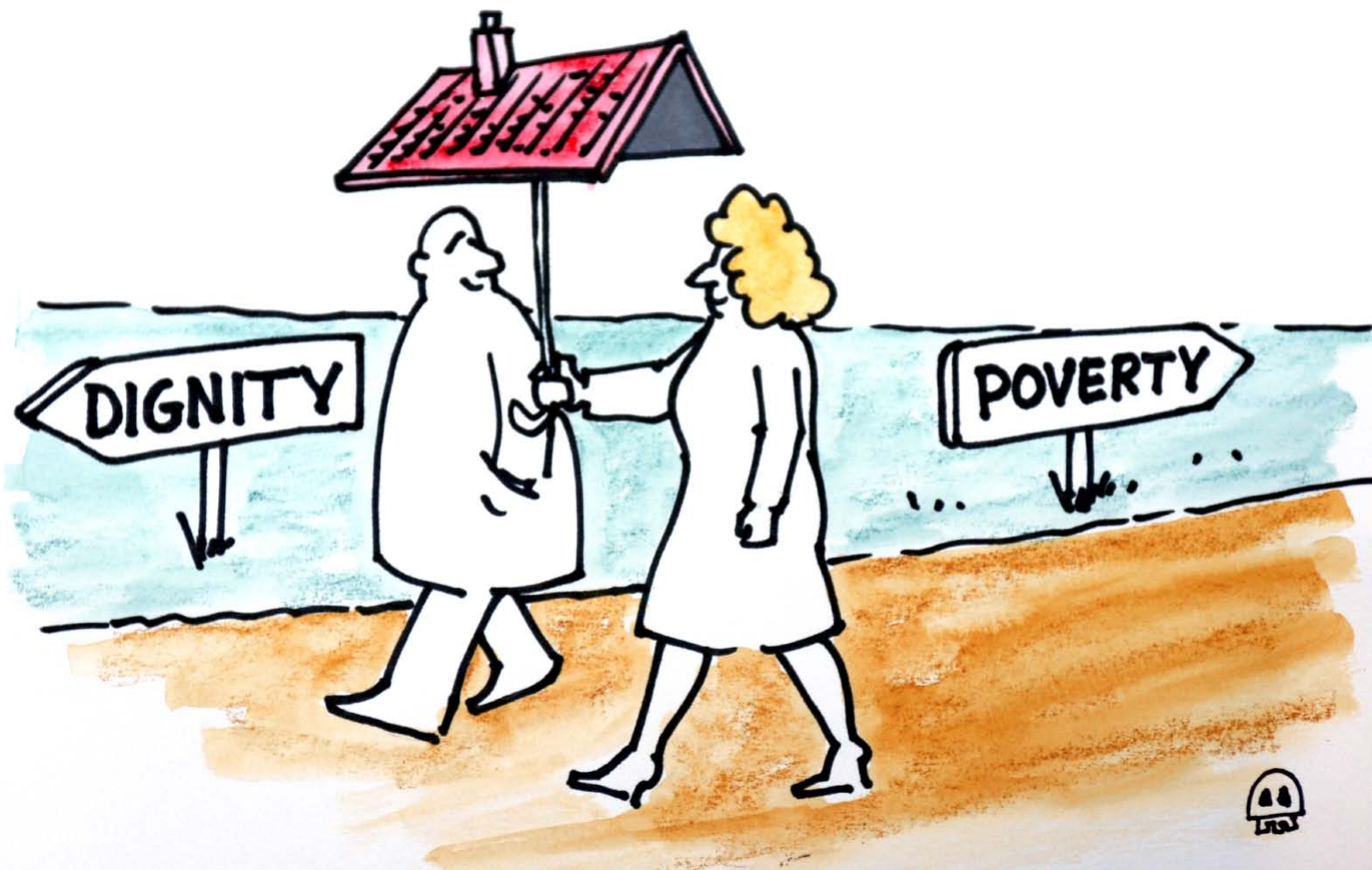


Danish EU Presidency 2012



11th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty 13 & 14 May 2012 Egmont Palace – Brussels

Homelessness and housing rights in times of crisis Is having a roof enough to feel at home in the EU of 2012?



Supported by The European Commission
Organised with the assistance of The European Anti-Poverty Network–EAPN
Hosted in Egmont Palace by the Belgian Government



11th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty

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DANISH PRESIDENCY
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE
EUROPEAN UNION 2012



Homelessness and housing rights in times of crisis

Is having a roof enough to feel at home in the EU of 2012?

11th EU MEETING OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY

10 & 11 MAY 2012

Egmont Palace, Place du Petit Sablon 8, Brussels

Under the Danish Presidency of the European Union
Supported by the European Commission
Organised with the assistance of The European Anti Poverty Network-EAPN
Hosted in the Egmont Palace, Place du Petit Sablon 8, Brussels, by the Belgian Government

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Declaration by delegates



People Experiencing Poverty made their first input to the 11th EU meeting of People Experiencing Poverty through a joint declaration. It was read out in the opening plenary session by Sabrina Emilio of the Italian delegation. The declaration was made to the attention of all the European Institutions and is given in full below.

Delegates to the 11th EU Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty show the red card to the EU Institutions

This is the Eleventh European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty.

For some of us it is an exciting new adventure, for others a familiar annual occasion. For all of us, it is a time of hope in a possible change.

But this year, more than ever before, we feel abandoned by those who declare they stand at our side, working for us and with us.

Ever greater numbers of people are homeless and living in precarious conditions (there's no need to cite official statistics; just look around, just ask the staff in

the shelters), ever greater numbers are losing their home because they can't afford to pay their rent or their mortgage, ever greater numbers are without a home because they are discriminated against.

Everywhere unemployment is mounting, workers are increasingly insecure, young people cannot imagine a future. As a 17- year-old girl has said, "Right now I have no dreams". Can there be anything worse than not having a dream when you are 17 years old?

All this is happening because the governments of the member states and the European institutions are not looking beyond the fiscal accounts. They are allowing the burden of the crisis to fall fully on the poor, the vulnerable, who bear no blame for it, while those who should be called to account are going practically unscathed and are even growing richer.

We feel that EU leaders have lost sight of the objectives for which the European Union was born 60 years ago: objectives that included respect for rights, widespread material and social wellbeing, solidarity and cooperation.

We call on you to follow up your many fine words with action. The policies now being used to combat the

economic and financial crisis are only creating more poverty and social exclusion. You must take this message to heart and act accordingly: Europe's future depends on it!

We too have rights, and not just on paper. We have the right to an adequate minimum income, to a quality job, to efficient and affordable social services, to water, electricity and a dignified place to live in, to health.

We have never thought the European Meetings of Persons Experiencing Poverty were the solution to all the problems. But we know it is perhaps a unique occasion to make our voice heard, to influence, with direct input, the shaping of policies that do concern us closely but that also have implications for the whole of society.

We want a real EU Inclusion strategy that has meaningful actions at local, national and European levels capable to meet the EU poverty reduction target. As people directly impacted we want to be part of deciding the actions to be taken and to be involved in the delivery and evaluation of these actions. We want financial investment to support such actions.

We want to make ourselves heard and seen not only in this room but also in the public space, so today at 12.30, one or two delegates from a number of the delegations will leave the meeting to assemble before the Building of the Council of the European Union to make a photo there, symbolically showing the red card to the European Union leaders and leave there our messages, while the rest of our colleagues engage in the agenda we are sure you will understand that this extraordinary time needs some extraordinary action.

Finally during this Danish Presidency we are reminded of the Hans Christian Anderson story of the Emperor's new clothes. In showing the red card to the EU Institutions today, for what we see as the failure to take seriously the commitments you made when you agreed the EU poverty reduction target, we take inspiration from the young child in this story, who dared to reveal that the Emperor was naked. We are encouraged that this revelation was a moment of awakening and a new beginning for the Emperor and we hope our action today will have a similar result.

Opening plenary – introductory remarks



Jesper BRASK FISCHER, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Danish Ministry of Social Affairs welcomed the Delegates on behalf of Karen Hækkerup, the Danish Minister of Social Affairs, who could not be present. The Minister would be following this important event via webstream and will hear the voice of the delegates.

Mr Fischer thanked delegates for the clear and strong message in their opening declaration. He understood the feelings behind the showing of the red card to the EU institutions, but hoped he might remain around the table to speak on behalf of the Council of the European Union of which Denmark currently holds the Presidency.

He reminded delegates that there is little common



social legislation at EU level, but that processes – the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) – have allowed countries to exchange and learn around common challenges and goals. Furthermore, the new Europe 2020 strategy puts social inclusion and poverty reduction alongside economic growth and job creation as what the EU is trying to achieve.

But we have not been successful so far. The numbers at risk of poverty in the EU grew by about 2 million people, 2009-10. Although that is the most recent data available, it is also clear that the situation has not improved since then. People did not anticipate such economic problems for so long in so many countries.

This European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty on homelessness and housing rights in times of crisis is therefore important and timely. Mr Fischer reiterated how important it is to treat people experiencing poverty with respect; only people with experiences of poverty, homelessness and exclusion know the reality of that experience. This is a meeting for them to make their voices heard.

Back in 2002, the Danish Presidency held the first

EU Round Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Aarhus. It was agreed that all stakeholders must be involved in this fight and this conference reflects the importance given to this approach. It is through joint efforts that we will get the best results.

There are good examples of homelessness strategies taking housing first approaches to secure housing with appropriate support services to meet additional needs. The evidence shows that this works and rates of falling back into homelessness are low. Resources are needed for new initiatives and targeted methods as part of strategies to fight homelessness.

László ANDOR, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion highlighted that the message from recent local, regional and national elections across the continent is that Europe has to change course and that wholesale austerity measures are no longer acceptable. We have no chance of fighting poverty if European economic policies cannot become more balanced. A smarter way of fiscal consolidation is needed.

The EU2020 strategy contains the objective to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. When this was agreed two years ago, we were criticised for not being ambitious enough. Now people say that this target is not realistic. But it is only unrealistic if we cannot restore opportunities for growth in the countries most affected by record high levels of unemployment, particularly those of the European periphery.

The division between EU countries is getting bigger and we need to find renewed solidarity between countries, as well as the solidarity needed within countries to fund the necessary social services. Without renewed investment, the overall economic potential of some countries is at risk as people increasingly have to migrate away in search of work and opportunity.

The European Commission has very limited capacity to intervene directly in Member States' social policies, but we have encouraged and instructed countries to protect vulnerable groups and explicitly called for countries such as Bulgaria and Estonia to do more against poverty and social exclusion. We have sent action teams to the eight Member States where youth unemployment is highest to support solution-finding.

The Commission is analysing how several Member States say they are addressing homelessness and will work to support and guide national, regional and

local homelessness strategies. European funding will continue to support efforts to identify the causes of homelessness and best practice solutions, including by evaluating innovative approaches.

Commissioner Andor stated his belief that it is not purely the single currency or the single market which connects us but also the same social values of solidarity, equal opportunities and social justice. We need to urgently discuss unfortunate policy responses that criminalise the homeless and look at how EU work on integrating Roma and tackling child poverty relates to housing and homelessness.

