

POLICY PAPER

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING EXCLUSION

'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

'Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction. Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.'

European Pillar of Social Rights, Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion, principle 19, Housing and assistance for the homeless

Introduction

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organizations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe, leaving no one behind. Driven by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where each person is valued for their inherent God-given worth and dignity and where our societies guarantee social justice for all people, including the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Eurodiaconia is playing an active role in raising awareness on 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 people being excluded from housing, with vulnerable groups such as children and pensioners, migrants, women and people facing cognitive impairment being particularly affected.

Such observations are supported, for instance, by FEANTSA's fourth overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2019 which reveals a dramatic picture of increasing homelessness across most of the EU – amongst children, women and migrants¹.

In 2017, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion had fallen by 5.1 million compared to 2016, equivalent to a 1.1 percentage point (pp) decrease in the share of the total population. As such, the share of the EU-28 population at risk of poverty or social exclusion fell to a level that had not been recorded since data became available in 2010². While Eurodiaconia warmly welcomes such improvement, the final objective of having at least 20 million fewer people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2020 set in 2010 by the Union and the Member States has however not yet been reached.

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 allow the EU to overcome its failure to implement the 2020 objective of reducing the number of persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion by 20 million in the years to come³.

¹ FEANTSA, *4th Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2019*, 2019, <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2019/04/01/the-fourth-overview-of-housing-exclusion-in-europe-2019?bcParent=27>.

² Eurostat, *People at risk of poverty or social exclusion*, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion#Number_of_people_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion.

³ European Commission, *Europe 2020 strategy*, 2010, https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en.

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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) can be used both in 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 individuals and their family), in a social sense (as a safe space providing privacy and an adequate foundation for personal relations) but also in a legal sense (as a space which is recognised to be one's private residence and hence exclusive possession)⁴. As such, homelessness should not be reduced to absence of housing: 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.

Several Eurodiaconia members also highlight drug addiction, alcohol problems and mental illness as potential explanatory factors for homelessness. 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, Kofoeds Skole in Denmark emphasized 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 several 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 consider 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 on the other hand state that both the EU and its Member States shall have the objective of promoting proper social protection and combating exclusion. The Union shall support and complement the activities of its Member States.

According to the Social Protection Committee, housing exclusion and homelessness are growing concerns across Member States⁵. Policies such as social housing and affordable rental housing programmes, targeted housing allowances, as well as the energy efficient renovation of existing housing stocks would be required to address the problem. Addressing homelessness would need integrated and sustainable solutions that combine prevention and support. However, in line with our partner FEANTSA, Eurodiaconia believes that there has been a significant decline in European ambitions to fight against homelessness and housing exclusion over the last few years⁶.

Since 2014, the European Parliament has passed 19 resolutions with a specific mention to homelessness with topics ranging from gender inequality, fundamental rights, children, disability, marginalized communities, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester, Roma, employment, poverty and urban policy⁷. Such resolutions, emanating from cross-party lines, 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Social Protection Committee, *2018 SPC Annual Review of the social protection performance monitor (SPPM) and developments in social protection policies. Report on key social challenges and main messages*, 2018.

⁶ FEANTSA, *4th Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2019*, 2019, <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2019/04/01/the-fourth-overview-of-housing-exclusion-in-europe-2019?bcParent=27>.

⁷ FEANTSA, *The 2014-2019 European Parliament's record on Homelessness*, 2019, <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2018/10/10/the-2014-2019-european-parliaments-record-on-homelessness>. See pages 22-24 for full list of resolutions.

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Recommendations to the EU

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

Building on the 2008 Written Declaration on Ending Street Homelessness⁸, the 2014 Joint Resolution on an EU Homelessness Strategy⁹ or the European Parliament's 2018 report on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies¹⁰, the EU should develop and implement an integrated approach to homelessness. Eurodiaconia believes that such an approach implies the necessary 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 people 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; f) promote quality services for the homeless.

While the European Pillar of Social Rights should remain the relevant framework for implementing policies aiming at reducing homelessness and housing exclusion through its 19th principle, Eurodiaconia calls for an extension of principle 12 on social protection beyond the scope of employment and worker's right to comprise the right of the most deprived to access social protection.

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 policies¹¹. Centered 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 relevant social investments approaches are necessary 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 people with different backgrounds that 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 situations¹².

Eurodiaconia believes that an efficient 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 that cannot be tackled appropriately through initiatives focused solely on providing physical

⁸ European Parliament, *Declaration of the European Parliament on ending street homelessness*, 2008. [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)

⁹ European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2014 on an EU homelessness strategy*, 2014. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2014-0043&language=EN>

¹⁰ European Parliament, Draft European Parliament legislative resolution on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, 2018. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0140_EN.html?redirect

¹¹ European Commission, *Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions. Towards Social Investment for Growth and cohesion - including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020*, 2013, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langld=en&catld=1044&newsld=1807&furtherNews=yes>.

¹² See <http://www.housingfirstbelgium.be/medias/files/housing-first-belgium-results-en.pdf> : a simple comparison in Belgium shows that Housing First support costs about 17.80 euros per night per person while a night in an emergency shelter costs 55 euros. 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.

