

CITIZENS WITHOUT HOUSING: THE PARTICIPATION OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN THE MAKING OF BUDAPEST'S NEW STRATEGY ON HOMELESSNESS

Budapest's "Home for everyone" strategy on homelessness emphasises housing solutions over charitable responses. Actively involving homeless citizens, the strategy has held 14 forums and established a Council of Experts by Experience. This approach enriched the strategy by emphasising housing solutions and addressing personal vulnerabilities. The participation of homeless individuals in crafting the strategy fosters their sense of citizenship and aids in developing more suitable policy responses to homelessness.



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The Municipality of Budapest has recently adopted a new ten-year strategy on homelessness with a goal of reorienting homelessness policy towards the provision of affordable housing. In this article, Bálint Missetics discusses the various ways in which homeless people were involved in and contributed to the process of strategy making.

The charitable and punitive responses to homelessness might appear as opposites of each other – and this opposition has a certain validity of course since the provision of soup kitchens and shelters is a more compassionate response than police harassment. But homelessness is about the lack of housing, and you cannot pay your rent with compassion. Logically, decreasing homelessness is possible only if the number of people who exit homelessness exceeds the number of those who lose their homes. It necessitates prevention and increasing the access of homeless people to affordable housing. The provision of shelters does neither.

The charitable understanding of homeless people as hopeless, vulnerable indigents in need of care, and the kind of vilifying, sometimes dehumanising discourse that tends to accompany the criminalisation of homelessness are also very different. However, neither is particularly conducive to the understanding that those who lack housing are also citizens, who have valuable experiences of the actual functioning – and dysfunction – of homelessness policies, as well as well-informed opinions and legitimate expectations about how it should be changed and should therefore be involved in process of decision making.

Home for everyone, Budapest's new ten-year strategy on homelessness¹, adopted by the Municipality of Budapest in 2022, attempts

1 Throughout the article, in accordance with the scope of the strategy (but opposed to the legal definition of the term in Hungary) "homelessness" is understood as to include the homelessness of families as well as of adult persons without children.

to break away from both misconceptions about homelessness. The process of strategy-making provided plenty of opportunities for numerous homeless citizens to make their voices heard. And in terms of its policy content, the strategy established that – as opposed to the dominant policy response to homelessness which is restricted to the provision of shelters, day centres, and outreach services – much more attention and many more resources should be dedicated to housing: to the prevention of its loss, and to the provision of affordable housing to enable homeless people to exit homelessness.

THE RATIONALES FOR PARTICIPATION

One of the basic principles of strategy-making was the involvement of homeless people in the process. This basic principle had four main rationales. First and foremost, it was understood to be the duty of the Municipality to provide opportunities for participation to those citizens who are most directly affected by the problems and policies that constitute the subject of the strategy. Second, the principle was also motivated by an understanding that participative methods can enhance the quality of the outcome of policy-making processes.

Third, homeless people's access to the kind of deliberative events that such participative methods entail was held to be of *intrinsic value*. Last but not least, the participation of homeless people was also a *political statement* about the membership of homeless people in the community of citizens of equal worth – an axiom which is frequently overshadowed in the public discourse and by the day-to-day operation of homeless services alike.

THE METHODS OF PARTICIPATION

The preparation and compilation of Budapest's new strategy on homelessness provided plenty of opportunities for participation to those with an experience of homelessness. Throughout the preparation phase, the Municipality of Budapest organised 13 well-advertised participatory forums in overnight shelters, temporary hostels, temporary homes for families, day centres, and one forum among formerly homeless tenants of the Municipality. Some of these events were held in the Municipality's own establishments, whereas others were organised in cooperation with the many NGOs and religious organisations which also provide services to homeless people.


The 14 forums could reach 221 people with an experience of homelessness. In some of the forums, the Mayor of Budapest or the deputy mayor in charge of social and housing policies was also present, which provided the participants with a rare opportunity to personally and directly address the Municipality's highest-level officeholders with their grievances, opinions and wants.

