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# Building Consensus? The French Experience of a 'Consensus Conference' on Homelessness

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- › **Abstract\_** *This article examines the context, organisation and outcomes of the French Consensus Conference on homelessness, held in Paris during November 2007. The objective of a Consensus Conference is, in essence, to develop a collective opinion on a controversial question, drawing on experts' contributions, but with the ultimate judgement made by 'lay persons'. This particular methodology was proposed in a specific context in France, when debates on homelessness were becoming very politicised and divisive. The proposal to organise this Consensus Conference was prompted by a desire to stimulate informed debate on homelessness, 'objectivise' the voluntary welfare sector's problems, and work out a set of principles that could be agreed by all of the key actors so as to improve public policies on homelessness. Although it is perhaps a little early to assess what lessons can be learned from this French experience, the paper attempts to draw some tentative policy and organisational conclusions.*
- › **Key Words\_** *Consensus Conference; France; homelessness; voluntary sector; public policies*

## Introduction

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The first 'Consensus Conference' on homelessness was held in Paris in November 2007. Patterned on a model already used in the medical sector, the Conference was proposed to the French Government by the Fédération Nationale des Associations d'Accueil et de Réinsertion Sociale (The National Federation of Welcoming and Social Rehabilitation Associations) (Fnars) in early 2007, following the controversy sparked by the Enfants de Don Quichotte action group (Don Quixote's children) (EDDQ) which had pitched tents along the Seine in protest at the plight of homeless people in France. The objective of a Consensus Conference is, in essence, to develop a collective opinion on a controversial question, drawing on experts' contributions, but with the ultimate judgement made by 'lay persons'. The aim of Fnars in organising this conference was to map out a strategy to implement clear public policy goals in addressing homelessness. Importing a methodology used in the medical sector into social policy is groundbreaking and unprecedented in France: the idea was to distil all available knowledge and to employ the work of an organising committee, over forty experts, and a multidisciplinary panel, to frame policy and practice recommendations to the public authorities.

By describing the context, organisation and outcomes of the French Consensus Conference, this paper aims to consider the appropriateness and effectiveness of this particular methodology as a means of stimulating debates on homelessness and, ultimately, to improve policies and practice with respect to homeless people. It is hoped that other countries may find aspects of the French experience instructive in developing their own methodologies for developing national homelessness conferences. The paper is informed by a series of interviews undertaken by the author with key actors involved in the Consensus Conference, including the Director and the President of Fnars, a trade unionist member of the panel and one of the Consensus Conference organisers. It should also be noted that the author was a member of the Consensus Conference organising committee, as a sociologist. While this provided me with an invaluable insider's account of the events, organisation and involvement of the various players in the Conference, this membership could also lay my objectivity and neutrality open to question. With this in mind, I have taken particular care to incorporate a reflexive approach in my analysis, and wished to bring this to readers' attention.

The article begins by reviewing key relevant events in France that provided the context for the Consensus Conference, and the part played by Fnars in them, before moving on to describe the methodology and proceedings of the Consensus Conference in some detail. It then identifies the most positive and least positive aspects of the Consensus Conference experience in France. Although it is perhaps

a little early to assess what lessons having been made public in December 2007 (Consensus Conference Report, 2007), I shall attempt to draw some tentative policy and organisational conclusions.

## The Context for the Consensus Conference

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### *2006-2008: homelessness in the headlines*

Housing and homelessness dominated the French headlines from the end of 2005 onwards, and a number of events coalesced to create a receptive context for organizing a national Consensus Conference on this topic. In summer 2005 there were several fires in low-cost residential hotels and buildings that had been converted into substandard flats in Paris; one fire in a six-floor multiple occupation building left seventeen people dead and about thirty injured. In winter 2005-2006, the Médecins du Monde organisation handed out tents to homeless people in Paris. The tents did not disappear with spring, however, and in summer 2006 local residents began to protest against the presence of these tents and their occupants who had taken up permanent residence in the streets and squares of Paris. The end of 2006 was marked by civic protest action taken by the EDDQ organisation. On 16<sup>th</sup> December, the founder of EDDQ, Augustin Legrand, pitched nearly 200 red tents on the banks of the Saint Martin canal in Paris. This was on the eve of the French Presidential election campaign and EDDQ was attempting to put housing and shelter for street homeless people firmly on to the political agenda. On Christmas Day 2006, EDDQ drew up a Canal Saint Martin Charter for access to housing for all<sup>1</sup>, which proposed making the right to housing enforceable everywhere in France. When the iconic Abbé Pierre (the founder of Emmaüs, a prominent French homelessness agency) died on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2007, the nationwide media pressure leveraged by EDDQ forced the Government's hand: a Bill establishing an Enforceable Right to Housing passed into law in March 2007<sup>2</sup> (Loison, 2007).

