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# A Service Provider's Perspective on Research on Homelessness

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## Introduction

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Homelessness is a particular state of deprivation where having to cope with a disconnected here-and-now often makes it hard to contemplate the future. We study homelessness because of the complex realities that give rise to it and because it is considered unacceptable that the right to adequate housing is not met. This is also why homelessness galvanises various stakeholders engaged in the promotion of social cohesion. These stakeholders work in their specific spheres but are linked together, despite an occasional clash of agendas, out of a shared responsibility to improve the quality of social and political responses to an issue that touches individual poverty and the ability of organized societies to deal with it. As researchers and practitioners, we do not speak for those affected by homelessness and inadequate housing, yet we are witnesses to our time in this particular sphere. It is in that spirit that I have sketched out these few remarks for this look back over 20 years of the Observatory.

FEANTSA has a large and varied membership, so while I cannot lay any claim to reflect a consensus view, everyone should be able to find some small area of common concerns, be it arising out of what the research tells us or from what we want the researchers to tell us.

The work we do in our different organisations falls within various areas of expertise ranging from initial contact and support to accommodation and housing, with in between a whole range of initiatives that will get named only when they have gone beyond the experimental. What we do is largely dependent on the commitment of public authorities and the means they give – or do not give – us to act. It also depends on galvanising public opinion that gives or takes away from our work some or all of its legitimacy. What we do is also shaped by the inventiveness of the voluntary community, which is constantly challenged by the problems in the lives of the men and women with, for and alongside whom we work.

The daily round may create a feeling of losing control; the problems and difficulties faced by the most vulnerable of our fellows demand complex, individualized responses that need to be developed within, and sometimes outside of, established frameworks. Yet, these responses are not just about the personal approach; they are set within local or national circumstances, are subject to and partake of processes that are themselves triggered by the effects of policy choices and the crises besetting our societies.

That is why research is needed. A reading of the different contributions collected here clearly shows the link that exists between us. It also shows the limits that circumscribe our knowledge today, which must be transcended tomorrow. It prompts a better formulation of the questions brought to light by our accumulated perceptions and understandings.

And finally, we need research to go beyond the boundaries that may be imposed on us by what we do. Circumstances conspire to create off-limits areas that academic study helps to lay bare, and that is something we need.

Two decades on, a broad account can be given of what we know with the confidence that what we are talking about is knowledge in the making. The scientific approach to a changing and forever evolving reality demands humility and tenacity in equal measure. The risk is ever-present of being disproved by an unexpected change, a historical momentum, political transition or just an isolated event with far-reaching ramifications. At the same time, research maps out what the future has in store; it is talking today about and for tomorrow.

Having established what diversity the Observatory's research and work enshrines through the accumulated insights, the legitimacy of the approach cannot go unmentioned and must perhaps even be brought centre stage: while housing and accommodation still remain on the fringes of EU responsibility, the Observatory's work shows the need for some form of common approach which not only does not disregard local practicalities and features but actually looks at how they fit together in the common social space.

The history of the Observatory is also our collective history of interaction through the sharing of knowledge, action and scrutiny of the effectiveness or otherwise of policies. As I see it, a few important things spring to mind in three areas: one is the gains from strengthening the common approach; another is the insights given into issues that still require further study; and finally, the future prospects opened up by the work done.

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## The Gains from Strengthening the Common Approach

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The first chapter of this book discusses the process of definition, highlighting how essential it is to talk about the same realities in the same terms, so we can advance both knowledge and the capability to act. This is in fact a key issue of consistency. In our pluralist Europe, which has also changed radically in recent decades and is still doing so, the variety of situations as well as the approaches and resources allocated to knowledge are unavoidable facts that shape an initial brief for research. As has been said before, research has to face the issue of shared interpretation before it can begin to generate shared knowledge. Differing expectations always make it difficult to go forward with a quantified approach that everyone can live with. The public authorities may want to reduce the scale of the problem while at the same time playing up the measurable outcomes. Activists may be tempted to exaggerate problems. Developing a quantified approach is especially difficult if there is no prior agreement regarding the subject-matter we are seeking to investigate.

