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# Networking and housing advocacy in the homelessness sector: a path towards social sustainability? A study of the Housing First Europe Hub

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► **Abstract\_** *This paper investigates the potential of pro-Housing First advocacy conducted by international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions to realise social sustainability ambitions in the homelessness sector. In particular, it delves into the transformative potential of the Housing First Europe Hub – a coalition of governmental and non-governmental organisations in Europe – in changing the governance of homelessness and promoting the Housing First model as a socially sustainable approach to (re-)house homeless individuals. In doing so, the paper seeks to answer the following two research questions: (1) How do international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions (such as the Hub) improve social sustainability in homelessness systems by advocating for long-term housing solutions for the homeless? (2) Which internal and external governance arrangements do they produce, and to what extent do these novel arrangements realise social sustainability ambitions in the homelessness sector? Informed by theories of social sustainability, social innovation, and bottom-linked governance, and grounded on empirical evidence collected during an eight-week ethnographic study of the Housing First Europe Hub, the paper studies social sustainability through the lens of (the politics of) homelessness. It concludes that international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions foster social sustainability through the promotion of housing needs satisfaction and the formation of new bottom-linked governance structures, especially in the (local, regional, national) contexts where Hub members are based. Albeit these novel governance structures remain highly susceptible to political opportunities and the will of influential decision- and policy-makers, they enhance democratisation and participation in decision-making and promote more socially sustainable responses to homelessness.*

► **Keywords\_** *homelessness coalitions, Housing First, social sustainability, bottom-linked governance, housing advocacy*

## INTRODUCTION

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For more than three decades, the concept of sustainable development has grown in popularity and guided public policy action towards the construction of a viable world where both humans and nature thrive (Du Pisani, 2006). The first definition of the concept is found in the famous report *Our Common World*, also known as the Brundtland Report, submitted by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) to the United Nations in 1987. In the text, the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p.43).

Since 1987, the world has witnessed a proliferation of definitions of sustainable development (Hopwood et al., 2005). The quintessence of the term has nevertheless remained the same, with sustainable development being founded upon three intertwined dimensions, or pillars: economy, environment, and society. Economic sustainability refers to the pursuit of growth that generates profits without imposing a burden upon environmental resources. Similarly, the environmental dimension seeks to ensure a balanced relationship between the use of natural resources by humans and the ability of ecosystems to regenerate. Finally, social sustainability translates into the achievement of goals such as democracy, social cohesion, and inclusion, promoting equal opportunities and a just world for all (Dempsey et al., 2011; Duran et al., 2015).

In spite of noble intentions by national governments to execute and realise sustainable development through policy initiatives, the realisation of social sustainability remains fragile since rates of poverty, inequality, polarisation, and injustice continue to rise worldwide. A number of academics have stressed the systemic neglect by decision- and policy-makers of socially sustainable goals (e.g. happiness, equality, community development, democracy, inter- and intra-generational justice, social cohesion) (Littig and Griessler, 2005; Dempsey et al., 2011; Parra, 2013; Shirazi and Keivani, 2017; Paidakaki and Lang, 2021). As a result of such negligence, social phenomena such as homelessness have become all the more evident, especially in dense urban centres. According to the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and Fondation Abbé Pierre, in Europe alone around 700,000 people experience homelessness on any given night—a 70% increase since 2010 (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2020).

Albeit homelessness is not a new social phenomenon, the policy response so far has been inadequate and largely fruitless. Most European countries still base their homelessness strategies upon institutionalised emergency solutions such as overnight shelters, which are often overcrowded and unable to accommodate all individuals in need of a bed (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2018). Additionally, the majority of (re-)housing programmes remain centred upon so-called ‘staircase’ services that often deliver unsatisfactory results in terms of housing stability (Tsemberis, 1999; Stefancic and Tsemberis, 2007; Collins et al., 2013). This ineffective policy response calls for the implementation of long-term, sustainable housing alternatives that focus on providing rapid access to housing for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. An example of such an alternative is the Housing First approach that has become increasingly popular in Canada, the USA, and Europe, gaining visibility in academic and governmental circles and being widely recognised as “the major recent innovation in homelessness service provision” (Baptista and Marlier, 2019, p.104). Housing First is considered an innovative model because it gives homeless individuals immediate access to independent housing, keeping people away from rough sleeping while providing a sustainable alternative to the mainstream institutionalised approaches described above.

In the last five years, an increasing number of governmental and non-governmental organisations in Europe have coalesced into the Housing First Europe Hub (in brief, the Hub) to advocate for the upscaling of Housing First in the local, regional, and national contexts where they operate, striving to change the ways homelessness is traditionally governed and managed. This paper aims to study and unearth the transformative potential of this coalition towards social sustainability in the homelessness sector, shedding light on the internal and external governance structures built by the Hub. Specifically, the paper seeks answers to the following two questions: (1) How do (inter-organisational) homelessness coalitions, such as the Hub, improve social sustainability in homelessness systems by advocating for long-term housing solutions for the homeless? (2) Which internal and external governance arrangements do they produce, and to what extent do these novel arrangements realise social sustainability ambitions in the homelessness sector?