We need to do more to prevent homelessness including by looking at issues of financial regulation that are systemic causes of homelessness. We also need to examine how policies around healthcare, employment support, food aid, human rights, regional development etc impact. To support such efforts the Commission has proposed that at least 20% of the total European Social Fund should be allocated to social inclusion. We will continue to get all Member States on board to accept this proposal.

Maggie DE BLOCK, Belgian State Secretary for Social Integration and Combating Poverty welcomed delegates on behalf of the Belgian Government. She expressed her understanding of the discontent conveyed by the red card message. The current crisis is quite devastating and people experiencing poverty are the first and the main victims. This period of austerity has cut government spending affecting our social programmes.

She highlighted that in Belgium, they are looking at ways to achieve structural reforms that will deliver the necessary jobs and growth whilst reducing spending. There is an ambitious goal on reducing poverty and much attention is needed to reach the most vulnerable. It is important to make use of all the means available. There has to be coordination between all levels of government.

It is also essential that authorities listen to people with experience of poverty to come up with consistent and coherent policies. The Federal Ministry of Belgium looks to work hand-in-hand with people experiencing poverty through participatory projects, consultation and real exchanges. It is important to have this European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty and such meetings need to continue as long as there is poverty.

This event focuses on homelessness and the right to

housing. In Belgium, people experiencing poverty have been closely involved in developing the Federal roadmap. Just last week, State Secretary de Block visited shelters in different regions of Belgium to hear the voices of service users about shaping services for the coming years. There has also been work to coordinate policies with local authorities, NGOs and other relevant entities. The coordination of European policies is also a way to combat homelessness, as supported by Council conclusions in 2010.

Dominique PION, French delegate from the 10th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty highlighted how important and enriching the European Meetings are for vulnerable people experiencing poverty. It helps to know that people in precarious situations are not alone, that people are experiencing similar challenges and situations in other European countries and that the crisis is making it even harder to get by.

However, there has been such little response to the issues highlighted and recommendations made by delegates that it is impossible to identify any real evolution from one year to the next. It is easy to think that it is, in fact, a waste of time and that delegates are speaking into the void despite the expertise gathered through years of experiencing the reality of poverty. The absence of political representatives from the meetings feels like a lack of respect.

Nevertheless, actions such as this which favour direct participation are essential to give a voice to people experiencing poverty and allow the development of shared messages. They recognise that people experiencing homeless and housing exclusion are full citizens and actors and stakeholders in community life. It is important that the European Meetings are organised every year and that the organisers deliver participative processes. It is essential to maintain dialogue with politicians and officials.

Madame Pion concluded by highlighting that on a personal level, the fact of participating had allowed her to stand up and take renewed charge of her life, to make her voice heard and defend her ideas. She recently voted for the first time in eight years because she felt she was a citizen again.

Creative presentations – the reality of people experiencing poverty in Europe



As with previous years, national delegations were invited to prepare a creative presentation to express and portray the reality of poverty. The presentations focused on this year's theme of homelessness and housing rights in the current time of financial crisis and included role plays, films and slides.

<http://www.eapn.eu/en/news-and-publications/news/eapn-news/11th-european-meeting-of-people-experiencing-poverty-homelessness-and-housing-rights-in-the-context-of-the-crisis>

Austria – a role play showed some of the many barriers facing a couple – one of whom uses a wheelchair – in accessing housing. They cannot take the first flat because it is on the second floor with no lift. They get offered a nice flat with an elevator but have to put down three months deposit, which they do not have. Finally, they get put in a shelter, but they cannot stay together as men and women are accommodated separately. If they want to stay together, they have to leave... and they end up on the street.

Belgium – a video highlighted the barriers that exist to accessing housing in the private rental market. As well as the simple barrier of cost, many people experience discrimination when trying to access rented accommodation. The video showed a landlord advertising a flat to rent. When he has to choose between the people who come to look at the flat, he is not interested in renting to the single parent or anybody with any kind of alternative lifestyle. He always chooses the safest option he can of the man with the good income, so vulnerable people have no good options in the end in the private market. At the same time, social housing is full.

Bulgaria – a slide presentation “incomes versus homes” set out the reality that there is a systemic problem with income levels and housing costs. The average wage is EUR 250 per month. Half of this has to meet the basic physiological needs of food, water and health, which leaves only EUR 125 for shelter, security, clothes and so on. “It is mathematically impossible for the average citizen to pay a mortgage.” So many families live together with multiple generations. “Self-confidence and future prospects are low.”

Cyprus – a slide presentation showed that there are many schemes in the country to help low-income households access their own housing. These are based on a strong commitment to social cohesion and mean that – although not all houses are good quality – less than 1% of the population lives in a household

facing severe housing deprivation. “We do not have street children, homeless people, or people begging for food... we want to make sure that these will never become our reality.”

Czech Rep: in the style of an old silent movie, a film showed a homeless man lying down to sleep on a park bench and dreaming of being in his “home, sweet home”. He sits on a comfortable sofa, drinking tea and reading the paper. But it is only a dream and he is woken on his bench by the rain. He goes to shelter, which is full. He then searches for things from the rubbish to make his own real-life ‘home, sweet home’ from cardboard and junk. This is the reality for 12 000 people in the Czech Rep today. Furthermore, delegates pointed out that homeless people have been banned from public spaces and the police are ordered to wake them up and move them on.

Denmark – a film highlighted that even in a country with a good reputation for social welfare, people still fall through the net. Even with the shelters there are, people can still end up on the street because there are not enough beds and usually dogs are not allowed in the shelters. It showed a series of photographs of homeless people accompanied by a song called “Homeless” by Bo Callaby & Friends, which was released in Denmark in support of a homeless charity:

*“I shuffle ‘cross the pavement, head hanging down.
You can call me a loser, call me a clown.
Now I’m just a homeless, hiding my tears.
But I used to be a powerhouse; a man of ideas.
Hey you, in your shiny car; drinking in your fancy bar.
I know just what you are. I used to be like you.
I sleep in doorways to stay out of the rain.
I’m sick in my body; I’m tired in my brain.
Life was so good to me, before we hit the Crash.
The house, the car, the parties; pockets full of cash
But you, with your diamond ring, surround yourself
with pretty things
You can’t tell me anything. I used to be like you.
What would you do, if all your worst nightmares came true?
What would you say, if your whole world broke down
this way?
You lose your job... your house... your wife...
Oh goodbye children, goodbye life.”*

Estonia – a presentation entitled “The Battle – an insight into Estonian reality of homelessness” highlighted that there are more homeless people than ever before, particularly in the capital Tallinn. The crisis has created new groups and new profiles of homeless people who have been unable to keep up payments

or maintenance on their accommodation or lost their family ties. Pensions are too little to pay communal fees and young people have no jobs.

Yet the media helps present homeless people as if they are from another planet and not human beings. Homeless people seem to lose their right to be an individual and to have a name. The reality is that if someone does not find a job within the first year of losing their job or their home, their chances of getting back on their feet are zero.

Finland – a film showed two children playing with a big dolls house where a family lives. The family has problems and has to move out. But who can now live in the nice house? The girl suggests people to move in, but the boy explains why each of them cannot. One man is too poor, “he doesn’t even have money”. He cannot get a good job because he doesn’t speak Finnish. Another is a junkie, “he lives in a stairway, not in a home.” One man is a “baddie” and although he seems to be reformed, the boy explains “you can’t know that.” The home is too expensive for a single mother looking after two kids. And winter is coming... In Finland, there are 7 400 homeless people. There are 25 000 empty apartments in Helsinki alone.

France – in a role play, the French delegation built a model house to show how hard homeless people have to fight for the ‘privilege’ of accessing housing. The model house showed all the virtual bricks needed to ensure effective access to long-term housing solutions and overcome the many barriers faced by vulnerable people. These included support with deposits, help with complex forms, housing grants, social supports, healthcare, sports facilities, shops, local associations and so on.

Germany – a video presented a true story from Hamburg under the title “the city belongs to everyone”. It showed images of a bridge over a road which has been used by homeless people for years for protection against the cold and rain. They created a small community and someone even donated a generator. But in 2011 the local authorities paid around EUR 118 000 firstly to put in fixed stones to make it less comfortable and then to remove the people and erect a big fence to keep them out. Many local people and organisations demonstrated against the fence, which was seen as a symbol of heartless social policy and it was removed after only two weeks. Local people even brought used furniture, carpets and some food for the returning homeless people. It is good news that the city belongs to everyone, but housing is still needed for 1 000 homeless people in Hamburg.

Greece – a slideshow showed many photos of destitution and protests in the country. It presented the stark reality that many people who recently had jobs and a home now cannot afford housing. At the same time, housing benefit was suspended in 2010 amongst widespread social security cuts. Athens is in “a state of humanitarian crisis” – there has been a 35% increase of people looking for shelter. There is a lack of resources and strategic coordination to address these challenges. Greece is seen as a “new social laboratory where the European Social Model is the target”. A new developmental model is needed based on sustainability, ecology, participation, social justice and solidarity, where people can live with dignity.

Hungary – a piece of theatre showed three contestants playing a game of “Wheel of Fortune”. Each ‘player’ has a roof over their heads, but they only have access to some of their basic needs depending on the spin of the wheel. Sometimes the wheel provides water, heating and electricity and sometimes it takes them away, symbolising the hard choices facing many people experiencing poverty. One of the contestants gets ‘BANK’ on their spin, which means they lose their house and are out of the game. While the game show host encourages the next player to spin the wheel of fortune, the remaining contestants decide to take a stand against the system. They chase the host away and give the eliminated player back their house, symbolising that the system can be changed if people unite forces.

Iceland – a dramatic video with the message “defend our homes” showed the tremendous impact of the financial crisis on families. One feature showed a family being forcibly removed from their home by police. Another showed how a man who lost his home destroyed it rather than let the bank take it. His is now in jail.

More than half of home owners now owe more than they own and around one in three have lost all that they paid for their homes. Rent is, on average, as high as the minimum wage, whilst food prices in budget supermarkets have increased 55% since 2009. The number of pensioners lining up for food handouts increased 204% from 2010 to 2011.

Ireland – a piece of mimed theatre shows officials consulting with homeless people to develop a new strategy or policies. The homeless person is pleased that they have been consulted and glad that the process has led to a new report, which is labelled “Promises”. After the ‘promises’ are launched with great media attention, the homeless person returns



to their everyday reality and does not see the officials again. The Promises are gathering dust on a shelf. Eventually, the homeless person finds them in a box in the bin, where finally they are at least useful for him to sit on. Effective strategies need to work with homeless people to deliver real solutions.

Italy – a video with the title “We don’t want the moon; only a house” showed images of run-down houses, some with inhabitants under. A song accompanied the images with the following lyrics (translated into English):

*It was a very lovely house; with no ceiling and no kitchen.
We could not go into it; because there was no floor.
We could not go to bed; in that house there was no roof.
We couldn’t even pee; since there was no pot to pee in.
But it was a really beautiful house; and it was in Crazy Street, Number 0.*

Lithuania – a slide presentation explained that although more social housing has been built in recent years, demand has also gone up. Furthermore, many social housing situations are far from adequate, especially for people with disabilities, or families with young children. Some social flats lack adequate heating and hot water. There were however examples of people being helped to find solutions.

