



## POLICY PAPER

# HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING EXCLUSION

August 2015

*"In order to combat social exclusion and poverty, the Union recognises and respects the right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices."*

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 34

### Introduction

Eurodiaconia is a dynamic, Europe-wide community of social and health care organisations founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of diaconal service, which are committed to promoting social justice. It represents more than 40 members working in over 30 countries, including churches, not-for-profit welfare organisations and NGOs. Together, they provide services to hundreds of thousands of persons in need across Europe.

Eurodiaconia is playing an active role in raising awareness of homelessness and in proposing next steps at an EU and Member State level. Amongst its national members, some have been working closely with homeless persons for many years. They are reporting a growing number of persons being excluded from housing, with vulnerable groups such as children and pensioners, migrants, women and persons facing cognitive impairment being particularly affected.

The observations of Eurodiaconia's members are supported by official studies. A 2013 Commission Staff Working Document called '*Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*' signalled that, in the wake of the financial crisis, homelessness has increased across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Rising mortgage foreclosures and unemployment levels are pushing households over the brink of financial self-sustainability and sending them into a downward spiral of debt and deprivation. Higher family breakdown rates and the downscaling of governmental support schemes have further contributed to this development.<sup>2</sup>

Eurodiaconia believes that homelessness undermines the human dignity of affected individuals, limiting their capacity to develop their potential and to participate fully in society. Furthermore, it damages social cohesion and the potential for inclusive economic growth. A coordinated response to homelessness is necessary to counteract rising societal inequality and reinforce the EU's aspiration towards a 'Triple A Social Status'.<sup>3</sup>

### Defining homelessness

Although there is no universal definition of homelessness, an important tool to grasp its different manifestations has been developed by FEANTSA: starting from the premise that homelessness is more comprehensive than the absence of a roof to cover one's head, the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) is increasingly used in both a European and an international context. Homelessness can refer to the absence of a home in a physical sense (as a space providing decent shelter to an individual and his/her family),

<sup>1</sup> Stephens, Mark et al, *Study on Housing Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Housing Provision and Labour Markets*, 2010; Commission Staff Working Document (CSWD), *Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> FEANTSA, *On the Way Home? FEANTSA Monitoring Report on Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe*, 2012, <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article854>.

<sup>3</sup> Juncker, Jean-Claude, *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission*, 2014, [www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker---political-guidelines.pdf](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker---political-guidelines.pdf).





but also in a social sense (as a safe space providing privacy and an adequate foundation for personal relations) and/or a legal sense (as a space which is recognised to be one's private residence and hence exclusive possession).<sup>4</sup> As such, homelessness should not be reduced to houselessness - it can also refer to insecure and inadequate housing which cannot fulfil the purpose of a 'home'.

Homelessness can stem from many causes, which are often interconnected. Some of these causes are structural, such as a lack of affordable housing, the downscaling of social security systems, or restrictive immigration policies, which can result in undocumented migrants landing on the streets.

The main personal causes of homelessness, according to Eurodiaconia members, are drug addiction, alcohol problems and mental illness. Other factors which can send the lives of individuals into a downward spiral and result in homelessness are the breakdown of intimate relationships and domestic violence. Finally, Kofeods Skole in Denmark emphasises that a lack of adequate support for those who have been released from prison can contribute to homelessness.

## Homelessness as an EU challenge

Eurodiaconia believes that there are currently a number of legal provisions which provide a foundation for coordinated EU action on homelessness. For example, Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that EU policies shall take into account requirements linked to the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion and the protection of human health, all of which cannot be appropriately addressed without tackling homelessness; articles 151 and 153 of the same Treaty state that both the EU and its Member States shall have the objective of promoting proper social protection and of combating exclusion, and that the Union shall support and complement the activities of its Member States in (amongst others) the field of combating social exclusion.

Member States have increasingly come to realise that they are facing common challenges in their fight against poverty and social exclusion. For example, the Social Protection Committee established homelessness and housing deprivation as a priority theme within the EU's social inclusion strategy for the year 2009, naming it the "light year on homelessness and housing exclusion." Whilst the subsidiarity principle remains intact, Member States have agreed to an EU-level cooperation and coordination process, which supports and complements their actions in relevant domains of social policy.<sup>5</sup>

The European Union is therefore entitled to support Member States, for example, by coordinating efforts to establish a common definition of homelessness or to collect comparable statistical data. Initiatives such as the 2010 Written Declaration on an EU Homelessness Strategy,<sup>6</sup> the 2013 Resolution on Social Housing in the European Union,<sup>7</sup> and the 2014 Joint Resolution on an EU homelessness strategy<sup>8</sup> constitute a clear call on the EU to take on a more proactive role in eradicating homelessness and improving the lives of those facing inadequate housing conditions. It is against this background that Eurodiaconia would like to make some recommendations to both the EU and its Member States on next steps in the fight against homelessness and housing deprivation.

