Building a comprehensive and participative strategy on homelessness

Suzanne Fitzpatrick
Heriot-Watt University

Introduction

The 'Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion and Assessment in Social Inclusion' Programme is carried out in the context of PROGRESS – the EU's Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity. PROGRESS has as its overall aim to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in employment, social affairs and equal opportunities, as set out in the Social Agenda. The PROGRESS programme supports the implementation of the EU Open Method of Coordination in the field of social protection and social inclusion (Social OMC) by – among other things – organising exchanges on policies and good practice and promoting mutual learning in the context of the social protection and inclusion strategy. It has as one of its objectives capacity building amongst key social actors and the promotion of innovative approaches. Homelessness has been identified as a key issue for European analysis, learning, exchange and the development of innovative approaches.

This Peer Review hosted by Portugal has as its central aim the promotion of mutual learning and exploration of good practice with respect to the development of national strategic approaches to addressing homelessness. It has a particular focus on the effective involvement of a range of relevant stakeholders in designing and implementing such strategies.

The Portuguese *'National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People – Prevention, Intervention and Follow-Up, 2009-2015'* was designed by a large group of stakeholders who publicly committed their organisations to the Strategy. It was launched on 14th March 2009 in a ceremony held by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. For the purpose of designing this National Strategy, an Inter-Institutional Group was formed with representatives from public and private (non-profit) entities. This Group was coordinated by the Institute of Social Security, a public institute created in 2001 under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

The Portuguese 'National Homelessness Strategy' is particularly interesting as it represents a breakthrough in the southern European approach to tackling homelessness (Baptista, 2009). While there have been national strategies on homelessness developed in a number of northern European countries over the past decade or so (Benjaminsen *et al*, 2009), including in Ireland, the UK, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and France, this is the first national-level 'southern strategy' (Baptista, 2009). As such, there are likely to be a range of lessons from this process which are particularly pertinent to those seeking to address homelessness in the context of other 'Mediterranean welfare regimes', notwithstanding the important differences between these southern European countries. However, the participative and inclusive approach taken in developing the Portuguese Strategy may also contain elements of good practice that are more broadly applicable across EU Member States in northern, central and eastern Europe.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an independent assessment of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy in order to inform the Peer Review debate. The paper also seeks to situate this policy development in the context of other relevant policy debates and developments at European level, and to identify potential areas of transferability to other Member States.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section summarises recent EU-level initiatives which pertain to this topic, and identifies other Peer Reviews which are relevant to this one. We then move on to describe the drivers and origins of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy and summarise its content, before an initial assessment is offered of the strengths and potential points of transferability in this policy development process. The final section suggests a series of questions to be considered as part of the Peer Review debate.

The Policy Debate at European level

Homelessness is now firmly established on the EU agenda as a political priority. In 2008, the European Parliament adopted a Written Declaration on Ending Street Homelessness. The Declaration calls on the Council to agree on an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015, calls on the Commission to provide annual updates on progress made in EU Member States towards ending homelessness, and urges Member States to devise "winter emergency plans" as part of a wider homelessness strategy. In 2009, the Joint Report of the European Commission and Council on Social Protection and Social Inclusion stated that *"sustained work is required to tackle homelessness as an extremely serious form of exclusion."* The Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion were charged with analysing the "social and economic inclusion of homeless people" and "access to adequate housing" across Member States, and the resulting synthesis report put forward 15 suggestions for addressing the key barriers to making progress at both national and EU levels in the fight against homelessness and housing exclusion[1].

Most significantly, the 2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion[2] calls on Member States to develop integrated policies to tackle homelessness, and provides guidance on how to do this, placing a strong emphasis on effective governance, monitoring and evaluation, and the setting of specific targets:

> *"Tackling housing exclusion and homelessness… requires **integrated policies** combining **financial support to individuals, effective regulation and quality social services**, including housing, employment, health and welfare services. More attention needs to be paid to the quality standards of social services and the specific obstacles the homeless face in accessing them."* (European Commission and the Council, 2010, p.10, emphasis in original).

This 2010 Joint Report stresses the importance of housing vulnerability in the current economic crisis, especially with respect to mortgage arrears and repossessions, and increased demand for support with housing costs and for social housing. The key role that housing (un)affordability

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[1] http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts/2009/homelessness-and-housing-exclusion

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=757&langId=en

plays in the generation of homelessness is outlined, particularly with regard to those homeless groups which do not exhibit complex personal problems. In the EU as a whole, housing costs bear far more heavily on poor than on non-poor households, relative to their income, significantly increasing their vulnerability to homelessness. Low income people are also far more likely to live in overcrowded and poor quality housing than non-poor people (see also Stephens *et al*, 2010). The Joint Report also acknowledges that being without a roof, or having to live in emergency shelters and temporary accommodation, is the most extreme form of homelessness, and indeed of poverty and social exclusion. It summarises the complex causes of homelessness, with relevant factors often operating at the structural, personal and institutional levels. Groups at particular risk of homelessness include those at margins of the labour market, young people facing particular challenges in accessing adequate housing, and vulnerable migrants and mobile workers. Measures to improve housing quality and affordability (including housing-related benefits), to increase the supply of social and public housing, and to improve access to employment, health and social services, are all strongly encouraged.

