
Reflections on the Leuven Roundtable on Homelessness: the End of the Beginning?

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Introduction

On 1 March 2013, a meeting of Ministers and Ministries from 24 EU countries met to discuss the issue of homelessness and to explore the possibilities for future co-operation on the issue. The meeting, arranged under the auspices of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, was co-chaired by Jan O'Sullivan, the Irish Minister with responsibility for Housing and Planning, and Laszlo Andor, the European Commissioner with responsibility for Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCSO) matters. The meeting agreed on six principles that should underpin European co-operation on the issue of homelessness. This policy review seeks to outline the process involved in bringing that meeting about, and to draw conclusions about how issues, which are not areas of EU competency, such as homelessness, can be addressed and advanced at a European level. Using the event as a case study it also reflects on European policy-making and where homelessness and housing exclusion might sit in that context.

Homelessness Policy and the EU

While many issues at European level can be dealt with by a single council formation, e.g. financial or economic issues by Economic and Social Affairs Council (ECOFIN), the issue of homelessness is not an EU competence. As a national responsibility, it resides with various different Ministries in different countries, e.g. health, environment, or social protection. This means there are no regular mechanisms within the conventional EU institutional structures where Ministers with this responsibility meet and no regular council meeting where questions relating to homelessness can be addressed. However, homelessness is an issue common to all countries in the EU, and while the fundamental causes are generally similar, the nature and extent of the problem and responses can vary widely.

The main opportunities to progress homelessness at a European level to date have been through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Gosme argues that the placing:

... of homelessness on the social OMC agenda through the common objectives has been an important first trigger for mobilisation of state and non-state actors... to support homelessness policy-making (2012, p.8).

The OMC allows for a shared competence on social policy matters between the EU and Member States, with the EU co-ordinating policies which are developed at national level in accordance with needs (Gosme, 2012, p.5). Spinnewijn (2009) charted the development of EU engagement with the issue of homelessness in the first decade of the century, noting the following reasons why it did not become as well integrated into the social inclusion agenda as other issues:

- (a) Lack of agreement on indicators related to homelessness.
- (b) Late emergence of homelessness as a priority issue in Member State National Anti-Poverty Strategies (NAPs).
- (c) Homelessness is commonly not the responsibility of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) delegate's Ministry.
- (d) Insufficient resources [allocated] within the Commission to advance the issue.

However, he notes a rising level of interest in the issue from 2008. In recent years, there have been significant moves at European level seeking further co-operation, up to and including a European Homelessness Strategy. The economic crisis in general has resulted in an increase in people in housing difficulty, ranging from mortgage distress and increased levels of eviction to literal homelessness. The 2012 Annual Growth Survey (European Commission, 2011) reported increased homelessness in several countries as a result of the economic crisis. Tacitly, countries that were experiencing high levels or indeed chronic levels of homelessness among migrant communities were acutely aware of the potential of deeper European-level involvement in homelessness at a policy, support, and financial level.

In 2010, the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, hosted by the Belgian Government in conjunction with the Commission, sought to draw together governmental, practitioner, academic and non-governmental experts to find a consensus on key issues related to homelessness to serve as a basis for developing policies on homelessness at a European level. In 2011, a number of key European institutions and actors – the European Parliament (2011), the Committee of the Regions (2011), and the European Economic and Social Committee (2012) all made calls for more concerted EU action on homelessness, and in 2012, the

EPSCO adopted conclusions calling on Member States and the European Commission to “develop and promote adequate schemes for persons who are homeless”(COEU, p.11).

The attitude of the Commission to increased EU involvement in homelessness was less clear. The Commission had co-sponsored the 2010 European Consensus conference on homelessness, and also in that year, in the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Exclusion (EC, 2010) noted that comprehensive strategies were key to fighting homelessness and housing exclusion. It also went on to emphasise the importance of governance in structures designed to combat homelessness, the key role of prevention strategies, and the need for robust monitoring and evaluation strategies (EC, 2010). However, there was a marked reluctance to move towards a strategy on homelessness on three principal grounds. First, there was a view that as it was an area of national competence, then the EU should not act outside of its competence; second the case for a strategy had not been made; and third, the Commission had not fully settled on its view of homelessness.

