
The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness: Potential of the Conference from a User's Perspective

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Introduction

As a representative of homeless users I consider the Consensus Conference not as a self-contained achievement, but rather as a useful tool for improving communication between homeless people and policy-makers. In this article I wish to reflect on how I view this interaction and how the Consensus Conference may alter the effects of a lack of understanding on each side.

I have been representing users' perspectives and interests for six years now. My first experience of rough sleeping was during 2004/5 in the Netherlands; I was taken in by the Salvation Army shelter service, and later by its transition shelter, for almost a year. Since then I have been able to access and maintain myself in regular rental housing. All of this has been decisive in determining my mission: to improve the quality of service and care, and promote the rights and co-determination of the homeless, as well as to link more effectively the interests of users, various service providers and other stakeholders.

I therefore joined the Client Council of the Salvation Army in 2005 in order to draw attention to what I perceived as a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of service providers about what adequate support could and should be for homeless people. My goal was, and is, to help bridge this gap by demonstrating that although providers operate the services on which homeless people are dependent, each homeless person is an individual being in need of care, whose basic rights have to be respected, and who must have access to information and take part in their recovery in order to be enabled to act. In my view, this is the only way to change the often-dehumanizing conditions of homeless provision into a partnership-based operation that creates pathways out of homelessness.

Homeless people experience alienation and social exclusion. Their paths into homelessness are paved with a reluctance to listen to friends and family, social services and other service providers, and to be listened to by the same people and organisations. The relationships that fall apart with the loss of one's home lead to a seriously splintered and also diminished network, which – as there is a lack of recognition that help is needed – services cannot completely substitute for; people entering homelessness are not approached, and they do not reach out in time.

I believe that re-establishing these networks is one of the cornerstones of the way out of homelessness. How they can be restored depends on various conditions, and this is the point at which the Consensus Conference could make a substantial contribution; it could articulate and “translate” these conditions from what I believe to be the users’ perception of them into what an EU or national bureaucrat and policy-maker can understand. It could reconcile the wording and the interests of these two perspectives.

Let me illustrate this with what I have learned from my personal experience of homelessness, my housing history, and engagement with user representation, as it is through this that I have come to understand that homelessness can be a real threat to any of us, and that getting out of it depends on a constellation of efforts that have to merge into individualised solutions. Homelessness can affect very different people, and this diversity demands a diversity of answers, tailored according to individual needs and possibilities. Most of the recommendations of the Jury of the Consensus Conference echo this quite clearly, which is one of the great merits of the process.

A family breakdown, a psychological crisis, overspending even for a short time, and putting too much hope into the possibility that a partner and joint new family will offer a way out – the crisis comes too fast, and partnership, job, home, financial stability and health are all gone at once. Mingle with those who use night shelters? Not for me right now. Independence and the need for privacy are driving forces that in this case are destructive; they keep you away from service provision as they are unavailable here, but in the end these are the same forces necessary for regaining the motivation to find a way out.

Had there been not an individual with a great personality at the right time in the right place in the outreach service of the Salvation Army, I would have not re-contacted my former links and the relevant services. Getting my debts managed, some psychological help and a route to regular housing again was mainly my own doing, for there was certainly a lack of adequate practical help and knowledge there. What I did find was a roof, and after a couple of months a room of my own where I could at last find some rest again. This gave me strength, regained self-esteem and the consciousness that this was my way out. Others,

I observed, sometimes need(ed) a little more practical and other help as it took – and takes – too long to find this route again. I believe that a place of your own, including support, should be offered much earlier in the process, and that this is what needs to be offered to all homeless people: to those who do not believe they can be partners, and to those who have been turned down in most of their relationships, whether private, service-related, with the general public or with the state – whoever has stigmatised them through one-dimensional judgements of their being a nuisance, an addict, superfluous and useless.

The Consensus Conference called for granting more room for client participation, and for service provision to be more responsive and adapt more to both individual needs and societal changes. These are key issues. But these key issues require key personalities; too many workers in homeless provision have a misconception of their role, or lack the necessary experience or attitude, and sit there as judges or rule-enforcers instead of applying an adequate helper's perspective by listening to and working with clients. It is time to move away from one-sided and general solutions with service providers and other stakeholders confronted with the reality of what is happening to the people they serve on the individual level.

I do not believe in numbers and typologies. They do not change the world. I believe in images, individual stories and life events that are tangible. Therefore, I do not consider that the recommendation of the Consensus Conference to use ETHOS as the classification tool for understanding homelessness is a real step forward. Rather, it evokes a false belief that counting and defining will solve the problems. There is no need for the further mystification of homelessness, and I am afraid that ETHOS avoids a real connection with those we exclude. Thus, while on the one hand I think that the Consensus Conference is a good tool for mediating between the languages of partners, I also think that in this respect it may serve to strengthen the discourse of a policy-making that we, the users, basically want to change.

Still, even if there is no immediate impact of the Consensus Conference, it is important to acknowledge that this is one of the many forums needed to challenge those people who are entitled to represent the interests of users, and also for those people who have experienced or are under threat of homelessness. They must keep in mind that their role is to connect, and the role of user representation is to make visible what matters.