### *Fnars takes centre stage*

Unlike voluntary organisations like Emmaüs or Restaurants du Coeur (Golden Heart Restaurants) for example that were helped to fame by the charismatic figures of Abbé Pierre and the comedian Coluche, Fnars is not well known amongst the wider French public, despite coordinating a network of twenty-two regional associations, linking together 750 voluntary organisations and public agencies which, in combination, run close to 2,200 services. However, to mark its Golden Jubilee in January

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lesenfantsdedonquichotte.com/v2/charte.php>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/UnTexteDeJorf?numjo=SOCX0600231L>

2006, Fnars began a major debate, giving a voice to the views of front-line stakeholders in homelessness (including welfare workers, administrators, managers, voluntary workers and service users). In November 2006, the outcome of this national consultation exercise was sent to politicians, Government agencies, the general public and the candidates in the 2007 Presidential elections; it was intended to act as a briefing on the daily work done by homelessness charities.

In the introduction, the Fnars President spoke of the need for a “new way of doing things”. The first step, she said, was to analyse the problem by evaluating the needs in a specific area, partly by generating better knowledge about the circumstances of people experiencing exclusion, as well as by taking stock of existing provision. “For there to be no argument, this fact-finding report must be informed by experts who can objectivise the real-life experiences” (Maestracci, 2006, p.7). This evidence must then be ‘shared’:

“if it is to be useful, central and local Government agencies – especially those of the *départements* – and voluntary welfare agencies must reach a consensus on this analysis. This phase of dialogue must make it clear what all the players agree on, but also where they differ” (Maestracci, 2006: p.7).

The Fnars President concluded that:

“... we see this common sense methodological proposal as the only sure way for public policies on exclusion to take long-term root and endure beyond changes of government. This is an area in which arguably no public policy can be effective and sustainable unless it is based on a broad consensus that is not confined to specialists in social issues”. (Maestracci, 2006: p.8).

The references here to ‘expertise’, ‘objectivizing’ and shared ‘consensus’ clearly foreshadow the Consensus Conference methodology.

In early January 2007, the Social Cohesion Minister commenced talks with various homelessness organisations, including Fnars, to work on the Bill to introduce the Enforceable Right to Housing. The Fnars President offered to take charge of finding accommodation solutions for the tent-dwellers throughout the country, in return for the Minister financing a Consensus Conference to give thought to public policies on caring for homeless people (Louail, 2007).

### *Fnars' aims for the Consensus Conference*

Fnars' proposal for the Consensus Conference arose out of a series of concerns. Prominent amongst these was the compartmentalisation of multiple actors and the failure to join up current knowledge and public policies, which called for a comprehensive solution to address what are complex and multi-dimensional needs. Provision for people experiencing housing exclusion in France has been likened to "a vanilla slice with no binder" (Damon, 2002: p.181.). Damon (2002: p.189) explains that it is composed of a complex bureaucratic machinery of institutions, laws and forms of provision "piled up with little evident overall logic" forming "a fairly impenetrable world comprised of countless arcane acronyms". A succession of laws and plans over many years; a failure to spell out their aims sufficiently clearly; and the wide range of provision and actors tasked with delivery, have rendered public policies towards those in housing need complex and obscure (Dyb & Loison, 2007).