Macedonia – a film titled “Profession: Homeless” showed a man with a guitar singing a story that, as he says, could happen to anyone. Part of the lyrics (translated into English) are:

*“My friend took a bank loan to grow some peppers, tomatoes and other veggies.
But as his fortune would have it, he was left with only his debt. Up to his neck.
The bank just took his house, the car and his flat.
He sent his children and wife to the grandmother’s house.
He was left all alone. All alone.
He lost everything and everyone.
Without money, east and west I walk alone.
Without money, north and south I sing alone.”
The man concluded with the message that “When we leave this world, we will not be able to take the goods and the gold with us. Everything will stay here on the ground. But the love we share with the people is the only thing that stays with us forever.”*

Malta – a film shows the story of how one woman became homeless. When her uncle was in danger of losing his restaurant due to bad debts, she was put

under pressure to put her house down as security for a loan to take over the lease. She was persuaded that it would give her children the opportunity of a better life. Lawyers and her uncle convinced her that she could not lose her home as, even if the worst happened, the bank would not throw her and her children onto the streets. “Don’t be stupid” they told her. But things did not go well, the uncle was abusive and her home was lost. She became overwhelmed with depression, shame and despair.

“At my lowest ebb when I almost believed that all doors were closed. A person put their arm around me and said: I want to help to regenerate your dignity.” Thankfully, a social worker was able to arrange meetings with the Housing Authority and she and her children were allocated a government flat after 18 months. “I made the fragile emotional process from homelessness to dignity.”

Netherlands – a slide presentation highlighted the reality of people being homeless in their own homes. Many people live in accommodation affected by mould, rot, infestations of rats or mice, or poor insulation. Energy costs have gone up a lot and some people have to “choose between heating and eating”. The poor living conditions make people ill and healthcare is expensive for them and society. A solution is to build affordable social houses that are not only energy efficient but produce energy e.g. through solar panels.

Norway – a slideshow presented that the reality of the crisis is higher unemployment and even less affordable housing. “The housing market creates and reinforces economic disparity between generations, landlords and tenants and between immigrants and natives.” Municipalities have failed to use their right to buy 10% of new buildings for the provision of social or affordable housing. More regulation of the housing market is required and housing made as important as health and education.

Portugal – a video set images of poor quality housing, people sleeping rough and homeless people with their limited possessions and often worn out bodies to music. It compared these realities to the adverts for expensive new housing. A piece of theatre was then mimed in which the bricks of constructing a ‘home’ were put together. Each brick represented a key element: dignity; equality; respect; a private life; social and family ties; security; social rights etc. “We have to break the silence. The dignity of each person is the responsibility of everyone. To live a dignified life, you need the right to housing, which is a universal right of every citizen.”

Slovenia – a slide presentation outlined that whilst homelessness is an abuse of a basic human right, Slovenia does not yet have a strategy to tackle homelessness. It highlighted the need for dialogue between all the stakeholders and proper engagement of people experiencing poverty. Public spaces can also be places for learning, training, personal development and socialising.

Spain – a slide presentation set out that whilst governments are supposed to respect the right to housing, the reality is different. Supported by images of poor quality housing and people demonstrating in the streets it explained that houses that were full of life at one time, are today in ruins. Speculation in the property markets and increasing unemployment are making the situation desperate for many families. Whilst some people get very rich there are around three million empty homes across Spain – enough to house everyone. There should be “no homeless person and no home without people. Let’s stop this. Together we can change this reality.”

Sweden – a slide presentation showed different areas of the delegation’s home towns and the effect of processes of gentrification. In the 1960s the government built one million apartments in ten years. This was great news and met many people’s needs, but there has been a lack of investment in this housing and in some places it is increasingly poor quality. Churches are active providing basic shelters and soup kitchen services. But “just living is not enough. One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.”

Slovakia – a film about the importance of learning to live together and not building up artificial walls. It focused on the discrimination and exclusion facing Roma communities. Despite some examples of happy coexistence, “barriers hidden in people’s thinking are becoming very real.” The video showed photos of walls built to separate ‘white’ and ‘Roma’ communities “as if we do not want to realise that we are convicted to live together.” If people build walls to keep other people out, they are also locking themselves in. The cause of these attitudes and divisions is not diversity, but poverty.

UK – a video presented a case study of The Seven Towers housing block in Belfast, Northern Ireland, showing the poor quality of the building, interviews with residents and press cuttings. The block was built in the 1960s to provide affordable housing, but has been majorly afflicted with damp and mould, heating problems and even sewage leaks. The Housing Executive was not fixing the underlying problems in the building or listening to complaints. “You’re trying to do things for your house, but they’re coming out and not even helping you.” The residents formed a committee to raise and address the major issues because they were not being involved in the management of the building and living conditions were increasingly unacceptable. The overall message was that “solutions can be found if agencies work closely with local residents”.

Workshops and dialogue meetings



The delegates split up into six workshops to exchange experiences, thoughts and ideas based broadly around three questions:

1. What are the key differences in terms of homelessness and violation of housing rights now in 2012 compared to 2008, pre-crisis?
2. What are the good and bad practices in addressing homelessness and violations of housing rights?
3. How best can local, regional, national and European policies be designed to address homelessness and violations of housing rights?

The workshop participants then came together into three dialogue meetings with representatives of important European stakeholders to discuss the workshop outcomes.

The topics, observations and recommendations of all the workshops and dialogue meetings are grouped together below under thematic headings. This is done to avoid repetition and facilitate clarity of the key messages emerging from the delegates.

The impact of the financial crisis

“Lots of people used to think it couldn’t happen to them.”

Homelessness and poverty have clearly increased over the period 2008-12 across all definitions of homelessness and housing exclusion covered by the ETHOS typology. The global often inter-related trends set out below have been witnessed across most European countries and regions:

- Unemployment is increasing
- Many people with work have experienced falling incomes
- Rents are rising
- Rising living costs – particularly energy and also food
- Increasing indebtedness of individuals and families
- Many more people unable to keep up their mortgage repayments

- Increasing numbers of evictions
- More people registered on social housing waiting lists
- Social and particularly housing benefits have been cut back
- Even funding for homeless services is being cut
- More people begging in the streets
- Poverty and homelessness are increasingly criminalised

Delegates provided some concrete examples of the changes that have taken place. In Berlin, homelessness has risen 50% from 8 000 to 12 000 people. Homelessness has at least doubled in Italy from 2001 to 2011, from around 20 000 to more than 50 000 people. The Swedish delegation had noticed more people begging in the streets, when it was previously very rare.

“I used to be like you.”

The situation in Greece was highlighted as being particularly extreme. Delegates talked about unemployment that has gone beyond 20%, with the situation even worse for some groups such as young people. Many people who remain in work are estimated to have lost 20-60% of their income. It is much harder for people to find decent work with a decent salary even if they have a good educational level. Furthermore, the law was recently changed so that people who do not pay their rent can be evicted more easily. At the same time, housing benefits have been totally stopped. There has been a 35% increase of people looking for shelter in Athens.

“I cannot accept that I work and cannot pay my basic needs.”

The Finnish delegation highlighted the growing number of people who are struggling to pay high rents and not able to pay for their other needs. Even people in work are facing housing exclusion. In Holland, it is increasingly common to see families having to choose between basic needs due to falling incomes whilst

rents, food prices and particularly energy costs continue to rise. The Italian delegation talked about 31% of families now being in default of their mortgages.

The increasingly significant reality of over-indebtedness was raised by delegates from many countries. The Hungarian delegation talked about people taking out loans in foreign currencies, and now finding themselves paying increasingly high repayments just because their national currency has lost value. In Sweden, banks have sold debts on, with the result that people are facing higher interest rates and repayments. The Estonian delegation raised the example of families whose debt repayments are more than their living costs.

In Iceland, waiting lists for social housing are now up to three years, with a similar figure of 3-4 years mentioned for Germany. Meanwhile funding for homeless services is being cut in many places. In Vienna, people are now asked to pay 4 euros a night in a shelter, while it was free before. In Italy, shelters are being closed while demand for them goes up. Municipalities in Belgium are increasingly refusing to deliver housing services under the pretext that people are the responsibility of other municipalities.

“Homeless people and people in poverty should not feel guilty. Governments should feel guilty.”

There were numerous examples of welfare systems more broadly being made more limited or harder to access, increasing risks of homelessness. The French delegation highlighted stricter rules about accessing shelters, which have increased the difficulties for homeless people and the failure of government to provide follow-up funding to pilot good practice housing projects. The Norwegian delegation talked about the government proposing that sick and homeless people work for society in return for their benefits. Many countries have seen disability benefits reduced or made harder to get. In Hungary, a range of services including schools have been closed.

Delegates from several countries including Holland, Ireland, Hungary and the Czech Republic discussed the increasing use of policies and police tactics to target homeless people using public spaces. People are arrested for public order offences, but they have no place to go. People are forced to spend the night in a cell when what they need is access to housing and support services.

Nevertheless, delegates were keen to point out that homelessness and housing exclusion is far from being an issue solely caused by the crisis. Structural problems with regards access to housing or employment and the risks that loss of one will lead to loss of the other already existed. It is just now affecting more people. For some delegates there is an issue of social justice here with Governments only seeming to really take an interest in mobilising resources when the middle class are affected.

The groups most affected

Groups who have long been disadvantaged and vulnerable have been most affected by the higher costs of housing, energy and food, the decreased availability of decent paid work and cuts to social services. They are also the groups who often find it hardest to have their rights enforced and access the services they need. These groups include:

- people with disabilities and their families
- migrants (undocumented and regular)
- Roma
- single parents and their children
- people suffering from addictions or mental health issues
- vulnerable older people
- 18-year-olds leaving care
- people leaving other institutions, including prisons and hospitals
- people with few or no qualifications
- people at risk of discrimination due to their ethnicity, colour, sexual preferences, lifestyle or other factors

“The price of the crisis is paid by those who have not caused it.”

However, the financial crisis has also created new or newly more significant groups at risk of homelessness and housing exclusion, in particular:

- Young people – who are finding it harder than ever to find a job or affordable housing to start their independent adult lives. Many only avoid



homelessness to the extent that they are able to remain living with their parents.

- The over-indebted 'middle-class' – people who might never have considered themselves at risk of poverty or homelessness only a few years ago are forming a 'new poor' due to their inability to pay back bank loans – including mortgages – taken in better times.

"We risk losing an entire generation of young people because they have no future."

- Increasing numbers of 'working poor' – many people who have work are so badly paid that they still have to choose between which of their basic needs to meet and face housing exclusion. Furthermore, people in this or other precarious employment situations often find themselves both excluded by private landlords and ineligible for support from social services.
- European orphans' – who were identified by delegates as children left to fend for themselves when their parents are forced to move abroad in search of work.

The Right to Housing

It was highlighted during the discussions that the EU provides for the right to adequate housing through article 34 of the Lisbon Treaty. Several Member States also have versions of this right in their national or regional legislation. For example, delegates cited that the right to housing is in the Italian Constitution.

"We don't want the moon, only a house."

However, quite simply this right is not being implemented properly across the European Union. Delegates called for governments to adopt an explicit right to housing where there is not one and to implement it where and when there is. The right to housing is as essential to a life of dignity as the right to education and healthcare. Implementing it also helps beneficiaries remain part of society, including within the labour market.

