



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ENDING HOMELESSNESS – WHY WE NEED MORE SOCIAL INNOVATION AND INVESTMENT

“Ending homelessness is a realistic and achievable policy goal but will require action and a commitment from EU policy makers.”

Social Platform, ‘Homelessness can be ended’, 24 June 2016

Introductory statement

Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic, Europe-wide community of social and health care organisations founded in the Christian faith** which are committed to promoting social justice. It represents more than 47 members working in over 32 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.**

Eurodiaconia members have been working closely with homeless persons for many years. They thus are able to observe the state of play and developments regarding the situation of homeless people and met several times in the past to exchange views and develop common statements within the Eurodiaconia network. This year, Eurodiaconia members provided input on the topic of homelessness through a survey and participation in a discussion in the European Parliament. Their **recommendations for European-level decision-makers from these debates and previous meetings** are summarized in this letter.

Executive summary

Homelessness is a severe issue in the European Union despite continuous efforts to end it for years. According to recent estimates of the European Commission, **about 410.000 people could be sleeping rough on any given night in the EU** (European Commission, 2013, SWD 42, p. 6). The number of people suffering from homelessness has in fact been increasing instead of decreasing in the last few years, now including more new faces of homeless such as young people, women and migrants. **These developments call for a reconsideration of our current approach to homelessness**, making it necessary to find new ways to support different groups of homeless people and putting more resources into ending this severe form of extreme poverty and material deprivation for good. That is why **investments into social innovation and housing services need to be upscaled** which enable a more effective approach towards the goal of ending homelessness. The European Union as a fierce defender of human rights and a driving force behind social justice has a considerable potential in supporting this end by promoting change on the national level and allocating more resources to research projects, innovative approaches and investments into housing-related infrastructure. Homelessness is a severe form of poverty and deprivation which can and must be ended. **The right to social and housing assistance is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** (Article 34), and Eurodiaconia calls on European decision-makers to live up to these provisions and to ensure their adherence in practice.





Context and importance of problem

The number of people experiencing homelessness has been on the rise in the past years in Europe. In 2013, the European Commission published a comprehensive working document on homelessness in the EU which highlighted **the exacerbation of the situation for people experiencing homelessness and the urgent need to act on this issue**. Furthermore, the changing profile of homeless was stressed, now including a rising number of women, youth and migrants (Confronting homelessness in Europe, p.7). **Homelessness constitutes a substantial burden on the people who have to suffer from it as it quickly exacerbates their mental and physical health**, and insufficient approaches to prevent and act against homelessness furthermore constitute an unnecessary burden on public money, as several studies have shown that prevention and early intervention are often the most cost-effective approaches (ibid, p. 12).

The main causes of homelessness that need to be addressed are **structural problems such as poverty, unemployment and lacking availability of affordable housing** (see Eurodiaconia 2016), which can be addressed by directing targeted resources towards improving related infrastructure, for example through structural or action funds. Other important causes are personal factors, notably mental health and addiction problems. In order to address these, social and health care services need to be supported and upscaled through investments and the promotion of social innovation so that the necessary service-based infrastructure and more effective approaches can be developed. **The European Union enshrines support to homeless people in its Charter of Fundamental Rights**, stating that it “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 Union law and national laws and practices.”

Policy review

The European Union already makes use of several tools to support the fight against homelessness in Europe, for example through funds such as the **European Social Fund (ESF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)**. Through the funds, food aid, social inclusion activities and labour market inclusion initiatives can be supported which help homeless people to be reintegrated into society. Nevertheless, the funds do not offer enough possibilities to provide targeted support. According to Eurodiaconia members, the ESF is hardly accessible for projects targeting homeless people as the main focus is still on labour market inclusion programs which do not favor those furthest away from the labour market such as homeless (see Eurodiaconia report on the use of the ESF, 2016).

Regarding investments into innovative approaches to homelessness, the EU is as well active in **supporting pilot projects and feasibility studies**, for example on the Housing First approach. Nevertheless, before initiatives like Housing First can be successfully applied, the necessary structural conditions such as affordable housing options need to be available, which is a major problem especially in urban areas where homeless people often gather. Thus, **integrated investment strategies need to be pursued** in order to enable these approaches to unfold their effectiveness. Furthermore, Eurodiaconia members stressed that although innovative approaches like Housing First are interesting and expected to be successful, their effectiveness in different national contexts is not assessable yet. Therefore, more studies in different countries and contexts are necessary in order to be able to make best use of social innovation.

The European Union furthermore pursues **monitoring and data collection on the topic of homelessness**, for example in the working document ‘Confronting homelessness in the European Union’ from 2013 or through the European Semester process. Nevertheless, the Commission as well acknowledges the need for more



comprehensive data which allows the monitoring and comparison of the homelessness situation throughout the EU. This need was reassured in a discussion organized by Eurodiaconia in the European Parliament where both Eurodiaconia members and MEPs reiterated the lacking availability of comprehensive data, among others on the causes and state of play of member states on homelessness, but as well on the effectiveness of innovative approaches in the homelessness sector (Eurodiaconia Meeting report, 2016).

All in all, European stakeholders already show a great commitment and efforts in more effectively addressing homelessness. Notwithstanding, the **increasing numbers of homelessness people and new social challenges within the homelessness sector show that these efforts are not sufficient** yet, but need to be increased in order to meet the growing demands and prevent a further rise in homelessness.