The Social Investment Package (SIP), published in November of 2012 (European Parliament, 2012), surprised many in its approach to homelessness. It was clear in the year running up the publication of the SIP that thought on the issue was rapidly evolving, and it was evident that there was considerable internal debate. The publication of a full *Staff Working Paper on Confronting Homelessness* (EC, 2013) as part of the SIP was a step further than many had expected. It also aligned well with the view of advocates for housing-led approaches and EU co-operation on this matter. While it stopped short of advocating a full EU Homelessness strategy, it did signal an acknowledgement that addressing homelessness was now a key part of social inclusion policy at a European level.

Pressure from Member States and Lobbying Efforts

It must also be acknowledged that there has been on-going pressure from various member states in relation to advancing European co-operation on homelessness. For example, as mentioned, the Belgian Government hosted the Consensus Conference as an initiative of the Presidency of the EU Council in 2010, co-organised with the European Commission. However, a key event in the context of preparation for the Roundtable meeting was the call by the French government, in March 2012, for a European strategy on homelessness. The paper was presented informally at first, and then formally communicated to the Commission later that year. It proposed a strategy based on five principles: housing first; importance of supply; importance of supports to maintain housing; prevention; and choice.

In addition, enhancing European collaboration had long been the goal of NGOs working in the area of homelessness, especially FEANTSA (the European Federation of Organisations Working with the Homeless) and its members. Gosme argues that European networks not only participate in:

... stakeholder dialogue with the Commission drawing attention to emerging needs and policies, but are also vehicles for mutual learning and centres of expertise which can support policy formulation based on evidence from the ground (2012, p.11).

There have been on-going ad hoc meetings (conferences, peer reviews, projects) which have brought together key national and European stakeholders to share learning and best practice. In addition this on-going dialogue has been supported by the work programme of the European Observatory on Homelessness.

The Roundtable

Early in 2012, Jan O'Sullivan TD (member of the Irish Parliament), Minister for Housing and Planning in Ireland stated her intention to hold a meeting of European Ministers with responsibility for homelessness during the Irish presidency in the first half of 2013. Upon taking up the role of Minister of Housing and Planning in December 2011 Minister Jan O'Sullivan highlighted that homelessness would be one of her core priorities, stating:

I am determined that my role as Minister for Housing will also see substantial progress in tackling the continuing scandal of homelessness in Irish society. I am working closely with the various voluntary bodies which are committed to ending homelessness so that everyone can access secure, safe and sustaining accommodation.¹

O'Sullivan, a Labour Party TD for a constituency with a high level of social exclusion saw homelessness as the most urgent problem in the housing side of her portfolio. The Presidency offered an opportunity to advance the issue at a European level. The intention of the meeting was to:

...bring added focus to the EU's involvement in the area of homelessness, to discuss issues of common interest and possible future cooperation so as to signal the strong support among member states towards addressing and tackling the issue of homelessness.²

¹ <http://www.labour.ie/janosullivan/>

² <http://eu2013.ie/news/news-items/20130301post-homelessnessroundtablepr/>

At first, it was conceived of as an “informal meeting” of Ministers, as routinely happens during Presidencies. However it became clear that a meeting in, or close to Brussels might be more opportune; attracting a greater number of attendees, and producing a more focused outcome. Minister O’Sullivan had expressed a strong view that the meeting should go beyond discussion to make some conclusions and suggest actions for the future. In the early stages it was proposed that there would be a meeting of Ministers to be followed by a meeting with the Commissioner to discuss the outcomes. However, with the Commissioner’s agreement to attend and indeed co-chair the meeting, there was a strong base for meaningful and productive discussions.

In preparation for the meeting, the Irish Presidency developed a discussion paper for circulation proposing a “framework for co-operation” (OMHP, 2013a, pp.6-7) which adopted the principles in the aforementioned French paper at its core. However it also sought to address a number of other contentious areas on the issue of homelessness at a European level. In particular, it emphasised the importance of a common reference framework, data, and research.