Guest intervention

Anthony MUNSLOW – Chair of the Working Group on Homelessness, Eurocities considered whether a legal right to housing was a necessary condition for solving homelessness. He recalled that Scotland has become the first country to introduce a full legal right to housing, whilst England and France have partial rights for certain groups. Yet this lack of a full legal right to housing in most of the EU territory does not stop the important work that many cities carry out to deliver solutions to homelessness.

He presented the example of Newcastle (UK), which like most EU cities, is facing budget cuts, but has improved its strategic approach to tackling homelessness based on: a) prevention activities focused on the whole community; b) prevention activities focused on people at risk; and c) crisis activities for people in or on the threshold of homelessness. Notably, it has delivered: a "No Second Night Out" approach to helping rough sleepers; coordination of all publically funded debt advice; a homelessness prevention fund; and the Newcastle Gateway, a single register of people requiring supported housing.

These good practices helped deliver good results, including:

- No bed and breakfast use since 2006
- Ending the use of shared room hostels by 2009
- 33% reduction in evictions from public housing between 2008 and 2010
- Lowest temporary accommodation use of the English core cities;
- No deaths reported as a correlation to inadequate accommodation standards
- 3 798 cases of homelessness prevention including 501 through debt advice in 2011

His conclusion is that a statutory strategic approach – to reinforce partial legal rights to housing – has proved to be a more effective means for responding to homelessness and creating the right conditions for preventing homelessness. There has been good work in numerous cities, but still more needs to be done to test and evaluate pilot projects that do not limit themselves to providing a bed, but also create opportunities – the definition of housing first.

Eurocities working group on housing and homelessness.

Whilst there have been efforts to enforce the right to housing in France, the best practice in the field seems to come from Scotland in the UK. Although the specific implementation was not presented in detail, delegates from the UK commented that important progress has

“I can deny myself much, but my children have a right to a dignified life.”

been made. They praised the excellent co-operation between the Scottish authorities and homelessness representatives. Delegates called on EU governments to take the Scottish example as their model.

Housing First

The housing first model was seen to be a positive development. A housing first approach applies the right to housing by providing a stable housing solution to homeless people as one of the first steps. This seeks to overcome the problem that for too long, in many areas of Europe, homeless people have been institutionalised in shelters or other insecure environments while efforts were supposedly made to make them ‘ready’ for a permanent housing solution.

The Czech delegation presented ‘Test Apartment’ as a good practice example in this context. Homeless people facing multiple problems are given a house with support for five years to make a new start. The stable environment provides a much better context for the person to address their other issues with help from the targeted support. At the end of the five years, it is expected that people will be able to move on and rent elsewhere.

In Denmark, a Housing First programme – with a budget of 500 million Danish krone (EUR 67.3 million) – has been tested quite successfully in eight municipalities, including the capital Copenhagen. Nevertheless, the Danish delegation said that concerns remained about whether people with special needs were getting sufficient support to address their problems in the houses.

In France there is a ‘housing first’ policy where people are supported to move directly from the street to mainstream accommodation, bypassing shelters, so that they can experience a more normal life. This is to be done with the necessary supports. However it is now running into major problems of funding.

Delegates supported the concept of Housing First, but only on condition that its true definition and true principle is followed and implemented. That means housing together with the necessary support services and not only housing. At the same time, it does avoid over-complicating situations where the primary need of an individual or family is simply stable accommodation.

“People are doing a lot to solve their own problems, but need a society that allows them to succeed.”

Integrated solutions

Any approach to tackling homelessness and addressing the needs of people experiencing housing exclusion requires integrated solutions. The causes of homelessness are complex and multi-faceted, including – amongst others – some or all of: loss of employment; inadequate employment conditions; rising living costs; health issues including accidents, mental health and addictions; over-indebtedness; discrimination and exclusion; relationship breakdown; and institutionalisation.

As the causes are complex addressing homelessness and housing needs must be approached in a holistic way. Providing housing and food is not a sufficient long-term solution. If support is not provided to address the other issues, many people will simply remain stuck in supposedly ‘temporary’ accommodation or return to the street.

“Deconstruct easy answers.”

In this context, bad practice examples were considered to be those shelters which did nothing more than meet immediate short-term needs and failed to address long-term needs or provide a step-up out of housing exclusion. The Polish delegation talked of homeless people having no access to social services via shelters. The Austrian delegation felt that it was wrong that many people using shelters were not even talked to, to identify any psychiatric or other needs. Effective implementation of the true principle



of housing first was supported as a good approach to deliver integrated solutions.

However, another challenge to effective integrated solutions was that different services that may be available to homeless people are not joined up, especially from the point of view of the homeless person. Bad practice examples included situations where a vulnerable person has to seek out multiple support sources, going through similar processes and retelling their story and their problems to each. This is often not only difficult and demanding, but also humiliating in many cases. People can also find themselves being sent from one service to another with no one taking responsibility to help them.

Another recommendation, therefore, was the establishment of 'one-stop shops' where anybody at risk of or experiencing homelessness can go to discuss and seek support for all their issues and needs. This would provide one point of contact for the homeless person to access all their rights and support needs with help in ensuring that different services are working in a coherent way to deliver positive outcomes.

National strategies on homelessness

It was largely felt that national strategies are necessary to support the delivery of integrated solutions to tackle homelessness. Although much service delivery is managed at the local level, national guidance, oversight and recommendations can drive positive change on the ground. National, regional and local authorities need to be pulling in the same direction.

"What makes the difference? Is it magic or is it people taking it seriously and making the right decisions?"

More than one delegate from the former Communist Bloc countries highlighted that there was no homelessness at all under communism. Central management made it impossible. So it is not an impossible situation to solve. Homelessness as we see it now is a structural consequence of capitalist, free-market principles allowed to go too far. National governments have to take responsibility for addressing these issues through the delivery of effective strategies.

National approaches are also important to overcome

problems whereby certain municipalities – particularly large cities – face disproportionate costs and start to refuse to offer services for fear of attracting more homeless people or because they feel that an individual should be looked after by their previous municipality of residence. National approaches to data collection are also important to improve understanding of the current and emerging problems and to make them more visible politically. The Austrian delegation highlighted that it was disastrous that homeless people do not exist in the latest figures in their country. Delegates also felt that poor data often led to superficial solutions.

"Give us back our future."

It was said that only 12 Member States have a strategy on homelessness, which is too few. Furthermore, delegates complained that even in countries with a strategy, there was not always evidence of it actually being implemented in any meaningful way. Amongst other things,

Guest intervention

Elodie Fazi – Policy Officer, DG Employment and Social Affairs, European Commission, pointed out that the Commission does not have the legal basis to constrain Member States to implement policies on housing. However, the Europe 2020 strategy does set targets and the Commission has and will be monitoring the progress towards delivering them.

There is awareness about the need to get reliable data and much work has already been undertaken at European level to develop common indicators around issues such as over-crowding and measuring housing deprivation. Moreover, Eurostat is also working to deliver data on homelessness in its census to measure the EU population.

'Housing First' approaches have generated considerable interest at EU level and the Commission is funding a pilot project on housing first in five cities. Issues around Roma populations are also increasingly visible on the European agenda and the Commission is planning to publish a communication on the subject.

effective national strategies could help identify good practice, improve data collection and ensure efficient funding mechanisms for delivering integrated solutions.

The role of Europe

Delegates at the 11th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty were clear that they wanted the EU to take a role in delivering effective homelessness strategies. Whilst delegates understood in discussions that the EU does not have competence for social policies, they were clear that European authorities have a responsibility to do as much as they can to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion.

“If we don’t have a Social Europe, Europe is not a real project.”

This was expressed in different ways by a number of delegates:

- We need a strategy which would allow the EU to monitor the progress of Member States, to encourage good practice and prevent bad practice, and to mainstream policies related to homelessness.
- We ask Europe to help us put homelessness on the national agenda. They should put more pressure on national governments.
- We ask for the attention of Europe to help focus on the right solution.
- We ask the EU representatives for a good framework
- The EU should support us so that our government takes its responsibility towards our organisations.
- There must be pressure on our governments. Now we see all too often a fragmented approach. There is a need for a national and European strategy that takes into account all aspects.
- We know that the distance between our local government and Brussels is very large, but we ask for help to develop a strategy.
- We seek a positive tool to motivate politicians to keep their election promises. Can Europe create an award for the best local politician?
- We need more adequate and concrete methods for social policy at the European level. We need a strategic vision.

- We need a global approach to solve homelessness and to enforce housing rights. The EU institutions should encourage governments to implement a strategy based on involvement of all stakeholders, including PEPs
- The EU framework should be changed because the absence of sanctions in the social sphere does not push Member States to keep their promises.

The European Social Fund (ESF) provides a major resource for achieving the EU’s social objectives, which

Guest intervention

Freek SPINNEWIJN – Director, FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People highlighted the reality that there is a large increase in homelessness in Europe and that the largest growth is in countries under strict economic control, such as Greece. Reduction in subsidies for social action is a recipe for total disaster. Young people and migrants are particularly at risk, but there is also growing homelessness among the middle class. It is shocking that in countries such as Hungary, homelessness is now a criminal offence.

It is becoming increasingly important to enforce the right to housing through legal action. FEANTSA is looking for specific cases to take to court. More should be done with the annual day for the homeless to push for effective implementation of existing rights. The approach of social rental offices should also become much more widespread.

The EU has an important role to play in providing an improved framework for developing effective strategies for tackling homelessness and overseeing the implementation of rights. We need better European data on homelessness and improved monitoring of the use of European funds to address homelessness.

FEANTSA: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/hp.asp>

must include fighting homelessness and housing exclusion. The European Commission has proposed earmarking 20% of ESF funding for combating poverty and social exclusion with the aim of meeting the EU’s objective of lifting 20 million people out of poverty by



2020. Although many Member States do not currently seem to support such an approach, delegates supported it wholeheartedly. It is essential that significant EU resources are mobilised to help the fight against poverty, homelessness and housing exclusion.

The use of EU Structural Funds for neighbourhood regeneration was also identified as being important for the provision of affordable housing. However, delegates felt that there must be proper criteria and regulation of the price and other conditions. Furthermore, it is important that European officials monitor Member States and check if funds are actually used for what they are assigned. If they are not, then they should directly intervene.

“Unless some solution is found to investment in social Europe, the Greek situation could be all our futures.”

Social housing

Delegates identified several common trends and forms of bad practice around social housing in Europe. Combined to different degrees in different countries, these factors mean that the overall picture across Europe is one where it is often very difficult for homeless people to access social housing and waiting lists are long. This in turn means that social housing is not fulfilling the role that it could do in tackling homelessness and housing exclusion. The prevailing lack of availability of social housing is almost the antithesis of the housing first approach.

1. A lack of investment in new housing

The reality revealed by the German delegation is that the country has withdrawn from the construction of social housing. The Belgian delegation bemoaned the fact the government invests in stations and buildings but not social housing. The Italian delegation highlighted that there was a call for tenders in 2010 to build new houses – 50% for social housing and 50% for the private sector. However, there has been no news about the social housing dwellings and it is not clear that the money is being spent effectively to deliver social housing that could address homelessness.

