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# How to Use the Open Method of Coordination to Deliver Policy Progress at European Level : The Example of Homelessness

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## Introduction

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The Open Method of Coordination (OMC)<sup>1</sup> allows the European Union (EU) to develop policies in areas where it has no competence to legislate. In 2000 the EU decided to use the OMC to advance policies in the area of social inclusion. Since 2000 the EU has developed a range of instruments to make the Inclusion OMC work effectively. The national action plans (NAPs) – renamed national strategy reports in 2006 – are the central and most visible instrument of the Inclusion OMC. Member states are expected to draft NAPs around commonly agreed EU objectives on a regular basis (initially every two years and currently every three years). It is the role of the European Commission, the executive branch of the EU, to analyse the policy progress of member states on the basis of a common set of social inclusion indicators. The analysis of the NAPs and the policy progress of member states towards the common objectives are then translated into policy conclusions and recommendations, which are published in the annual EU joint report. This report is adopted every year by the Spring Council, which is an annual gathering of the heads of government or state of each EU member state and is devoted to social and economic questions.

In 2006 the thematic scope of the Inclusion OMC was broadened to include health, long-term care and pensions, and the common objectives were substantially revised and simplified. But the process in itself remained largely unchanged.

Most academic research on the Inclusion OMC has focused on the impact of the visible policy process described above (e.g. Zeitlin and Pochet, 2005), but the Inclusion OMC goes beyond this visible process. It has created dynamics which

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see the Inclusion OMC pages of the European Commission website: [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/spsi/the\\_process\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/the_process_en.htm).

are only related in a superficial way to the NAPs process, and which originate from activities that the European Commission funded under the Community Action Programme Social Inclusion (2001–2006) and its successor, PROGRESS (2007–2013). Most of these funded activities are aimed at strengthening the visible parts of the OMC by raising awareness of and increasing participation in the NAPs process. But there has always been some limited flexibility around using the funding to develop activities that can exploit the potential of the OMC beyond the NAPs.

Under these funding programmes, several European NGOs have received core funding. At the start of the Inclusion OMC, five NGOs were funded, and at present around ten receive funding. Some NGOs, such as the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), concentrate heavily on the NAPs process; while others, such as FEANTSA, have developed a more independent course of action over the years, and concentrate on the NAPs process only in as far as it can help advance the cause they are working on.

This paper focuses on homelessness in the Inclusion OMC and seeks to trace how homelessness became part of the EU agenda, and indeed became a priority issue, and the role FEANTSA played in this process. It will also look at the less visible elements of the OMC and conclude with suggestions on how to develop the OMC to exploit fully its potential impact on the fight against homelessness. This paper is written as a think piece. It seeks to provoke and raise debate, and should be read in that context.

## **The History: Getting Homelessness on the EU Agenda**

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It was during the Portuguese Presidency in the first half of 2000 that the EU decided to use the OMC to have a more visible impact on the reduction of poverty. The EU set itself ambitious goals and expectations ran high. In a short time the EU reached an agreement on common objectives (commonly referred to as the Nice objectives) and on a set of inclusion indicators that would measure progress in the member states. The NAPs process was thus launched, with the first NAPs covering the period from 2001 to 2003.

### ***Common objectives, NAPs, and indicators: a weak basis for action on homelessness***

The common objectives, adopted by the Nice Council in 2000, were ambitious and precise enough to be relevant for the fight against homelessness, and they included two clear references to this issue. One of the overarching objectives was to ensure access to resources, rights, goods and services for all, and within the ambit of this the EU agreed to guarantee access to decent and sanitary housing. A second

overarching objective was to reduce the risk of exclusion, as part of which the EU agreed to put in place policies to prevent life crises such as homelessness. While homelessness was not amongst the issues considered most important, the common objectives provided a sufficiently strong basis for EU intervention.

The EU has not yet been able to agree on a common indicator related to homelessness. The list of common indicators covers complex areas such as health, employment and education, but not homelessness. The EU recognised from the beginning the importance of having indicators on homelessness and housing exclusion, but reaching an agreement turned out to be more difficult than expected. It was only in 2009 that housing was added to the list of areas covered by the indicators, but a common indicator on homelessness still seems far off.