To answer these questions, we first draw from theories of sustainable development, social sustainability, social innovation, bottom-linked governance, and transnational advocacy networks. We then analyse empirical evidence from an eight-week ethnographic study of the Hub conducted between February and March 2021 by the first author. To collect empirical data, the following research methods were used: (1) web research (websites of FEANTSA, Housing First Europe Hub, and Y-Foundation); (2) document review (*Housing First Guide: Europe*, 2016, *Housing*

*First in Europe* report, 2019<sup>1</sup>); (3) participant observation in four Hub meetings (including the annual coordination group meeting and steering group meeting); and (4) six semi-structured interviews with seven participants from the Hub (the two Programme Coordinators, the coordinator of the Advocacy work cluster, representatives from three Hub member organisations, and the Director of FEANTSA). The data collected during this study served two main purposes: (1) to document the history and unique features of the Hub (genesis, internal structure, membership, division of tasks); and (2) to empirically identify novel governance arrangements shaped by the Hub and its members when interacting with each other and with decision- and policy-makers at multiple levels (local, regional, national, international).

The paper continues with a brief introduction to the Housing First model and its main characteristics, setting the background of the research. It then proceeds with the theoretical foundations upon which the study was based, followed by the empirical findings of the ethnographic study. At the end of the paper we reflect on the potential of international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions in leading transformative change in how the homelessness issue is governed and addressed.

## THE HOUSING FIRST MODEL

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The Housing First model was created in 1992 by the American psychologist Dr. Sam Tsemberis, and implemented through his New York City-based organisation Pathways to Housing. It is promoted as an innovative approach to (re-)housing for chronically homeless individuals, focusing on the satisfaction of housing needs of rough sleepers suffering from mental illnesses or addictions (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Specifically, the model is based on the following eight core principles: (1) housing as a human right; (2) choice and control for service users; (3) separation of housing and treatment; (4) recovery orientation; (5) harm reduction; (6) active engagement without coercion; (7) person-centred planning; and (8) flexible support (Tsemberis, 2010).

The success of the Housing First model in North American and European policy circles over the past thirty years can be attributed to its innovative approach, dealing more holistically with the homeless and recognising their agency (Baker

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<sup>1</sup> *The Housing First Guide: Europe* (Pleace, 2016) is a document designed to explain what Housing First is and how it works, as well as how it can be used for pro-Housing First advocacy. The *Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy, and Fidelity* (Pleace et al., 2019) is a comparative report describing the level of diffusion of Housing First practices in various European countries.

and Evans, 2016). Homeless individuals (also referred to as ‘users’ or ‘clients’) are given immediate access to an independent home, in addition to which they receive targeted support in their transition to self-sustained living. This support is offered by Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams or – depending on individual needs – through an Intensive Case Management (ICM) approach<sup>2</sup> (Greenwood et al., 2013).

A key feature of the Housing First philosophy is the emphasis placed upon individual choice and control, which is perhaps where the Housing First model and institutionalised responses to homelessness differ most. In staircase services, users achieve a series of milestones that bring them towards acquisition of an independent home. Within this process, they transition through different forms of housing: from community residences to supervised single-room occupancy to (finally) independent housing. Additionally, users are required to comply with certain rules such as maintaining sobriety, demonstrating they are ‘housing ready’ in order to progress to the next step (Tsemberis, 1999). By contrast, Housing First provides housing as a *first* stepping stone in the recovery process (Figure 1), encouraging users to actively work towards their recovery by engaging with their support teams as many times as they wish, rather than when they are required by the programme (Hansen Löffstrand and Juhila, 2012). In the words of Sam Tsemberis:

The general philosophy and practice of traditional mental health care systems, at the core, is to tell clients, ‘This is what you *need* to do’. In stark contrast, [Pathways Housing First] continually asks, ‘How can we help?’ and then listens to the answers.

(Tsemberis, 2010, p.41, emphasis in original)

Freedom of choice is one of the main reasons for the considerably high housing stability rates in Housing First as compared to traditional (re-)housing models (80% of Housing First users typically remain housed after two years, whereas 59% do so in institutionalised staircase services) (Tsemberis, 1999; Stefancic and Tsemberis, 2007; Collins et al., 2013). Low housing stability rates have in fact led some authors to shun traditional approaches to homelessness, suggesting they might even “contribute to chronic homelessness for many individuals” (Greenwood et al., 2013, p.648).