In Lithuania, it was argued that the government is not building enough social housing and the waiting lists are very long. As mentioned earlier in this report, more than one delegate from East European countries

talked of a nostalgia for the time when government took responsibility for making sure all the citizens were housed.

2. The selling off of existing stock

“People don’t dream of luxury. They just want their basic needs met.”

The Norwegian delegation talked about municipalities selling their housing units to the private sector so that what used to be ‘social housing’ is now increasingly expensive. In Sweden, rental housing and flats were built on large-scale in the 1960s. Since then, home ownership has been promoted; even new houses and flats are meant to be sold. People who are looking to rent an affordable house or flat are excluded. Rather than build social housing, the government seems more interested in criminalising poor people and building more jails.

3. A lack of adequate maintenance and management of social housing that has led to many unhealthy and insecure living environments.

In Malmö, Sweden, there are neighbourhoods which have experienced a significant deterioration of the housing situation in the residential blocks. People live in bad and unhealthy dwellings with cockroach infestations and so on. People don’t want to live there anymore. Also, see the creative presentation from the UK, which focused on a housing block in Belfast, Northern Ireland that had been built cheaply and where the housing authority was ignoring the increasingly awful conditions.

4. A lack of effective control of the price and living costs of social housing

As well as rents that are not affordable for people with the lowest incomes – linked obviously to the question of adequate minimum income guarantees – much social housing suffers from increasing heating costs, often due to poor insulation. Delegates talked of working very hard to try to pay the bills so as not to lose the flat, whilst governments were cutting benefits. In Sweden, high quality standards seemed to have had unfortunate consequences in raising rents because of higher construction costs.

5. The lack of priority access for homeless people and unclear criteria for allocation

The Norwegian delegation spoke about there being no distinction in target audience to prioritise families that have lost their home. Delegates talked of new social housing being opened but not yet used with a lack of clarity about how they are supposed to be allocated.

In Gothenburg, Sweden, there are 7 000 people on the waiting list for a house or flat, but there is no transparent way of attribution. Because of this a black housing market has developed, with a lot of subletting. In Hungary, being poor or homeless is not enough to get social housing – priority is given to the sick and migrants.

“What is being provided must meet the actual needs of people.”

6. Issues with the suitability of stock to meet people's needs

The lack of social housing for different sized family units, from single individuals to couples with several children was highlighted. In many areas it is very problematic for families with just two children – what might be considered the stereotypical family unit – to find appropriate social housing. The Hungarian delegation also highlighted problems with social housing being located in areas where it is extremely difficult to find employment. Unless affordable accommodation is suitable for individuals' or families' needs, it effectively does not exist for them.

7. The lack of choice given to homeless people

A delegate recounted their personal experience of being awarded an affordable housing accommodation, but having no choice about where the house was situated. This lack of choice had implications for family and social connections as well as potential work opportunities. However, if they refused to accept the house they would lose their rights to another house.

Construction of social housing is generally a local issue. However, homelessness is a national and European problem. Delegates therefore urged action at national and European levels to deliver more social housing stock appropriate to the needs of people experiencing homelessness. A delegate felt that

the EU must oblige Member States to give subsidies to co-operatives for construction new social housing. Cyprus was cited as a positive example where municipalities were building affordable social housing along with some areas of Eastern Europe.

Guest intervention

Claire ROUMET – Secretary General, CECODHAS Housing Europe – the European Federation of Public, Cooperative and Social Housing

highlighted how much housing is a problem shared by most EU countries, albeit in different ways. It is true that public housing is not always of good quality, but the key issue is usually around funding. Many national governments have cut their commitment to social housing and housing markets have become distorted from a lack of regulation and speculation. Housing has become a key driver for increasing inequalities.

There are major issues around: the number of empty dwellings; the ease with which banks evict people; the focus of budget cuts on payments and services aimed to support the most vulnerable; and failure to match supply and demand of social housing in many areas.

The European Structural Funds offer important opportunities for local authorities to build or refurbish housing infrastructure, which need to be much better accessed. But it is equally important that there is EU action to tackle the increasing gap between the cost of housing and the income of people. New constructions must not fuel a new housing bubble. There also needs to be work on other economic and social problems, for example access to banking services.

Housing is quite high on the EU agenda and all Member States should now report to the EU on how their budgets, social policies and taxation systems are contributing to preventing and tackling homelessness and housing exclusion.

CECODHAS Housing Europe:
<http://www.housingeurope.eu/>



Regulating/Incentivising the private sector

An alternative to constructing new social housing is to take measures to make the existing housing stock accessible to people experiencing housing exclusion. There are several opportunities for making better use of the private housing stock through better regulation and incentivisation of owners.

One area particularly highlighted by delegates – from Germany, Malta and Northern Ireland among others – was the shocking number of buildings lying empty across Europe while people remain on the streets. The Maltese delegation pointed out that there are 8 000 empty apartments in the country, enough to house all the homeless without constructing any new buildings.

“Landlords only want to rent to double-income households.”

Landlords are not obliged to rent out their properties and may decide that they will earn more money by allowing the building to fall into disrepair and speculating on the price of the land the building is on than maintaining or renovating the building to provide rentable accommodation. Delegates felt that such a situation is immoral and unjust.

Many called for forced purchase of empty flats and buildings by local authorities to provide additional social housing stock. Others talked in terms of recognising the rights of people to reclaim unoccupied buildings to provide housing solutions for those who need them. Another suggested option was to raise taxes on unoccupied buildings, which would provide funds for social services but also incentivise private owners to make their properties available on the market even with low rents.

“There should be no homeless person and no home without people.”

The Belgian delegation shared a notable example of good practice. “Project 123” has turned what was previously a squat into a legal residence for 70 people. It

is funded by the Wallonian regional government and demonstrates that political will can turn unoccupied buildings into housing solutions for homeless people. Delegates called on national and European authorities to push for such approaches and for local authorities to be less bureaucratic and to take action.

Another suggested solution, which addresses more than unoccupied buildings is for local authorities to enter into agreements with private landlords to provide affordable housing to people currently experiencing housing exclusion. By covering some of the rent, the council achieves an affordable system for providing affordable housing. The private landlord can also benefit from having a guarantee from the local authority that the property will always be rented.

People also talked about regulation of the private rental market. At the moment, private landlords are nearly always only interested in profit and Governments cannot expect such an approach to deliver affordable housing for all. There are two main issues here. One is regulation of rent increases. When average rent increases are outstripping average wage increases there is a structural problem which needs addressing. The second major issue is discrimination, where landlords will not rent to certain groups because of prejudice against them. The State has an important role to play in intervening to outlaw such discrimination and enforce its implementation so that one of the major causes of housing exclusion can be overcome.

Preventing evictions

Housing solutions are not always about providing new housing. A key risk factor for homelessness is people being evicted from the housing that they have. In terms of identifying cost-effective solutions to tackling homelessness, there is significant potential from preventing evictions when people experience short-term crises.

“There should be no homeless person and no home without people.”

Delegates felt that banks and landlords were often excessively ruthless and blind to the human dimension of housing issues. People are often evicted too quickly and easily because they are experiencing problems in meeting their rent or mortgage payments. They do

not have time or support to resolve their issues and being evicted makes it so much harder still.

Delegates argued that authorities need to intervene and provide support to people at risk of eviction. Rent allowances should be made available to people facing difficulties so that they can stay in their home whilst long-term solutions are sought. Although this obviously costs money, it is a lot less money than is needed to provide services to people who are already in a situation of homelessness.

A Polish delegate shared their experience of a bank refusing to suspend the debt of their husband when he became ill. This lack of understanding and flexibility put the family in a terrible situation when they were already having to deal with the illness itself. Problems then escalate.

Some examples of good practice were provided. In Austria, an association works to prevent people being evicted and support them through their crisis. In France, there are committees who work to find solutions to people's rent problems, backed by a solidarity fund. People can apply for rent support for 6 months if they are facing difficulties. In Germany, certain companies are prepared to decrease temporarily the rents to match the needs of people experiencing poverty but they are a small minority.

Rent and deposit guarantee systems are also useful in enabling people to access housing and avoiding crisis situations that lead to homelessness. However, the Belgian delegation, for example, talked about problems with the implementation of such schemes, with the banks and local authorities not supporting people as they should.

Emergency services

"It could happen to you."

Delegates recounted numerous examples of basic needs being covered through the delivery of emergency shelters, soup kitchens and so on. Delegates also praised some services in Heidelberg which organised free shows and entertainment to meet needs that go beyond mere survival. There were examples of authorities recognising the particular risks for homeless people in winter and providing extra

shelter accommodation, such as 750 extra beds each winter in Lille, France. Austrian and Italian delegates also spoke of authorities leaving stations open in winter for homeless people.

However, as many delegates sought to highlight, there are many problems and limitations attached to these practices. The Belgian delegation talked of the government doing too little too late every winter as if each time the precarious situation of homeless people were an unexpected surprise. The Bulgarian delegation praised the fact that the government responded to a particularly hard winter and organised shelters for the first time. However, they lamented that this did not form part of an integrated solution. The French delegation lamented that the winter shelters close at the end of March even though service needs remain.

Delegates sought to highlight that when services limit themselves to covering emergency needs, they fail to address the underlying problems or causes of the situation and they fail to provide pathways out of homelessness. They provide relief, but not long-term solutions, papering over the cracks of the structural causes of homelessness and housing exclusion.

"Let's not paper over the cracks."

In some cases the complexities of accessing shelters mean that so much time and effort is needed to manage this daily challenge that other issues cannot be addressed. For example, in France, people have to leave the shelter with all their possessions each day and book a renewed place by phone. Shelters designed in principle as emergency services risk institutionalising homeless people and undermining their dignity by failing to treat them as individuals or providing any hope of fundamentally changing their situation.

Nevertheless, the solution is not to simply close shelters and remove the most basic safety net for homeless people. The solution is to develop integrated approaches to meeting basic short-term needs – for which there can be a role for emergency shelters – and addressing underlying challenges and longer term individual needs.



Guest intervention

Sylvie LE BARS – *Hope in Stations Project Manager, ANSA (New Agency of Active Solidarity)* presented this example project funded by the European Commission focusing on Homeless People in European Train Stations. Train stations have become a natural place for homeless people to gather since they provide safe and anonymous shelter, a place to find means of subsistence and a socialising space. The project sought to experiment with using stations as a place for organised service provision.

The project has developed understanding of the homeless populations in stations and identified needs for services such as health and psychiatric support, free toilets, social spaces and social lockers. Finding solutions relies on the social responsibility of railway companies as well as volunteers and the co-operative engagement of diverse service providers. There is a need for training programmes, communication campaigns and common indicators.

The Mayor of the municipality in which Brussels-Nord station is situated took the decision to remove groups of Roma for reasons of public order. This highlights the importance of developing systematic and evidence-based approaches that are not so dependent on the local political and cultural context. Guiding principles need to be improved consultation, responsibility and mutual understanding. The Dutch Railway Company signed the “European charter to implement social activities and for solidarity in railway stations”.

