The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness: Comments on the Jury Propositions

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Introduction

Is there a consensus on homelessness beyond sentimental platitudes that serve no useful purpose? Is there a point in looking for agreement on what policies the EU needs? The answers to these two questions define the objectives of this European Consensus Conference on Homelessness (ECCH), and therefore determine the assessment of the Jury's proposals.

Any action on homelessness presupposes that homeless people are not solely to blame for their situation, but that the community is instrumental in the processes of exclusion, and that it bears a responsibility for ensuring that everyone has decent living conditions. Basically, while the individual-collective responsibility equation is the very essence of the current democratic debate, all states have, to some degree, a policy of helping homeless people and preventing housing hardship, including statutory forms of protection and housing quality standards.

The European Union pursues policies against social exclusion, but lacks responsibility for housing. Yet, the European framework of laws and regulations affects the housing sector: tax harmonization, state aid (housing-related social services exempted from competition rules), migration policies, and so on. The Union is an agent, managing factors that impact on housing, social exclusion leading to housing hardship and homelessness, and on the policies to address these issues. The main task of the ECCH was to define the scope of the European Union's legitimacy in tackling homelessness, and how to mainstream this objective across all EU policies.

Diversity of Homeless Experiences

The Jury proposed a broad interpretation of homelessness as something that affects different social groups in different and complex ways. Housing hardship as portrayed through the archetypal figure of the 'tramp' is a thing of the past; women, young people, migrants and families are among the new victims of the street. The root causes of their situations have also diversified, as has the range of living conditions that now characterize housing hardship: from insecure accommodation, through squats and places unfit for human habitation, to the street. These difficult situations intersect with other issues, like mental health and addictions. Diversity seems now to be at the core of housing hardship: diverse pathways, diverse situations, diverse causes, and diverse problems linked to housing hardship.

Understanding housing hardship now means taking into greater account its many contributing factors, personal, institutional and structural, and how they interact. This makes attempts at defining housing hardship more complex, but a definition is a prerequisite of any measure to tackle housing hardship – in terms of both targeting and quality assessment. The Jury saw the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), drawn up by FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness in 2005, as a relevant way of describing the variety of situations in each EU Member State. It is a tool that enables policy-makers to base what they do on a common analytical framework, and to steer EU policies towards a common goal of improving the situation throughout the EU, regardless of inter-country disparities. It also allows Member States to carry out coordinated joint studies, using the same analytical foundations to pursue policies, the effectiveness of which can be assessed.

However, the Consensus Conference Jury emphasized that the ETHOS guide refers only to housing *conditions,* and suggested that it might be useful to include duration-related aspects; the time spent in a given situation is arguably a determinant of how great an impact living conditions will have on physical and mental health, and on the deterioration of the social and economic situations of those affected. Furthermore, an interpretative framework, however relevant, does not preclude EU state governments from turning it to other purposes.

The Risks of Categorising Homelessness

A sociological typology in the hands of any government bureaucracy can degenerate into a tool for the dehumanizing categorization of human suffering, whereby people risk being pigeon-holed and dealt with through predefined standard solutions that ignore the social and human realities of those affected. This kind of mechanistic categorization system has long proven limited in its dealing with social issues. The

central challenge that European societies face is how to combine the full exercise of the right to housing – protected by consensual norms – with public policies that organize personal services, and with administrative procedures that respect the reality of each individual's life, history, desires and choices. While establishing an analytical framework to monitor changes in housing problems may be a necessary step forward, it must be linked into mechanisms that guarantee the individual the full exercise of their rights, and public policies that enable rather than impose.

Homelessness and Human Rights

As the Jury pointed out, housing hardship should be seen for what it really is: a serious and intolerable violation of human rights. Such a violation of fundamental human rights and dignity should be opposed with the utmost intensity in our developed European countries. The Jury also found, vitally, that housing hardship and homelessness can no longer be tackled by policies that merely manage consequences and marginal situations, or pursue only emergency policies dictated by weather conditions; such public policies sideline people by providing only basic survival services for the most extreme situations.

Europe needs an integrated strategy that cuts across all social and economic aspects, interacting with housing, health, and working conditions, but also with the factors that shape the housing market: the scope of public service sectors; tax harmonization; bank loans and so on. By managing factors that influence price formation, the volume of construction and the scope of public housing services, EU policies play a part in defining what homelessness is. The impact of any proposed EU regulation on the living conditions and social rights of European residents must be assessed. The Jury's finding that housing hardship is a violation of human rights raises the issue that protecting this right is no longer a policy *option*, but an *obligation* to be fulfilled by and within the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and other instruments aimed at the protection of social rights, such as the Council of Europe's Social Charter, have been incorporated into the basic Treaty of the Union, and they are now clearly binding on the various EU institutions as well as on Member States; the Union must not only respect these social rights, but also ensure that they are respected by Member States. We thus have the basis for a set of 'social convergence criteria', parallel to the economic criteria of the eurozone.