The President of Fnars articulated another concern: she believes that the sector does not accurately portray the reality of social problems. It focuses too much on the charitable and humanitarian aspects of social interventions (as evidenced, for example, by the image of the 'French doctors', the 'golden heart restaurants' and Abbé Pierre) rather than the need for effective social policies. While humanitarian interventions are positively perceived by the general public, there is no popular consensus on inclusion policies whose results are not immediately visible to them. The voluntary welfare sector is often portrayed as a close-knit, consensus-based community, when in fact it is highly fragmented and riven by feuding (Dyb & Loison, 2007). The prevailing argument throughout French society has long been that voluntary organisations would be able to solve the problems if only they were properly resourced. However, the President of Fnars argued that what was required was to pool and 'objectivise' knowledge about social problems in order to avoid a myriad different and sometimes inconsistent views competing with each other, undermining the effectiveness of interventions. Fnars' proposal to organise this Consensus Conference was therefore prompted by a desire to set the debate rolling, objectivise the sector's problems, and work out a set of principles that could be agreed by all of the key actors. The ultimate purpose was "to frame an effective and sustainable policy for homeless people beyond political divisions and electoral issues" (Press release; Fnars, 12 November 2007).

## The Consensus Conference

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### *What is a Consensus Conference ?*

“Consensus conferences started out as a public health management tool developed in the United States in the 1970s. The idea at the time was to improve patient treatment by bringing together the top specialists in a medical technique before a forum of doctors and through organised discussion to gradually map out the one best way...” (Boy *et al.*, 2000: p. 781).

In the early 1990s, the model evolved into a meeting of lay people brought face-to-face with experts in a bid to democratise science and technology. The National Authority for Health (formerly the National Agency for Health Services Accreditation and Assessment (ANAES)) developed the Consensus Conference method in the French context, and published guidance to help professionals take ownership of it. This method:

“consists in having a panel draft recommendations at the conclusion of a public presentation of expert reports distilling current knowledge. The public meeting is conducted at once as a scientific conference, in which experts present and discuss their work, a democratic debate in which each participant (experts and members of the audience) can voice their views, and a judicial review in which a panel makes pronouncements. The panel is multidisciplinary and cross-occupational, draws up its recommendations in closed fashion, with the utmost possible independence and objectivity, distinguishing between scientific evidence, presumption and standard practice.” (ANAES, 1999: p. 8)

Four main phases can be identified in the process of organising a Consensus Conference (ANAES, 1999). The preparatory phase is the first and the longest. The conference promoter, having found the necessary **funding**, selects the **topic** and hands responsibility for the conference to an **organising committee** which sets up a **bibliographical group** to produce a summary of the existing literature on the subject. The organising committee also appoints **experts** and a **panel**. The panelists are non-specialists, ‘average citizens’ who are representative of society in general (ANAES, 1999). They are intended to compare notes in post-conference closed door sessions with a view to resolving the differences highlighted by the expert interventions on the chosen topic. The documents written by the bibliographical group and each expert (the experts are questioned on their work and in this document they answer questions on the theme of the conference) are given to all of the panel members to read ahead of the public hearing. The second phase is

the **public hearing**: the experts present their work and answer questions put by both the panellists and members of the **public**, who can comment on, qualify and react to the experts' pronouncements. In the third phase, the panel convenes in a two-day **closed meeting** to draw up the conference conclusions and **recommendations**. In the fourth phase, the chairs of the panel and the organising committee unveil the recommendations in public.