The paper was, however, deliberately conservative in its goals. While adopting the principles from the French paper as a basis for co-operation, the Irish Government were consciously not calling for a European Strategy on Homelessness. This was in recognition of the importance of building a broad consensus on the issue across countries and in acknowledgement of the marked sensitivities around a “strategy”. Some of the sensitivities are directly related to the competency issue and the fact that not all countries would welcome European intervention in this “domestic” matter however others related to fears of imposition of definition and measurement methods undermining national data collection systems and also having budgetary implications. The Irish Government deliberately focused on ensuring this meeting brought as many players as possible around the table to build this broad consensus. This was for three reasons. First, the meeting and paper was seen as part of a process moving towards greater European cooperation and not an end in itself; secondly as the meeting fell outside the formal European apparatus for its outcomes to be meaningful, it was important that as many countries as possible were represented and that the Commission was involved. Thirdly, while the event was part of the official Presidency programme, marshalling the required political and diplomatic resources for more complex negotiation was not possible in the context of overall Presidency priorities. In the drafting of the discussion paper, there was extensive consultation, including with the Commission around certain sensitive issues, in language it drew heavily from SIP, and cautiously approached matters around the definition and measurement of homelessness. In addition, bilateral engagement with other Member States in advance of the meeting was important.

With the Roundtable scheduled for 1 March, the Discussion Paper was circulated in early 2013, inviting Ministers to comment. Broadly, there was a warm welcome for the contents of the paper, and general agreement around its contents. The results of the consultation were synthesised into a draft report that was tabled for discussion at the roundtable. Once invitations had issued and again when the Discussion Paper issued to the various Ministries it was important that the relevance and significance of the meeting was communicated at a national level. To support this FEANTSA mobilised member organisations in Member States to encourage their governments to attend the event and highlight the support of national homeless organisations for the event and the discussion paper.

The Outcome

The Roundtable meeting was attended by Ministers or representatives of Ministries from 24 countries, a very strong attendance for a meeting of this nature. The Presidency sought agreement on the draft report, and further contributions from member states were reflected in a final report that issued some time later. The meeting agreed six principles to inform homelessness policy across Europe.

- *Principle 1* – Develop and share knowledge and best practice.
- *Principle 2* – Core elements for response.
- *Principle 3* – Funding.
- *Principle 4* – Common reference framework.
- *Principle 5* – Research, innovation and data collection.
- *Principle 6* – Implementation and monitoring (OMHP, 2013b).

The report sought to strengthen co-ordination on these six principles, and importantly agreed that the Commission should “support and facilitate Member States in their efforts to combat homelessness through implementation of the Social Investment Package in a defined way” (OMHP, 2013b, p.3). Furthermore, it was recorded that those present hoped it was the beginning of a process of engagement and would welcome meeting again.

Discussion and Conclusions

For many reasons, homelessness and housing exclusion, though clearly recognised as severe forms of social exclusion, have struggled to find their way onto a central place in the policy agenda at European level, notwithstanding competency issues. Key to this problem appears to be the difficulty in agreeing common indicators (Spinnewijn, 2009, p.303). Given the rising level of interest in an increased level of European engagement on the issue, the Irish Presidency initiative was designed to explore the possibilities for further co-operation. The economic crisis that beset Europe from 2008 must be seen as one of the key changing contexts. Certainly, it acted as an important catalyst for the increased focus on the issue. The rise in housing-related social exclusion including homelessness as a result of the adverse economic circumstances is well recognised and indeed is cited in the Commission Staff Working Paper as the principal reason for more “urgent concerted action” on homelessness (EC, 2013, p.1).