The Joint Report urges Member States to develop comprehensive homelessness strategies which focus on:

- prevention as the most cost-effective way of combating homelessness. There is a particular emphasis on reducing evictions, and on minimising the instances of people leaving institutions with no home to go to.

- moving beyond the provision of simply temporary/crisis accommodation, to more comprehensive progression policies designed to help people move on to supported and/or permanent accommodation.

- a 'housing first' approach, which offers individuals stable accommodation as a first priority, though it cautions that this should not be a 'housing only' approach in circumstances where people have additional support needs.

- improved governance, with key elements likely to include: strong leadership by the main relevant public authority; effective participation of all key stakeholders; and consensus on the agreed strategy.

There are a number of other recent EU-level initiatives relevant to homelessness, including a series of earlier and ongoing Peer Reviews. These are outlined briefly below. In combination, these EU-wide initiatives have played a decisive role in the development of the Portuguese National Strategy on Homelessness.

Relevant EU-level Initiatives

1. ETHOS

   The ETHOS typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion has become the basis for the discussion of the definition of homelessness for policy and data collection purposes in a number of countries across Europe (Edgar & Meert, 2005; see Appendix 1 for a summary

version)[3]. This ETHOS typology was adopted by the European Commission and the Council in the 2010 Joint Report. It was also fundamental to the development of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy as discussed further below.

2.   Study on the Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level

This report, commissioned by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, reviewed the methods of data collection on homelessness in Europe (Edgar *et al*, 2007). The report sets out a methodology for developing a homeless monitoring information system and makes a number of recommendations to the European Commission and national governments[4]. Again, this report was highly influential in the development of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy.

3.   MPHASIS Project (2007 – 2009)

This project, funded under PROGRESS, was entitled Mutual Progress on Homelessness Through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems. The main objective was to improve the capacity for monitoring information on homelessness and housing exclusion in 20 European countries on the basis of the recommendations of the previous EU study on the Measurement of Homelessness (see above). This was undertaken through transnational exchange and was supported by action-oriented research which directly fed into the European and national discussions on monitoring homelessness within MPHASIS[5]. Portugal was an active participant in the MPHASIS project and one of the key background papers provided for this Peer Review is the National Position Paper on Portugal produced for the MPHASIS project (Caeiro, 2009).

4.   Study on Housing Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Housing Provision and Labour Markets

This project, also funded under PROGRESS, analysed the interaction between welfare regimes and housing systems, particularly with respect to the generation and amelioration of housing exclusion (Stephens *et al*, 2010)[6]. One key objective of this research was to investigate the impact of welfare regimes and housing systems on the scale, causes and nature of homelessness, and to review policy responses to particular groups at high risk of homelessness, such as single men with support needs, young people, women fleeing violence, and immigrants. Portugal was one of six participating Member States in this study, and the evidence provided by the Portuguese national team in the Housing Exclusion study has informed this Peer Review (Baptista & Perista, 2010)[7].

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[3]   http://www.feantsa.org/files/freshstart/Toolkits/Ethos/Leaflet/EN.pdf
[4]   The report can be downloaded at http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/homelessness_en.htm
[5]   The final report and other documents associated with this project can be downloaded at http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/
[6]   The final report can be downloaded at http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/EUExclusion/HOUSING%20EXCLUSION%2026%20May%2020 10.pdf
[7]   The Portuguese national report published as part of this study can be downloaded at http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/EUExclusion/Portugal.pdf

5.   Mutual Learning on Social and Housing Exclusion

Organised by the European Commission, this conference brought together policy-makers, stakeholders, researchers and representatives from projects across the EU. It focused on two priority topics, one of which was homelessness and housing exclusion (the other was the EC active inclusion strategy.) The conference disseminated the 2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, along with the results of a number of social inclusion projects funded through PROGRESS, and the findings of the 'Study on Housing Exclusion' conducted by Stephens *et al* (2010).

6.   European Consensus Conference on Homelessness

The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, taking place in Brussels on 9-10th December 2010, is an event which seeks to establish common understandings on fundamental questions about homelessness, in order to provide a basis for future policy progress. Originating from the health and technology sectors, consensus conferencing is a tool for facilitating progress on issues where a lack of shared understandings blocks policy progress. The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness is the first consensus conference on a social issue at European level. It is an initiative of the Belgian Presidency of the EU Council, co-organised with the European Commission. FEANTSA is co-ordinating the process and the French Government is a key partner[8].