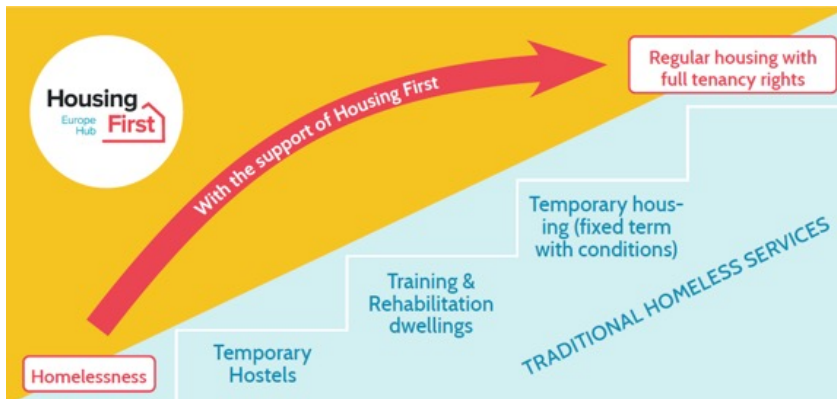
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<sup>2</sup> The ACT team is an interdisciplinary group of experts from the health and social work fields (e.g. psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, peer-support workers) assisting Housing First users with very complex support needs—for instance, those affected by serious mental illnesses. The ICM approach couples a Housing First user with a support worker, who assists the former in accessing health and welfare services, sustaining housing, and reintegrating into society through, for instance, budget counselling (Pleace, 2016).

In addition to a high level of choice for service users, a point often mobilised in favour of Housing First is its cost-effectiveness when compared with emergency solutions to homelessness. This should not be confused with cost savings, since Housing First services do not engender a reduction of the public budget allocated to the homelessness issue, but simply use it more efficiently (Culhane, 2008). The most substantial piece of evidence cited in this regard is a study conducted by Culhane et al. (2002), which demonstrated that moving homeless individuals with severe mental illnesses into permanent housing costs taxpayers only \$1,000 more per person (in comparison to previous costs related to this group living on the streets, and touring repeatedly between expensive public services such as shelters, hospitals, and the criminal justice system). The efficacy of Housing First thus rests upon the dual success of (1) moving homeless individuals into permanent housing while (2) vacating shelter beds that would otherwise be occupied (Culhane et al., 2002; Culhane, 2008).

**Figure 1: Housing First versus traditional homelessness services.**

**Source: Housing First Europe Hub (2020a, p.4).**



Inspired by the Pathways to Housing model, different versions of Housing First began to develop outside of the United States as the approach gained popularity. One well-known example is the Canadian *At Home/Un Chez Soi* programme, introduced in the early 2010s (Allen et al., 2020). Another example of a country adopting a comprehensive (re-)housing programme is Finland, where the 'housing first' philosophy was made a core element of the national homelessness strategy in 2008 (Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009; Pleace, 2017).

More specifically, in the Finnish program, housing is coupled with psychosocial support depending on users' individual needs, and provided as the first step for the reintegration of homeless people into society (Y-Foundation, 2017). By virtue of a comprehensive policy and strong political will, the country has successfully lowered the numbers of homeless people and remains the only country in Europe where homelessness rates are in decline (Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009; Pleace, 2017). The Finnish model differs, however, from the American one in the organisation of rent payments and support. In the Finnish model, tenants pay rent themselves (if necessary, through housing allowances) and greater emphasis is placed on the principles of personal choice and harm reduction (Y-Foundation, 2017), whereas the American model focuses on behavioural change and users' recovery from their (mental, physical) ailments (Hansen Löffstrand & Juhila, 2012; Allen et al., 2020).

In the rest of the European continent, Housing First strategies were acknowledged as valid tools to reduce homeless numbers in the European Union (EU) from 2010 (Houard, 2011). At supranational level<sup>3</sup>, the first Housing First pilot project (2011–2013) was directly funded by the European Commission and had the goal of testing whether the model could be implemented in European cities. Nationally, the well-known French *Un Chez Soi d'Abord* programme was rolled out in four cities (Lille, Marseille, Paris, Toulouse) in 2011 (Estecahandy et al., 2015). This momentum drove FEANTSA and the Finnish Y-Foundation – two leaders of the European homelessness sector – to establish the Housing First Europe Hub, a network of governmental and non-governmental organisations working on Housing First in Europe, in 2016.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

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This section outlines the theoretical foundations of our investigation of the transformative potential of pro-Housing First international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions to promote and realise social sustainability in the homelessness sector. It draws from theories of social sustainability, social innovation, bottom-linked governance, and the transnational advocacy networks (TANs) framework, in order to bring to the fore key aspects of social sustainability linked to the homelessness sector.

