SPC Thematic Review: Housing-led enabling social services tackling homelessness and housing exclusion

(September 2019)

1. <u>Scene Setter</u>

Homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) are the most extreme manifestations of poverty and social exclusion. They refer to the living situations of persons who do not have an adequate dwelling, either because they are living in the streets or in temporary accommodations, or because they face inadequacy or insecurity with their current housing[1].

Since 2010, awareness of HHE has increased and there have been calls for more rights-based approaches and integrated strategies for fighting HHE across the EU. This includes relevant 2012[2] and 2016[3] Council Conclusions, the European Parliament resolution of 2014[4] and the Commission paper "Confronting Homelessness in the European Union" [5] accompanying the 2013 Social Investment Package (SIP). In recent cycles, the analysis in the country reports produced as part of the European Semester cycle have increasingly covered the issue of HHE. Most recently, the European Pillar of Social Rights, in its principle 19, has recognised the rights to housing and assistance for the homeless, as well as protection against forced eviction. The Revised Joint Employment Guidelines adopted in June 2018, including guideline 8 on equal opportunities, social inclusion and combatting poverty, states that "for those in need or in a vulnerable situation, Member States should ensure access to adequate social housing or housing assistance. Homelessness should be tackled specifically".

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[1] European Typology for Homeless and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS)
https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-HHE-and-housing-exclusion
[2] Responding to Demographic Challenges through enhanced participation in the labour market and society by all - Council Conclusions (22 June 2012),
https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11639-2012-INIT/en/pdf
[3] Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion: An integrated approach - Council Conclusions (16 June 2016)
http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10434-2016-INIT/en/pdf
[4] European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2014 on an EU homelessness strategy
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2014-0043
[5] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52013SC0042

Despite the increased policy attention to homelessness and housing exclusion and the recent improvements in the social and labour market conditions across the EU, HHE remain a significant concern in a number of Member States. In 2018, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) reported[6] that the number of homeless people has increased over the last decade in all Member States, but Finland. This finding is supported by research carried out by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN, 2019) on behalf of the European Commission[7], which confirms that Finland is the only Member State to have seen its level of homelessness reduced over the last decade.

2. Thematic Review findings

In line with the policy priorities of the Finnish presidency, in September 2019 the SPC held an in-depth thematic discussion on "*Housing-led enabling social services tackling homelessness and housing exclusion*". The discussion was framed by presentations from ESPN and FEANTSA, who presented key findings from their latest reports, as well as the Czech Republic and Finland, who presented their national practices in the area.

In the ensuing plenary discussion, a number of common findings and challenges emerged, supporting the importance of exchange of best practices and the value of peer learning:

- The drivers of homelessness are complex and often reflect vulnerabilities related to personal circumstances (illness, addiction, family breakdown), structural (indebtedness, joblessness, rising housing costs), or institutional (leaving care or prison) causes. Segregation and discrimination against vulnerable groups also plays a role. Whilst the causes of homelessness are multiple, its determining characteristic is the absence of a suitable housing solution.

- Policies to address homelessness should focus on prevention, re-housing and support (where needed), as well as on tackling the housing situation alongside other barriers to inclusion. This is perceived as more effective than policies and measures which focus on managing homelessness and housing exclusion as a challenge in the short term (i.e. the provision of shelters and emergency accommodation as the predominant focus). The need to ensure shelters and emergency accommodation of adequate quality and to all who need them is

recognized by the Member States. However, there is a growing awareness that without integrated strategies that cover prevention, re-housing and support in the long term, shelters and emergency accommodation cannot provide proper public policy solutions to homelessness.

- An increasing number of Member States are engaging in the development of such integrated strategies to address the issue of homelessness and housing exclusion. Yet, their development appears to be hindered by a lack of an agreed definition of HHE; insufficient related data collection, monitoring and evaluation; and - as reported in some countries - limited public support and funding available at the local level.

- In several Member States, the provision of financial and housing guidance has proven to be an effective way to prevent evictions. Debt settlement and rapid re-housing, (especially for families with children), supplemented with psychological and social support are identified as cost-effective measures that can significantly reduce the number of forced evictions and the risk of homelessness.

- For people already affected by homelessness and housing exclusion, two broad policy approaches can be distinguished: the 'staircase approach' which involves step-by-step assistance to homeless people through various forms of temporary housing support, up to the point where they are deemed ready to live independently in their own home; and the 'housing first' approach, which prioritizes the provision of stable housing from the start, in combination with enabling care and social support in order to assist the individual in the rehousing process.

- Currently, the staircase model of service provision is dominant in the European Union, with many Member States focused on providing temporary accommodation in response to the rising levels of homelessness. There is, however, growing evidence that housing-first strategies are more beneficial and cost-effective in the long run, as they allow authorities to focus intensive social support on the often complex social, mental and physical challenges that the individual might face beside homelessness.

3. Policy recommendations:

Homelessness and housing exclusion are a growing problem that negatively affects the individuals and threatens social cohesion. Efforts to tackle and prevent HHE play an important role in building socially and environmentally sustainable economies promoted, for example, under the Economy of Well-being approach of the Finnish presidency of the European Union. The following recommendations emerged from the SPC discussion:

- Integrated approaches that combine prevention, rapid access to permanent housing and the provision of enabling support services are recognized as more efficient responses, compared to those, which focus on managing homelessness predominantly through emergency and temporary accommodation and the provision of support for the most basic needs. A minimum provision of temporary accommodation of good quality (e.g. shelters) remains however an essential part of integrated strategies to respond to emergency situations and ensure a transit accommodation while a permanent re-housing solution is found.

- At national level, the involvement of a wide range of public and private stakeholders, including local and regional authorities, as well as relevant NGOs in the strategies aimed at fighting HHE is essential. The involvement of people affected by HHE in designing the appropriate response is considered a good practice. Strong inter-ministerial, cross-governmental and cross-sectoral collaboration helps to better identify and address the multiple and distinctive needs of the homeless persons. Social security provisions that support independent living are another important factor.

- Since ensuring sufficient funding can be a challenge, sharing of best practices and mutual learning should be developed to support the efficient allocation of funds by promoting effective evidence-based approaches to HHE. Member States and the European Commission should fully exploit the potential of EU structural and investment funds in the fight against homelessness in the context of the new Multiannual Financial Framework.

- At European level, the clarification of the concepts of homelessness and the development of reliable data should be continued. The agreement on coherent EU indicators for the regular monitoring of the progress achieved would be a major step forward towards increasingly ending the HHE challenge. Homelessness should keep a central place of the Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

- Building on the strategic links between the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights, the topic of homelessness and housing exclusion is an important issue, that should become more visible in the main social and economic policy process of the EU. Tackling the HHE challenge should be taken into consideration by the incoming Commission in the design of a post Europe 2020 strategy and in the framework of the action plan on implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- Homelessness and housing exclusion should also be mainstreamed across relevant sectoral policies such as gender equality, health, disability, child and youth inclusion, migration, free movement.