Relevant Peer Reviews

Four previous Peer Reviews and another current Peer Review have particular relevance to this Peer Review on the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy[9]:

- 2004: UK – The Rough Sleeping Strategy, England;

- 2005: Denmark – Preventing and Tackling Homelessness;

- 2006: Norway – National Strategy – Pathway to a Permanent Home;

- 2009: Austria – Counting the Homeless – Improving the Basis for Planning Assistance;

- 2010 (forthcoming) – Finland – The Finnish National Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness.

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[8]   http://www.feantsa.org/files/freshstart/Consensus_Conference/Leaflets/FEA%20014-09_EN.pdf

[9]   In addition, a 2007 Peer Review of France's 'National Action Plan against Substandard Housing' also covered homelessness to some extent.
http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2007/national-action-plan-against-substandard-housing

1. UK – The Rough Sleeping Strategy, England[10]

    The Rough Sleeping initiative in England aimed to substantially reduce the number of people sleeping rough and to reintegrate former rough sleepers into sustainable housing and into wider society. The strategy has developed since the Peer Review in 2004, but crucially its success has continued in that the numbers of rough sleepers in England have been maintained at a low level relative to the baseline figure in 1998. However, the methods used to count rough sleepers in England have been subject to widespread criticism and the recently elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government has launched a consultation on a revised methodology for rough sleeper counts in England[11].

2. Denmark - Preventing and Tackling Homelessness[12]

    In 2002 the Danish government introduced a programme called "Our Common Responsibility" targeted at the most socially marginalised people in Denmark, including homeless people, people with alcohol or drug problems, prostitutes, and people with mental disabilities. The programme focused on homeless people who were difficult to reintegrate into normal living situations, and older homeless people who required some measure of residential care but who, because of their homeless experience and behavioural issues, could not be accommodated in mainstream residential care homes. The Danish Government established special nursing homes and also, under the unfortunate slogan "freak houses for freak existences", provided unconventional small dwellings, and help in maintaining them, for those who wished to live independently. In these "freak houses" residents could behave differently from the norm without having to confront hostile reactions from other people. The programme also offered emergency provision, such as night shelter cafés. The project was implemented by municipalities, which receive earmarked funding from the central government to pay for it.

3. Norway - National Strategy – Pathway to a Permanent Home[13]

    Backed by the Norwegian Parliament, this national strategy to prevent and tackle homelessness aimed to: prevent people from becoming homeless; contribute to adequate quality in overnight shelters; and to help ensure that homeless people received offers of permanent housing without undue delay. There were five performance targets, including an aim to reduce evictions by 30 per cent, and an undertaking that nobody should have to seek temporary accommodation after release from prison or other institutions. The strategy was coordinated by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development in cooperation with other ministries, the Norwegian State Housing Bank, and the county and local authorities. Local authorities, together with the voluntary sector, have the main responsibility for meeting the Strategy's goals. It was suggested that this scheme was a good example of

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[10] http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2004/the-rough-sleepers-unit-england
[11] http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/evaluatingroughsleeping
[12] http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2005/preventing-and-tackling-homelessness
[13] http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2006/national-strategy-to-prevent-and-tackle-homelessness

how central and local government can work together to meet relevant goals in addressing homelessness.

4.   Austria – Counting the Homeless – Improving the Basis for Planning Assistance[14]

Vienna has had a programme for the reintegration of homeless people for twenty years. Despite this long-term policy commitment, there was said to be not enough practical experience in Vienna with respect to instruments for monitoring and assessing homelessness in order to inform policy and service planning. The availability of both quantitative and qualitative data on homelessness was thought crucial in enabling Vienna to adapt and improve local social planning in line with needs and, ultimately, to better integrate homeless people into the regular housing market. Hence it was hoped that the knowledge generated through the Peer Review would allow Vienna to improve their evidence base for policy development and evaluation. More broadly, this Peer Review sought to examine approaches to improve data collection on homelessness at the municipal level of government across EU Member States.

5.   Finland – The Finnish National Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness[15]

In February 2008, the Finnish Government adopted a programme aimed at halving long-term homelessness by 2011. This is based on the "Housing First" principle, which asserts that appropriate accommodation is a prerequisite for solving other social and health problems, and the programme includes a goal to convert all traditional short-term shelters into supported housing units that facilitate independent living. A total of 1,250 additional homes, supported housing units or places in care are expected to be made available. The programme also includes projects aimed at providing supported housing for recently released prisoners, reducing youth homelessness and preventing evictions, e.g. by providing and expanding housing advisory services. The programme is based on a partnership between central government and the country's ten largest cities affected by homelessness. The forthcoming Peer Review hosted by Finland will seek to assess the programme's success and to exchange experiences with countries that are implementing or preparing similar national strategies to reduce long-term homelessness.