Member states were expected to integrate the Nice common objectives into their NAPs. In the first round of NAPs (2001–2003) only a few states referred to homelessness as an urgent and important problem. It was not until the third round of NAPs (2006–2008) that homelessness emerged as a priority issue for many member states. It is quite interesting to note that the focus on homelessness grew stronger after the EU's decision to revise the common objectives making them much more general and taking away all direct references to homelessness and other forms of severe exclusion. It was as if member states wanted to compensate for the lack of focus in the revised common objectives by increasing their thematic focus in the NAPs.

Nonetheless, homelessness remained only one of a large number of priorities in the NAPs and was not really pushed on the EU agenda by the Social Protection Committee (the intergovernmental body representing the interests of the different member states in the Inclusion OMC). The NAPs have until now remained under-exploited as a basis for ambitious EU action on homelessness.

The reasons for homelessness remaining a weak element of the visible part of the OMC are very much related to its institutional set-up. The Social Protection Committee (SPC), together with the European Commission, is the most important actor driving the NAPs process. The SPC consists of government representatives, who are usually from the national ministries of social affairs and/or employment, few of which have the issue of homelessness amongst their responsibilities. In most EU member states it is the ministry of housing or health that leads on the issue of homelessness, and in some countries homeless policies have been decentralised to the regional level (Spain, Belgium, Austria) or to the local level (especially in Eastern Europe). It is therefore very difficult to find natural interest and support for an issue such as homelessness in the SPC, despite two of the common objectives being directly related to homelessness. This is less of a problem for issues such as child poverty, which relates more easily to the direct competences and natural interests of SPC members.

Furthermore, an increasing number of SPC members are delegates from the international affairs department of their ministry, which further impacts on the lack of thematic leadership in the SPC. These members usually have a thorough knowledge of EU processes but are not necessarily well placed to push for particular themes such as homelessness because of lack of relevant knowledge. It is clear that the composition of the SPC is not in line with the ambitions of the Inclusion OMC, as it covers areas which largely fall outside the responsibilities of the government delegates involved. The SPC has thus become a rather weak body, which is not really able to take up the role of leader of the Inclusion OMC.

The power gap resulting from the lack of SPC leadership has been filled by the European Commission, though this role has remained largely overlooked by academic researchers examining governance of the OMC, which is striking as the Commission is probably the single most important player in the OMC. Initiatives seem to come almost exclusively from the Commission; and most of those suggested by the Commission get almost automatic support from SPC members. Strong leadership is indeed necessary to make the OMC work and the Commission is probably best placed to take up this role. However, a significant problem is raised by the lack of thematic expertise in the Commission; the social inclusion unit, which is responsible for the Inclusion OMC, consists of around ten people and is mandated to cover a very wide range of policy areas including employment, housing, health and education.

Responsibility for certain social problems that have been identified as EU priorities, such as child poverty, homelessness and overindebtedness, tends to fall on the shoulders of individual civil servants in the Commission. Progress on a certain issue thus often depends on the individual characteristics of the civil servant in question, including personal interest in the issue, knowledge and understanding of the issue, the career perspectives a focus on a particular issue might bring, and relations with his or her hierarchy.

Because of the lack of resources and expertise on most specific social problems there is a tendency in the Commission to select 'easy' issues to work on. These issues are often related to the OMC process rather than its content. It is no coincidence that much attention has been given in the OMC to issues such as stakeholder participation, with a special focus on the participation of people living in poverty, and on awareness raising to promote the involvement of stakeholders. These are relatively consensual issues that require little expertise and that can be easily translated into concrete actions. For some European NGOs with similar difficulties accessing expertise on specific social problems, a focus on stakeholder participation and awareness raising helped strengthen their role in the Inclusion OMC. As a

result the OMC has been much more process driven than content driven. This lack of content has the effect of driving away stakeholders who could have an impact on actual policy development for certain social problems.

It must be noted that the Commission tried to compensate for the lack of expertise on some of the priority issues of the Inclusion OMC by setting up its own scientific network with experts from all EU member states. However, this network also concentrates heavily on the NAPs as the main tool of the Inclusion OMC and does little to increase expertise on current and future priority issues.