Solidarités Actives France: <http://www.solidarites-actives.com/> – Hope in Stations project: <http://vimeo.com/35514412>

Transitional support

As part of developing integrated approaches, there were some good practice examples identified around the provision of transitional support to people entering or at risk of homelessness. Luxembourg has Social Rent Offices (SRO) providing homeless people with an opportunity to rent accommodation at a reasonable price on a three-year contract. Although the contract can only be renewed once, it gives people at risk of homelessness targeted support at a time of crisis.

The Slovenian delegation said that if someone loses his house, he is entitled to a temporary residence or a transit home, hopefully until an even more stable solution can be found. There is also a good practice resettlement program in which an NGO provides access to a flat, whilst the tenant commits to finding employment within a certain period. In Spain, there is a programme for people to work for a short-term contract in exchange for housing and a minimum income.

Such transitional measures lie somewhere between preventing eviction and emergency services. They are aiming to provide some housing security, albeit in new accommodation. However, their success ultimately depends on their ability to move people along a pathway away from a position of housing exclusion. The success of the Slovenian resettlement programme was estimated to be around two thirds of participants securing a job and being able to secure their own future. This still leaves a third who cannot. In Spain, the feeling was that an even greater percentage is unable to secure a job and therefore simply returns to the street after the ‘transitional’ support.

**“We have to act now,
because tomorrow will be too late.”**

Once more, the conclusion is that transitional support programmes can be a useful tool in addressing specific short-term needs, but must form part of an integrated approach that also looks to address issues such as the lack of access to sustainable employment.

Ensuring access to social services

Key to the delivery of integrated solutions to homelessness is effective access to social services in addition to housing solutions. Delegates identified several issues and problems with the way that social services are organised and managed in many countries that prevent the delivery of effective responses to the issues faced by some of the most vulnerable people.

Many systems are organised in such a way that people have to go to many offices or organisations to get the services they need or complete an application process. Bureaucratic delays and complications also mean that people who desperately need support are often left waiting for months for services or benefits. This is dramatic for people who are experiencing

poverty and housing exclusion whose situations can seriously deteriorate before the appropriate services are accessed. A French delegate pointed out that if you lose your identity papers it is as if you do not exist anymore to the service providers

A specific issue is also around awareness of rights and available services, with delegates recounting that people experiencing poverty and housing exclusion often feel alone. Without a social worker – or similar – who takes overall responsibility for a case, people can fail to access their rights because they do not know what to do or where to go to access them or even that they exist in the first place. Immigrants are particularly vulnerable to this where language is an issue.

The result of these problems is that support which looks good on paper does not achieve the results that it ought to. People with health problems or caring responsibilities are also particularly vulnerable to losing out if the system requires them to devote significant time and effort to accessing their rights.

Delegates talked of people being passed from one service to another, having to fill out multiple forms and in some cases giving up because of the difficulties involved, including transport costs to go to the various required offices. There are also important issues around removing people's dignity by forcing them to repeatedly set out their problems, misfortunes and failures and/or obtain certification of their precarious situation. This can further marginalise vulnerable people and squeeze them out of the system.

“We are the ones who see and live the reality of austerity measures.”

As mentioned in the section on integrated solutions, one-stop shops are a recommended means of preventing homeless people falling between services and inefficient and incoherent delivery of social and health services. ID cards are another possible idea to improve the connectivity of services and speed of delivery, avoiding repeated form-filling.

Specific services for vulnerable groups

Delegates highlighted some good practice examples around the provision of targeted support services to particular groups at risk. Examples included:

- In Lithuania, there is now a ‘village’ for single mothers and their children as well as institutions that help women to leave home escaping from domestic violence.
- There are projects in Slovenia to try out innovative practices in integrating migrants.
- In Belgium there is a new programme which provides temporary accommodation for former detainees.
- A member of the Portuguese delegation talked about a project that addresses Roma running in 20 municipalities and stated that it is not difficult to deal with Roma and that it is just a matter of understanding the cultural differences.
- In Norway, the housing allowance has been modified to cover all modern family types. Previously young people were excluded.

However, beyond these kind of examples, delegates felt that there was still generally not enough done to meet the particular housing needs of people with disabilities, mental health issues, or large families. Several delegates called for more assisted living accommodation for people with disabilities and more support and rehabilitation programmes for people with other issues including drug problems or leaving hospital. Emergency services also have to consider accessibility issues better.

The French delegation highlighted that the active solidarity income is not accessible for young people under 25, thereby excluding a particular group who are struggling to access housing appropriate to their needs.

“We need to learn to live together and not build up artificial walls.”

It is also worth noting however, that ‘homeless people’ is also a category of vulnerability which is often under-targeted by support services. The Icelandic delegation highlighted that emergency shelters where



not for homeless and poor people, but victims of domestic violence only. In Hungary also, the sick and migrants are identified as priority groups for social housing, but being poor or homeless is not enough by itself. A Maltese delegate confirmed that social services had told them there was nothing they could do for them because they had no children. A delegate wondered whether this could force homeless people to try to qualify for one of the categories eligible for housing support, for example by having a child, which cannot be a good approach.

Co-operative approaches

In several countries, charities, NGOs and community groups are active in providing good practice solutions to meet the housing and support needs of homeless people. The Maltese delegation presented the example of the Millennium Chapel run by a priest, which works to empower people through the provision of accommodation, food, psychological help, training and job opportunities with support from the community.

**“The dignity of each person
is the responsibility of everyone.”**

An organisation in the Czech Republic developed the Renewal project, which saw homeless people working on restoration of an old Cadillac with sponsorship. This helped make the homeless people feel useful and valued again and changed public perceptions of the people involved. An organisation in Estonia also works to develop people's self-esteem and social interaction. It developed a programme for unemployed people to take part in support activities for others, such as isolated older people, in return for gifts in kind, such as food.

In Cyprus, an organisation called Updort buys private housing to turn it into affordable housing for homeless people. Other delegates told of being housed by organisations such as the Salvation Army and how that had helped them find their feet again.

A project has been developed in Serbia in which housing is built for refugees. Families that have been successfully housed then become a reference point and support for new families entering the project. In this way, the project is developing a support network that increases the potential of the initial investment

to deliver positive results for people at risk of housing exclusion.

In France, there is a policy where NGOs can lease accommodation from municipalities who then lease it to a homeless person. This overcomes many of the barriers to housing that that can be involved for a homeless person. In Finland there is supported accommodation where the state pays half the cost of rent and NGOs the other half.

Such activities were seen positively in most cases, however delegates raised the following issues and concerns:

- Community and voluntary organisations provide important services for homeless people, however they are under more funding pressure than ever and are often having state funding cut. Authorities need to support these organisations better to do their good work on the ground including providing the ability of such organisations to undertake long-term plans and hold on to good staff who understand their work.
- There is only so much that associations can normally do. Their efforts need to be effectively supported and accompanied by social and health services and other government schemes to promote inclusion.
- Good practice often remains isolated projects, which help individuals, but would require more support and attention to provide structural solutions to homelessness and housing exclusion
- Not all associations are equally good and many are only able to focus on providing emergency services. It is important that their efforts are integrated into an overall strategy and that they also supported to work to empower homeless people and enable them to have a voice in their own life decisions.
- Solidarity and the work of NGOs should not relieve the State of its responsibility to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion.
- European regulations were not seen to always support the work of co-operative organisations or enable local authorities to make decisions based on social criteria. For example, the Cypriot delegation explained that co-operatives that did much positive work in providing cheap loans were forced to turn into commercial banks on entry of the country into the EU.

Dignity and rights

Delegates called for greater focus on the respect of human rights and the dignity of the individual in approaches and policies for dealing with homelessness. This report has already detailed some of the concerns expressed around shelters, which dehumanise homeless people by taking no account of individual needs or requirements of privacy etc.

“Everybody has the right to live a life in dignity.”

Another issue is that people often lose rights far too easily if they lose their home. In many countries, for example Portugal, people who are homeless and have no address can lose their rights to social supports and benefits. This can result in them not having money to meet even their most basic needs. People with no address also risk losing access to employment, banking and other services from private markets. The Swedish delegation also talked about people losing social benefits if they are unable to manage their debts.

An interesting practice has been developed in Finland where homeless people have an ID card which allows them to access services in particular areas even without a fixed address. It also helps with the collection of data on homelessness. Although cards are not without issues in terms of the rights of the individual, some delegates called for their extended implementation.

“When you are poor, it doesn’t matter whether you are a million or one.”

In Belgium, certain social service providers can supply a reference address, which is a legal arrangement for people without a primary residence so that they still enjoy their rights. This is good practice for overcoming a significant barrier to accessing needed services for homeless people. Nevertheless, the practice is still not even fully implemented across Belgium. Services need to be aligned on these issues.

The individualisation of rights is very important. People should have the right to determine the form

of their living arrangement – for example alone, with family, friends or in a community – without any consequences. Respecting rights also means fighting the different expressions of discrimination which limit the access of individuals to housing.

A human-rights-based approach is particularly important in developing policies for immigrants who are particularly vulnerable to being treated in ways that deprive them of their basic rights. The same applies to Roma communities, with an Italian delegate highlighting that a Roma integration problem would not exist if people stopped discriminating against them in their access to education, jobs and services as well as in social interaction.

People felt that the EU had an important role to play in ensuring that people’s rights are guaranteed if they lose their address, possibly through the promotion of ID cards and or ensuring social services provide a reference address as good practice. The EU should also strengthen its implementation of the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights – which all Member States have signed – with regards to Roma and immigrant populations in particular.

Participation

A major issue for respecting the dignity of homeless people as well as for identifying the most appropriate, effective and efficient policy solutions to housing exclusion is the participation of homeless people. This participation needs to be understood at two levels as follows.

“Nothing about us without us.”

On the one hand, the views and experiences of people experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion need to be taken into account in the elaboration of policies and programmes to tackle these problems. Municipalities need to involve homeless people and their organisations to participate in decision making and in dialogue regarding the development of services, with regular reviews and meaningful account taken of their input.

On the other hand, individuals need to be involved in the definition of their own personal pathway out of a situation of housing exclusion. This involves allowing



people to have some choice in their housing situation and for their needs to be consulted for the identification of the most appropriate support services.

“There is humiliation in being written out of the ordinary everyday decisions that affect you.”

Good practice structured participation of homeless people and their organisations in the development of local policies has been developed in four Dutch municipalities known to the delegation. Other good examples were also identified, including the Northern Ireland immigrant forum’s involvement in organising ‘mystery shopper’-style reviews of services and provision of advice and recommendations to service users and providers alike.

Minimum income

Delegates were clear that minimum income should be part of a safety-net set of measures in all EU countries and that this level must be adequate to alleviate forms of poverty, homelessness and housing exclusion.

“We have no money to even pay social housing.”

At the same time, more support is needed to ensure the existence of more quality jobs that are dignified and come with adequate pay, and more and better training for a better quality employment. The increasing numbers of working poor across Europe needs to be tackled.

Minimum income levels need to take into account the cost of housing and key goods and services such as food and heating. An alternative approach to providing income is nevertheless to reduce the cost of living by controlling particularly energy/heating and housing costs. A delegate argued that the Council should ensure that people on benefits have heating.

The Italian delegation highlighted that minimum income schemes are being experimented with at regional level. A national right to minimum income is still needed, however.