The event is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Overall, the first meeting of EU homelessness Ministers is a significant milestone in itself. The high level of attendance reflects the growing acknowledgement of the problem and a willingness of Ministers to come together to exchange views on it. The decision of Commissioner Andor to attend, and indeed, to co-chair the event is an important step in Commission engagement on the issue of homelessness. This indicates the Commission, although clearly wary of embarking on a potentially fraught new work stream, acknowledges combating homelessness as a key part of the social inclusion agenda. It was also evident that Ministers were interested in discussing closer working, with an additional EU dimension. Finally, the agreement on the six principles sets out an agenda on which the next steps can be based, and they are a “good fit” with the focus on homelessness within the SIP.

As Hill (1997) notes the relationship between policy and politics cannot be underestimated and one of the key lessons from the Irish initiative is the centrality of politics to policy making. The Council of the European Union operates in an extremely crowded policy landscape, with limited time, and many demands. As with all policy areas, working in a 27-member state structure presents challenges in terms of dealing with such a variety of political and policy differences, and with national sensitivities and nuances. In addition, there are a wide range of actors involved in the Presidency planning process, ranging across the national government apparatus, and into official channels in the European Council itself. Given the nature of the Union as a multi-state, multi-lingual entity, the range of processes and precision of language requires time and resources to navigate. In addition, while all countries share the problem of homelessness, the nature and extent varies across the Union. Attitudes and approaches to dealing with the issue are also diverse.

Accordingly, strong and single-minded political will to bring the matter to the table is vital. Overall, the approach of aiming for broad consensus rather than a radical shift in direction and overly circumscribed outcomes were important to an agreed output from the meeting.

Gosme describes “Europeanisation” as a three-tier process including:

... top-down processes influencing national agendas, bottom-up processes influencing the EU agenda, and horizontal cross-national influencing... which are empirically linked in practice” resulting in greater interconnectedness between national policy-making and European policy making processes (2012, p.5).

Certainly there are elements of all these in relation to homelessness at a European level. It is perhaps too early to say where the Roundtable initiative sits in the overall “Europeanisation” of homelessness policy. From a position where the issue was very marginal to the social OMC, there has been a marked rise in the level of interest at a European level in recent years. The OMC clearly does allow for cooperation but the process is slow and incremental where policy is built step by step allowing for “mutual adjustment” and protecting against lasting mistakes (Lindblom, 1959, pp.81–82). Perhaps such an approach is particularly appropriate in complex and contested areas however, and importantly it does not facilitate radical policy change (Randall, 2011, p.292). Indeed this very point was raised by Gosme (2012) where she queried whether there had been a “conscious decision” not to push for EU evaluation and monitoring in relation to homelessness given it was a “sensitive policy area” (p.16) within the competency of member states who might be reluctant to fit their national homelessness policy making into an EU monitoring framework.

The SIP is the context identified for the Commission to support and facilitate Member States on homelessness, so there is a clear need to determine a course of action for this to take place. Clearly a specific European forum where homelessness can be addressed continues to be absent. It appears that the Social Protection Committee remains the vehicle through which actions on foot of the Report must be progressed. There is unlikely to be an appetite for a new structure, so it appears that some new agreed programme and method of working must be conceived. There have been recent calls for a “Roadmap” to ensure implementation of the homelessness-related aspects of SIP. However, it must be cautioned that overall the SIP resides in the EPSCO council formation which does not include many Ministries with responsibility for homelessness. While the Irish initiative gave the issue a new impetus, Presidencies are transitory and further meetings of Ministers will require homelessness to be reflected in the priorities of those Presidencies.

While the Leuven Roundtable demonstrates that Member States are anxious to co-operate with each other on the issue of homelessness, and they have agreed on the six principles on which that co-operation should be based, the issue is now to translate those principles into further steps and concrete actions. Many of the drawbacks and obstacles to progress on homelessness that were identified in this article in relation to the OMC remain in place. The Irish initiative, as mentioned, explicitly sought consensus between Member States and with the Commission. It sought to advance the issue without bringing about disruptive change or challenge. This may be seen as its strength and indeed also weakness. It remains to be seen how the circumspection displayed in the agreement reached at Leuven will overcome these. Therefore the Roundtable might be conceived of as the “end of the beginning” of EU engagement on homelessness.

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