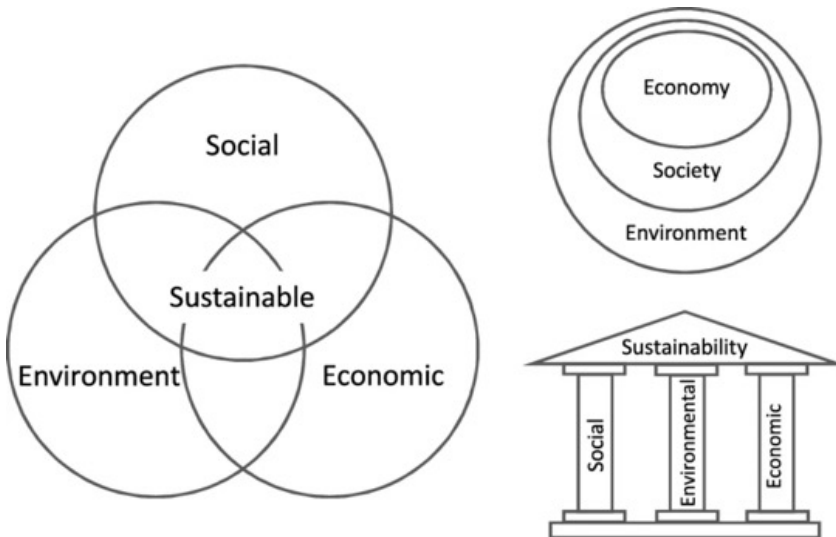
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<sup>3</sup> With the term 'supranational' we refer to policy circles revolving around the European Union and its institutional bodies.

### ***Social sustainability: the forgotten pillar of sustainable development***

The historical evolution of the sustainable development concept can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when academics began to question the impact of human activities upon natural resources in Europe (Du Pisani, 2006). In recent history, the 1987 Brundtland Report popularised the sustainability concept, inducing a proliferation of sustainability-oriented policies and measures, a vivid academic debate, and a plethora of conceptualisations of sustainable development picturing the three pillars of sustainability as being intertwined in different ways (Giddins et al., 2002; Purvis et al., 2018). Examples of such conceptualisations are the so-called nested, ring, and three-pillar models (Figure 2). The nested model views the three dimensions of sustainable development as interwoven with one another, with the economy depending on society, which in turn depends on the environment for subsistence. The ring model depicts the three dimensions as separate yet interconnected, with sustainability being the connubium of all three. Finally, the three-pillar model treats each dimension as the backbone of sustainability (Giddins et al., 2002; Purvis et al., 2018).

**Figure 2: Different ways of conceptualising sustainable development, from the three-ring sector (left) to the nested model (upper right corner), to actual support pillars. Source: Purvis et al. (2018), p.682.**





In spite of its prominence, the sustainable development concept has also been subject to much criticism related to its meaning and efficacy. Mehmood and Parra (2013), for instance, criticise the lack of an integrated approach to the three (economic, environmental, *and* social) goals of sustainable development, claiming that the three dimensions are not as inseparable and intertwined as originally conceived, resulting in policies that focus on one or two aspects of the concept only. This selectivity leads to trade-offs between the three pillars, especially undermining the social one, since decision- and policy-makers tend to prioritise pro-growth economic and environmental goals, overlooking social goals such as justice, inclusion, and democracy (Giddins et al., 2002; Littig and Griessler, 2005; Dempsey et al., 2011; Boström, 2012; Mehmood and Parra, 2013; Parra, 2013; Shirazi and Keivani, 2017; Paidakaki and Lang, 2021).

Social sustainability thus emerges as a critically unaddressed issue or the “weakest pillar of the triad” (Parra, 2013, p.142). Such a neglect partly lies in the vague definitional contours of the social sustainability concept (Vallance et al., 2011) and the difficulty in measuring and assessing immaterial results in the fields of justice, participation, democracy, and social inclusion—all falling under the social dimension of sustainable development. As a consequence, an overarching definition of social sustainability is still missing today.

In this paper, social sustainability is approached from the dual perspective of sustainability as an *outcome* and a *process*, a view that has already appeared in the literature. Boström (2012), for instance, states that:

[S]ocial sustainability often refers to *both* the improvement of conditions for living people and future generations *and* the quality of governance of the development process... The social pillar of sustainable development could thus be seen as including both *procedural aspects*, such as the role of democratic representation, participation, and deliberation, and *substantive aspects*, that centre on “what” is to be done (i.e., the social goals of sustainable development).

