

Comments on the Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness in the light of the Hungarian context

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Brief national context of the Hungarian homelessness strategy proposal

In Hungary a comprehensive, national strategy proposal on tackling homelessness as well as reforming the present system of homeless service provision and its service and financing structure was developed in 2008. It has been the first document attempting to address the phenomenon of homelessness in a complex way. Containing comprehensive national strategic elements the document can serve as a starting point for a series of governmental measures to tackle homelessness. The development of the strategy proposal was drafted by two well-known and acknowledged experts in the field of homelessness after they were commissioned by the then ministerial commissioner for homeless affairs under the previous Government in 2007. The strategy proposal first was presented at the national conference of homeless service providers in the autumn of 2008 to representatives of the Government and the relevant ministry as well as homeless service providers, then after a relatively short period of discussion it was formally sent to the Government.

While the strategy proposal was developed and it was acknowledged by homeless service providers, it has not been adopted at governmental level so far. Although some elements of the proposal appears in certain initiatives, the development of a comprehensive action plan based on broad cooperation of the relevant stakeholders has not been initiated and the partially implemented elements of the strategy proposal do not seem to have significant impact at the national level.

Although the document itself hasn't been adopted by the Government as a whole we consider important to share its objective with the host country and the other peer countries to present what the current priorities are in Hungary in the fight against homelessness.

Objectives of the Hungarian strategy proposal

The document covers three strategic objectives:

The first strategic objective is about access to housing as well as sustaining housing. Its major points are as follows¹:

- Instead of supporting housing purchase and homeowner centred support of access to housing rental subsidies should be provided
- Increase the number of social rented housings by introducing housing associations for building and operating rented housings as well as supporting private rentals
- Harmonizing and enlarging the current housing subsidies
- Strengthening the security of housing in the rental sector, reducing rent and public utility arrears by regulating the debt management procedures of local governments and public utility service providers, making evictions procedures more difficult for local authorities to enforce

The second strategic area aims at the re-organization of homeless service regulation and its main elements are as follows:

- To replace the present definition of 'homeless' by introducing the definition of 'houseless'
- Examination of eligibility for social assistance
- Transformation of the current normative financing of institutions into service financing
- Integration of the supported housing programmes currently operated by periodic project funding into the system of housing subsidies as reintegration support for homeless people
- Establishment of a Homeless Programme Office (Agency) responsible for the implementation of homeless policies

The third strategic element sets the target of reducing the number of rough sleepers with the following elements:

- Introducing the practice of the so called 'positive zero tolerance' in order to define the conditions threatening the lives of rough sleepers in such a fatal way that people can not be left in the street any longer
- Partnership agreement and monitoring system should be developed with the family support services, childcare institutions, mental health institutions, addiction treatment centres as well as prisons in order to prevent people from relapsing

¹ Györi-Maróthy: 'Which Way to Go On? Potential Framework of a National Homelessness Strategy', Budapest, 2008 p.6-7

- Low threshold night shelters and temporary hostels in order to facilitate access for rough sleepers
- Operation of day centres for active daytime assistance

Current Governmental measures

The new Hungarian Government formed in 2010 May promised explicit measures concerning the issue of homelessness particularly rough sleepers. The bill - presented by the Ministry of Interior in September 2010 - that would allow local authorities to expel homeless people from public places banning even silent begging - resulted on the one hand the objection of homeless service providers but on the other hand it initiated the dialogue between the Government and homeless service providers. On 19 October 2010 the Government adopted a resolution on the tasks to be done in connection with the legislative changes related to the appropriate use of public places. In order to prevent disproportionate breach of social rights and solidarity when regulating the appropriate use of public place the Government calls upon the ministers concerned

1. to “develop a midterm action plan aiming at the reduction of the number of rough sleepers as well as the reform of service provision for homeless people,
2. to ensure the financial condition of the midterm action plan with special regards to the use of EU resources.”²

As it shows from the Government resolution it includes two of the three objectives of the Hungarian homeless strategy proposal, while the first objective on strengthening the security of housing is not mentioned here.

