

## **11<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (Brussels, 10-11 May 2012)**

The theme for the 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Organisation of the meeting:** *The Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union organised the 11th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty on 10 and 11 May in Brussels with the support of the European Commission and the assistance of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and FEANTSA. The meeting was hosted in Egmont Palace by the Belgian Government.*

A full report of the meeting will be available later.