(Boström, 2012, p.5, emphasis in original)

Boström argues that policies and governmental action should not only aim to achieve socially sustainable *goals*, but should also address background *processes* that ultimately make communities more (socially) sustainable, such as political participation, transparency, access to decision-making, and citizen empowerment (Boström, 2012). Parra (2013) further stresses this argument, claiming that social sustainability should be approached from the perspective of governance. She asserts that rather than restricting the social dimension to the achievement of a specific set of goals, a governance approach would allow a more integrated view of sustainable development that pursues socially just outcomes while paying

attention to *how* those outcomes are achieved, i.e. the governance processes they create (Parra, 2013). Gruber and Lang (2019) reflect this vision in their analysis of collaborative housing models in Vienna, emphasising how these models pursue rent affordability outcomes while encouraging processes of tenant participation, collaboration, and the construction of solid community ties.

From these contributions, it can be inferred that social sustainability is strengthened by the inclusive and just outcomes it pursues as *well* as the governance dynamics it fosters in the process. The literature on social innovation and bottom-linked governance allows further unpacking of the governance structures that are part and parcel of the realisation of social sustainability in (urban) development.

### ***Social sustainability as a process: insights from social innovation and bottom-linked governance theories***

Social innovation is a concept based on three axes: (1) the satisfaction of previously unmet social needs; (2) the construction of new social relations; and (3) the empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Moulaert et al., 2013). Similarly to social sustainability, it proposes a different approach to development focused on pursuing social goals that revolve around the principles of equality, solidarity, cooperation, and inclusion (Moulaert et al., 2007; Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2007).

This scholarship has focused on civil society organisations that initiate and lead socially innovative initiatives by utilising resources and their networks in novel ways to satisfy human needs, developing new forms of collaborations among each other. These collaborations usually take the form of formal or informal solidarity-based coalitions for advocacy strategising, participatory/collective visioning, and information exchange among their members (Paidakaki, 2017; Paidakaki et al., 2022).

Other forms of collaboration involve bottom-linked governance configurations (García and Haddock, 2016; García and Pradel, 2019); namely new, deeper, and more productive modes of interaction between socially innovative actors (governmental and non-governmental advocates) and decision- and policy-makers across territorial levels (local, regional, national, international), creating a more favourable policy environment for the former to reach their objectives (Gerometta et al., 2005; Pradel et al., 2013). When decision- and policy-makers are open to interact with socially innovative actors and encourage and enable social innovation (e.g. through policies, legislation, programming, funding), the new bottom-linked relationships that arise enhance the participatory, inclusive, and democratic character of decision- and policy-making (Eizaguirre et al., 2012; Paidakaki and Parra, 2018).

Such coalition-building structures and bottom-linked governance creations take place at different levels: local, regional, national, and international. Keck and Sikkink (1998, 1999) conceptualise international coalitions as TANs, or groups that gather “actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.65). These networks assemble a wide range of stakeholders, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, foundations, the media, and religious organisations from different countries (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, 1999), all adding their unique resources and capabilities to the table, benefiting all members involved and strengthening the network as a whole (Yanacopulos, 2005).

### ***Embedding social sustainability in the homelessness sector***

Informed by the concepts of sustainable development, social sustainability, social innovation, bottom-linked governance, and transnational advocacy networks, and following Boström’s (2012) dual definition of social sustainability as an outcome and as a process, we understand social sustainability in the homelessness sector as follows:

*... Social sustainability as an outcome refers to the actions taken by governmental and/or non-governmental organisations in the homelessness sector to decrease the number of homeless people through housing needs satisfaction. Conversely, social sustainability as a process refers to governance structures within the homelessness sector; namely, the construction of novel (inter-organisational) coalitions and bottom-linked governance arrangements for a more democratic design of socially innovative responses to homelessness.*

With this definition of social sustainability in mind, the next section studies the Hub, a new European homelessness coalition of governmental and non-governmental organisations from different European countries working together on the issue of homelessness from a Housing First perspective.

## **A STUDY OF THE HOUSING FIRST EUROPE HUB**

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The Housing First model had been gaining popularity in Europe by the time the Hub was created in 2016 (Houard, 2011; Busch-Geertsema, 2014). This shift can be partly attributed to the vast success of the ‘housing first’ philosophy in Finland, where it led to substantial results in curtailing homelessness rates (Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009; Pleace, 2017). A key actor in this process has been Y-Foundation – a leader of the non-governmental homelessness sector and core promoter of the Housing First approach in Europe – which has played a substantial role in defining

the Finnish Housing first principles upon which the country's homelessness policy is still based today (Y-Foundation, 2017). Motivated by this success, the Foundation aspired to replicate the model on a wider scale (T. Hytönen, personal communication, 5 March, 2021) with the support of FEANTSA, a European umbrella organisation with over 100 national organisations in different European countries.