Housing First versus the continuum of care model

In Hungary - similarly to other countries of the former socialist block - tackling homelessness within institutional framework started about 20 years ago when a growing number of people became homeless and appeared in public places during the period of the transition. In order to meet the immediate needs the establishment of night shelters and temporary hostels took place in the major cities within a few years' time. The differentiation of the types of services as well as the establishment of the state normative financing which made the financial conditions more reliable for homeless service providers resulted the current institutional structure based on the continuum of care model. The present institutional system still bears the marks of the early structure that normally meant to be transitional. In the framework of the continuum of care model independent housing becomes an accessible alternative exclusively for some 'housing ready' or 'easy to integrate' newly homeless people as a kind of 'reward'. There is little possibility and capacity for social workers within the conventional and overcrowded shelter system to provide tailor-made help aiming at the social reintegration of service users. The insufficient proportion of

² 1217/2010. (X. 19.) Government resolution on the tasks to be done in connection with the legislative changes related to the appropriate use of public places

the rental housing stock – especially social rentals (4%) – makes the possible pathways out of homelessness even more limited and often leads to bottleneck situations in the shelter system.

In 2005 a national pilot project attempted to accommodate ‘housing ready’ service users from shelters and hostels (some projects also involved rough sleepers) in supported housing by utilizing the capacities of the private rented sector. Within one and a half years’ period of the pilot project approximately 1000 homeless people were accommodated in supported housing across the country in traditional dwellings or pensions. Although the project was really successful, it did not target hard to reach rough sleepers and long-term homeless people but helped move on the ones able to live independently. Unlike Housing first projects service users were not visited by an interdisciplinary team (ACT) available for 24 hours, but only one social worker. Visits were more frequent in the beginning of the projects then both the frequency of the visits and the financial (~80 EUR) support were gradually reduced in the second half of the projects in order to promote separation from institutional care. Unfortunately, we can not provide national data on the follow-up of this pilot thus we do not know how many of the beneficiaries were able to sustain their housing in the long run. Supposedly many of them became homeless again following the end of the pilot project. According to homeless service providers supported housing accompanied by the necessary social work should be maintained for a longer period than the pilot project lasted in order that people will be able to sustain their independent housing.

In 2010 similar projects were launched across the country in the framework of a programme funded by the European Union and co-funded by the European Social Fund. There are about 700 homeless people involved who can receive housing benefit in rental dwellings provided that they improve their employability by trainings or manage to enter the labour market.

Considering that the projects are funded by EU resources the programme will have a ‘cream-off’ effect since homeless service providers select and involve less problematic service users in order to fulfil the indicators. In such circumstances the reach and involvement of long-term homeless people with multiple problems can not be expected.

Housing First transferability

For the transferability of the Housing First approach it would be important to study more in detail its exact methodology. To this end it would be useful to learn more about Assertive Community Treatment as well as the content of social work provided. After better understanding of the exact methodology pilot projects might bring a kind of break-through in the currently dominant feature of the ‘staircase’ approach. In the Housing First approach the field of social work is transferred from the institution to the home of the individual. Thus social workers are expected to fulfil different tasks requiring a different attitude, such as enabling people to sustain their dwelling, get on well with neighbours and acquire life skills for independent living. At present the Housing First approach is being tested in many European countries and it would be timely for Hungary to join this group of countries.

Focus on reducing the number of rough sleepers

In accordance with many other countries' strategic targets as well as the Government resolution referred to above, the reduction of rough sleeping is in the focus of the currently drafted mid-term action plan. In connection with rough sleeping the authors of the Hungarian strategy proposal recommend the concept of 'positive zero tolerance' to be introduced. It would condition the interventions to tackle rough sleeping by weather circumstances and individual conditions such as age, pregnancy and the disability of the individual. If the given conditions were met people could not be left out in the streets even if they refuse the help offered.