Summary and added value of Portuguese Peer Review

All five of these other Peer Reviews on homelessness are relevant to the present Peer Review hosted by Portugal. With respect to the UK and Danish Peer Reviews described above, their emphasis on the very most marginalised groups of homeless people – rough sleepers and those with multiple problems – is relevant to the Portuguese National Strategy which similarly has a focus on these most extreme manifestations of homelessness (see below). The Austrian Peer Review from last year – with its focus on improving the knowledge base for evidence-based policy development and evaluation - is highly relevant to the Portuguese Peer Review in that

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[14]   http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2009/counting-the-homeless
[15]   http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2010/the-finnish-national-programme-to-reduce-long-term-homelessness

particular importance has been attached in Portugal to the development of an effective information and monitoring system on homelessness. Meanwhile, the Norwegian and Finnish Peer Reviews are highly relevant in that, as with the Portuguese Peer Review, they focus on the development and assessment of national strategies on homelessness. Clearly the ongoing Finnish Peer Review is particularly germane given its concurrent status, albeit that Finland and Portugal present very different contexts for the development of national strategies on homelessness (that in itself may provide interesting learning opportunities, insofar as their contrasting contexts may lend themselves to very useful comparisons with respect to what can be achieved via national strategic approaches). Thus it is planned to collaborate closely with the team undertaking the Finnish Peer Review in order to exploit any synergies in these parallel processes.

The key added value that this Portuguese Peer Review could be expected to bring would be to build upon these earlier mutual exchanges on interventions for extremely marginalised groups, on improving information systems, and on developing and implementing national strategies. Crucially, however, it will provide an opportunity to consider these lessons in a southern European context as all of the previous relevant Peer Reviews have been located in northern and central Europe.

The Development of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy

The Drivers of the Strategy

In Portugal, as in the other southern European countries (Italy, Greece and Spain), the most disadvantaged members of society have traditionally been cared for via informal social networks (the family, neighbours and the local community) as a 'compensatory' form of welfare. However, these bonds have weakened in recent decades because of social and economic change, and increasingly charities and other voluntary organisations have attempted to fill the gap, funded in part by the state (Caeiro, 2009). In the case of homelessness, for example, service providers are mostly non-profit organisations (church organisations or secular NGOs) that are financed by the state (about 80 per cent of their funding comes from the state).

The relative poverty rate[16] in Portugal, at around 18 per cent (Stephens *et al*, 2010), is high by EU standards, and is higher for elderly people (22 per cent) and for children under 16 (23 per cent). Until the early 1990s there were no specific measures or policies addressing poverty in Portugal, and little interest had been shown in developing homelessness policies until the European Commission asked Member States to make homelessness a priority and to include specific measures in their National Action Plans (now National Strategic Plans) produced in the context of the 'EU Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion' (Caeiro, 2010)[17].

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[16]   i.e. percentage of individuals living in households with an income of less than 60 per cent of median household income.

[17]   Download relevant report at
http://www.feantsa.org/files/freshstart/Campaign_2010/background_docs/FEANTSA_handbook_EN_FINAL.pdf

While robust evidence on trends in homelessness in Portugal is scarce, in the early 2000s it became apparent that homelessness was growing in cities like Lisbon and Porto. This apparent growth in the problem, and the difficulty of gaining a clear understanding of the phenomenon due to the uncoordinated nature of responses, prompted the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (which, through the Institute for Social Security, is the major funding body and regulator of services in the field of homelessness) to take a more strategic approach. A process was launched which eventually led to the broad-based partnership that developed the National Homelessness Strategy.

The Process of Developing the Strategy

The first step taken was to try to gain a better grasp of the reality and extent of homelessness in Portugal. In a survey undertaken by the Institute for Social Security in 2004, a questionnaire was sent to all relevant institutions (municipalities, local social services and homelessness service providers) designed to collect information about existing provision for people experiencing homelessness. This was followed up by the first ever national count of rough sleepers in Portugal at the end of 2005.

One of the main conclusions of this research was that there was an urgent need to design a national strategy which sought to prevent homelessness, intervene effectively where homelessness occurred, and to provide follow-up support for people who were moving on from a homeless experience. Amongst the key challenges identified were the fragmented pattern of service provision in Portugal, a lack of strategic cooperation between agencies, and a lack of information sharing and monitoring. But at the same time there were encouraging signs of emerging local mobilisation to address homelessness more strategically in some parts of Portugal.