For the establishment of the Hub, the widespread scepticism that gravitated around the Housing First approach at the time was an important hurdle that had to be first overcome. Before Housing First gained the popularity it enjoys today, in fact, it was often subject to doubts regarding feasibility in a different national context than its original:

“[P]olitically at that time in Europe, in the homelessness sector, there was not a consensus that Housing First and housing-led strategies were the right way forward... and certainly there was resistance in making [Housing First] a priority, and on focusing policy and advocacy action on Housing First.”

(S. Jones, personal communication, 5 March, 2021)

Among several sets of concerns found in the European homelessness sector, one in particular questioned the implementation of the Housing First (American) model in Europe, expressing doubts about the feasibility of the model's adaptation to a different welfare system than the American one—particularly considering that Europe presents a multitude of welfare and social policy systems (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013). This scepticism was reinforced by resistance among FEANTSA's membership and board, who were against the idea of carrying out specific work on Housing First and thus vetoed the allocation of funds for the creation of a satellite network working exclusively on this approach (F. Spinnewijn, personal communication, 2 April, 2021).

To overcome this hurdle, the CEO of Y-Foundation, Juha Kaakinen, offered to finance a separate venture in which FEANTSA could be indirectly involved without putting a strain on its resources, thus respecting the veto imposed by its board (S. Jones, personal communication, 5 March, 2021). The Housing First Europe Hub was created as a joint venture between the two organisations, albeit fully funded by Y-Foundation.

Once the aforementioned hurdle was overcome, FEANTSA and Y-Foundation began canvassing potential partners within the homelessness sector with the goal of building a diverse group of like-minded organisations from different countries. However, finding willing members to be part of the Hub was a difficult task which presented yet another challenge:

“We wanted to have a mixture of NGOs, foundations, public authorities, local authorities, national authorities, etcetera; so we approached some,

and some others knocked on the door of the Hub... In the beginning it was not so easy to find organisations that were keen to do stuff on Housing First; you know, it's not like they say in French '*embarras du choix*', it's not like there were hundreds of organisations that we could choose from."

(F. Spinnewijn, personal communication, 2 April, 2021)

The Hub was finally established in July 2016 by FEANTSA and Y-Foundation, along with 13 allies from various sectors and European countries. In 2022, six years after its inception, the network counts 37 founding and associate partners coming primarily from the governmental and non-governmental sector (e.g. the Belgian Ministry for Social Integration, the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland, the Lyon Metropolitan Area, as well as Crisis UK, Fondation Abbé Pierre, Focus Ireland) (see Appendix). Since its inception, the Hub provides a platform where like-minded actors come together to work on a shared objective (the promotion of Housing First in Europe), each bringing their own expertise to the table and gaining back valuable resources (e.g. training opportunities, advocacy tools, knowledge exchange).

### ***The Hub's unique alliance features and bottom-linked governance leadership***

The Hub primarily focuses on increasing its visibility as a network working on Housing First in Europe, while stimulating the debate around the model and its potential to change and improve traditional approaches to homelessness. The division of tasks within the network coincides with the Hub's five work clusters: *Advocacy* (spreading awareness about Housing First and the Hub), *Community of Practice* (where Housing First practitioners come together and share experiences from their daily jobs), *Housing First for Youth* (centred around the Housing First model for youth aged 13–24), *Research* (producing regular updates such as the quarterly Research Digest), and *Training* (for organisations, professionals, and housing providers who are qualified to deliver Housing First-related training modules to a variety of audiences). Each cluster is headed by one coordinator elected through voluntary participation, and consists of an undefined number of participants (between five and ten on average) who are assigned to the cluster depending on their personal interest and professional expertise.

The Hub benefits from its members' unique assets. Each Hub member brings with them a unique set of knowledge, tools, and connections that benefit peer members and the Hub as a whole. As the ethnographic study conducted at the Hub in early 2021 showed, one example of how Hub members contribute to the overall strength of the alliance includes their links to local networks and political contacts, as well

as their long-term experience in implementing the ‘housing first’ approach. For example, Hub member FEANTSA enriches the network with its political connections within the EU, as well as its expertise on advocating for homelessness issues at the supranational level. Y-Foundation brings to the Hub notable experience on the ‘housing first’ approach, considering the organisation’s long track record in significantly reducing homelessness in Finland and the prominent role it played in defining the Finnish Housing First principles.

The Hub is an international and inter-organisational coalition consisting of governmental and non-governmental members coming from local, regional, and national levels. Through the Hub, liaisons and alliances are created among unlikely partners (e.g. national ministries and local NGOs), which allow access to a pool of contacts and resources in other countries and contexts. From the perspective of non-governmental organisations, being in the same network with high-level governmental bodies legitimises and validates their cause as they become affiliated with – often hard-to-reach – political actors. At the same time, governmental organisations who are Hub members benefit from the expertise of non-governmental organisations in conducting work on the ground. For example, the Spanish organisation HOGAR SÍ contributes with extensive know-how of managing a large number of Housing First units across the country (300 out of 500 specifically) (V. Cenjor del Rey, personal communication, 24 March, 2021).