The forums allowed for the involvement of a relatively large number of people in homelessness, but they usually provided limited opportunity for the thorough discussion of problems or recommendations raised by the participants or for the in-depth exchange of their personal experiences. It was for this reason that the process of strategy-making also included the establishment of the Council of Experts by Experience. The goal of the Council was to provide – through a two-day workshop consisting of plenary sessions and small-group exercises – an opportunity for a group of homeless people to gain more insight into the most important problems and dilemmas of the process of strategy making, and to create a space where they can express and discuss their observations, thoughts, and proposals in more detail.

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The members of the Council of Experts by Experience were selected through an open call advertised through large, colourful posters in virtually all establishments that provide services to homeless individuals or families in the city. The selection process was meant to ensure a correspondence between the composition of the Council and the homeless population of Budapest in terms of age and educational level, and to facilitate – through the different living situations of the participants – the representation of the variety of their experiences.

From the 71 applications, 25 people were able to participate in the interactive workshops. The workshops were co-facilitated by two experienced, formerly homeless activists. Members of the Council


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were also provided with hard copies of the strategy’s preliminary version for comments, were invited to share their conclusions directly with the Mayor, and delegated one of their members to speak at the City Assembly when it debated and voted on the final version of the strategy.

THE RESULTS OF PARTICIPATION

Some of the results of the participation enhanced the *validity* and *credibility* of the overall policy orientation of the strategy. The excessive focus on the personal vulnerabilities (mental illness, addiction) of homeless people which often characterises the professional or academic discourse on homelessness can be counterbalanced by theoretical arguments and empirical studies, but they can be also challenged by how homeless people themselves connect their personal experiences to the structural problems of housing affordability in general, and, in particular, to the scarcity of affordable rental units:

“I am 73 years old, I have my pension, which is enough for food and clothing, but I don’t have 150,000 forints [~ €400] for rent. I did not get a municipal flat for 11 years; I have been living here in this room for ten years now. I cannot step forward. I have four grandchildren who cannot even visit me here. I am still working, but I cannot step forward.”

“We applied for [municipal] flats as well, when we were there with the kids. But we did not win, because the ratio is bad: there are way too many applicants for way too few flats. This is where the municipality, the government should act, to create new social housing. Because otherwise a lot of people will remain homeless until they die.”

Other frequently voiced concerns underlined the *untenability* and urgency of those practical problems with the current homeless assistance system which decision makers, service providers and social workers are obviously aware of, but might sometimes accept as intractable by now. Participants, for example, provided instructive personal experiences about the variety of ways in which frequent bedbug infections affect their lives:

“I came to this shelter specifically because I heard that there are no bugs here, so I don’t have to show up to work fully covered with [bedbug] bites. I cannot even change clothing like that, because if they see it, they immediately wonder, whether I have a skin infection, or what? These little things can cause huge problems in a workplace.”

“My little son is in daycare, so that I could work 6 or 8 hours – I work as a cleaner now in an office. [...] But I am not allowed to bring a change of clothes to him, because we live in a [temporary home for families], and they think that there are bedbugs here”.

Finally, the participation of homeless people in the process of strategy-making also unearthed experiences which would be impossible to gather by consulting data or the opinions of social workers alone. In every single forum, for example, at least one of the participants gave voice to his or her experiences of humiliation or discriminatory treatment *within* and by the homeless assistance system:

“If you say something, they kick you out.”

“They say that if you don’t like it, you can go elsewhere.”

ON HOW WE SEE EACH OTHER

All “homeless services” and “homeless policies” face the obvious limitation of trying to directly ameliorate a problem which is ultimately the consequence of the overall structure of wealth and income inequalities, without being able to address these inequalities. However, another important obstacle to more effective and more equitable policy responses to homelessness relates to the social construction and public perception of “the homeless” as another group of people – who for some inexplicable reasons need not, or cannot, be housed as the rest of the citizenry.

As we have seen, providing opportunities for people in homeless to present and express themselves not only as *clients*, but as *citizens* whose voices matter – and *who matter* – is valuable not only because of its ability to contribute to more appropriate policy responses, but also because of its potential in cultivating an understanding of “the homeless” which is the prerequisite of any truly suitable policy response. Participation should therefore not be ignored as a cornerstone of effective and comprehensive strategies on homelessness.