The continuation of the NAPs process is increasingly at the centre of discussions on the future of the OMC after 2010. In several member states the drafting of the NAPs has become a bureaucratic process with too little policy relevance. Although it is true that the NAPs process has played an important role in setting the anti-poverty agenda in some member states, it is important for the Commission to move beyond agenda setting and really drive policy progress on certain issues. If not, there is a risk that member states and other key stakeholders will lose interest in the Inclusion OMC.

### ***Mutual learning : an interesting but shallow basis for progress on homelessness***

Some years after the launch of the Inclusion OMC the Commission realised that it needed to strengthen the focus on content in order to maintain the interest of stakeholders. It became clear quite quickly that the NAPs were too vague and diverse for use as a tool of transnational policy learning and benchmarking. For this reason the Commission increased the commissioning of thematic studies and began thematic peer reviews. These reviews were particularly aimed at compensating for the lack of detail in the NAPs and at answering a growing demand from member states for concrete policy learning.

To date, four peer reviews on homelessness have taken place, the first of which focused on the English Rough Sleepers Strategy. The second examined a controversial Danish policy initiative, 'Alternative housing for alternative life styles', which provided very basic accommodation for extremely marginalised homeless adults. Norway hosted the third peer review on the recently launched Norwegian homeless strategy ; and the fourth peer review took place in Austria in 2009 and concentrated on data collection on homelessness.

All reviews were interesting but did not get the expected reaction or follow-up, one of the main reasons being that the selection of issues for the reviews seemed to happen without a clear plan on how to advance the fight against homelessness in the Inclusion OMC. The reviews remained small, isolated seminars, and the results could not be easily brought together to stimulate follow-up actions amongst key

stakeholders. The selection of peer countries and of the participants in the reviews could also have been more strategic. Some of the people attending the seminars had no or little connection to homelessness. The fact that the SPC plays an important role in the design of the peer review process possibly contributed to the lack of strategic focus.

The Commission also tried to strengthen the content of the Inclusion OMC through supporting transnational projects. Initially several dozen small projects received funding, but for reasons of manageability and concern about the actual impact of small projects, the Commission began funding a smaller number of large projects. Many of these concentrated on evaluating the NAPs, but some aimed at deepening the understanding of certain social problems. A handful of projects focused on homelessness; to a certain extent they contributed to a better understanding of homelessness and reached out to a wider group of stakeholders interested in European cooperation on homelessness, but they had little impact on actual policy progress at EU level or in the different member states. The lack of strategic intervention by the Commission is striking; there was no attempt to cluster the projects and peer reviews in order to create an EU stream of action on homelessness.

Financing studies was a third instrument that the Commission used to deepen knowledge on social exclusion and to build a European body of expertise to drive the Inclusion OMC. About twenty studies were financed by the Commission, including two studies related to homelessness: one on access to housing for migrants and a second on the measurement of homelessness. It seems that strategic considerations were important in the selection of the studies. This is certainly the case for the study on the measurement of homelessness, which contributed substantially to concrete progress on homelessness under the Inclusion OMC.

Most research on homelessness at EU level has been carried out by FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness as part of the organisation's annual work plans which are funded by the Commission.<sup>2</sup> Generating knowledge on homelessness has always been an important priority for FEANTSA, which in the early 1990s created its own research network. The Commission, however, has not really shown great interest in the research work of the Observatory, and only recently started using research findings to advance the homelessness cause at the EU level.

Homelessness was and remains one of the many issues covered by the mutual learning programmes and activities of the Inclusion OMC, but the focus has not been strong enough, or strategic enough, to create a European dynamic on the issue of homelessness.

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<sup>2</sup> For access to Observatory publications, please visit the research pages of FEANTSA's website: [www.feantsaresearch.org/code/en/hp.asp](http://www.feantsaresearch.org/code/en/hp.asp).

***Relations between the Commission and FEANTSA:  
an unstable basis for progress on homelessness***

As mentioned above, the Commission is probably the most important driver of the Inclusion OMC, such that good working relations between the Commission and FEANTSA are essential to moving homelessness up the EU agenda. Homelessness had been an important issue of concern for the Commission since the launch of the Inclusion OMC, and the structural financial support FEANTSA receives from the Commission since 2000 is proof of this. But there has always been some reluctance in the Commission to go beyond the funding of FEANTSA and to really push homelessness as a distinct policy issue on the EU inclusion agenda.