The first thing therefore was to define a subject-matter of research that is relevant in today's Europe. Homelessness, inadequate housing, exclusion from and by housing – who is affected? What situations are we talking about? The creation of a common definition was a crucial step forward. ETHOS (as outlined in the first chapter of this book) is now recognized and used by many actors and institutions. At informal meetings of housing ministers that I have had an opportunity to attend and also Commission and Council of Europe body meetings, it acts as the – if not shared, at least shareable – standard.

The premise had to be that having a home – whether self-contained accommodation or a chosen place to live – met three cumulative criteria: a physical space that meets identified needs, a social space, and a space enjoying security under the law. The definition of the criteria for a home was necessary to categorise housing as inadequate as inadequate housing is defined by a variance between actual living conditions and these criteria. The ETHOS typology ranging from homelessness and rough sleeping to forms of temporary or insecure accommodation is therefore based on a definition of adequate housing from which the definition of the various forms of inadequate housing stem. It falls to field workers to make use of this work, which is the product of research and can be turned directly into action. Knowledge is universally recognized as the crucial basis for initiating action.

There is a difference of views on how temporary a state homelessness is, as well as who is at risk of homelessness and who is inadequately housed. These differences will determine how much focus is put on certain categories experiencing particular issues (abused women, refugees, etc.). After difficulties caused by the conceptual approach between rooflessness and inadequate housing, the discussions at the December 2010 consensus conference settled on the idea of describing

both rooflessness and inadequate housing by the term “homelessness” since the concept of “home” enshrines the ideas of privacy, security, and hence one’s relation to others and the social environment.

That is a major contribution the research has made. It now enables a unified approach, and increases the prospects for sharing knowledge and mapping out common lines of work both locally and between EU countries and EU institutions. In so doing, it opens up prospects for prevention (including identifying the causes of housing exclusion), reducing the burden of homelessness and the toll it takes on individuals. Finally, it enables the essential move into housing to be accounted for and measured.

A second major advance lies in the legal approach to the housing issue. By linking housing rights with the right to housing, research has promoted and accelerated new insights and put a focus on the link between human rights and the right to housing. This issue is discussed in detail in the chapter by Fitzpatrick and Watts. The historical comparative study of changes between often culturally distinct legal systems has provided the widely differing European approaches with the basis to construct a coherent approach to link the human right to have a home and the substantive right to the guaranteed exercise of that right. In this way, the research has given substance to something often instinctively felt in daily individual and concerted action.

The context of international law and a number of national laws has moved on. We are now able to use tools that allow us to try and enforce human rights that have become justiciable against states and public authorities for the implementation of social policies, because we have gone from non-binding provisions of international law to Article 31 of the 1996 Revised Social Charter, which introduced the collective complaints mechanism. Developments in case law around the European Court of Human Rights have also enabled us to refer to and draw on European law in local actions where fundamental rights are at stake.

FEANTSA’s commitment to collective complaints is evidence of this development in our relationship to the law. The use of “legal rights” is a full part of the fight against housing exclusion, and was to be instrumental in clarifying the terms of the debate between “beneficiaries” and “entitlees” in social protection mechanisms. Much still remains to be done, but the work started offers the means for it. The creation and commitment of the Expert Group on Housing Rights was behind the compiling of a database and the setting-up of the Housing Rights Watch – a European network of voluntary agencies, lawyers and academics that ensures the continuity of efforts. The relationship between research and local and international fieldwork is another practical and effective development we can be proud of. Here again, interaction cannot do without commitment by front-line workers who may need to re-appraise positions which fail to give full weight to commitments legally provided for.

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## Insights into Issues Requiring Further Study

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Evidence of a strong interaction between social protection systems, housing policies and the labour market has gradually emerged from findings of the decisive impacts such structures and policies have on housing exclusion. Research findings have also pointed to changes needed in different countries. This theme is explored in the chapters on welfare states and homelessness and on housing and homelessness. “Housing first” is now an approach found in most national strategies, as outlined in the chapter on homeless strategies and innovations, but expressed in different ways. These differences, not to say divergences, are also found among the stakeholders in the fight against housing exclusion.