Furthermore, participant observation at internal Hub meetings and semi-structured interviews carried out during the 2021 ethnographic study revealed that Hub members also benefit from the network by gaining access to *advocacy* and *vocational training*. A first example of such benefit is the Hub’s informational resources (e.g. infographics, reports, webinars, videos) which are made accessible to all members and used by them as tools to further their own advocacy work at local, national, and international levels. The *Housing First Guide: Europe* is an illustrative example of such an informational resource, frequently used by the Hub for the alliance’s advocacy work and which was translated from English into other languages by certain members of the Hub (M. Schmit, personal communication, 29 March, 2021). A second example is the *Train the Trainer* programme, where staff members from Hub member organisations learn to train a variety of audiences (e.g. civil servants, service workers, other Housing First practitioners) on Housing First. Finally, a third example is the recently published *Evaluation Framework* (Housing First Europe Hub, 2020b), a template used to evaluate whether a certain programme can be classified as Housing First.

During participant observation in internal Hub meetings, it became apparent that the most valuable assets the Hub offers to its members are the *networking opportunities* and the chance to establish new linkages with peer members. These

connections are essential in (1) stimulating new contacts between organisations working on the same issue; and (2) enhancing the credibility of Hub members at home through their association with a high-profile network.

“Maybe the biggest part of the worth for me [is] meeting people across Europe that are *all* doing this with the same spirit, the same mentality, and the same energy. And that really motivates [you] to keep going, because it can be quite a hard battle... Also the connectedness, [being] part of something that is not just you and the Municipality trying to get something done, but it’s a bigger movement.”

(M. Schmit, personal communication, 29 March, 2021; emphasis in original)

The linkages created as a result of these networking opportunities have considerable impact upon members’ advocacy work in the local, regional, or national contexts where they operate, allowing them to accrue their influence vis-à-vis their target policy- and decision-makers. By showing their participation in an international network working exclusively on Housing First, and providing hard evidence of the model’s success and modes of application in various territories, Hub founding and associate partners use their Hub membership as a tool to advocate for sounder homelessness policies and strategies.

“If you say that this is something that works all over the world and you have proof of that, and you are part of that group... When you say: ‘We are members of FEANTSA, of the Hub which is working only on Housing First; look at the data, look at the reports, look at the results in other countries. We are part of this and we can give you all this experience and all this information’, it’s a very good key to entry.”

(V. Cenjor del Rey, personal communication, 24 March, 2021)

On top of building productive relationships with their peers and in their process of building bottom-linked governance structures, Hub members seek allies in local, regional, national, and supranational policy circles who are considered essential for the successful promotion of Housing First. This governance formation process is largely performed by members as individual organisations, rather than by the network as an umbrella actor. As a result, founding and associate partners build ties at home on their own, supported by the Hub’s resources and expertise when necessary. For instance, Hub member Crisis builds liaisons with politicians and civil servants in the UK by directly contacting them and inviting them to conferences and other events (M. Downie, personal communication, 19 March, 2021). Likewise, Hub associate Housing First Berlin has established cooperation with the current administration of the Department of Integration, Labour and Social Affairs in Berlin (I. Bullermann, personal communication, 16 March, 2021). At the supranational level, pro-Housing First advocacy is carried out mainly by FEANTSA due to its

extensive knowledge of the European policy context and established political connections (S. Jones, personal communication, 5 March, 2021).

According to three interviewees, their respective organisations have forged collaborative relationships with target policy- and decision-makers, which suggests bottom-linked governance structures may be created as a result of these interactions.

“[O]ften the term [Housing First] opens a lot of doors, but... we notice that always, when we try to argue and discuss it: ‘Let’s make it bigger. Let’s make it more normal as an approach in the health system’, then the discussion becomes more difficult.”

(I. Bullermann, personal communication, 16 March, 2021)

However, two other interviewees shared a different experience, mentioning an abrupt end of discussions on the possibility for upscaling Housing First from a pilot project to a fundamental element of a national homelessness strategy.

“I think the difficulty of Housing First is that if you tell the story it’s hard to say that you do not approve, because how can you say no to that? But if you then have a conversation on how to get to such a place, that is where the difficulties begin. They say: ‘The political climate is not good’, or ‘We have a lack of housing’; you get all these kinds of conversations. So they are very open to the story and they also think it’s very good, but it’s very hard to get the political support and really do something. It’s very hard to get beyond the point of ‘Oh wow, what a great story’.”

(M. Schmit, personal communication, 29 March, 2021)

## CONCLUSIONS

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This paper has aimed to uncover the transformative potential of international and inter-organisational homelessness coalitions, such as the Hub, in realising social sustainability ambitions in the homelessness sector, specifically shedding light on the bottom-linked governance structures steered by the Hub’s members.