In March 2007, a meeting brought together representatives of a wide range of public and private entities involved in homelessness. They agreed the need to develop a national strategy on homelessness and an Inter-Institutional Group, co-ordinated by the Institute of Social Security, was formed to devise such a strategy. This Group built upon the partnership structure that had enabled the 2005 rough sleepers count, but was amended via increased NGO participation, a replacement of local-level bodies with mainly national players, and the involvement of research units as partners alongside policy colleagues (rather than simply providing commissioned inputs). There was also provision made for occasional contributions by specific external stakeholders at key stages in the process (such as FEANTSA). Such a broad-based consultative approach is unusual in Portugal, particularly at national level.

Another key element in the process of strategic development was that each representative on the Inter-Institutional Group was charged with liaising with senior officials in their respective organisation to ensure "institutional endorsement" of the work being undertaken in the Group. Formal "institutional approval" was sought from all parties as soon as the Group had reached consensus on the most challenging issues. With respect to the definition of homelessness, for example, a letter of commitment which refers to the adoption of this definition was signed by all of the partners and also refers to a commitment to publicise this definition nationally. This "legitimating path" was challenging for some stakeholders, especially those of a collective nature such as the NGO federations.

The National Homelessness Strategy was formally launched in March 2009 and the implementation phase began. The initial stage of implementation involved the development of operational tools (e.g. a training manual for staff, information systems, etc.) and monitoring and evaluation instruments. There was also a focus on dissemination and the continued involvement of stakeholders through regular meetings of the Inter-Institutional Group with the "local social networks" which are responsible for implementing the strategy at local level. Data collection focusing on the characteristics of homeless people was also a key element of strategy implementation. However, as these assessments are still to be completed by all of the local social networks at the time of writing, it is unclear what the current scale of homelessness is in Portugal. The estimate that has been provided by the host country is that there are around 3,000 homeless people in Portugal (according to the relatively narrow definition outlined below), most of them in Lisbon and Porto.

The Content of the Strategy

The Strategy comprises mainly broad aims to be implemented at a local level, based on detailed homelessness plans which are intended to take into account local needs and priorities. The strategy is organised around two main aims:

- to enhance the evidence base on homelessness via the adoption of an agreed definition of homelessness, and a shared information and monitoring system; and

- to promote quality in the provision of homelessness services and responses.

The Strategy defines three specific areas to be tackled under these two strategic aims:

- preventive action in order to avoid situations of homelessness arising from eviction or discharge from institutions;

- direct intervention in situations of homelessness, focusing on the clarification of procedures and responsibilities, and also on innovative approaches; and

- follow-up support after resettlement, which is to be achieved within the local social networks.

There is a particular emphasis in the Strategy on improving the quality of intervention practices in the homelessness field, via, for example, training initiatives, enhancing the effectiveness of local homelessness units, and the adoption of local integrated approaches. The Strategy has placed a greater emphasis on the housing exclusion dimension of homelessness than has hitherto been the case in Portugal, but it also directly addresses other issues such as health, income, social benefits and employment.

The Strategy also establishes an organisational structure for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy, both at national level and at local level. In keeping with the growing emphasis in recent years on the role of local stakeholders, particularly local authorities and local social networks, in creating strategies to tackle homelessness, the National Strategy provides guidelines for the implementation of local 'diagnoses' of homelessness and local homelessness plans. The national Group for the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Strategy is

responsible for disseminating these guidelines and for providing support to the local networks and units responsible for designing homelessness plans.

The "underlying philosophy" of the National Strategy can thus be summarised as follows (Baptista, 2009):

- strengthening the evidence base;

- enhancing interagency cooperation and mutual responsibility;

- improving staff training, including that of dedicated 'case managers' for homeless people;

- strengthening the focus on housing needs and responses;

- ensuring continuity and diversity of support; and

- shifting the state's role towards more strategic control over the provision of services.

One important aspect of many national homelessness strategies, also emphasized by the 2010 Joint Report, is concrete targets and indicators of progress towards meeting these targets (Benjaminsen *et al*, 2009). While most of the detailed objectives in the Portuguese Strategy relate to policy implementation goals or 'milestones' (e.g. disseminating definitions, delivering staff training, setting up local networks, establishing information systems etc.), there are some concrete targets with respect to service delivery (e.g. that 80 per cent of homeless people should have a 'case manager'), and also some target outcomes for homeless people themselves (e.g. to ensure that no one has to stay overnight on the street for more than 24 hours due to the lack of an alternative; that noone should leave an institution without having all necessary help to secure a place to live). There are also a range of specific targets agreed at local level.

Early reports on implementation suggest that, while good progress was made in some areas in 2009 – particularly with respect to the dissemination of the homelessness definition, the gathering of information on homelessness in local areas, and the setting up of relevant processes and structures for addressing homelessness – a number of difficulties were encountered. These difficulties related mainly to insufficient financial, human and logistical resources being made available to meet all of the agreed objectives, as well as challenges in harmonizing timetables, and resistance in some quarters to intervention in this area. Actions planned for 2010 include:

- monitoring the establishment and development of relevant local intervention networks;

- the development of the information systems;

- implementing innovative solutions which guarantee a minimum standard of service;

- staff training; and

- monitoring and evaluating the strategy.