Our recommendations

Eurodiaconia has developed specific recommendations for European decision-makers based on exchanges with members who have years of experience working with homeless people on the grass-roots level, and in discussion with European stakeholders who are engaged in the topic of homelessness on an institutional level. Eurodiaconia calls on European decision-makers to consider the following steps in order to develop a more comprehensive and sustainable way to address homelessness in the EU.

Poverty-related funding tools

- **Facilitate access to existing funds.** - Existing funds which offer financial support for social projects such as the FEAD or ESF constitute a high administrative burden and thus decrease the possibility to access the funds for small NGOs. Furthermore, the topic of homelessness is not sufficiently incorporated in these programs. Thus, the administrative burden for the funds should be reduced and more space for developing projects that benefit homeless people shall be made available.
- **Allocate more targeted funding opportunities for civil society organisations.** - Social service providers are main actors in supporting the homeless and in finding new ways to respond to changing social challenges. Thus, supporting those and enabling them to make use of EU-funding is crucial if we want to find more effective ways to address homelessness. In this context, also the visibility of funds need to be ensured, as to make sure that they can be taken up.

Investment

- **Invest into social housing.** – The most urgent issue Eurodiaconia members identified is the lack of affordable housing options. On the one hand, the lack of social housing pushes people into homelessness when they are no longer able to pay their bills, and on the other hand it is hard to find housing options for people already in homelessness. Thus, housing options need to be developed, also for target groups with special needs such as elderly people and people with health problems.
- **Promote the eradication of homelessness through comprehensive social investments.** –People suffering from homelessness have a broad set of needs which need to be addressed in a holistic way. Investment is necessary in a range of fields, depending on the situation and existing service offers on the local level, including into employment, health care, rehabilitation and anti-eviction measures. This should not only be achieved through financing non-state service providers, but as well through upscaling and modernising Member States' social protection systems.



Social innovation

- **Support the development of social innovation to more effectively address homelessness.** – Homeless people often suffer from an interconnected and complex range of problems that need to be addressed in order to effectively re-integrate them into society. That is why innovative and adapted services are especially relevant in this context as they, unlike general approaches, react to the diversifying needs of homeless people. Therefore, the development, implementation and evaluation of social innovation in the homelessness sector shall be promoted.
- **Ensure the inclusion of social innovation and investment in any strategies on homelessness at local, national or European level.** – Social innovation and investment as key means to improve the situation of homelessness in Europe need to be stressed in any comprehensive strategies.

Monitoring and data collection

- **Promote data collection to foster a common understanding of homelessness.** – Comprehensive data on the numbers of people in homelessness and the factors surrounding the issue on a European level are needed in order to enable cross-country comparisons and learning as well as to be able to track developments and evaluate the effectiveness of innovative approaches to address homelessness.
- **Reinforce the poverty target within the European Semester.** – Data on the state of play on Member States' policy is best collected and communicated to the national level over the European Semester processes. Therefore, the focus on poverty-related policies needs to be strengthened.

Societal integration and understanding

- **Foster a better understanding and accessibility of rights for intra-EU migrants.** – Several Eurodiaconia members mentioned the increasing number of homeless EU migrants among their services, and their unclear status of rights, foremost with view to access to social protection systems and social services (Eurodiaconia 2016, Effectively addressing homelessness). In order to be able to help this target group out of homelessness, a better access to information which facilitates understanding of their rights is necessary.
- **Fight prejudices against homeless.** – Public authorities and civil society may hold prejudices against homeless people which hinders their effective reintegration into society, as reported by Eurodiaconia members. Advocacy efforts and information campaigns to fight prejudices against homeless people need to be strengthened on both European and national level.
- **Raise awareness of homelessness.** – The attention given to the topic of homelessness varies greatly, depending on public interest and political agenda. Nevertheless, in order to end homelessness, the topic must stay high on the agenda and be dealt with consistently. Therefore, European decision-makers should use opportunities to participate in common actions and raise awareness of homelessness in the EU. Recent failed actions like the renewed Written Declaration on an EU Homelessness Strategy in the European Parliament and the reluctance of the European Commission to develop an EU homelessness strategy evokes the notion that homelessness is not a priority for the EU institutions anymore.



Conclusions

Homelessness is still a severe problem within the European Union, which became worse in the last years by exposing increasing numbers and groups of people to insecure and roofless living. In order to end homelessness for good, Eurodiaconia calls on European decision-makers to live up to the provisions in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy by developing a comprehensive strategy to effectively address this severe form of poverty and extreme material deprivation.

Although efforts have been made by allocating funding as well as supporting data collection and innovative approaches, the situation is still exacerbating: More data need to be collected in order to be able to understand the developments and underlying causes of homelessness, more funding possibilities need to be made available in order to be able to offer integrated and innovative services for homeless people, and more investments into the social infrastructure in Member States are needed as to live up to the provisions made. Homelessness can only be effectively addressed when words are followed by actions.

References for recommended readings

Eurodiaconia (2015). *Policy Paper on Homeless and Housing Exclusion*. Brussels: Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia (2016). *Effectively addressing homelessness: The role of social innovation and investment in the homelessness sector*. Brussels: Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia (2016). *Meeting report. Discussion on the role of social innovation and investment in the homelessness sector*. Brussels: Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia (2016). *Mapping on the implementation of the European Social Fund at national level*. Brussels: Eurodiaconia

European Commission (2013). *SWD 42 Final. Confronting homelessness in the European Union*. Brussels: European Commission

Feantsa (2012). *Social innovation into combat homelessness: A Guide*. Brussels: Feantsa

September 2016