

Building a comprehensive and participative strategy on homelessness

Juha Kaakinen

Sosiaalikehitys Oy, Programme to
reduce long-term homelessness

General comments

As already stated in the discussion paper by Suzanne Fitzpatrick the Peer Review of the Finnish National Programme to Reduce Long-term homelessness is highly relevant for the Portuguese Peer Review as they both focus on the development and assessment of national strategies on homelessness. Reading both the discussion paper and the other background material provided by the host country confirms this assessment. Comments in this paper are based on the experiences in implementing the Finnish Programme and the mid-term evaluation and the recent country report written for the Finnish Peer Review.

As a general comment it is justified to say that, although still in a very early stage of its implementation the Portuguese strategy has shown some encouraging results. If we compare the Portuguese strategy to Finnish strategy we can find several similarities:

- targeting the strategy on the most vulnerable groups of homeless people;
- a participative process of preparing the strategy involving a large group of stakeholders;
- the signing-up of the Strategy by all members of the core Inter-Institutional Group (in Finland: signed letters of intent between municipalities and state authorities);
- building up a large network of relevant actors both on the national and local level for the implementation of the Strategy.

However there are also several differences, some of them clearly related to the contextual differences between two different welfare regimes. All differences are not explained by these contextual differences.

Key issues

Differences in strategic approach

There have been several homelessness strategies in Finland during the last 25 years. These strategies and programmes based on them have resulted in a significant reduction in the number of homeless people. At the end of the 1980s we had almost 20,000 homeless people in Finland. During the last years the number of homeless people has been about 8,000. However these programmes were more Housing Policy oriented and didn't manage to help the situation of those

homeless who have multiple social and health problems and who need intensive care and support.

An evaluation of these programmes led to a change in the homelessness strategy. In 2008 the Government decided to implement a national programme to reduce long-term homelessness for 2008-2011. The objective of the programme is to halve long-term homelessness by 2011 (and to end it completely by 2015) and to intensify measures to prevent homelessness. As a quantitative target there is the requirement to create about 1,250 new dwellings, supported housing or care places for the long-term homeless people.

In this programme long term homelessness is defined as: "A person whose homelessness has become prolonged and chronic, or is threatening to become chronic, because normal housing approaches have not worked, and because there have been insufficient housing solutions tailored to individual needs."

The programme is being implemented with reference to the letters of intent agreed to by the State authorities and the 10 largest Finnish cities with a problem of homelessness. These letters of intent contain tailored, city-specific action plans including the funding, timetable, staff and target group for all projects in the programme period.

Responsibility for financing the Programme is shared between the State and the local authorities. The State has set aside EUR 80 Million in structural investment for the Programme and EUR 10.3 Million for the hire of support personnel. Furthermore, the Finnish Slot Machine Association (RAY) has set aside EUR 18 Million as financial assistance. The over-all cost of the programme is over EUR 200 Million. Several state authorities (Ministries e.g.), ten cities and several NGOs and private companies are involved in the implementation of the programme both on the national and local level.

There are some important elements and principles in the Finnish programme that are relevant when comparing different strategic approaches. First of all the programme is very concrete: every new housing unit or dwelling is mentioned in the city specific implementation plans and there are also clear economic commitment from both the state authorities and the ten cities. This financial commitment has guaranteed the achievement of the quantitative results. We already know that the quantitative targets will be exceeded: instead of the original 1250 we are going to have about 1,600 new dwellings for long term homeless people in use during the programme period. All cities have already announced their commitment to continue the programme also for the period 2012-2015.

The programme is founded on a clear philosophy and vision of the elimination of homelessness, the 'housing first' principle. Solutions to social and health problems cannot be a condition for organising accommodation: on the contrary, accommodation is a requirement which also enables other problems of people who have been homeless to be solved. Having somewhere to live makes it possible to strengthen life management skills and is conducive to purposeful activity.

The basic idea behind the 'housing first' concept as developed in Finland is a housing package where accommodation and services can be organised according to the resident's needs, abilities and social welfare and health requirements. A person is allocated independent accommodation with a tenancy agreement – a 'home' – and services that differ in their intensity according to the

individual are established around this. Services are implemented via partnership working between the accommodation provider and public social and health services.

We aim to find permanent solutions for each long term homeless person. In our experience, dormitory-type units (hostels and shelters) contribute to homelessness instead of preventing it. Specific subcultures characterised by temporality and lack of responsibility develop easily in the dormitories. Dormitories also easily serve as a fertile ground for different types of criminal activity. The dormitory conditions do not safeguard the type of privacy and safety that would make the solving of difficult social and health related problems possible.

According to our understanding, dormitories cannot serve as a modern solution for homelessness, even as a temporary solution. The 21st century minimum solution for homelessness is supported housing with an adequate number of professional staff members. As a result, all the dormitories in Finland are destined to be converted into supported housing units within a few years' time. It is evident that the authorities also need to maintain a readiness for providing emergency housing in acute homelessness situations. Emergency housing can only be a temporary solution, which here signifies a maximum of a few weeks time during which a more permanent solution needs to be found.