This commonality is interesting in that it fosters local debate and forces a rethinking of the forms of intervention. The second chapter of this book evaluates the development of services for homeless people across Europe. Research holds a significant place in the process of big change under way. Its primary task is to provide information regarding the diversity of approaches and clarify the issues through evaluations: the differences in approach do not just reflect specific strategies, but are also the outward sign of housing policies and social policies that stem from particular understandings in each country of the reality of homelessness and inadequate housing.

### ***“Research on national strategies has shown the similarities and differences. Is “housing first” a meaningful policy or just a buzzword?”***

The “housing first” approach can also prompt serious concerns among front-line actors because of the growing influence it has on policy frameworks in contexts affected by the economic crisis and the swingeing measures taken by States. The broad statements of principle that accompany its implementation come up against market-dominated realities and sometimes the questioning of what have become traditional and secure practices especially in service provision. The model’s relevance emerges only out of a discussion on what is understood by the homelessness experience, and in particular it compels clarification of the link between individual vulnerabilities and the failings of the welfare system. The final thing to come out of this discussion is the very big challenge presented by service coordination and the interplay between stakeholders, which is necessary to make policies against housing exclusion work. The explanatory example shows that this is not just wishful thinking, but a necessity in which everyone’s place is yet to be made clear.

## **Future Prospects Opened up by the Work Done: Changing Contexts**

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A reading of the different chapters that report on how the research has moved on affords interesting insights into the challenges ahead, and a crosscutting view of the complexity, diversity but also the similarities of the European reality. The research validates our efforts to stay connected with one another and highlights that although we may fear we are alone in facing obstacles which are difficult to overcome we can find direction and guidance from the work of others. We need these assessments and findings that sustain and play into our commitments. Furthermore, research showing how the housing sector is being eroded (through state withdrawal from the direct production of mass accessible housing and the resulting decline in the social housing stock at a time of commodification of production) prompts an urgent rethinking of the role of states and the role that the EU should exercise in housing policy.

### ***Poverty***

The link between homelessness and poverty has become clearer from the analyses done in recent years, not least through looking at the structural dimension as opposed to the individual approach, but with other considerations factored in. Analysing poverty as a process enables a link to be made between homelessness and a set of factors that create different forms of poverty. It is a position that involves developing research around the slow deterioration in social welfare provision designed to deliver prevention and support, which on the grounds of rationalizing expenditure is producing growing insecurity, and contributing to a progressively growing vulnerability to poverty.

This reflection on the permanency or otherwise of conditions of poverty and especially the multiple nature of poverty, which cannot be seen either as a permanent condition or as a single reality, chimes with the concerns of the European institutions (Parliament, Commission and Council). It comes at a particular time – that of a global economic crisis which has challenged the methods of intervention.

The Observatory has to some extent already paved the way, not least through the specific studies done over the years around the exclusion of women and young people. In the chapter on women's issues, the most important message is that on the link between women's homelessness and poverty. This finding shows the practical importance of the financial side of support for finding and staying in housing.

The research reveals the complexity of young people's relation to housing through a variety of approaches on all levels of the issue (see the chapter on youth homelessness in this volume). It also points up the importance of structural factors (globalization and State withdrawal from provision), which paradoxically throw responsibility back on the individual. Young people are forced to become more proactive and have to fight to make the right to housing exercisable. Hence, the proposed review and assessment of how institutions work in terms of prevention of homelessness and care of young people, and in promoting measures targeted at young people's needs. These measures also need to factor in the poverty of young people who are also on the margins of social protection provision.

One key perception to emerge from the poverty-focused approach is that poverty is not just about having no objective means or resources, like a job or housing, but also the inability to use the resources that are available: chronic poverty is about being mired in this situation, i.e., the erosion of the ability to make use of available resources. The "poverty" approach significantly informs the debate, not least through opening it up to other analytical tools specific to research on this matter. It also prompts a reconsideration of the means used to achieve participation by those most immediately affected.