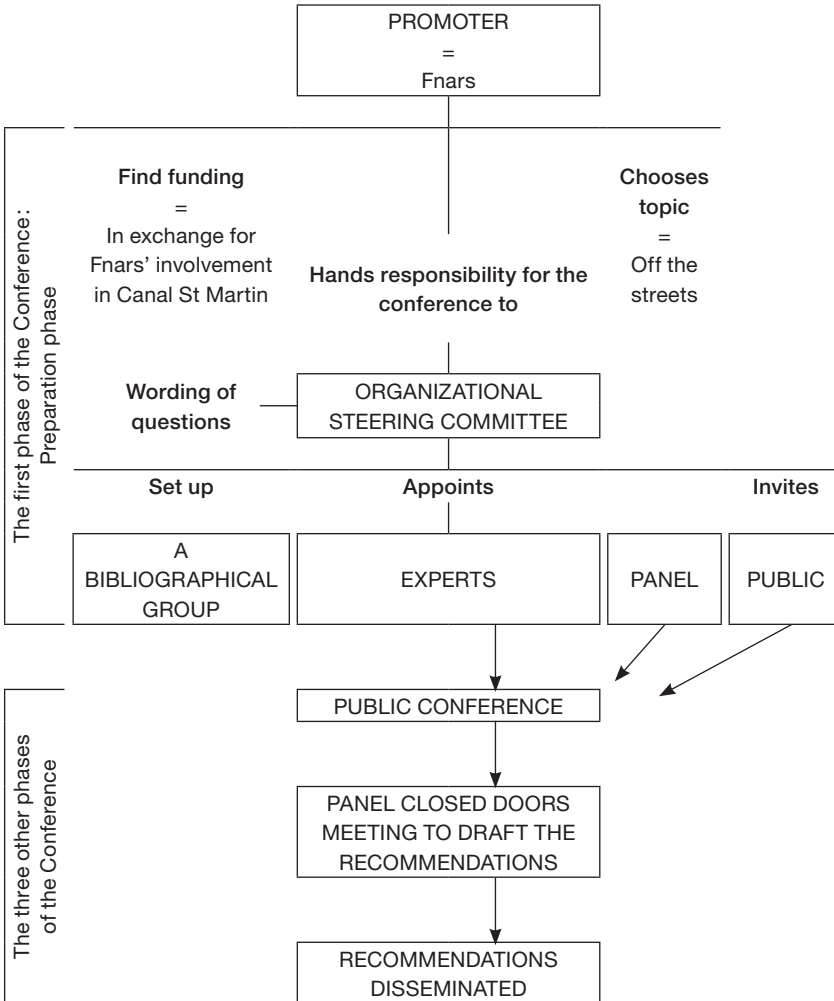
### *“Off the streets” : the Fnars Consensus Conference*

In January 2007, Fnars was able to negotiate with the Ministry of Social Cohesion the **funding** of a Consensus Conference on the **topic** of homelessness<sup>3</sup>, with homeless people described as “those who live the most precarious lives and about whom least is known” (Consensus Conference Backgrounder, 2007 : p.11). Fnars takes a homeless person to be “a person either sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (cellar, shed, car, underground station, building staircase, street, park and so on) or who attends night shelters, almost all of which until recently accepted people only for short stays and without doing anything to help them back into society” (Consensus Conference Backgrounder, 2007 : p. 11). **The Federation specified** that “... in reality, homelessness is not an easy concept to pin down. A person may be homeless by day and housed at night, or vice versa. They may spend one night in a shelter and the next on the streets” (Consensus Conference Backgrounder, 2007 : p.11).

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<sup>3</sup> However, representatives of Fnars have emphasized the difficulties they subsequently had with the government agencies over the conference budget and financing.

Figure 1 Organization of a consensus conference on homelessness



Source: freely inspired by ANAES (1999)

Figure 1 above outlines the development phases of this Consensus Conference on homelessness, which was named *Off the Streets*. The **organising committee** comprised thirteen members taken from academia (statisticians and sociologists), the voluntary community (the main organisations working with homeless people in France) and central and local Government. This was the lynchpin of the conference: it was chaired by the Fnars President, meeting twice monthly from May 2007 until November 2007 to work out the issues and topics to be addressed and to frame



the questions for the experts. A sociologist and an official of the Social Affairs Inspectorate were tasked with developing the bibliographical summary, based on a literature review.

The organising committee selected a wide range of **experts**, including welfare workers, representatives of the voluntary community, researchers and academics, doctors, public figures, government agency officials, local politicians and so on. Speakers from outside France were also invited, to provide insights into relevant public policies in their countries. Testimony was gathered from **homeless people** in two ways: a filmed series of interviews with homeless people presented during the public hearing stage of the conference; and through local discussion forums held in Angers, Paris and Avignon, the findings of which were also presented at the public hearing. The forum approach consisted of asking homeless people and front-line workers (professional and volunteer workers in shelter provision) for their views on two questions: *What does getting off the street and into society mean to you [or your clients]? Why do you [or your clients] use or not use shelters and hostels?* and comparing and contrasting respondents' experiences and analyses.