Unlike Finland, Hungary is in a different stage concerning the strategic approach towards homelessness therefore the issue of gradual abandonment of conventional shelters is not on the agenda. According to some experts such low threshold 'wet' shelters would be needed which are accessible for homeless couples and people with pets. Ensuring personal security as well as storage for personal belongings is also very important and frequently echoed need of service users. Some pilot projects providing low threshold services have had good achievements in accommodating and keeping former rough sleepers in shelters. However, simultaneously with low threshold accommodation the increase of quality standards in conventional shelters would also be necessary in order to avoid overcrowding and ensure private space for service users. The involvement and participation of service users in transforming the shelter system is a very important element of success.

The dominant point of view in Hungary concerning rough sleepers confines to some form of institutional accommodation. As for chronically homeless people with long-term disability residential home accommodation would be needed as a long term solution. Accommodating rough sleepers in the conventional shelter system is aiming at temporary harm reduction to avoid hypothermia rather than a permanent solution. Unlike the Housing First approach in Finland the dominant approach in Hungary would conserve the homeless status of the chronically homeless at a step higher in the 'continuum of care' model.

Need to focus on prevention

According to the findings of regular homeless counts conducted annually on 3 February every 7th homeless people becomes homeless within a year. Focusing on long-term homelessness and prevention at the same time as presented in the Finnish National Programme is a reasonable objective. Although they are the two ends of the frontline in the fight against homelessness an effective homelessness strategy can not lack preventive elements. Therefore mapping the trigger factors as well as blocking pathways leading towards social exclusion and homelessness is of crucial importance.

In Hungary some recent measures of the new Government attempt to address some elements of the prevention of homelessness by prolonging the moratorium on evictions as well as introducing a moratorium on the rise of public utility fees. Nevertheless, the comprehensive implementation of the Hungarian strategy proposal as well as a broader understanding of the prevention of homelessness covering all the known trigger factors would be timely and more effective.

Setting quantitative targets

The requirement to formulate clear targets in homelessness strategies is also highlighted in the Joint Report adopted in March 2010. The necessity of setting quantitative targets is probably strengthened by member states having significant experiences in developing homelessness strategies. The achievements of former targets to reduce homelessness in Finland may have encouraging effect on all the actors concerned in the implementation and might generate further commitment. Further strength of the Finnish strategy is the financial efficiency of supported housing as presented in the Host Country Report. Social expenditures can not always be justified on cost-benefit ground and translated into the language of politicians, but when a programme even generates savings it can be presented for the political decision makers as a reasonable 'investment'.

Conclusions

The objectives set in the Finnish National Programme to Reduce Long-Term Homelessness are particularly ambitious and the achievements of the former homelessness strategies also reinforce that Finland is on the right track to eliminate long-term homelessness by 2015. The strategy covers the most important elements for an effective strategy that are listed in the 2010 Joint Report. The most essential conditions of a successful strategy are the political commitment and stable funding as well as clear and quantitative targets at the same time. In the point of view of long-term homeless people the most important feature of the Finnish strategy is access to permanent housing. The Hungarian situation concerning homelessness is more unfavourable than the Finnish context, thus for Hungary there is significant learning potential in the analysis of not only the current but also the former Finnish strategies.

Annex

Definitional issues

In Hungary the Act III of 1993 on social administration and social services defines the definition of homelessness as follows: 'a person is homeless if he or she does not have a registered place of residence except for those whose registered place of residence is a homeless institution'. Under the second definition of the same law 'any person shall be considered homeless who spends nights in public places or other kind of places unfit for human habitation.'

The authors of the strategy proposal recommend a new definition instead of the present one, according to which the present definition will be replaced by the definition of 'houseless'³:

'Any person shall be considered as houseless who is unable to ensure an (independent) housing of minimum adequacy by his self-effort for himself or his family.'

³ Győri-Maróthy: 'Which Way to Go On? Potential Framework of a National Homelessness Strategy', Budapest, 2008 p.42