It was emphasised that the Strategy was focused on medium and long-term results, with only modest expectations of concrete results at this early stage. Rather, the hope was that new mechanisms would be put in place that stood the test of time and represented a 'paradigm shift' in how homelessness was dealt with in Portugal.

Assessing the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy: Key Areas of Discussion

There are a number of particularly interesting aspects of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy, some of which present potential transferable lessons for other EU countries. The key points are summarised below.

Opening a 'Window' in the South?

First, and most fundamentally, the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy is the first 'southern' strategy to be adopted and represents *'The opening of a policy window in a southern European country'* (Baptista, 2009, p.73). It raises the possibility that, even in the context of a weak welfare state and severely limited resources, positive action can be taken to address homelessness. This point may also be of particular interest to eastern European Member States, and indeed to wealthier European countries too in the context of the current economic crisis and budget constraints.

Tackling homelessness in Portugal has traditionally been "the task" of NGOs for a combination of reasons: the late and slow development of the welfare state; a long tradition of (mainly religious) organisations providing services for the poorest groups; and a predominant understanding of homelessness as a "social problem" rather than a "housing problem". NGOs working with homeless people have witnessed an evolving relationship with the State: from total absence, towards funding dependency and regulation. But given the diverse nature of these NGOs, service provision is implemented according to the ethos and practices of a wide variety of social welfare institutions, most of which are not homeless specific, albeit that in more recent years local authorities have started to play an important role in the enhancement of local networks to address homelessness. As Baptista & Perista (2010) summarised:

> "All in all, there is no homelessness system, but rather homelessness service providers and until now a relative absent State."

While it is too early to be certain of the full practical impacts of the Strategy on the actual delivery of homelessness services, it is clear that expectations run high in terms of its potential to bring about a 'step-change' in the quality and co-ordination of services for homeless people in Portugal. This became quite apparent during the focus groups conducted for the Housing Exclusion research project (Stephens *et al*, 2010). The Portuguese policy makers and practitioners interviewed often stressed that, with the implementation of the National Homelessness Strategy, improvements were expected in preventing homelessness in a range of specific cases, such as prisoners due for release with no home to go to and families facing homelessness because of rent or mortgage arrears (Bapista & Perista, 2010).

Agreeing a Narrow but Practicable Definition?

The lack of a clear definition of homelessness, or use of very narrow definitions of homelessness, is argued in the 2010 Joint Report to make it difficult to establish a definitive picture of the phenomenon. In Portuguese the term homelessness (sem-abrigo) means "without shelter" and

has traditionally been associated with people sleeping rough, although it does nowadays usually also include people in temporary accommodation. The definition of homelessness agreed by the Inter-Institutional Group reflects this traditional understanding of the concept of homelessness in Portugal and, while it is based on the ETHOS typology, it is restricted to the first three categories of this typology (see Appendix 1). It is articulated in the National Strategy as follows:

> "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."

In at least one respect this definition is somewhat wider than that first envisaged, as originally people had to be "repeatedly roofless" to be considered homeless. It is also worth noting that, in the "operational requirements" that supplement this definition, it is made clear that the residence status of foreign nationals should not affect their classification as "homeless" if they fulfil the other relevant criteria. Thus even "irregular" or "short-stay" foreign nationals may be considered homeless in the Portuguese context.

Nonetheless, the overall narrowness of the definition of homelessness is something that has been explicitly acknowledged and has been the subject of extensive and considered debate in Portugal. It was felt that in order to be practically useful, the definition adopted in the National Strategy had to command widespread support, had to be in keeping with dominant cultural understandings of the phenomenon, and had to reflect operational priorities:

> "This was a discussion held for a long time and it ended up as being a decision of all the entities represented in the [Inter-Institutional] Group: to have a more restricted definition because it is also more operative. This does not mean that we should not consider all the groups at risk of homelessness and that in other countries are considered homeless. It was a more consensual definition and it would be more complicated to have a broader definition." (Policy maker, quoted in Baptista & Perista, 2010, p.64).

> "One of the factors leading us to a more restrictive definition was because in Portugal when we talk about homelessness we talk about these more extreme situations. And I remember when we discussed the ETHOS typology with such a wider scope I had never thought – at least with our cultural references – of some of those groups as homeless... For us that was not simply homelessness...If we deal with a definition that includes a very diverse range of situations we could end up by having a strategy that would have a great dispersion of measures....." (NGO representative, quoted in Baptista & Perista, 2010, p.64).