This is not to say that compliance with common rules and national laws, legal protection on an individual basis, and the willingness of stakeholders to enable individual strategies will be enough. Member States must demonstrate strong political will, reflected in the dedication of resources. The development of the

'Housing First' strategy in Europe will remain an empty phrase, for example, unless substantial means are provided to raise this public policy goal beyond the level of a sound bite. 'Talking the talk', or employing nothing more than a communication strategy, without 'walking the walk' and actually providing funding, discredits policy-makers and increases the risk that democratic institutions will lose credibility as they lose support from a population that considers itself as having been short-changed; this may happen where rights and ambitions are promised but not delivered though substantive policy measures.

Furthermore, even where policies prioritize the supply of, and access to ordinary housing for everyone in ensuring respect for human dignity and social integration, a safety net, or social emergency sector, is still needed. The 'Housing First' policy will not replace emergency provision that addresses other needs than exclusively housing ones. The two areas are not mutually exclusive, however; getting people into housing could be seen as a sequential process of different forms of provision, enabling people to move from one to the next (from supported housing to stripped-down basic accommodation, and then on to collective arrangements), without making this part of an integration approach, but by simply allowing everyone to progress in line with their own strategies, desires, and the vagaries of their lives.

From this angle, social support for households is less about 'inclusion', specific standards of living, or behaviour, and more about activation, empowerment, and increasing the ability of the individual to control their lives, make choices, and progress according to their aspirations. This requires a support system, whether in temporary accommodation or in ordinary housing, that can better accommodate individual time frames, meandering pathways, and minority lifestyles.

Homelessness, Criminalisation and Poverty

Homelessness policy can no longer just be about social 'sticking-plaster' solutions that aim to ensure the physical protection of so-called deviant individuals from street violence, the weather, and the lack of care. In our democracies, rights purport to be universal; just as the Greek 'demos' means 'people', so are our societies based on the idea that no-one – especially the most vulnerable, or the 'unclassifiable' in terms of social function – will be abandoned. Homelessness, however, is one of the most brutal manifestations of abandonment by society. Homelessness policy is not only about measures directed at individuals but also – and perhaps more so – at society as a whole, enabling checks on whether democratic institutions are living up to their core values.

Our democracies also purport not to be totalitarian – not to ask individuals to conform to stereotypes in order to gain access to rights; it is a society's duty to provide a place for everyone without seeking to standardize its citizens. That being so, homeless services must seek to adapt to the diversity of human behaviour; this means accommodating homeless people's lifestyles so that they can find a place in society without having to deny their own history or personality, and not facilitating compliance for those who do not conform to the mould of the ideal citizen.

There is no question that we stand at a crossroads – at the meeting point of opposing, cataclysmic forces: on one hand, the criminalization of poverty which denies the democratic ideal and justifies abandonment on the grounds of the deviance and eccentricity of those deemed not to conform; on the other hand, the progress of social work in respecting the privacy and diversity of individuals through processes of empowerment, and the organization of housing systems that increasingly accommodate individual strategies within the framework of increasingly strong legal protection.

The race is on between the criminalization of poverty and the full recognition of marginalized individuals as part of mainstream society. Regular attacks on social rights may sometimes leave stakeholders despondent, and the forces of obscurantism may sap the democratic ideal by criminalizing poverty and blighting public policy in Member States, influencing the shaping of a Europe that is rationalist, efficient and not always heedful of the rights of its most vulnerable residents. However, the professionalism and activism of those resisting and fighting against such attacks should not be underestimated, and will flourish in the long term.

Conclusion

This conference has proven that there is consensus. There is consensus on the idea that ensuring decent living conditions that respect individual choices is a collective responsibility at each institutional level. There is consensus in seeing the institutions as stepping stones for citizens, enabling them to rise up, and not as crash barriers preventing divergence from social norms of behaviour. There is consensus that poverty is not the fault of those in need, and that the fight against homelessness is primarily a battle against ourselves – against the dark side that makes us fear others as we close our eyes to the suffering, isolating ourselves ever further in cocoons of comfort mingled with anxiety. There is no alternative but to take care of each other, and to protect ourselves collectively through ensuring rights and the policies that secure them. Even if there is no consensus, those who believe in the possibility of one will continue to come together.