The Commission, and to some extent also the SPC, has never been very enthusiastic about targeted EU action on a limited number of specific social issues under the Inclusion OMC. This scepticism has been even more pronounced with regard to issues of extreme forms of poverty. The fear that a focus on very marginal issues, such as homelessness, could marginalise social policy ambitions for the EU was and still is very present amongst certain key Commission officials and members of the SPC. Some believe that an excessively strong thematic focus on extreme poverty would drive the attention of member states away from the protection and strengthening of the European social model, and pave the way for an even stronger, free-market-driven, European integration process. Therefore they want the primary objective of the Inclusion OMC to be the establishment of a strong and ambitious social pillar in the EU structure. This pronounced position on the role of the Inclusion OMC complicated FEANTSA's relations with the Commission and led to disagreement about possible EU interventions on homelessness.

The position of the Commission is predominantly an ideological one, which ignores to some extent the current political reality. It is inspired by the universal approach to poverty and social exclusion that exists in several EU member states, but it is often forgotten that the EU has little competence in the area of social policy and that the OMC is unlikely to be a sufficiently strong policy instrument to develop a role for the EU as a real social policy actor. In the EU of twenty-seven member states there is little hope that its power in the area of social policy will substantially increase in the near future.

FEANTSA has always called for the Inclusion OMC to have a more realistic and pragmatic approach that is focused on specific themes where progress is possible in the present difficult political context, and with strategic mutual learning between member states and other stakeholders as its primary objective. There is a real risk that the dream of building a strong social Europe through the Inclusion OMC prevents EU policy makers from seizing opportunities where the OMC can be used to have more immediate impact on policy progress in certain areas.

The demand for more targeted action on homelessness has been an issue of dispute between FEANTSA and the Commission since the launch of the Inclusion OMC in 2000. Targeted action is not only potentially beneficial for the Inclusion OMC, it is also important to guarantee the added value of a network such as FEANTSA to its members and to the Commission as its main source of funding.

The members of FEANTSA are involved in European cooperation because they look for inspiration and support to strengthen the fight against homelessness in their respective countries. Therefore access to knowledge and expertise from other countries and the creation of a favourable EU policy context are important priorities. It was FEANTSA's hope to achieve these objectives within the visible NAPs process, but it turned out that progress was easier through pursuing a more independent course of action concentrated on the other tools of the Inclusion OMC, such as peer reviews, studies and key events.

As argued above, the NAPs became quite quickly a bureaucratic exercise for a growing number of member states, and few plans had any real strategic value for domestic policy development on the issue of homelessness. For a significant portion of FEANTSA's membership it therefore made little sense to invest time and energy in the NAPs, as they had little or no bearing on the problem of homelessness.

At the start of the NAPs process FEANTSA counted on the support of the Commission and the SPC to develop a strong stream of action on homelessness within the NAPs. This did not work, probably due to the governance problems described above, and a few years into the Inclusion OMC FEANTSA found itself in a difficult situation. The Commission, supported by the SPC, wanted to strengthen the process underpinning the NAPs by increasing the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including the general public, and by investing in public awareness-raising activities. The thematic focus of the NAPs process therefore had to be as wide as possible. FEANTSA, on the other hand, wanted to strengthen the thematic focus on key issues such as homelessness to make the NAPs process more valuable to its members and other stakeholders involved in the fight against homelessness and to obtain concrete policy outcomes. The Commission counted on FEANTSA and other European NGOs to help strengthen and promote the OMC process. FEANTSA, as an EU-funded NGO, was expected to concentrate on the development, implementation and evaluation of the NAPs, rather than on the development of a homelessness agenda for the EU, independent of the successes or failures of the NAPs process. This split attention between a stronger NAPs process and a more solid focus on homelessness has framed FEANTSA's work plans for several years and led to a specific strategy for the promotion of stronger EU intervention on the issue of homelessness.



