

## Counting the homeless – improving the basis for planning assistance

Freek Spinnewijn  
FEANTSA

This seems to be a different type of Peer Review than the Peer Reviews FEANTSA was involved in in the past. It seems to be a more open Peer Review not based on a particular best practice of the host country. We therefore think it is useful to list a number of reflections to contribute to the debate at the meeting.

### General comments

- FEANTSA obviously agrees that proper planning is very important for effective homelessness policies, and that data collection is an essential element of planning. But the importance of data collection goes beyond planning, and also relates to the actual design of policies, and the monitoring and evaluation of policies.
- Continuous planning and data collection only make sense in the framework of a public homelessness strategy. We understand that homeless counts can be useful to generate political interest in the issue of homelessness, but data collection and planning efforts should have more ambitious goals.
- Planning and data collection should not happen in an isolated way at local level. Planning and data collection should be organised in the first place at the level where policy is designed and monitored, which in most EU member states is the national and/or regional level.
- FEANTSA believes that a distinct homelessness strategy is required to ensure effective policy intervention on homelessness. For such a strategy to be developed it is necessary to have a solid understanding of the scope and nature of homelessness. A clear definition of homelessness is essential in this respect. FEANTSA believes that the ETHOS typology which we finalised in 2005 can be a good reference for developing a clear definition. FEANTSA developed some time ago a checklist for effective homelessness strategies which can be consulted on the FEANTSA website.<sup>1</sup>
- We believe that homelessness policies should be based on evidence – both quantitative and qualitative. It is surprising that in so many EU member states homeless policies are still based assumptions and sometimes even prejudices rather than on a solid understanding of homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=797>

## Some comments on data collection

- There are several ways to collect data on homelessness – through surveys, counts, continuous recording systems, etc. In the framework of the MPHASIS project (funded by EC in which app. 20 member states participated) a model of an effective homelessness information system/strategy has been developed which includes several data collection methods. In this model there clearly is an important role for the local authorities.
- It is important that data collection strategies deliver both quantitative and qualitative data. A total number of homeless people is important especially to mobilise political support and to monitor progress. Data on the changing profile of the homeless population are probably more important for policy development because they often require substantial changes in policy measures.
- In many countries a key problem is that people stay longer in homelessness services than is required for their reintegration process. Several countries have committed themselves to reducing time spent in hostels. Therefore flow data which give an indication of the time people stay in hostels are very important.
- The collection of data needs to be of interest to all stakeholders involved. Especially for (NGO) service providers which are usually involved in the collection of the data, their involvement needs to positively impact on the development/management of the services. Often data at the level of the services are linked to the public funding that is made available. This is understandable but not helpful to mobilise NGOs on data collection initiatives – especially if the funding is calculated on the number of bed spaces filled.
- Data which are related to the targeted prevention on homelessness are very important for effective policies, but often not or not sufficiently/systematically available. This concerns data such as homelessness upon release from prison, hospital or other institution, and data related to eviction notices and eviction orders. Often only small changes to existing administrative recording systems are necessary to get data on homelessness prevention.
- FEANTSA understands the added value of point-in-time surveys, but we believe that continuously recorded data are probably more valuable for providing service user statistics. Attention should go to reinforcing the continuous collection of data by homeless service providers and to adapting administrative records to better capture homelessness. Several good practices exist on administrative and service-based data recording systems which can serve as a source of inspiration.
- A directory/database of homeless services can be an important source of supply statistics (e.g. the number of bed spaces, the occupancy rate) which can be useful for measurement and estimations of homelessness. Such directories of services have multiple uses and purposes: for internal use by service providers, for research/survey purposes, for policy-makers to collect relevant service information (no. of beds, type of support provided, etc), for use by homeless people themselves (see for instance: [www.homelessuk.org](http://www.homelessuk.org)). FEANTSA believes that setting up a service directory is an important first step in measuring and monitoring homelessness.