An independent, multi-disciplinary **panel** of sixteen eminent figures (including lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, trade unionists, sociologists, economists, philosophers, geographers, journalists, voluntary organization leaders and administrative officers) and chaired by a senior judge, was appointed by the organising committee. The panellists were chosen to give an alternative or critical view informed by their experiences, their interest in the issue, or their position as observers.

For two days in November 2007, 350 people (service users, politicians, welfare workers, provision managers, journalists and researchers) attended and took part in the **public hearing** at which experts were quizzed by the panel and the general public. The two-day programme centred around a series of questions put to these experts. These included: *Do we know enough about homeless people and is this knowledge taken in to proper account in public policies? How are homeless people perceived by the general public? What should the aims and founding principles be of provision for young people aged 18-25? How do street homeless people take ownership of public spaces? How should public policy deal with the regulation of public spaces? How can we define what it means to get off the streets and into society? Can 'zero homelessness' be a public policy objective without in practice leading simply to increased shelter provision?*

### *The Consensus Conference report*

Following the two-day public hearing and two-day **closed session**, the panel met in early December 2007 to compile a fifty-page report, which was published on 5<sup>th</sup> December. In its report, the panel made a number of proposals arising from the damning finding that:

“... the principles of provision are beyond reproach, but the system does not work. Or rather, it delivers the opposite of what it pledges: instead of a route to definitive integration through housing, a return to independence and the recovery of empowerment, and notwithstanding the signal efforts made in terms of methods and funding, it offers what the panel has called a ‘revolving door’ scheme whereby the homeless person who has been helped, housed and cared for goes back onto the street in an even worse state than before, having lost even more hope and desire in the meantime”. (Consensus Conference Report, 2007: p. 49)

Hearing evidence given by foreign experts, the panel concluded that, unlike some other European countries, France fails to ‘get people off the streets’. The panel report comments that:

“what separates us from these countries is not the condition of homeless people – sadly, that is equally appalling everywhere – nor the effort and imagination of welfare workers – most are, as the Conference audience showed, largely above all reproach – nor yet perhaps the amount of collective effort put in (at least in budgetary terms) – that has gone up substantially for several years. What does characterize the French policy, by contrast, is the confusion of roles, the division of responsibilities, the lack of flexibility, and the obscurity of objectives. In that regard, it can be said that the most destitute of us – for the homeless are firmly of us... – are those to whom perhaps the most destitute of policies are applied.” (Consensus Conference Report, 2007: p.49)

The panel argues that: “The layering and muddle of responsibilities in the matter [homelessness] must be addressed by coordination, not only on the ground and in emergency situations, but also nationwide and in a continuum.” (p.50), and proposed five basic principles to achieve an enduring reduction in the number of homeless people. First of all, respect must be shown to homeless people. Secondly, the diversity of their situations must be acknowledged: “the ‘traditional’ tramp is not often seen nowadays. Workers in insecure employment, the family thrown onto the street, the young person at odds with their family, are much more common” (p.49). Thus, these different categories of homeless people must be taken into account within a “necessarily general framework” that nevertheless offers a range of responses to each one. The third principle advanced by the panel is that of *unity of policy implementation*. Preventative interventions (averting evictions, for example)

and sustainable integration policies (such as solving the social housing construction shortage) must be brought together to support homeless people. The panel's fourth recommendation was to put the principle of "unconditional intake" – that is, the requirement to help all those in need – into practice. Finally, the panel argued that "The key to effective use of policy instruments, fifthly, is a geographical – i.e., district-wide – approach to communities in which a full range of assistance services must be implemented based on as detailed as possible a survey of needs and means. The plans must be defined, achievements measured and systematically evaluated in a periodically updated contract of objectives and means." (p.50).

The panel concluded that:

"... over and above these things, we must set to work at looking on how we see our towns, public spaces and everyone's use of public facilities and amenities, as well as on socialising certain risks related to exclusion, in particular those related to becoming homeless. The loopholes in our social welfare systems must be plugged, not necessarily by reverting to the formulas of the post-war period, but by getting all to provide against the disasters that befell the few in order to avert still more serious disasters for society. The panel's concern was to present principles and ways of acting. It trusts in those with responsibility to put them into practice and to put an end to this intolerable situation." (Consensus Conference Report, 2007: p. 50).