<sup>4</sup> FEANTSA, *ETHOS – Taking Stock*, 2006, <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article120>; Busch-Geertsema, Volker et al, *Homelessness and Homeless policies in Europe: Lessons from Research*, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Marlier, Eric et al, *The EU and Social Inclusion. Facing the challenges*, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2010-0499&language=EN>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2013-0246+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P7-RC-2014-0008&language=EN>



## Recommendations to the EU

- **Develop an integrated approach to homelessness through the modernisation of social protection systems**

Building on the European Parliament 2008 Written Declaration on Ending Street Homelessness<sup>9</sup> and the 2014 Joint Resolution on an EU Homelessness Strategy,<sup>10</sup> the EU should develop and implement an integrated approach to homelessness. Eurodiaconia believes that such an approach would be an integral step in the modernisation of social protection systems across Member States. It should a) involve relevant stakeholders such as national and local policy-makers, researchers, service providers and persons experiencing homelessness; b) aim to establish a common definition of homelessness, taking the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) into account; c) enable the collection of comparable and reliable statistical data; d) provide a framework for monitoring and evaluating national homelessness strategies, and be linked closely to relevant EU Funding Instruments; e) facilitate mutual learning and transnational exchange on key challenges in the fight against homelessness and f) promote quality services for homeless persons.

- **Promote the eradication of homelessness through social investment in relevant social policies**

The European Commission released the Social Investment Package (SIP) in February 2013 to guide EU countries in implementing a social investment approach to their social policies. Centred on prevention, a social investment approach aims to develop policies which prepare persons to handle emerging social challenges, rather than merely 'repairing' existing issues that threaten an individual's well-being. Furthermore, a social investment approach is designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities, and to support them in accessing employment and participating in society on an equal basis.

Eurodiaconia believes that social investments in the area of homelessness are necessary in order to reduce and prevent homelessness at the same time. Effective homelessness strategies that fall within a social investment approach to housing policy may cover prevention and early intervention, quality homelessness service delivery, rapid re-housing, systematic data collection, monitoring and using shared definitions (ETHOS typology). The Helsinki Deaconess Institute, a Finnish member of Eurodiaconia, has adopted a social investment approach in its 'Aurora House' project, providing housing for 125 persons who have very different backgrounds and have repeatedly lost their homes. Investments into safe and temporally stable forms of housing are much more cost-effective than dealing with the consequence of emergency situations.<sup>11</sup>

In particular, Eurodiaconia believes that a social investment approach can be fruitfully translated into practice by empowering vulnerable individuals through the introduction of adequate minimum income schemes, accessible and high-quality services of general interest, and inclusive labour market measures. Homelessness constitutes a multi-dimensional phenomenon which cannot be tackled appropriately through initiatives focused solely on providing physical shelter. Building on the 1992 Council Recommendation<sup>12</sup> and the 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation<sup>13</sup>, an integrated approach to tackling homelessness would significantly strengthen the safety net for those who have lost, or are at risk of losing, their homes.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?reference=P6\\_TA\(2008\)0163&language=EN](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?reference=P6_TA(2008)0163&language=EN)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2014-0043&language=EN>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://pathwaystohousing.org/housing-first-model>: a simple comparison shows that the daily costs in a Housing First programme are about 57 \$ (appr. 50 Euro), while a night in an emergency shelter costs 73 \$ (appr. 65 Euro), in jail 164 \$ (146 Euro), in an emergency ward of a hospital 519 \$ (appr. 463 Euro), and in a psychiatric hospital 1,185 \$ (appr. 1057 Euro). Of course, the frequency and duration of usage of emergency services vary from person to person, and service users tend to stay in Housing First-projects on a longer term.

<sup>12</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 June 1992 on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in the social protection systems (92/441/EEC), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:31992H0441>.

<sup>13</sup> Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/867/EC), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32008H0867>.



## - Reinforce the Poverty Target within the European Semester

One of the five headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy is the reduction of the number of persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion by 20 million by the year 2020. As such, the strategy has set concrete benchmarks for social cohesion and community integration at the highest political level; in principle, through Europe 2020's poverty target, homelessness has been shifted from the fringes to the centre of the EU agenda, and should constitute an important focal area within the European Semester.

However, tangible progress towards the poverty target has been disappointing over the past years. The number of persons experiencing poverty has increased, rather than decreased since 2010. In part, this can be connected to the consequences of the financial crisis and a prioritisation of fiscal consolidation over social protection; however, it can also be linked to structural shortcomings in the Europe 2020 strategy's implementation, such as a lack of political commitment by Member States, and a lack of genuine involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as national parliaments and civil society actors.

Eurodiaconia therefore shares FEANTSA's recommendations<sup>14</sup> to a) put a stronger emphasis on addressing poverty and social exclusion, including homelessness, in the Annual Growth Survey and ensure more balance between economic and social priorities; b) urge Member States to include effective and integrated strategies and policies to combat poverty and homelessness in their National Reform Programmes; c) introduce social impact assessments of economic CSRs to ensure they do not undermine the poverty target or increase the risk of homelessness; d) promote genuine involvement of national parliaments and civil society stakeholders at the various stages of the European Semester, in order to ensure the democratic legitimacy of the process and a convergence between social policies and social realities in the EU's Member States.

