

## WORDS FROM FEANTSA

At the root of social work sits a fundamental tension: how do we acknowledge and combat the systematic and social disempowerment of individuals without perpetuating this very disempowerment in our efforts? How do we avoid replicating the power dynamics that keep people marginalised while trying to promote their welfare and rights? Social actions such as the fight to end homelessness can, despite the best of intentions, inadvertently strip those it intends to help of their autonomy, dignity, and power. Navigating this tension underlies the practice of participation.

Giving voice to marginalised communities has long been central to grassroots and community-based social movements, such as the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement in the US. For many years now, it has been a priority of FEANTSA to listen to, and encourage the listening to and involvement of, people with experiences of homelessness in actions that concern them. In pursuit of this, we have previously examined the state of participation in homeless services and explored how organisations involved individuals with lived experience in decision-making and advocacy efforts. In both our actions and through dedicated publications we have explored the benefits achieved and the challenges faced in implementing participatory approaches.

As the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) continues towards the goal of ending homelessness in Europe by 2030, against the backdrop of at least 895,000 people living in homelessness throughout Europe, it remains necessary to reflect on the nature and structuring of services and policies, and the latent attitudes they may reveal. While planning activities aimed at lifting people from homelessness and preventing further homelessness, participation continues to offer us the opportunity to challenge our perceptions of the role and character of homeless social and policy work. Importantly, this must be done without tokenism – it is not enough to simply show those who have experienced homelessness in decision-making processes; we must listen to them, recognising their expertise and informed perspectives. As the articles in this edition illustrate, participation is a means to empower individuals, challenge stereotypes, and ultimately, shape a more open and inclusive world.

In this edition of our magazine, we take a deep dive into how homeless services have been implementing participation in recent years, bringing forward successful examples of real participation. We explore a collection of articles that spotlight the voices and experiences of those who have experienced homelessness, shedding light on how their active involvement is inspiring innovation within services, challenging stereotypes, and influencing policies on homelessness.

# EDITORIAL



By **Bryony Martin**, Communications and Events Officer, FEANTSA

The magazine begins with **neunerhaus'** Peer Campus in Vienna. The article explores how the campus empowers individuals with lived experience to become mentors for others recognising the guiding value of peers and their unique position and ability to support others through shared knowledge and experiences.

**Arrels Fundació** in Barcelona challenges norms by involving those with lived experience in a variety of roles from everyday operations to decision-making. They explore how participation, in particular visible participation, helps to dispel prejudices. **Focus Ireland's** Lived Experience Ambassador Programme (LEAP) humanises homelessness and influences policy through personal narratives. It gives participants the opportunity to push for their own rights and recognition, instilling them with greater self-confidence.

Participation may demonstrate its respect for lived experience by valuing self-direction. For example, **Kralji ulice** explain how they empower individuals and acknowledge their potentialities by letting their own desires and interests inform the activities of the association and the opportunities provided - leading to projects such as persons with lived experience guided tours of Ljubljana, and their street paper. In the article on **Budapest's "Home for everyone"** strategy, we learn how a series of forums and the creation of a *Council of Experts by Experience* helped generate a deeper sensation of citizenship and more effective policy responses. **The Erasmus+ "HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue"** project fosters autonomy and cooperative problem-solving by utilising an Enabling Co-planning approach. This article explains how the HOOD project consortium actively challenges traditional approaches (f.ex.: avoiding paternalistic, service worker-led aid), and allows people to dictate what will help them: asking beneficiaries to imagine themselves *happy*. It is not assumed that the organisation knows better than the individual.

Finally, we had the pleasure to guide an interview with YLDISS and Roberto, members of **Le Syndicat des immenses** about what they found to be the significance of participation, and what kind of barriers might impede access to participation. They expanded on the power of participation for combating prejudice and the invisibility of those in poverty in Belgium.

As you navigate through these articles, you may observe a common thread: participation not only prevents the reinforcement of marginalising power dynamics, but it is necessary for transformation. Numerous challenges remain for achieving real participation, such as limited funding opportunities and the need for broader policy changes for substantial progress, as explored in the articles within. We hope this edition of the magazine may serve as inspiration for how participation may be successfully implemented in our efforts ahead of the 2030 deadline. Ultimately, the respect we aspire to promote for those individuals both in situations of homelessness and with past experiences of homelessness, must begin within our services themselves. We must recognise the knowledge of those with lived experiences of homelessness as exactly that - knowledge.



# WORDS FROM EXPERIENCE

## THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION AND INVOLVEMENT OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Today, I work as a professional helping people who are experiencing homelessness. I have been there myself; homeless, unsafe, and feeling that I was not part of society.

