



Portugal 2010

# Peer Review: Building a comprehensive and participative strategy on homelessness

Short Report



On behalf of the  
European Commission  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



Held in Lisbon (Portugal) on 4-5 November 2010, the Peer Review was hosted by the Institute for Social Security of the Portuguese Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. In addition to the host country, seven peer countries were represented: Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Serbia and Spain. Represented as stakeholders were the Eurocities Working Group on Homelessness and the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). Taking part for the European Commission was a representative of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

## 1. The policy under review

Launched in March 2009, Portugal's **National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People** takes a rights-based approach, notably as regards the rights to housing and equal opportunities. The first national strategy of its kind in Southern Europe, it was formulated in consultation with a wide range of **stakeholders**. Its two **main aims** are to:

- **enhance the evidence base** on homelessness through the adoption of an agreed definition and a shared information and monitoring system;
- **promote quality** in homelessness services and responses.

Specific areas of action include:

- **prevention** of homelessness arising from evictions or discharge from institutions;
- **direct intervention** in situations of homelessness, focusing on the clarification of procedures and responsibilities and also on innovative approaches;
- **follow-up support** after resettlement, which is to be achieved through the local social networks;
- **staff training**, as a way of improving services to the homeless.

The strategy is based on a fairly narrow **definition** of homelessness: "A homeless person is considered to be an individual who, regardless of nationality, age, sex, socio-economic status and mental and physical health, is roofless and living in a public space or insecure form of shelter or accommodated in an emergency shelter, or is houseless and living in temporary accommodation for the homeless." On that definition, there are currently estimated to be some **3,000 homeless people in Portugal**, which has a total population of about 10.6 million.

**Local action** is strongly promoted by the strategy. The national level disseminates guidelines for local diagnoses of homelessness and for local plans to tackle the issue. The development of local social networks, and of networking sites, is encouraged. They are closely involved in preventive and remedial action, as well as information gathering. Specific **targets** are agreed at the local level. The Peer Review examined in some detail the local action taken in Lisbon and Porto, which have the highest homelessness figures, and in Cascais.

Most of the strategy's **national objectives** relate to policy implementation milestones. There are also some service and outcome targets – for example, that 80% of homeless people should have

a case manager, nobody should be on the street for more than 24 hours for lack of an alternative, and anyone leaving an institution should receive all necessary help to find a place to live.

NGOs have traditionally provided much of the assistance to Portugal's homeless people. Under the current strategy, the NGOs work closely with national and local government services in this field.

## 2. Lessons learned

Among the main points to emerge from the Peer Review:

- The **Portuguese strategy** could provide a useful **model for other countries**, as regards:
  - **Process:** Right from the start, **stakeholder buy-in** is essential - particularly by those who will be delivering services, such as NGOs. **Political commitment** is also important here, and this too takes time to build. An **umbrella organisation for NGOs** involved with homelessness can facilitate discussions with the State.
  - **Outcomes:** Participation in strategic development should not be seen as an end in itself. At least two key elements are needed: some **concrete targets**, both qualitative and quantitative, which can be clearly monitored, and ideally with a timetable set for achievement; and an **implementation plan** for achieving the targets. The goals must also be backed by a clear, realistic **financial commitment**.
- **Definitions** of homelessness pose a dilemma. Narrow definitions can help to move things forward, but may risk excluding some groups of homeless people. Broader definitions are more inclusive, but may be implemented in a way that avoids a dissipation of energies.
- **Cost-effectiveness** is a concern in all the peer countries. There is pressure to demonstrate that the more progressive approaches to homelessness, as well as being more humane and just, can be cheaper and/or better value-for-money. Some countries have made much more progress on demonstrating this cost-effectiveness than have others. The EU might be able to help here, by providing all Member States with the relevant methodological tools.
- Portugal's emphasis on generating a **better evidence base** was generally welcomed. **Staff training** was also seen as a useful focus.
- **Case management** was considered a particularly cost-effective form of intervention. A number of the peer countries already use it as a way of delivering targeted, tailored services, particularly to those homeless people with more complex needs.
- The **"Housing First" approach** experimented in a pilot project (50 places) in Lisbon met with great interest. The idea is to move homeless people into stable housing straight away and tackle their other issues simultaneously, rather than taking them through various forms of temporary accommodation until they are deemed "housing-ready". A number of countries are pursuing the "Housing First" approach quite vigorously, and others are interested in developing it. There is considerable evidence that "Housing First" does produce benefits and is cost-effective.
- **EU support** for action to tackle homelessness was welcomed by the peer reviewers. EU requirements or recommendations in this field can strengthen the hand of those who are

putting forward a progressive agenda in the Member States. The EU's **2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion** calls on the Member States to develop integrated strategies to tackle homelessness. It provides detailed guidance, and comes out clearly in support of a Housing First approach. The specific chapter devoted to homelessness in the report can be considered as an **EU policy framework**, approved by the Council of Ministers. The European Commission's **Recommendation on active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market**, adopted in 2008, promotes a holistic approach based on three pillars: guaranteed minimum income support for everyone, ensuring labour market access for all, and the provision of in-kind social services. All of these are clearly relevant to the situation of homeless people. The **voluntary European quality framework for social services** will also support an enhanced quality of the services delivered to homeless people. The **European Consensus Conference on Homelessness**<sup>1</sup> (hearing of experts by a European jury in Brussels on 9-10 December 2010) will build consensus on the fundamental issues so that Member States can move forward on tackling homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://feantsa.horus.be/code/EN/pg.asp?Page=1301>