Another point made was that, although the definition adopted in the Strategy is a relatively narrow one as compared to the full ETHOS typology (albeit that it does extend beyond the very narrowest definition as is not confined to rough sleepers only), the measures contained in the document explicitly address situations which are both upstream (prevention) and downstream (resettlement) of the official definition of homelessness. In fact, one critical advance of the Strategy lies in the fact that homelessness prevention is now explicitly addressed for the first time ever in Portuguese policy frameworks.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the focus given to the first three ETHOS categories in the Portuguese homelessness definition – categories dominated by middle aged single males, with weak social support, health problems and precarious labour market trajectories - has *"turned invisible"* some other homeless populations which do exist in Portuguese society, namely women, gypsy/Roma communities, and African ethnic minorities (who often have serious problems with inadequate housing but are not considered homeless) (Baptista & Perista, 2010). In the case of women, their 'invisibility' is linked to the fact that they resort more often than men to informal support networks when faced with homelessness, but also to the fact that institutional responses addressing issues like domestic violence or support for young mothers are not considered 'homelessness services' in the Portuguese context. In addition, there are likely to be other large groups who would be considered as homeless in at least some other European countries – such as people sharing with friends and relatives because they have no home of their own –who are rendered 'invisible' by the relative narrowness of the definition.

Putting a Different Understanding of Homelessness on the Agenda?

One of the most important impacts of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy seems to have been to raise the profile of homelessness as a policy issue and to begin to shift understandings of its nature:

> *"The drafting of the national strategy seems to have simultaneously achieved the demanding task of putting the issue of homelessness on the agenda, and that of enhancing an opportunity for action and thus the decision to introduce changes in the homelessness policy arena."* (Baptista, 2009, p.58).

Until the launch of the National Strategy, tackling homelessness had not been acknowledged as a political issue at a national level and had attracted little research attention. It had been viewed largely as a marginal concern within the broad field of social issues, understood in a narrow and "individualistic" way as a small-scale and extreme problem affecting individuals with *"serious and complex personal"* problems (Baptista & Perista, 2010, p.75), and had tended to attract only 'moderate' public and media interest.

Likewise, notwithstanding a shift in recent years amongst some agencies towards responding to a wider range of needs and to greater specialisation, services for homeless people are still orientated mainly towards the provision of basic support (temporary shelter, food and clothes, basic medical care, personal hygiene), with social and psychological support also commonly provided. Help to meet the housing needs of homeless people, other than for emergency and temporary accommodation, is still rare.

All of this reflects an understanding of homelessness as primarily a "social problem" rather than a "housing problem". However, the Strategy has played an important role in introducing a housing dimension into understandings of homelessness:

> *"Although…homelessness has mainly been approached from a social exclusion rather than from a housing exclusion perspective, the Strategy directly addresses the issue of housing needs and the provision of housing solutions, involving both the state and the local authorities as major stakeholders in the implementation of policy measures in this area.*

This approach represents an important evolution in the definition of homelessness policies in Portugal, where housing has always been notably absent." (Baptista, 2009, p.60).

This increased emphasis on housing within the Strategy is also viewed as linked to the emphasis on better evidence and information systems:

"I think that at the moment the municipalities still have the excuse to say that they do not have a diagnosis of the homeless. But we hope this will change with the Strategy, because there will be a local diagnosis in order to identify the needs in this specific area. The relative weight on housing support should be rebalanced with the Strategy. There has been [too much weight] placed on the social...side with accommodation responses...very precarious and temporary solutions." (Policy maker, Portugal, interviewed for the Housing Exclusion project (Stephen *et al*, 2010) by Baptista & Perista (2010)).

Securing Stakeholders' Commitment

The Portuguese National Strategy on Homelessness was suggested as a subject for Peer Review mainly because of the comprehensive and participative approach developed in all phases of strategic development - design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In particular, the high degree of stakeholder commitment that appears to have been achieved throughout this process may provide a helpful mutual learning opportunity for a number of EU Member States.

In the Portuguese context, the National Strategy represented a clear shift in the governance of homelessness since for the first time it involved the joint preparation of a document by a group of public bodies (central government departments and municipalities) and private bodies (NGOs and research centres). There is a clear concern throughout the Strategy to address the issue of the participation of different stakeholders in implementation, and this is one of its guiding principles. The relative stability of the core Inter-Institutional Group was considered central to enhancing the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the Group, albeit that allowance was also made for occasional contributions from external stakeholders. The Strategy was fully signed-up to by all members of the Group, and while the "legitimating pathway" pursued throughout the strategic development process, involving step-by-step institutional endorsement and approval, was challenging for many organisations, this formal 'buy-in' was crucial to the coherence and effectiveness of the Strategy.