Criminalisation of people experiencing poverty

Many concerns were raised by delegates about the criminalisation of people experiencing poverty. There are many examples of national and local authorities introducing policies and practices that actually or effectively criminalise people for being poor and homeless.

Guest intervention:

Jean-François MOLAS – BAPSA (*Assistance Brigade for Homeless People*) Paris explained that BAPSA is a specialist division of the police working to help homeless people in Paris. It does not aim to take homeless people forcibly from the street, but will, if necessary, take people who deny they need help to hospital for medical attention. BAPSA collaborates with many organisations that provide support services to homeless people and has direct contact with social workers.

M. Molas outlined that the ‘crime’ of vagrancy had been annulled in France in 1984, followed eight years later by that of begging. There is therefore a right to live on the street, although certain areas – notably tourist areas in Paris, Nice and Marseille – still apply such laws locally. There has been a legal right to housing in France since 2007, but it is not yet effectively applied. Just this year, the Courts declared that a lack of emergency accommodation amounted to a violation of fundamental rights.

Looking at particularly vulnerable groups, one of the most important issues is housing people with disabilities because housing services are often not adapted to their needs. Women with dependent children are targeted for support, but it often remains difficult to find solutions for them. Immigrants and asylum seekers are another group who risk not only finding themselves excluded from the mainstream economy but also support services. BAPSA does not report undocumented migrants to the authorities, but tries to help them.

BAPSA Paris: <http://www.prefecturedepolice.interieur.gouv.fr/>

The German creative presentation examined a case of a local authority forcibly removing people from under

a bridge and trying to fence off the area. Delegates from Belgium talked of the forced removal of small areas being used by homeless people in Brussels – even their mattresses were burned. It is often illegal to live in a caravan or on the beach etc and yet for many people there are not appropriate alternatives.

“What we see is not the eradication of homelessness, but the eradication of the homeless.”

Laws in Hungary, Czech Republic and Holland have made it possible for police to forcibly remove homeless people and/or beggars from public spaces. A Dutch delegate talked of being attacked by police after trying to bring food to homeless people in a train station and of people being fined for drinking in the street, even though they do not have a home they can go to. Delegates recounted that in Frankfurt, homeless people are regularly kicked out, with buses taking them out of the city.

Delegates felt that governments were often more concerned with hiding homeless people for the benefit of the rich and tourists than on delivering real solutions. The French delegation highlighted that even though the anti-begging and anti-vagrancy laws had been rescinded in many places, they were still applied in some municipalities, notably tourist areas in Paris, Nice and Marseille.

Taking action and changing attitudes

Delegates welcomed the opportunity to participate in this European Meeting, but were strong in their message that words are not enough. They spoke with passion about the need for action to address the key issues facing people experiencing poverty, homelessness and housing exclusion.

“I am pleased with this meeting. I can tell my neighbours we are not alone.”

Delegates backed up their calls in their opening declaration for a change of approach in Europe towards a more social Europe. Governments need to understand that investment in social programmes may cost

money in the short-term, but it also creates jobs and avoids greater costs in the future.

Many delegates also called for renewed solidarity amongst people to rise up and challenge approaches that are not based on respecting individuals' dignity and rights. They wanted more action to force recognition of their problems and the solutions that are available. More has to be done to change the attitudes and prejudices against people experiencing poverty.

- We have to break the silence. Each person is first of all a human being. We must fight against everything that is unjust and unfair.
- Let's stop this. Together we can change this reality.
- We will not go away. We will continue to make our voices heard.
- There is a responsibility on decision makers to act. They already know the reality.
- We get some attention but one day per year is not enough.

“We talk talk talk, but there is no change and no explanations from the EU institutions.”

- We have several good practices, bad practice is that there usually is not enough money made available to sustain them.
- Most important is to change the attitude towards homeless people and to understand that everyone has a right to a decent life!
- Last year we made a big human chain around the European Parliament to raise awareness. We should organise in each country at the same time a human chain around an empty building.
- More use must be made of the annual European Day for the homeless, which is still unknown to many of the delegates
- European Information Campaigns could challenge the stigma and discrimination suffered by people just for being poor



Joan BURTON, Irish Minister for Social Protection was clear that the unifying theme of people's interventions has been the need to respect the dignity of the human person. She commended the efforts of those who are working with others to improve their situation and that of their families and communities.

When countries like Ireland joined the EU, they wanted to reconcile economic development with enhancing the lives and opportunities of their people. Ten years ago Ireland felt very rich and that the country and Europe was advancing. However, the predominant international finance-capital model has not left room for detailed human concerns. Today is a reminder of the importance of social spending; spending which is also investment. If you invest in secure housing, that is a Keynesian investment. In the US, there is a lot of investment in the military. In Europe it can be more through the social side.

Occasions like today are crucial to hear the experiences and opinions of those affected by poverty, homelessness or housing exclusion. Many people who are now decision-makers can easily forget the realities that they themselves maybe saw at first hand when they were younger. We need to continue to encourage and

develop structured partnerships between decision makers and people experiencing poverty to inform our social policies.

Solutions have to cut across all the policy domains of poverty and housing exclusion in their multiple dimensions. There is a crucial role for other policy areas outside the traditional remit of social inclusion and protection policies.

The Irish government is committed to playing its part in meeting the Europe 2020 poverty target which will ensure that benefits of economic growth and job creation envisaged by the strategy are shared by all citizens of the EU. The IMF programme of fiscal consolidation is very tough, but the government continues to seek to minimise its impact on the most vulnerable. The poverty reduction effect of social transfers in Ireland is a relatively successful 60%, but more needs to be done.

We have to support people struggling with debt and unemployment and work to prevent homelessness and housing exclusion. The Irish government has worked to persuade banks not to evict people, because who is going to take on that house in such a crisis? Security of tenure is important. Equally, welfare

payments should not become a trap into a life without dignity; we should be helping people to work.

Ireland takes over the EU Presidency for the first six months of 2013. Ireland will be active in promoting achievement of the European Poverty Target and highlighting the importance of a European-wide approach to the eradication of poverty across Member States. Improving the position of vulnerable groups, including children, lone parents, people with disabilities and jobless households will remain a priority for the Presidency. Ireland aims to address the issue of homelessness and housing exclusion at a Council meeting during its Presidency and will organise the 12th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty.

Lauris Beets, Chair of the Social Protection Committee recognised that the EU is obviously going through turbulent times and the outlook is not rosy. Unemployment is expected to remain at around 10% for the next two years. Over-indebtedness threatens access to housing. The crisis has reduced the capacity of households to meet their financial obligations and to make timely payment of mortgage loan repayments and utility bills.

SPC monitoring has confirmed that the economic downturn has brought the EU away from its goal of reducing poverty by 2020; indicators on poverty and social inclusion show we are moving in the wrong direction. There are more people at risk of poverty or exclusion, but also more people at the very bottom of the income distribution even within the group at risk. Access to essential health and social services has worsened and there are increasing unmet needs for care.

The Social Protection Committee (SPC) promotes co-operation on social protection policies between Member States and with the Commission. In this context, both incentives and opportunities are needed in a good combination to reduce long-term unemployment. This is about maintaining workers' knowledge and skills, activation measures and permanent investment in human capital. But tackling unemployment is not enough.

The current economic and financial crisis has clearly highlighted the fundamental role of social services in areas such as healthcare, childcare or care for the elderly, assistance to disabled persons or social housing. Maintaining income support at an adequate level is also an effective guarantee against precariousness and social exclusion, reducing the worst effects of the crisis.

Attention needs to be paid to the quality of fiscal consolidation measures. They must be responsive to social needs of all generations and preserve the capacity of social protection to cushion the effects of economic shocks in the short and long terms. Controlling social protection expenditures is not the only condition for growth; after all, social protection spending was not the reason for the current crisis.

The SPC already made homelessness and housing exclusion the main focus of the 2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. One of the key messages was the importance of integrated strategies and building cohesive and environmentally sustainable societies. The Committee will further consider how the Open Method of Coordination can best increase attention to these issues. The discussions at this meeting will feed into that thinking and hopefully lead to concrete progress before the next People Experiencing Poverty conference.

Ludo HOREMANS, President of the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) reminded participants that people experiencing poverty have come together for a European meeting many times already in this same Egmont Palace. In 2010, the European Year Combating Poverty, EAPN assessed what had been done with the recommendations of the previous five years' meetings and discovered that expectations were far from being fulfilled.

Many delegates have expressed increasing displeasure that so little progress has been made on their recommendations after the positive experiences of the meetings themselves. So this year, delegates came to talk, but also to make an action. Encouraged by the words of Commissioner Andor to show our message outside this building, delegates physically showed their red cards in front of the European Council and Commission buildings.

Delegates' message is the displeasure at policies to exit the crisis only with austerity measures that are affecting ordinary people and people experiencing poverty who are not at all responsible for this crisis; and leaving those who are responsible nearly untouched. We want and we need an EU focused on co-operation and solidarity. This is delegates' plea to leaders.

Mr Horemans felt that it was good to see so many Commission officials present in the meeting sessions with the delegates and that dialogue with the European administration seemed to be strengthened as a result. However, it was important not to expect



everything of the Commission. Decisions are mostly taken by national Ministers so it is important that the recommendations of this European meeting go also to them.

Dignity and respect are the most important words emerging from the discussions. We need effective housing policies, but whilst it is essential to have a dwelling, it is even more important to have a home and to live with dignity. Comprehensive approaches are needed covering the multiple needs of homeless people with strong and robust social and health services. Whenever solutions are looked for, it is important to listen to the people experiencing the issues themselves and not just on an ad-hoc basis, but in a structured way.

It is good the Irish Presidency will organise the 12th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty next year, but we also have to make sure that the work does not stop at the door. We need follow-up actions and to engage people experiencing poverty in ongoing processes to find solutions. We also need to think about whether we should put more 'action' on the agenda of our European meetings.

Finally, it is very important to support the proposal of the Commission to earmark 20% of the European Social Fund for social inclusion measures. EAPN is launching a campaign to pass this message to all our Heads of State and Government. The EU can only find a solution out of the crisis through such social investment.

Freek Spinnewijn, Director of FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People highlighted that it was a good idea to have this European Meeting focused on homelessness and housing rights, not only because it is such an urgent issue, but also because there is already European political impetus around it.

We know, and there has been lots of discussion at this meeting about, the fact that homelessness and housing exclusion is a big problem. Although we do not have one reliable figure, we know that this situation involves several million people who use homeless services at least one day per year.

Commission Andor set out that there is a mapping exercise on what is being done in Member States to tackle homelessness. The relevant recommendations coming out of this meeting should be taken into account in that exercise. The Commissioner said that some countries have listed homelessness as a social policy priority in their National Reform Programmes.

This is a clear indication that Member States would welcome more support from the EU to help them address homelessness. From FEANTSA's reading of those documents, half of the EU countries ask for it.

A strong role for the EU on homelessness has already been called for by: a resolution of the European Parliament; the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion adopted by the Council in 2010; reports from the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions; and the outcome of the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness organised by the Belgian Presidency of the EU in 2010. There is basic unanimity on the need for such EU action. Now it is time to act.

