



Implementing the new Portuguese Homelessness Strategy: on the right track?

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Recent positive developments have occurred regarding the implementation process of the Portuguese Strategy for the Integration of Homeless Persons 2017-2023. Improvements have been made in the functioning of the operational structures which will support implementation, thus addressing some of the main challenges which led to implementation failures in the previous strategy.

Description

On 25 July 2017, the Portuguese Strategy for the Integration of Homeless Persons 2017-2023 (ENIPSA) was approved by the Council of Ministers' Resolution 107/2017. It is based on three strategic objectives, the first two of which were reiterated from the previous national strategy (which covered the period 2009-2015): a) promoting knowledge, information, awareness raising and education on the phenomenon; b) strengthening intervention aiming at promoting the integration of homeless persons; and c) strengthening coordination, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The new strategy is planned to be implemented according to bi-annual action plans which are to be prepared by an Interinstitutional Group composed of public and private non-profit organisations (the GIMAE) responsible for monitoring its implementation in close cooperation with the local homelessness units, and to be approved by a new body – the Interministerial Committee. This new governance structure, where all ministries are represented, is responsible for ensuring that the definition, linkages and implementation of public policies in their respective area of government are aligned with the objectives and goals of the strategy in relation to homelessness. A further innovation with regard to the new governance structure

is the strengthening of the representation at the GIMAE of the local homelessness units, which were set up after 2009.

The approval of the strategy was preceded by successive rounds of consultations with different stakeholders (e.g. public and private entities involved in the former GIMAE responsible for the monitoring of the 2009-2015 strategy, and local homelessness units). Some factors have contributed to consistent (although in its infancy) progress in the operationalisation of the new strategy, namely: i) the renewed commitment of public and private stakeholders in this new stage; ii) the acknowledgment of previous achievements and failures in implementing the 2009-2015 strategy as foreseen; iii) positive changes at the local level arising from the adoption of a strategic approach to homelessness; and iv) explicit political support at the highest level.

Since mid-September 2017, it has been possible to observe the execution of a number of successive initiatives which may be crucial to ensuring baseline conditions for a successful operationalisation of the strategy, namely as regards: a) the strengthening of the representation of the local homeless units within the

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governance structure of the GIMAE; b) the setting up and operation of several internal working groups directly focussing on specific areas of the strategy (e.g. communication, training, intervention, and monitoring and evaluation); c) the approval of the internal regulations of the strategy's governance structures; and d) the setting up and operation of the strategy's main governance structures.

The implementation of these first stages of the 2017-2018 Action Plan has been coordinated by the Institute for Social Security, which is the governmental body responsible for the overall coordination of the strategy and has involved the active participation of a wide range of public (e.g. ministries, public institutes, local authorities) and private (e.g. NGOs, research institutes) stakeholders. On 28 November 2017, the first action plan was approved by the Interministerial Committee and endorsed by the Minister for Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. On 30 November, the strategy's website was launched.

Outlook & commentary

The recent developments in the implementation of the new (2017-2023) strategy in Portugal need to be framed within the context of the experience in implementing the previous (2009-2015) strategy. On the one hand, the drive for change boosted by the strategy, together with the ability and commitment of local stakeholders led to positive changes in reorganising local responses to homelessness in a coordinated and integrated way in several local territories (Baptista, 2013). On the other hand, several failures in its implementation (e.g. lack of political endorsement, lack of institutional drive, lack of

transparency in resource allocation, weak horizontal coordination, failure to implement monitoring and evaluation procedures) jeopardised the foreseen attainment of most of its initial objectives.

The renewed State interest for a strategic approach to homelessness resulted both from a push from civil society organisations and other non-governmental stakeholders involved in the previous process and from the emergence of a more "welcoming" political agenda. The direct involvement of the President of the Republic in pushing forward the need for a new National Homelessness Strategy was also a key driver.

The participation of a diverse range of stakeholders in the implementation of the new strategy has been strengthened during the last two months through the operationalisation of the different strategy's governance structures which have been actively working in the implementation of the 2017-2018 Action Plan. Moreover, the Institute for Social Security has regained an activating and nurturing role in coordinating the operation of the overall strategy, which had been one of the success factors in the drafting process of the 2009-2015 strategy; conversely, the fading away of such responsibility strongly contributed to major failures registered in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of the 2009-2015 strategy.

The potential for change in the homelessness arena introduced by the approval of a new policy instrument in 2009 – which was not fully realised – may now regain a new impetus. In fact, it is important to recall that Portugal was the first Mediterranean country to adopt a strategic

approach to homelessness. Unachieved expectations regarding actual change in the delivery of homelessness services, despite local level developments registered between 2009 and 2017, may now find fertile ground through the necessary central state support. This may help to achieve the announced breakthrough in strategically tackling and preventing homelessness in the country. The European Commission's concern on the need to tackle homelessness voiced explicitly through the European Semester process (EC, 2017) which occurred concomitantly with these developments may strengthen national ambition to deliver positively in this area.

Further reading

Baptista, Isabel (2013), The First Portuguese Homelessness Strategy: Progress and Obstacles, *European Journal of Homelessness*, Volume 7 (2), pp. 87-107, available at: http://www.feantsa.org/download/ib_review1753693207719349638.pdf.

European Commission (2017), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank - Annual Growth Survey 2018, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-comm-690_en_0.pdf.

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