By analysing the internal features of an international and inter-organisational homelessness alliance and its governance-building potential, some important conclusions are drawn. An initial conclusion suggests that the Hub and its members further social sustainability in homelessness systems through the *goals* they pursue (e.g. the satisfaction of permanent housing needs for the homeless) and the *processes* they mobilise, fostering a culture of productive interactions and exchanges between and across members in terms of access to information, resources, political connections, advocacy tools, and training opportunities. By



providing a platform for founding and associate partners to connect with like-minded organisations from the governmental and non-governmental sector situated in different countries and contexts, the Hub enables its members to explore and create new linkages with their peers through networking. The alliances that arise from these new connections benefit all members through information exchange, practical know-how, advice and training, and experience in conducting advocacy and field work at multiple levels. Specifically, Hub members coming from the governmental sector gain the practical knowledge of their non-governmental partners in how homelessness work is conducted on the ground. Conversely, non-governmental members of the Hub benefit from their association with a far-reaching, international network working solely on Housing First, which bolsters the credibility of their advocacy work when interacting with policy- and decision-makers at home. Supported also by evidence-based successes of Housing First in a variety of countries and contexts, non-governmental advocates hold better potential in convincing decision- and policy-makers to review existing homelessness strategies and develop more comprehensive, socially sustainable policies, promoting the implementation of Housing First in their community.

To further expand its socio-spatial and politico-institutional reach and pursue its socially sustainable goals in the homelessness sector, the Hub also catalyses a series of external (bottom-linked) governance structures led by different members at various levels that enhance democratisation and participation in decision-making and promote more socially sustainable responses to homelessness. Although the potential for bottom-linked governance to achieve said goals remains limited when Housing First advocacy efforts stumble upon an unfavourable political climate, novel governance structures can materialise in public-private partnerships with political actors (e.g. between Crisis UK and local civil servants, or between FEANTSA and EU institutions). In such bottom-linked governance structures, socially innovative organisations in the homelessness sector aim to consolidate their relationship with decision- and policy-makers and thus unlock opportunities (funding, political connections, new legislation) that allow them to challenge conventional responses to homelessness, promote socially sustainable solutions to homelessness such as the Housing First model, and enhance the democratic, inclusive, and participatory character of the governance process within the homelessness sector.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Overview of Housing First Europe Hub members, listed in alphabetical order. Source: authors.**

Member	Status	Country	Organisation type
Agence Nouvelle des Solidarités Actives (ANSA)	Associate partner	FR	Non-governmental
Asociación Provienda	Associate partner	ES	Non-governmental
Belgian Ministry for Social Integration	Founding partner	BE	Governmental
Crisis	Founding partner	UK	Non-governmental
Danish Board of Social Services	Associate partner	DK	Governmental
Depaul	Associate partner	IE	Non-governmental
Dihal	Founding partner	FR	Governmental
EST Métropole Habitat	Founding partner	FR	Governmental
FEANTSA	Founding partner	EU	Non-governmental
fio.PSD	Associate partner	IT	Non-governmental
Focus Ireland	Founding partner	IE	Non-governmental
Fondation Abbé Pierre	Founding partner	FR	Non-governmental
Grand Lyon	Founding partner	FR	Governmental
Greater Manchester Housing First	Associate partner	UK	Governmental
HOGAR Sí	Founding partner	ES	Non-governmental
Homeless Link	Associate partner	UK	Non-governmental
Homeless Network Scotland	Associate partner	UK	Non-governmental
Homelessness Australia	Associate partner	AU	Non-governmental
Housing Finance and Development Centre	Associate partner	FI	Governmental
Housing First Berlin	Associate partner	DE	Non-governmental
Housing First für Frauen	Associate partner	DE	Non-governmental
Housing First Nederland	Associate partner	NL	Non-governmental
Husbanken	Associate partner	NO	Governmental
HVO-Querido	Associate partner	NL	Non-governmental
Limor	Associate partner	NL	Governmental
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority	Associate partner	UK	Governmental
Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030	Founding partner	ES	Governmental
Respond	Associate partner	IE	Non-governmental
Rock Trust	Founding partner	UK	Non-governmental
Sant Joan de Déu València	Founding partner	ES	Non-governmental
Simon Communities	Associate partner	IE	Non-governmental
Simon Community Scotland	Associate partner	UK	Non-governmental
Stadsmissioner	Founding partner	SE	Governmental
Strasbourg Eurométropole	Associate partner	FR	Governmental
Turning Point Scotland	Founding partner	UK	Non-governmental
World Habitat	Associate partner	UK	Non-governmental
Y-Foundation	Founding partner	FI	Non-governmental