## The Assessment

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This final section of the paper will assess the merits of the Consensus Conference approach, considering its positive and negative aspects, and where we should go from here.

### *On the plus side...*

Fnars' Director hailed the Consensus Conference as a success on at least four counts. First, he argued that some associations and experts had started out "doubting Fnars' ability to transpose a medical sector methodology into the social sector". There was even some "ideological opposition on all points" of the methodology used. However, despite all this scepticism, the chosen methodology had proved itself and the project could be counted a success. Secondly, while the voluntary sector is not noted for its openness to cross-cutting approaches, the substance (topics) and form (including composition of the organising committee, panel and conduct of the public hearing) of the Consensus Conference had produced an original, cross-cutting approach to a societal issue, marrying expertise with work on public policies. The President of Fnars made a similar point: "Our

priority throughout the approach was to put independent thinking and decision-making first, especially through the multiplicity of actors involved and the multi-disciplinary, independent composition of the hearing panel". Thirdly, the insights offered through the bibliographical summary enabled a corpus of common knowledge to be developed, "which is a first in its way". Fourthly, several types of actors who are often not involved in this sort of exercise were successfully engaged in the process. Thus, there was a major focus on wider European experiences, drawing on testimony from non-French experts; service users' voices were heard both through a film and in personal testimony at the local discussion forums; and media coverage was secured, even though the public hearing took place in the late autumn (homelessness is usually only of interest to the media at Christmas and in the depths of winter, because of the dangers of sleeping out in cold weather).

### *... and the minus side*

Some aspects of the Conference could have been better organised, admitted the Fnars Director. Much of the energy of Fnars' teams was put into the operational side, organising the public hearing, at the expense of upstream organisation of their network and engaging the membership. Some large member organisations and non-member associations were involved in the project, but not enough of them, he thought. The absence of one of the experts on the public hearing day left the European mix unbalanced and southern Europe without proper representation. One of the Consensus Conference organisers regretted the absence of welfare workers and users on the organising committee, saying that it lacked front-line input.

A key challenge for the voluntary organisations was how to successfully translate a medical sector instrument into the social sector to 'objectively measure' the 'homelessness issue'. The concern was: *can medical and social issues be measured in the same way?* The science of society and 'social matters' is clearly not as objectively verifiable as medicine, and the Consensus Conference model could not be transposed into the social sector without some adaptations. Thus, Fnars did not follow some of the ANAES recommendations. For example, the organising committee is meant to be independent of the promoter and should not include members representing the Consensus Conference funders, according to ANAES (1999). The organising committee chair is usually appointed to organise and coordinate meetings, and ANAES (1999: p.11) makes clear that "the chair appointed must not have a conflict of interest on the topic of the recommendations". This rule was adopted in the medical sector due to 'conflict of interest' issues, particularly with respect to the vested interests of powerful pharmaceutical companies. For the Consensus Conference organised by Fnars, however, the organising committee was chaired by Fnars' President, and one of the Consensus Conference organisers said that some commentators had therefore criticised Fnars as being both judge

and jury within the process. However, the Fnars President pointed out that ANAES itself had departed from this rule on many occasions. She also argued that for the Consensus Conference to work, the organising committee chair must play an energising role and can only do so if he / she wants the conference to succeed. Another potential area of criticism was that representatives of the State were on the organising committee of the Fnars conference. While the concerns about a conflict of interest may be particularly acute in the medical sector because of the economic power of the pharmaceutical industries, the question still bears asking in welfare and homelessness sectors: *could and did the State, as the conference funder (and ultimately the funder of new interventions and services), take a neutral position?*

The Fnars Consensus Conference is also open to more general criticism. This methodology is intended to produce joint expertise and to put debates on 'non-consensual' issues into the public domain. The panellists are therefore supposed to be non-specialists; average citizens who are representative of society. The Fnars Consensus Conference panel of eminent figures did not fulfil these criteria as all members were directly or indirectly engaged with homelessness. Moreover, the trade unionist member of the panel reported that no real clash of ideas took place between the panel members because they were all coming from more or less the same position. Thus, unlike consensus conferences where members of the public are asked to forge a consensus starting from different and conflicting, expert opinions, the panel here did not appear to be starting from a 'blank sheet', but rather from positions of experience and authority and in the context of what seemed to be a pre-existing consensus on the key issues.