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shelter. Building on the 1992 Council Recommendation¹³ and the 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation¹⁴, 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.

Promote the eradication of homelessness within the European Semester

One of the five headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy is the reduction of the number of people 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 should have 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 people experiencing poverty has not decreased as expected since 2010 despite the recently experienced economic recovery. In part, these failures can be connected to structural shortcomings in the Europe 2020 strategy's implementation for instance, in 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.

In 2018 the Commission had underlined investment in adequate social housing and other housing assistance as "essential" in its Annual Growth Survey, focusing on the need to protect "vulnerable people against unjustified forced eviction and foreclosures, as well as tackling homelessness". While this was welcomed by Eurodiaconia, the 2019 Annual Growth Survey and the recently published Country Specific Recommendations however fail to mention homelessness.

Our organisation therefore shares FEANTSA's recommendations¹⁵ 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 and upcoming 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, Eurodiaconia members continue to experience administrative hurdles due to the complexity of rules surrounding ESF funding allocation. Smaller organisations 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 continue reducing the administrative burden on (potential) ESF grant beneficiaries by simplifying application and monitoring procedures.

Eurodiaconia furthermore calls for such efforts to also be translated in the upcoming implementation of the new European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the next long-term EU budget 2021-2027.

¹³ 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>.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ FEANTSA, Press Release Annual Growth Survey 2018 calls on Member States to tackle homelessness, November 2017. <https://www.feantsa.org/download/press-release-autun-package3489233594162587263.pdf>.

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Recommendations to EU Member States

Develop national strategies on homelessness

Whilst it is encouraging to see that an increasing number of EU Member States are adopting strategic approaches to homelessness, many of them have not yet implemented a national strategy to address the issue. Eurodiaconia calls upon all Member States to develop national strategies which:

- a) Consider the added value of a Housing First approach, which aims to provide people facing homelessness with stable housing from the start. Housing-led approaches are becoming more widespread in Europe; various countries have already adopted their 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 workers. 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' models¹⁶.
- b) Combine emergency support with effective preventive measures. This not only includes 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 for 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 people 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 over-indebtedness (mentioned by members in Sweden and Hungary) and
- e) persons with a mental illness (mentioned by members in Sweden and France).

Such observations are backed by the Social Protection Committee in their 2018 annual report¹⁷ and by the latest reports by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA)¹⁸.

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. One of Eurodiaconia's Greece based member aims at providing housing and traineeship for refugees. Young homeless on the other hand can face particular difficulties to enter the labour market, access education and training opportunities. The Helsinki Deaconess Institute therefore aims to provide support to this specific group of persons in Denmark. 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. Diakonie Austria thus developed special programs to help this fringe of the population.

¹⁶ See footnote ¹²

¹⁷ See footnote ⁵

¹⁸ See footnote¹.

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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

Under the current programming period, at least 20% of the ESF is foreseen to promote social inclusion and poverty reduction. Most of the Member States have exceeded this benchmark and have invested between 20% and 30% for social inclusion and poverty reduction, with an EU level average of 25.6%¹⁹.

Eurodiaconia recommends allocating at least 30% of the ESF+ to promoting social inclusion and reducing poverty. This would build on the current practice by Member States and demonstrate the added-value of EU funds in building a more social Europe.²⁰

The resources included in the 30% of the ESF+ should aim to enhance access to affordable, sustainable, high-quality services; combat discrimination; fighting homelessness and promote the social inclusion of all on the local level.

Tackling homelessness post 2020

As the Europe 2020 strategy is coming to an end, it is crucial to think forward and develop new policy strategies for the future. While keeping the European Pillar of Social Rights as the main guiding compass for further developments in the fields of social policies and homelessness, Eurodiaconia encourages the EU to further develop and implement an overarching visionary and transformative post-2020 strategy based on the Sustainable Development Goals²¹.

It is indeed time for the European Union and its Member States, regions, municipalities and relevant stakeholders to move from commitment to immediate action, based on their adoption (along with the rest of the international community) of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, the Sustainable Development Goals should be integrated into EU policies with each EU institution driving the implementation of the strategy forward in order to finally permit the foundation of a Union in which 'nobody has to be poor, excluded or homeless and everybody is actively included in society and working life.'²²

¹⁹ *ESF Transnational Platform (April 2018), Social inclusion indicators for ESF investments – Areas for development in addressing the 20% social inclusion target in the ESF+.* Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/content/social-inclusion-indicators-esf-investments-areasdevelopment-addressing-20-social-inclusion>.

²⁰ EU Alliance for investing in children: How can the EU's post-2020 budget fight child poverty and social exclusion? Recommendations for the ESF+ and the Common Provision Regulations, 2018

²¹ Eurodiaconia, *Integrating and Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018. <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Pub-2018-Towards-a-Social-Sustainable-and-Equitable-Europe.pdf>.

²² Europe Moving Towards a sustainable future, contribution of the SDG Multi-Stakeholder Platform to the Reflection Paper 'towards a sustainable Europe by 2030', 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/sdg_multi-stakeholder_platform_input_to_reflection_paper_sustainable_europe2.pdf.