## - Reduce administrative hurdles to accessing ESF Funding

Like other NGOs and service providers, Eurodiaconia members generally rely on multiple sources of financing, which can include private donations and (in some countries) church taxes. However, the largest percentage of funding usually comes from public authorities. It is important, therefore, that NGOs and service providers can access EU structural funds to co-finance their activities.

Unfortunately, the new funding period has done little to remove the administrative hurdles which Eurodiaconia members continue to experience. Due to the complexity of rules surrounding ESF funding allocation, smaller organisations in particular often lack the capacity to apply for ESF funding or to manage grants effectively once they have been allocated, the latter of which can have an adverse effect on project implementation and disrupt organisational structures. Eurodiaconia therefore calls on the EU to reduce the administrative burden on (potential) ESF grant beneficiaries by simplifying application and monitoring procedures.

## Recommendations to EU Member States

### - Develop national strategies on homelessness

Whilst it is encouraging to see that an increasing number of EU Member States is adopting strategic approaches to homelessness, almost half of them have not yet adopted a national strategy to address the issue.<sup>15</sup> Eurodiaconia calls upon all Member States to develop national strategies which:

- a) Take into account the potential added value of a Housing First approach, which aims to provide persons facing homelessness with stable housing from the start. Housing-led approaches are becoming more widespread in Europe; various countries have already adopted its principles in their national strategies (e.g. Denmark, Finland, France, Scotland). Their potential is strongly tied to the availability of affordable housing and to the continued access of beneficiaries to support by social

<sup>14</sup> FEANTSA, *Confronting Homelessness in the Context of the European Semester 2014*, 2014, <http://feantsa.org/spip.php?article4184>.

<sup>15</sup> So far, EU Member States which have adopted a national strategy are the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK (<http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?rubrique143>).



workers;<sup>16</sup> if adapted to the particular challenges of different national contexts, a Housing First approach can complement, or even constitute an impactful and cost-effective alternative to, traditional 'staircase' models.<sup>17</sup>

- b) Combine emergency support with effective preventive measures. This includes not only affordable housing, but also reinforcing mechanisms to tackle obstacles such as complicated or high rent guarantees, and measures to reduce the number of evictions (especially of families).
- c) Support the work of NGOs and social services providing debt advice, for example by developing an information system for families facing serious rent arrears and over-indebtedness.
- d) Counteract the discrimination towards homeless persons and the criminalisation of homelessness, both at the national and the local level.
- e) Involve relevant stakeholders such as local authorities, NGOs and service providers, social workers and particularly people who are themselves facing homelessness in the development and monitoring of strategies and policies. Eurodiaconia members 'Hungarian Interchurch Aid' and 'Diakonie Düsseldorf' both emphasise the importance of providing space for the active participation of homeless persons in diagnosing policy gaps and coming up with solutions.

#### - **Develop targeted policies for particularly vulnerable groups**

In line with the increase of homelessness across Europe, Eurodiaconia members report the increasing size of new target groups. Whilst the homeless used to be predominantly middle-aged, single men, there is a growing proportion of a) young persons (mentioned by members in Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, Czech Republic, France); b) migrants (mentioned by members in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France); c) women (mentioned by members in Sweden and France); d) persons becoming homeless due to overindebtedness (mentioned by members in Sweden and Hungary) and e) persons with a mental illness (mentioned by members in Sweden and France).

In response to these changes, Eurodiaconia members have deemed it necessary, over the course of the past years, to adjust their methods of providing support. For example, undocumented **migrants** face greater obstacles in accessing social services than legal residents, and are often forced to hide from the authorities. Young homeless persons can face particular obstacles to the labour market, education and training opportunities. One of Eurodiaconia's members in Denmark therefore aims to provide more internships and training opportunities to this group of persons. Rising homelessness amongst women is often linked to domestic violence, but lack of childcare can also have detrimental consequences - particularly in the case of single mothers.

Homelessness results from a unique interplay of causes amongst the different groups, and therefore requires a range of different policy responses, rather than a monolithic approach which presupposes a high extent of homogeneity amongst Europe's homeless.

#### - **Ensure better access to, and use of, EU structural funds at the local level**

Eurodiaconia and its members welcome the Commission's decision to allocate at least 20% of ESF funding to combating poverty and promoting social inclusion, in line with the Europe 2020 headline target on poverty reduction. Eurodiaconia calls on Member States to a) make 20% of its ESF budget available for projects aimed at reducing poverty, including homelessness; b) ensure that there is sufficient awareness of ESF funding at the local level and that the means of accessing it are communicated in a transparent way; c) encourage the use of ESF funding for integrated projects and services (for example for projects which combine housing interventions with employment or education-related actions) in order to generate more effective and sustainable solutions for persons experiencing homelessness.

<sup>16</sup> Busch-Geertsema, Volker et al, *Homelessness and Homeless policies in Europe: Lessons from Research*, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 12.