In this trade unionist's view at least, the process itself was highly directed and even biased. At the public hearing, "the room was packed with all the right-on left", so had the conference been more pluralist, in particular in terms of political representation (more right-wing politicians, for example), she feels that the Government might have done more to drive the panel's recommendations, but "the fact of it being a 'family gathering'" ultimately worked against the overall approach and the use of the panel's conclusions because "there should have been more of a clash of ideas." The various conference participants were well-acquainted and accustomed to meeting one another, so they formed a (superficially) quite homogeneous and cosy group. It seems then, that the Consensus Conference temporarily quelled the feuding between agencies which managed to form a common front to deal with the crisis, but at the same time this lack of debate may not have been helpful with respect to the purpose of the Consensus Conference (Dyb & Loison, 2007).

Finally, it should also be noted that Fnars managed to set up this conference within just six months, even though ANAES (1999) recommends starting the organisational groundwork nine to twelve months ahead of the public hearing. So, while Fnars

might be congratulated on its ability to prepare the conference in such a short time, questions also arise about the problems that this generated. It may well be that some views went unheard, or that the selection of the organising committee or panel members was skewed by this foreshortened timeline.

### ***And afterwards?***

In December 2007, the EDDQ decided to pitch new tents in Paris, arguing that even with the passing of the Enforceable Right to Housing Act and the organisation of the Consensus Conference, the public authorities had still not resolved the problem of homeless people. The police put a stop to the attempted encampment on the banks of the River Seine near to Notre-Dame cathedral. This new furore prompted the Prime Minister to take charge of the affair personally and he invited key homelessness service providers to visit the Matignon (the Prime Minister's official residence). In a change from usual practice, the voluntary organisations did not turn up in disarray, but united around the thirty-seven proposals of the Enforceable Right to Housing Act Implementation Assessment Committee (whose report was handed in to the President of the Republic in October 2007) and the Consensus Conference panel's recommendations. The Prime Minister tasked Etienne Pinte MP to work with the voluntary agencies and to sign a contract "with more concrete and detailed objectives", working to a "shorter timescale" than that detailed in these previous two documents.

The voluntary agencies then worked together over three weeks to draw up thirteen 'immediate pledges': these twenty-six associations and national federations concerned with homelessness:

"demanded that the Government immediately implement a new public policy on housing that delivers the performance requirements on housing and temporary accommodation confirmed by the Enforceable Right to Housing Act of 5 March 2007. The guidelines for such a policy are set out in two key documents: the first report of the Enforceable Right to Housing implementation assessment committee, and the *Off the streets* Consensus Conference panel report".

At the end of January, the Pinte report was handed to the Prime Minister at a meeting with the voluntary organisations. He pledged to endorse the Pinte report's conclusions and said that €250 million euros would be allocated to implement them in 2008. However, in their press release, the voluntary organisations said that the Prime Minister's proposals were

"... not calculated to deliver radical improvements to the living conditions of people enduring homelessness and housing hardship, nor apt to get more movement going along the entire chain running from temporary accommodation

to housing. The State's failure to do enough to address such a serious problem is untenable".

They argued that the funding announced (€250 million instead of the €1.5 billion called for) was too little to implement the policy measures that they had put to the Prime Minister and which he had endorsed. They issued a 'call to action' for 21<sup>st</sup> February 2008. That day, twenty-eight associations, including EDDQ, Secours Catholique, Fondation Abbé Pierre, Emmaüs, the Salvation Army and ATD Fourth World, held a protest and a mass sleep-out for housing in the Place de la République in Paris. According to the organisers, 15,000 people (1,800 according to police estimates) joined forces to call attention to the housing shortage in France.

On the evening of the protest, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of a homelessness Czar (super prefect) to coordinate implementation of the action plan for homeless people that had been unveiled in January<sup>4</sup>. The following day, the Prime Minister signed a departmental instruction on "the implementation of the priority agenda 2008-2012 for shelter and access to housing for homeless people" based on the conclusions of the Pinte report and setting the prefects six priority areas of work for shelter and access to housing for homeless people. However, no change was made to the €250 million budget allocated to fund the measures for this year.