This encouragement of cross-sectoral co-operation was particularly crucial, and challenging, in the Portuguese context because one important legacy of the traditional lack of state response to homelessness in Portugal has been the creation of "total" responses in some NGOs, which can create a 'closed environment' for some clients and a resistance to inter-agency working:

"Given the lack of adequate and timely responses from the different services,
namely public services, some organisations start to grow in order to concentrate the whole range of responses needed (health, housing, job integration...). There are many organisations doing almost everything and being financed almost entirely by social security. I understand why this happened, but I don't think this is positive. It ends up by creating resistances to partnership working because people do not understand why there is a need for change since for their clients they provide all the answers." (Policy maker, Portugal, quoted in Stephens *et al*, 2010, p.232).

The National Strategy seems to have made a significant contribution to addressing these concerns:

> *"Inter-agency cooperation has also gained strength [via]... the [nature] of the drafting process underlying the creation and implementation of the National Strategy, by the incentive given to the development of local homelessness units, and by the continuation – and even dissemination – of some interesting and innovative projects in this field."* (Bapista & Perista, 2010, p.78).

Impact of EU-level Initiatives

Finally, one of the most striking elements of the Portuguese Strategy is the critical role that EU-level initiatives have played in its development. As the official responsible for homelessness in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has stated quite bluntly:

> *"The trigger for the development of the strategy was undoubtedly the need to include measures for homelessness in the National Action Plan. This created an opportunity to get homelessness on the agenda…There was clear recognition of the need for a concrete evidence base and this led to the national research and ultimately to the development of an ambitious, substantiated strategy. Opportunities for the Ministry's relevant policy makers to exchange information, experience and good practice at European level were also extremely important in helping to develop the strategy."* (Caeiro, 2010, p.20).

Confirming this analysis, a researcher directly involved in the development of the National Strategy has commented:

> *"...the drafting of a National Strategy on homelessness is presented as a response to national and European agreements in both the housing and social inclusion domains. The importance given to the EU agreements (the European Social Charter, the European Parliament's Written Declaration to end street homelessness, the NAPs/inclusion) at the beginning of the document is a clear sign of the impact of EU policy orientation on national policy-making processes."* (Baptista, 2009, p.58).

Key Issues for Debate at the Peer Review meeting

The focus of this Peer Review is the promotion of mutual learning and exploration of good practice with respect to the development of national strategic approaches to addressing homelessness, with a particular focus upon the effective involvement of a range of relevant stakeholders. The following specific questions could therefore be focussed upon in the discussion by the peer countries:

- To what extent do national strategic approaches to homelessness already exist in the peer countries, and in what respects are these strategic approaches similar to, and different from, the Portuguese Strategy?

- Does Portugal provide a useful model for strategic development on homelessness for other European countries, or are there circumstances specific to Portugal (for example, the pre-existence of local social networks) which enabled this Strategy to be developed that do not pertain elsewhere in Europe?

- In particular, does the Portuguese model of cross-sectoral co-operation have valuable lessons for northern, central and eastern European Member States, or are the circumstances in northern, central and eastern Europe so different that 'transfer' of this sort of policy process is not feasible and/or appropriate?

- How can the development of national strategies in other countries achieve and sustain the commitment of a range of relevant stakeholders as appears to have been attained in Portugal?

- Is a focus on the narrowest definitions of homelessness, such as that settled upon in Portugal, sensible and realistic in some contexts or should this pressure to narrow definitions be resisted?

- Does the adoption of a narrow definition of homelessness raise significant equalities concerns, especially with respect to gender, as women's homelessness tends to manifest itself in different ways to that of men's?

- Is a focus on staff training likely to deliver significant results with respect to improving the quality of services for homeless people or are available resources better spent in other ways?

- Similarly, how much emphasis should be placed on strengthening the evidence base on homelessness as opposed to funding direct service provision?

- Is there scope for the promotion of more EU-level influence on the homelessness policies of Member States, such as that which has clearly been very important in the Portuguese context, particularly with respect to those Member States which have less developed policies on homelessness?

- What impact will the economic recession ("the crisis") have on the ability of Member States to pursue effective strategic approaches to homelessness such as that attempted in Portugal? In particular, how will it affect their capacity to adequately fund such strategies? How well equipped are Member States for coping with the needs of new homeless cases generated by the crisis?

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Appendix 1: ETHOS – Summary of European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

ROOFLESS	1	People living rough
	2	People staying in a night shelter
HOUSELESS	3	People in accommodation for the homeless
	4	People in women's shelter
	5	People in accommodation for immigrants
	6	People due to be released from institutions
	7	People receiving support (due to homelessness)
INSECURE	8	People living in insecure accommodation
	9	People living under threat of eviction
	10	People living under threat of violence
INADEQUATE	11	People living in temporary / non-standard structures
	12	People living in unfit housing
	13	People living in extreme overcrowding

Source: Edgar *et al*, 2007 - adopted by the European Commission and the Council (Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2010).