Conclusions – the Key Messages

The theme for the 11th European meeting was **“Homelessness and Housing Rights in the Context of the Crisis”**. The event brought together over 150 delegates (people with direct experience of poverty and/or homelessness) from 30 countries to reflect on this theme under three headings: the impact of the crisis; practice examples; and policy recommendations. The delegates exchanged views with representatives from national ministries, the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, academics, researchers and social NGOs.

Key messages of people experiencing poverty were:

On the reality of poverty, homelessness and housing exclusion

- **Poverty and homelessness can happen to anyone:** Causes of poverty and homelessness can affect anyone; from losing your job to physical or mental health problems, and from relationship breakdowns to the logical but unethical consequences of unregulated landlords and banks.
- **Discrimination is a major problem:** People experiencing poverty, an unconventional lifestyle, or imperfect housing, employment or criminal records face significant prejudice and discrimination in accessing housing. This discrimination is redoubled for groups such as: people with disabilities; Roma; immigrants (both undocumented and regular); single parents; and ethnic minorities.
- **The crisis has created additional profiles of people at risk:** Young people struggling to find employment, older people seeing the value of their pensions and savings eroded, and increasing numbers of ‘middle-class’ people facing over-indebtedness and mortgage defaults demonstrate a worrying new profile of people at risk of homelessness and housing exclusion.
- **Authorities should stop fighting the poor:** Too often, the authorities seem more intent on hiding or fighting people experiencing poverty and homelessness e.g. criminalising use of public spaces, destroying rough-sleeping communities, evicting squatters etc. than on ensuring alternative solutions exist. People should not be criminalised for being poor.
- **Homelessness and housing exclusion are a cause of poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, health problems etc. as well as a symptom:** The lack of a stable housing situation

undermines the ability of people to retain or return to work, remain in good health, access their rights, live a life of dignity, and contribute fully to society. It contributes to a vicious circle of exclusion.

- **There is a dramatic lack of access to social housing:** In many regions, people without access to decent work or adequate minimum income have to wait so long for social housing that the challenges they face to re-establish their lives can have multiplied many times by the time they are housed. There is a lack of social housing stock and of priority access for homeless people.
- **The private rental market is currently insufficiently regulated or incentivised to offer a solution:** High rents, prejudiced landlords and a lack of legal protection mean that vulnerable people at risk of poverty or exclusion often either cannot access privately rented housing or have little protection against poor living conditions or evictions.
- **Shelters do not provide a long-term solution to homelessness:** Many efforts to provide temporary shelters have simply papered over the cracks of rough sleeping and failed to support or enable people to move into permanent housing or address other issues, thus institutionalising many homeless people.

On the approaches and solutions needed

- **Access to housing is a basic human right, which needs to be enforced:** International agreements, declarations of different EU institutions and some EU national constitutions recognise the right to housing. More needs to be done at EU and Member State levels to implement this basic human right, in line with corresponding rights to e.g. health or education.
- **Housing first approaches are worth developing:** For many homeless people, it is better and more cost-effective to find an immediate housing solution and to address additional problems from there, rather than seek to resolve the other issues first from insecure situations or temporary accommodation. However, housing first should not be used to dismantle emergency and other necessary services or to force people into inappropriate housing for their needs.
- **The complexity of homelessness and housing exclusion requires integrated solutions:** Housing first does not mean housing only.



Targeted support to attend to the health, educational, social, employment and minimum income needs etc of vulnerable and homeless individuals is essential.

- **End the disgrace of unoccupied buildings that could house millions:** With a bit of political will, it would be possible to end the reality of speculators leaving significant numbers of buildings empty whilst other citizens have nowhere to live. Increasing tax on unoccupied buildings could also raise money for social investment.
- **Services must be joined up at the point of contact with homeless people:** The complexity and bureaucracy of service provision across health, housing, employment etc. cannot continue to be another challenge facing people experiencing or at risk of housing exclusion. One-stop shops are needed where homeless people can address all their complex needs.
- **People experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion must be involved in the decisions that affect their everyday lives:** As a matter of personal dignity and to increase the delivery of successful outcomes, it is essential that people are supported to engage in real ways in the definition of plans or policies to improve their own situation.
- **Housing and Homeless strategies:** There is need for further development of integrated housing and homelessness strategies – which have already proven to be effective – at local, regional, national and EU levels. People who experience poverty and homelessness must be engaged in the development and implementation of such strategies.

The central message from delegates was that they have had enough of measures to combat the economic crisis that are only creating more poverty and social exclusion. To reinforce this message, the delegations symbolically showed a red card to the EU Institutions for allowing “the burden of the crisis to fall fully on the poor, who bear no blame for it, while those who should be called to account are going practically unscathed and are even growing richer.”

The delegates feel that politicians’ words on poverty reduction and fighting homelessness in the EU are empty. Like the boy in the Emperor’s New Clothes, they dare to point this out. **It is time for the development of real homelessness and inclusion strategies in the EU, not only on paper, but backed up by meaningful actions.**

Improved data collection and better understanding of the realities facing people at risk of homelessness and housing exclusion is needed. The European Structural Funds should be used strategically to support the reduction of poverty and homelessness. Such actions and more are required at European level to ensure access to housing and the financial means to live a dignified life for all those who live in the EU. This is essential to achieving the EU poverty reduction target and to the success of the EU project as a whole.

Annex One – side events

All delegates were invited to attend one of two side events to the conference that were held on the afternoon of 11th May 2012. The following short reports give a flavour of the topics discussed.

Side Event One

- Organised by: EUH (the European Union of Homeless) and HOPE (Homeless People in European Stations)
- Location: building of the Belgian Public Service for social integration
- Structure: Keynote speech and debate

The organisations EUH and HOPE were presented. EUH is an informal network of people experiencing homelessness organised by member organisations from five EU countries: Armutsnetzwerk, Germany; Á Varos Mindenkié, Hungary; Comité Des Sans Logis, France; Daklozen Aktie Komitee, The Netherlands; and Front Commun SDF, Belgium. HOPE is a trans-national project to improve the conditions and accompaniment of homeless people in EU stations with partners including railway companies in: Luxembourg; Spain; Italy; Germany; Belgium; Poland; and France.

Maarten Loopmans from the Catholic University of Leuven provided a keynote speech: 'Homeless under pressure: gentrification, inner city renewal and the selective right to the city'. He argued that processes of gentrification meant that market value dictates the use of public spaces. This has led to policies that privatise and ban homeless people from public spaces. The right to the city and the principle of using the city together are therefore under threat, most of all for marginalised groups.

In the following debate, participants broadly agreed that decent housing and the fight against poverty in general remains the priority, but that the right to public space is also important and should never be denied to anyone. It was felt that recurring local themes and approaches – included the criminalisation of homeless people – requires a common local, national and European approach.

Side Event Two

- Organised by: La Strada and BRAVVO
- Location: Maison de Quartier Querelle
- Structure: Presentations of local initiatives
- La Strada is a regional initiative of the Commission Communautaire Commune de Bruxelles. It was created in 2008 to help provide an overview and better understanding of the situation of homelessness in the city, and to be a support centre to organisations working in the field. La Strada collects data and personal experiences from homeless people, shelters and social workers. They are also working to explore what works and what does not work in terms of policies and service delivery by creating a space for discussion between the relevant stakeholders. They have been particularly studying what happens in winter where there is usually a last-minute emergency response to a situation that could be planned for. They have been trying to coordinate service provision better through an online platform.

BRAVVO is a local-level initiative of the City of Brussels. It started out with a focus on young people who were hanging out in public spaces rather than participating in education or employment activities. However, as the number of homeless people on the streets of Brussels has risen over recent years, BRAVVO's work has moved towards broader groups and 'communities' of homeless people. The organisation is active in the field, approaching homeless people to discuss their situation, difficulties, tensions and conflicts, and to try to help them find solutions.

Discussions compared some of the common causes of homelessness and attitudes to homeless people and their use of public space by the public and the authorities. It was felt that whilst data on homelessness will never be perfect and that every case is important even if it is just one person, data can help justify the need for change to the authorities. There was discussion about how to provide specific services without separating homeless people off in a 'ghettoised' approach.

<http://www.bravvo.be/>

<http://www.lstb.be/>

Annex Two – Attendance list



Austria	
SCHUTTE Michael	Straßenzeitung Augustin
GANGLE Silvia	Amsel
TIGGES Axel	Personal Assistant Vera Hinterdorfer
HINTERDORFER Vera	BAKU – Begleitung aller Krisensituationen
GEIGER Carina	Personal Assistant Irmgard Kampass
KAMPASS Irmgard	Sichtbar-Werden
LEHNER Waltraud	MindestVerunsicherung
Belgium	
VANDERMEERSCHEN Elke	BAPN
MEIRSCHAERT Véronique	BAPN
AUSLOOS Daniel	BAPN
LANGLOIS Dominique	BAPN
BAERT Geneviève	BAPN
Bulgaria	
NIKOLOV Aleksandar	EAPN Bulgaria
TODOROV Aleksandar	EAPN Bulgaria
STAMBOLUSKII i Borislav	EAPN Bulgaria
NIKOLOV Ivan	EAPN Bulgaria
ASIPOV Sabri	EAPN Bulgaria
Croatia	
SVAGUSA Vesna	Centre for social policy initiatives
CZ Rep	
MROZEK Stanislav	Slezská Diakonie
FURAK Milan	Caritas Ostrava
LEWINSKI David	Slezská Diakonie
ORAWSKI Robert	Slezská Diakonie
PLSKOVA Jana	Salvation Army
Cyprus	
KAZANTZIS Ninetta	EAPN Cyprus
STAVROU Georgios	EKYSY
KYRIAKOS Odysseos	EAPN Cyprus
APOSTOLIDOU Efrosini	Cyprus Greens Woman Movement
Denmark	
BAY-PETERSEN Sofie	SAND
Ernstsen Per	SAND
BERTELSEN Martin	SAND
ANDERSEN Leif	SAND
SCHEIL Eva Pia	SAND
Estonia	
KAHJU Laura	EAPN Eesti MTÜ
ELBING Andrus	EAPN Eesti MTÜ
TOPAASIA Ervin	Nõmme Child Welfare
TURSMAN Tiina	Omastehoolajate MTÜ

Finland	
VAISANEN Veikko	Settlement Kalliola
TOIVONEN Matias	VVA ry
KAHARA Pertti	Settlement Kaliola
VARSAKAKI Timo	KRIS
NIEMELAINEN Ulla Mari	S-asunnot oy
France	
COLLINET Geneviève	FNARS
BERTHON Francis	Entraide ouvrière
DEPLANQUE Richard	Fondation Armée du Salut
FRISCOURT Fabrice	Armée du Salut
PION Dominique	Impact
SZYMANSKI Catherine	Secours Catholique
Germany	
BIEHN Erika	VAMV
NIEDERLAND Karin	Straßenfeger
HENRICH Diana	Netzwerk Friesenkraft
MULLER Jörg	
PLIETZSCH Sven	AWO
FRANKE Werner	
Greece	
VARDARAMATOU Konstantina	EAPN Greece
ATHANASSOULAS Thanaddid	EAPN Greece
KESOVA Larisa	EAPN Greece
Hungary	
MESTER Attila	HAPN
SZIGETI Adrienn	The City is for All
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DE BLOCK Maggie	Belgian State Secretary for Social Integration and Combating Poverty



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