



Mission of Social housing, a service of general interest promoting social and territorial cohesion
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Introduction

The quest for clarification engaged by the Commission in the Green Paper and the stronger place that services of general interest has been given in the future Constitution are two sides of the same coin: a framework is needed to ensure that all Europe's citizens and residents have access to better quality services and goods that they can afford wherever they live. It is about guaranteeing access to fundamental rights for all including housing.

SGI and housing

Public policy action in the housing sector addresses the needs not covered by the market and the last joint report on social inclusion published by the Commission and the Council gives express recognition to the role played by public policies of housing in inclusion and access to other essential services.

Whatever else, access to the service of housing is a prerequisite for access to other services of general interest like energy, health, education and quality-of-life-related services. The resulting essential public service goal is to guarantee access to housing for the following reasons:

- Access to housing is an objective of social and territorial cohesion. Housing has to be seen as an area- and country-wide system, because it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint stable target groups. Decentralization of housing policy is not going in hand with a transfer of revenue powers but instead by cuts in housing policy budgets. As a result, it is widening territorial gaps.
- Access to housing is an objective of social inclusion. The market meets only certain needs, and appropriate housing responses are needed for specific needs (people with disabilities, elderly persons, etc.) or local market shortages. Quality housing must be ensured for all, including the poor. That means pursuing an ambitious housing service of general interest.

Public housing policies are essential to guarantee access to housing and social housing is an instrument of public housing policy has specifics that need to be taken in account:

Multiple goals: addressing integrated cohesion policies

It delivers an integrated response to a range of objectives. The provision of good quality, affordable housing directly impacts not just on social inclusion but also on cohesion, sustainable community development through mixed urban renewal schemes, and the environmental impact of housing through environment-friendly solutions, and social diversity.

Should compensation therefore be calculated for all an organization's operations or just for a specific mission in a particular area? Mechanisms now exist through which to effect averaging between operators or missions to enable sustainable funding of SGI and transparent use of public funds - what will become of these mechanisms?

Public guarantees for investment are needed to ensure continuity and equality of access to SGI. As things stand, for example, different ratings between the tiers of local and regional government that underwrite investments is making long-term investments costlier in the poorest regions. We want sustainable, fair public guarantee systems to be set up, and for the current debates on SGEI to invest them with legal certainty.

Network services, local and social services

The social housing sector is not of a kind with network services and it is impossible to apply the same conceptual framework to housing. Like them, it requires major investment, but unlike all the network sectors covered by sectoral directives, the infrastructure is not built in order to facilitate movement flows. Like social services, it is to do with social welfare, but it is not about delivery of personal services. Health and education, for example, are sectors that require initial investment, but the service of general interest consists in health or education services, not infrastructure. Finally, housing is also unlike all other services of general interest in that the need for housing is permanent. Water, electricity and employment services are SGI that are used when needed. Taps are not left running nor lights on unless they are being used; likewise roads and trains, that are used when there is a need to get from A to B. Houses are durable goods that everyone always needs and are used all the time. Housing of general interest is such a good provided by the public authorities for population groups that cannot house themselves. All these characteristics make social housing a special SGEI which does not fall within the examples and definitions put forward in the current debates, but which must be given recognition as such.

Housing markets may be flawed in many ways. Tight market creating a shortage of affordable housing, urban concentration or conversely urban sprawl, social segregation in some districts ... all failings that social housing can address in many different but always local ways!

Not all sectors are apt to affect competition and Community trade in the same way, and that must be taken into account. We ask for a clarification of the application of competition rules to our sector with respect to the subsidiarity principle. And therefore, we also call on the intergovernmental conference to lay the foundation in the future Constitution for actions at Community level in the field of services of general interest by strengthening the article on services of general interest.

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CECODHAS, the European Liaison Committee for Social Housing, is a network of national and regional federations of social housing organizations in the 15 EU Member States and some new accession countries. Its aims are to promote social housing to the Community authorities and develop exchanges between its members on key issues in social housing. It has 45 members in the 15 European Union countries and in 8 new accession and other European countries. Nearly one in five Europeans live in social housing. CECODHAS members provide 35 million homes in all - 25 million rented social housing units, plus 10 million which were built and/or financed for sale to owner-occupiers <http://www.cecodhas.org>