### ***Migrants***

The "housing first" concept, which is prominent in all national strategies, has helped identify the needs for future research into immigration and the impact of the financial crisis – both issues that go beyond national settings. The persistent and visible presence of migrants among those excluded from housing is an issue that must be addressed head-on at a time when the "housing first" principle forms part of most national strategies. This issue is explored in detail in the chapter on immigration and homelessness, and also in the chapter on welfare states and homelessness. There is a direct link between this issue and the exercise of fundamental rights. There is a strong inclination to limit the benefit of social protection, including in emergency situations, to nationals and foreigners whose paperwork is in order. In this context, migration is a thorny issue to address. It is set in a framework already discussed – that of the debate between "beneficiaries" and "entitlees", topped off by the daunting issue of whether it is fair to benefit from rights for which no direct contribution has been made. To this must be added the instability that typifies the situation of immigrants, who may move in and out of regular and irregular status multiple times. States have introduced various forms of increasingly temporary status, as is reflected in the Spanish and Italian regularisation procedures which require a permanent job, or the temporary permits in France, and the subsidiary "mini-asylum" protection status in Germany.

Where EU nationals are concerned, the research has yet to look at harmonization and assessment of the right of establishment relative to freedom of establishment as it can be understood since European citizenship was established (Maastricht 1992). The question migrants' raise is that of the limits to human rights and social rights, even though the issue transcends nation state borders. The consequences of migration flows between Central/Eastern and Northern/Western European countries still need to be measured. The fragile link with employment, and social marginalization, are fraught with consequences for the provision of decent housing and accommodation. Migrant women now make up an identifiable category of homelessness groups. Then, too, consideration needs to be given to what has become known as the European dimension of migration. This is an issue that will be addressed in the proposed treatment at national and European level.

It is quite devastating to note that the observations made in 2004 in *"Immigration and Homelessness in Europe"* (Bill Edgar, Joe Doherty and Henk Meert) are still valid today:

*"Legislation designed to block and control in-migration contributes to a social environment in which immigration is defined as a problem, and contributes to the widely-held conviction that immigration is to be resisted, curtailed and avoided – defined as a problem in legislation, immigrants become a problem in the real world of housing estates and job markets... "discrimination and outright violence against foreigners are encouraged by the language of illegality" (Le Voy et al. 2003, p.14)"* (Edgar et al. 2004: 43).

The debate may have shifted towards the search for scapegoats – as witness the French and Italian policies on the Eastern European Roma in summer 2010, although the EU is trying to bring its commitments to tackling discrimination into play – but the issue remains a live one that is gaining some momentum in the current context.

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## Conclusion

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Rereading the major work done over the last twenty years, I have come to realise that we have made a much longer and more complete journey together than I had thought. Researchers and practitioners do not necessarily use the same vocabulary, but a sort of interplay can be seen between the positions that reflect what each can really deliver.

There is something comforting in this conclusion and in the realization that a battle is being fought with a range of means towards the same end. Research also reflects the progress made by appropriate practices. It should enable us in future to consider which way policies need to go, and to support them in a way that the public authorities we work with every day can understand. The major changes that have taken place in housing and the issues around “well-being” explored in the studies and evaluations of actions and systems loom large in our concerns. Research allows us to take a more complex approach to economic or institutional factors, which the diverse mix of “homeless” people militates against addressing in general terms. But the chaotic aspects of the current situation suggest that what is needed is a solid look at the inequalities and structural barriers that dominate progress in social inclusion.

Access to social and public housing is for many the only way to avoid or exit homelessness. But we also know that the fight against exclusion requires a different approach to the market, which is the main source of inequality between the wealthy and the poor. Granted that not everything can be legislated for, the fact remains that new forms of intervention need to come about based on sound national strategic commitments to “housing for all”. Instruments for social control of the housing market need to be devised and promoted. Having observed and studied the different social welfare schemes and therefore stressed the new role of States in the sphere of homelessness, we must take our thinking forward on the crucial commitment of Europe and the forms it should take. I should like to conclude on that note. The aim here has not been to revisit everything we have done over the past 20 years, but simply to offer up a few thoughts for an anniversary, which is also a tribute to those who have made it possible.