I moved into a housing unit that implements the Housing First model. The model unconditionally provides an independent rental flat with its own rental contract for a person experiencing homelessness and support if needed and wanted. The time I moved in, I didn't even want to belong to society or even be a part of it. Back then, I found living that way easier because society didn't treat me very kindly. After doing a lot of work on the road to recovery, I realized that the housing unit had a big impact on my life and who I am today: an adult who pays taxes and is interested in social impact. It was not realistic that I would have been jumping for joy involving myself in social impact immediately, right after getting my own place. This road to recovery, my personal growth, has happened slowly. It has taken its own time.

Building a long-term hope and motivation that has been done with me, has been crucial to my path. It hasn't been done by force, but by giving me an opportunity to enjoy and the possibility to influence my own environment.

I started my community work by cleaning and planting flowers in the housing unit's front yard. Doesn't sound big? For me, the experience was extremely meaningful! It was easier to do things for the common good than thinking about myself first. Only later I learned how to put myself first. And that's how I ended up leaving my earlier life, into a new and scary world I didn't know much about.

In Tupa, our organisation's temporary accommodation unit, the residents participate in environmental work to maintain the neighbourhood clean and safe, not only for themselves but also for others. Environmental work includes meeting and talking to neighbours, collecting drug paraphernalia and other trash, taking care of plants etc. I started doing small tasks myself in the housing unit to benefit the other residents, and I believe that the involvement and participation benefitted me, the residents of Tupa as well as everyone else in the society.

# EDITORIAL



By **Tii Judén**, Expert by Experience, Vva ry/No Fixed Abode, Finland

Everyone has the ability to involve themselves; sometimes the complicity is visible even by sitting quietly in group activities. This may look minimalistic, especially from the point of view of measuring effectiveness, but for a person quietly participating in group activities just saying “Good morning” or asking for a cup of tea can be a big leap in involvement as well as in participation.

Nowadays, workwise, I try to motivate people so they can be active individuals in their own lives and in communities rather than being passive bystanders. In our organisation we have started group activities for women who have experienced homelessness. These women have participated in planning and organising the things they want to do with us for their own well-being, for example, beauty care, art classes, and cooking together. It is important for each of us to be able to be a part of deciding on things that concern us.

For many years I have wanted to help people who are still living the life I have lived. I feel that nowadays I am doing something meaningful for people who are experiencing what I used to. Their needs and voices should be heard and taken into account. Each of us should have a place in society, and the society needs all of us. After falling from the path, hope is the only thing that takes a person back on track.



## WORDS FROM EXPERIENCE

### THE SENSE OF GENUINE EQUALITY IS A KEY ROLE OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISATIONS WHICH OFFER HOMELESS SERVICES

I worked as a member of FEANTSA's Participation working group between the years 2007-2017. The group created participation tool-kits, arranged seminars and trained people all over Europe in participation. But the most important choice of the project was that half of the people in the group had lived experience of homelessness and half had a professional status.

In organisations there are different levels of participation; from been asked your opinion to full participation and shared power. Of course, some people have more structural power, but we all have the power of interaction. In our Housing unit "The house of Fellows" (The first

Housing first Unit in Finland) I asked a resident at the beginning: "What actions would you like to participate in?" He stared at me for a long time, eventually replying "Now I would like to participate in my own life, nothing else."

In my own organisation, which was founded by the homeless themselves, we have used participation since day one. Participation penetrates the whole organisation from the ground level to the top. One fourth of our paid staff has experienced homelessness and we have a team of experts who train and mentor professionals and experts by experience nationally in Finland. Our first executive manager has experience of homelessness. My boss has experience of homelessness. First, he contacted our organisation by sending notes under the door. Gradually he came into our services and one day he was offered a paid job and after he retired, he was asked to be the chair of the organisation.

We once received a large donation from the city photo exhibition and some people were a little suspicious that the money would simply go to some overall expenses. We told the donor to tell people that we used the money to hire two people who had experience of homelessness to work with us.

# EDITORIAL



By **Sanna Tiivola**, Executive Manager, Vva ry/No Fixed Abode, Finland

We participated in a competition to create a housing first unit together with Y-foundation in the first period of the Finnish national program to end homelessness. The city of Helsinki offered to the winner the building and land where the unit could be established. Our group consisted of a person experiencing homelessness, residents of a housing first unit, staff of both organisations, an architect and a constructor. A member of a group and a resident in our housing unit asked me if he could do a work practice period at the same time - I can still remember the worker from employment services phoning me to say “How come this person’s title is the project manager?”

There are many stories like this, but the main offer to people who come to our organisation and services is the opportunity to feel genuinely equal, otherwise people don’t feel that the power and resources are shared. Full participation means access to the same possibilities that everyone else has.