## Conclusion: A Consensus on Homelessness?

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It can be argued that the work of the voluntary welfare agencies was not politically successful: they managed to extract from the Government only a 'six-point priority agenda' from the thirty-seven proposals made by the Enforceable Right to Housing Implementation Assessment Committee and the Consensus Conference panel recommendations. Notwithstanding the various reports that landed on the Prime Minister's desk and the multiple meetings he had with the voluntary sector agencies within a matter of weeks, the actual outcomes with respect to public policy assistance for homeless people are on the disappointing side.

For the Director of Fnars it is a qualified disappointment: "looking at what has come out of it, you think 'all that just for that'." However, he also argues "... we probably now have to wait a bit longer to be able to gauge the long-term impacts of this initiative. The report was in on the Prime Minister's desk within three weeks and that is no mean feat." The Consensus Conference can be considered a success in that it

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<sup>4</sup> 'Prefects' are the agents of the authority of the State at the level of the département (an administrative division roughly analogous to an English 'county'). S/he is responsible for public order and is a direct representative of the Prime Minister and of every Government Minister, within the département. S/he implements Government development and town and country planning policies on the scale of the département.

gave credibility to the voluntary welfare agencies who managed, for the first time, to come together around shared conclusions and common recommendations. Since the Consensus Conference and the events of January 2008, Fnars and the National Union of Private Social and Health Charitable Organizations (UNIOPSS) have been coordinating a collective effort with more than thirty voluntary welfare agencies to take civic action on homelessness forward, implementing the Consensus Conference report's recommendations to organise area-based approaches to tackling homelessness. The sector has shown itself capable of cohesion and has radically transformed its approach by 'objectifying' its working methods. The Fnars Director believes that the Consensus Conference both benefited from the political climate and media focus on homelessness, as well as helping to bring an alliance into existence. The consensus forged by voluntary welfare agencies around the panel recommendations gave credibility to the work done by Fnars and to homelessness organisations more generally.

The Consensus Conference can therefore be said to have had some impact in France's welfare sector. Arguably, the main interest of the panel's report lies not in its content or approach. The findings and recommendations are not particularly innovative and, as the trade unionist member of the panel points out, there was no new consensus forged. During the preparation phase, in the Consensus Conference organising committee, there was quite a lot of debate and disagreement between the representatives of organisations involved in the fight against homelessness, but as we were working to strict deadlines and were determined to provide a consensus during the public hearing, it might have given the impression that the Conference as a whole was overly consensual. The Conference's contribution lies in a combination of three factors: the innovative nature of the tool used to enable consensus; the conference promoter, Fnars, and its ability to secure the involvement of a wide range of relevant organisations; and the sustained engagement of the French media and political classes. It helped to forge at least temporary unity around the problems of homeless people. During the different events at which I was present, the voluntary agencies were undoubtedly singing more or less the same tune on the Pinte report proposals and on the reports of both the Consensus Conference panel and the Enforceable Right to Housing implementation assessment committee. The media picked up on this change of attitude:

“Since the attempt to set up camp on Paris' Ile de la Cité in December, the voluntary welfare agencies have stood four-square. Received in a first meeting at the PM's residence at the end of December, they have kept up the pressure for the Government to engage a pro-active policy to address the issue of people enduring homelessness and housing hardship.” (Libération, 30 January 2008).



Does this really spell the end of 'in-fighting' between voluntary agencies? The next few months will tell, but the broader point is that these mixed results of the Consensus Conference in France can, to some extent, be explained by the specifics of the French context. Paradoxically, this context inspired the organisation of the Conference in the first place, but the very same context and associated events created a sort of political 'drag' which prevented the level of debate from improving significantly. Nevertheless, I am of the view that the methodology of the Consensus Conference is a promising means to improve political and policy debate in this field. By clarifying knowledge on homelessness, focusing the debate on homelessness issues which are likely to attract media interest and drawing up a list of recommendations that could attract general consent, a Consensus Conference could produce a real impact and provide real benefits.

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