatives to more traditional approaches like emergency or night shelters, the staircase model and so on.

Speaking as FEANTSA’s president, but also as a practitioner whose professional duty it is to link theoretical and political concepts with the problems and limitations of their practical implementation, the notion of a national strategy to combat or even end homelessness seemed to become more and more realistic over the two days of this ECCH. The opportunity to challenge and discuss these new concepts with people in responsible positions – whether at national or local level, whether civil servants or professional social workers active in NGOs – showed me that the time has clearly come for a radical change in dealing with homelessness at national and local level, as well as at European level. A very important and decisive fact in this instance is that all three levels are interdependent and must be linked in a logical, constructive and complementary way if we are to overcome the human tragedy of people being forced to live – or should I rather say to survive – without a home in 21st century Europe.

During the ECCH, these reflections and thoughts became more and more evident – not only to me, but to all the participants from Luxembourg. Over the two days we constantly exchanged views on these new perspectives and, just as the jury members did with the experts, we discussed the pros and cons of these approaches in the context of the realities we live in our everyday professional lives. In the end we all agreed that we should continue to meet once back home, and that we should try to develop strategic guidelines on the basis of the Jury’s final recommendations.

Outcomes of the Conference

The first very encouraging event emerging from this context involved a note written by the civil servant with responsibility in the area of homelessness to the Minister of Family affairs in which the ‘Housing First’ concept was briefly explained, and which the Minister accepted as a future alternative concept to be put into practice in Luxembourg; this happened just two weeks after the end of the ECCH!

There was a second event at the end of January; I was invited in my capacity as FEANTSA’s president to present the outcomes of the ECCH, and to explain the concept of a national strategy to combat homelessness, to the organisation responsible for designing and writing the National Reform Program (NRP) for Luxembourg. In the end, the concept of such a national strategy was introduced as one of the new measures of the NRP proposed by the Ministry of Family Affairs, with a clear emphasis on ‘Housing First’ or, in acknowledgement of one of the Jury’s key recommendations, on ‘Housing Led’ policies.

A third and politically very important event was the announcement by Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, in his yearly speech before the Parliament on the 19th of April that “we need a national strategy to combat the situation of homeless people, as well as a variable housing offer adapted to different types of people” (translation by the author). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Family Affairs organized two meetings that were attended by most of the Luxembourg participants in the ECCH, as well as other national and local representatives, where the first elements of a national strategy to combat homelessness were analysed and discussed. A further meeting took place at the beginning of July, and the first draft of the strategy shall be proposed to the Government by the end of this year, 2011.

Conclusion

Looking back on the impact of the ECCH on discussions on homelessness in Luxembourg and other European countries – thanks, in particular, to the recommendations of the Jury – it is clear that we now have a common European basis from which to build on and evolve the fight against homelessness. This basis may allow us to realize the European Parliament’s ambition to “end street homelessness by 2015”, which was part of its declaration as early as 2008, and which it reiterated on December 6th 2010.

If we want to overcome the problem of people being forced to live without a home, be it in Luxembourg or anywhere else in Europe, we need to stop acting in isolation. We need to link the activities of NGOs in the field with local political ambitions and strategies to avoid and combat homelessness at local level. We need the coordination of Ministries responsible for housing, employment and health for vulnerable people at national level. And we need to link national politics with the European efforts, undertaken in the frame of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAP) and European structural funds, to overcome poverty and social exclusion in all EU member states.