The implementation of the programme is supported by an extensive development and research project. In the national development network over 200 social workers, support workers and researchers from municipalities, NGOs and state organisations have taken part in the working groups and seminars.

Although there has been a wide variety of measures in preventive work, we find it necessary to focus more systematically in developing and broadening preventive actions in the new reduction programme 2012-2015.

A model for strategic development

There certainly are a lot of country specific factors in building a framework for strategic development on homelessness. There are also several more universal elements that are apparent and necessary and these elements in our view are well illustrated in the Portuguese exercise. The implementation of a national strategy (or even building a national strategy) is not possible without the identification and involvement of all relevant stakeholders both on the national and local level. This kind of network requires also strong coordination on the national level (the role of the Inter-institutional Core Group).

Cross-sectoral co-operation

Cross-sectoral co-operation is not specific only in some welfare regimes. It is an essential precondition both in preparing the strategy and also in implementing it. It seems that those actors are more committed in the implementation of the strategy who have already taken part in preparing the strategy. Also it seems that in the Nordic welfare regime the need for cross-sectoral co-operation is even more urgent because work in social and health sectors has developed into a vast specialised array of services with several professional groups. Although we have already a

lot of experiences of cross-sectoral work it seems that there are a lot of new challenges also ahead. The needs of homeless people don't necessarily fit in the traditional categories and department lines of our services. We are working on piloting some new service provisions that intentionally break these department lines (and barriers) e.g. a multiprofessional mobile team that provides support and services for ex-homeless people with substance abuse problems in their own apartments. People working with homeless people seem to have also a clear need to establish their professional identity as homelessness workers.

Commitment of relevant stakeholders

In our understanding there are several levels of commitment. Undersigned declarations, undersigned letters of intent are all important and their moral impact can be significant. The final test-bed of commitment is however money. According to our experiences best concrete results in helping homeless people can be achieved through letters of intent and agreements that are supported by clear financial commitments from all key stakeholders. These financial commitments are not possible without an extensive political consensus ranging from the national to the local level. Building this kind of extensive political consensus is not self-evident, it requires strategic initiatives where the active role of relevant state authorities and NGOs is crucial.

Definitions of homelessness and equality

In Finland several earlier homelessness reduction programmes have reached quantitatively good results. It seems however that these programmes have been targeted more to those homeless people whose sole reason for homelessness has been the lack of affordable rental apartments. The programmes have in fact excluded large groups of homeless people, whose lives have been afflicted by serious exclusion and multiple problems.

The homeless are not a homogeneous group. For different purposes we need different definitions of homelessness. The Portuguese definition of homelessness is understandable and justified if it is used as an operational definition for prioritising actions. With limited financial resources it is reasonable to target actions on those groups of homeless people who are most vulnerable and in greatest need of services.

Also the Finnish Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness is concentrating on the most demanding group of homeless people. We don't expect to end homelessness completely with the current programme, but we expect to realise a significant reduction also in the general homelessness with actions targeted at the long-term homeless people.

Homelessness is certainly also an equality issue and homeless women one of the most vulnerable groups of the homeless. But homelessness as a phenomenon can also be seen as an equality issue from quite another perspective. Homelessness is a male-dominant phenomenon as for example in Finland 80 % of all homeless are men. This male-dominance is reflected in the public opinion. The "silent majority" still quite often sees homelessness as a problem that mostly concerns middle-aged men with heavy drinking and considers themselves guilty of their own condition. These attitudes may also reflect in the low quality of emergency accommodation.

Staff training and strengthening the evidence base

Building up a well-functioning service system for homeless people needs both systematic training of staff and research and monitoring of the services. It is not realistic to contradict these needs with service provision. We don't know what services are needed unless we know who are our homeless people and what are their needs. Services for the homeless is a very special service area with special needs of multiprofessional expertise. Also the use of the experience of homeless people and ex-homeless people should be recognised. In our new development project we plan to use systematically these experts by experience in designing new services.

The impact of the economy

For us the impact of economic recession has had a surprisingly positive impact on our reduction programme. We conducted recently a scientific evaluation by the Technical University of Tampere on the economic effects of our programme. According to the study, intensified supported housing generates significant savings as the use of services decreases. The survey carried out in a Tampere supported housing unit shows that housing with intensified support halves the use of social and health care services compared to service-use during homelessness. This equates to 14,000 Euros of savings per resident. The total annual savings for 15 residents in the unit in question amounted to 220,000 Euros. These economic results have already proven to be extremely valuable in the preparation of the new programme.

Final comment

European Peer Reviews are valuable for mutual learning and exchange of experiences. There is also need for a more determined political action on the EU-level to compact homelessness. In our understanding ending homelessness is the sole most efficient measure to fight against social exclusion. We have strong empirical evidence which shows that ending homelessness is possible, it is realistic, it is ethically justifiable and it is also economically viable. For these reasons we have great hopes that the European Consensus Conference in December will prove to be a major breakthrough in EU-level policy on homelessness.