## Some comments on planning

- We agree that setting targets is an important element of effective planning. Targets should be both ambitious and realistic. They should relate to solving/ending homelessness and not to managing homelessness. In this regard, it might be useful to look into FEANTSA's campaign for the EY2010 against poverty which calls for an end to homelessness. We have translated this overall goal into 5 concrete objectives (1) Make sure nobody has to sleep rough because of lack of services adapted to their needs (2) Make sure nobody stays in emergency accommodation longer than his/her situation is an emergency (3) Make sure nobody stays in temporary accommodation longer than is required for the process of integration (4) Making sure that nobody becomes homeless upon release from an institution (5) Making sure that no young person becomes homeless in the transition to independent life. We believe that every EU member state should integrate these objectives in one way or another into their public homelessness policies. We are aware that for these objectives to be reached some structural causes of homelessness will have to be addressed, but we believe that the objectives are concrete enough to allow for visible progress in all EU member states in a fairly short time-frame.
- There is a tendency to overcomplicate the solutions for homeless people. For most homeless people the solution will be housing with support adapted to their (changing) needs. For a minority of homeless people in most countries, institutional solutions might be required. What makes progress difficult is not so much the actual solution, but the cooperation/sharing of responsibility between different stakeholders that is required to reach the solution. Therefore much attention should be devoted in the planning phase to the division of responsibilities and tasks – between and amongst public bodies, policy makers, homelessness service providers, mainstream service providers.
- An important factor in proper planning is budgeting. A superficial comparison between EU member states reveals that the budgets reserved for combating homelessness vary enormously (even after correcting for the differences in living standards, public budgets...). Very little European work has been done on how to budget for homeless strategies. Unlike in the US and Australia, very little cost-benefit analysis exist of current public interventions on homelessness in Europe. Such analyses can be a useful source of information for the planning of public homelessness policies.
- Data collection is obviously not sufficient to inform planning processes. Research and evaluation of policies are equally important. There are only very few EU member states that have a research programme as an integral part of their homelessness policies. In most member states there is no or little attempts to develop a strategic research programme, which should be easy because of the relatively small research community working on homelessness.
- There seems to be some frustration with the Viennese authorities about ineffective prevention policies which address the structural causes of homelessness such as unemployment and developments in the housing market. FEANTSA believes that some modesty is required regarding the prevention of homelessness through interventions on the broader structural causes of homelessness. In some instances it might be more effective to intervene quickly when homelessness occurs rather than trying to prevent homelessness by policy intervention

in areas where the specific triggers leading to homelessness cannot be clearly identified. We probably have to accept that solving homelessness through prevention only is not possible.

- We referred above to FEANTSA's checklist which includes 10 dimensions to make homeless strategies effective. This might be an interesting framework in the planning process. Checklist can be consulted on the FEANTSA website.<sup>2</sup>
- We believe that one of the basis of successful policy intervention is common understanding of the scope, nature and causes of homelessness amongst all stakeholders, and a shared understanding of what is the solution and what are the policy measures needed to get to the solution. Such a consensus amongst the stakeholders is often lacking and can create barriers to policy progress. There are several methods to build such a consensus – consensus conferencing is one of them. A European consensus conference will take place in 2010, and can serve as an inspiration for some EU member states.

## Some comments on the role of the EU

### *General ...*

- There is a clear political momentum on homelessness at EU level and a growing number of member states. European cooperation can have a strong impact on homelessness policies in the different EU member states – also on planning. Examples from other countries on targets, budgets, forms of cooperation, etc. can be a source of inspiration for policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders. But this requires systematic and strategic EU involvement on the issue of homelessness. We are hopeful that an EU strategy on homelessness which supports member states and fully respects the principle of subsidiarity will be developed as a follow up of the thematic “light year” on homelessness (2009).

### *Data collection ...*

- As referred to above, the MPHASIS project delivered interesting results on which the EU can build. We suggest that the European Commission develops a action plan based on the outcome statement of the MPHASIS project. FEANTSA is prepared to support this.
- The 2011 census will be an important opportunity to get a base-line figure of the number of homeless people at EU level and in some countries. In the EU regulation on population and housing censuses, it is clearly stipulated that homeless people have to be covered. But we anticipate serious shortcomings with the results of the census. It will be important for Eurostat to provide technical (and financial) support to ensure that the census figure on homelessness reflects as much as possible the reality in the future.
- The data on homelessness collected in the framework of the EU Urban Audit are incomplete and inaccurate. On the basis of the EU-funded research on data collection and the MPHASIS project a toolkit for cities should be developed on homelessness data collection in order to improve the homelessness data in the Urban Audit.

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=797>

*Targets ...*

- We are surprised that member states were asked about the impact of the Written Declaration 111 of the European Parliament. The WD is in the first place aimed at EU bodies. It calls upon the Council to commit to ending street homelessness by 2015. It calls upon the European Commission to monitor progress on homelessness in the different EU member states in the framework of the OMC. The EP asks member states to develop effective winter emergency plans including sufficient emergency accommodation to ensure no homeless person dies of cold during the winter period. We believe that it is important that the demands to the Council and the Commission are fully integrated in the OMC social protection & social inclusion. The thematic “light year” on homelessness is provides a good basis for this.
- The EU could commit to ending homelessness as outlined in FEANTSA’s 2010 campaign with the 5 concrete objectives. It would allow for a variety of concrete EU actions – actions under the OMC, funding through the Structural Funds, and potentially even legal action.

These reflections will hopefully be useful for the debate in the Peer Review. We are aware that more concrete examples of what works in terms of planning and data collection would have been useful, but we FEANTSA can provide more concrete information in the follow up of the Peer Review.