For the EU to take a more proactive approach it was necessary for homelessness to appear as an important issue of concern in the NAPs. FEANTSA invested a lot of time and energy in making sure that there was sufficient reference to homelessness in the NAPs, which it then pointed to as a clear mandate from member states for the Commission to develop a more strategic EU intervention on homelessness, independently of the NAPs. In spite of the governance weaknesses inherent in the Inclusion OMC, FEANTSA was able to make progress during the different rounds of NAPs and homelessness appeared gradually as an important issue of concern for most EU member states. In the 2005 joint report, homelessness appeared for the first time as a key priority for some member states, and in the 2009 joint report the EU calls for sustained efforts to combat homelessness.

### ***Involving other actors: a wider basis to make progress on homelessness***

FEANTSA realised that it was important to include other actors in its efforts to develop an EU stream of action on homelessness under the Inclusion OMC. FEANTSA was viewed as the sole source of demands for an increased focus on homelessness and the demands were losing strength as a result. In 2006 FEANTSA reached out to other stakeholders outside the voluntary homelessness sector in order to build a broader alliance calling for stronger European cooperation on the issue of homelessness, and the European Forum to Combat Homelessness was set up. The forum includes public authorities and actors from neighbouring sectors such as health and employment. It not only strengthened lobbying for a stronger EU involvement, but also gave more credibility to the claim that a stronger EU focus on homelessness could deliver policy change.

In 2008 FEANTSA managed to get support from the European Parliament, the only EU body which is directly elected by EU citizens. The Parliament called for an end to street homelessness by 2015 in a Written Declaration, and, probably even more importantly, called upon the European Commission to be more active and ambitious on the issue of homelessness in the Inclusion OMC. The call from the Parliament gave FEANTSA's request for a strong EU intervention on homelessness clear democratic legitimacy.

### ***A focus on data collection: a breakthrough for progress on homelessness***

There was consensus at the start of the Inclusion OMC on the need to have better data on homelessness and housing exclusion as a basis for effective policy intervention. In 2001 the SPC agreed a list of social inclusion indicators, but agreement on indicators specific to homelessness and housing exclusion was not possible at that time. The SPC called, however, for strong efforts to improve the available data on homelessness and housing exclusion, especially at member state level. Following

this call the European Commission asked Eurostat to study possible methods for measuring homelessness, which could then be promoted across the EU and eventually lead to an EU indicator on the number of homeless people.

Eurostat set up a small working group in which FEANTSA, together with representatives of five national statistical institutes, took part. The feasibility study was subcontracted to the French statistical institute INSEE, which was problematic due to INSEE's strong preference for, and extensive experience in, large point-in-time surveys of the homeless population. FEANTSA and some representatives of the national statistical offices preferred the method of continuous data collection through administrative registers or NGO-managed data-recording systems, as this would be cheaper, more effective and provide more useful data. FEANTSA successfully argued for the feasibility study to look at the variety of existing data collection methods in Europe in addition to testing the feasibility of conducting large surveys in the different EU member states.

This led to a clash of opinions between FEANTSA and the Commission, which went beyond the methodological issues to other highly relevant issues for policy progress such as the definition of homelessness, the link between data and effective policy intervention, EU involvement on homelessness and FEANTSA's role therein. The clash probably led to increased interest and willingness amongst certain Commission officials to deepen the work on homelessness under the Inclusion OMC.

INSEE produced an interesting study, but it was clear to the Commission and other stakeholders that a follow-up study was necessary to come to practical conclusions. As Eurostat was not interested in continuing to work on the issue of homelessness, the Commission was obliged to take the lead and the follow-up study was carried out under William Edgar, who was also the lead coordinator of FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness. The study tried to define what kind of data collection and information strategies should underpin effective homeless policies, and the seemingly objective and policy-neutral focus on data collection delivered important and practical conclusions for policy progress. It led to explicit support from the Sub-Group on Indicators of the SPC, and therefore also from the Commission, for a definition of homelessness based on FEANTSA's ETHOS typology. It also resulted in the implicit recognition of the dynamic nature of homeless population profiles, which requires a holistic policy approach where rehabilitation and prevention play important roles. The result of the study was a practical toolkit for building solid information strategies on homelessness.

FEANTSA knew that the study was a key tool that could be used to enhance EU intervention on homelessness, especially having been endorsed by the SPC and the Commission. Together with the scientific coordinators of the study, FEANTSA set up a European transnational exchange project to spread and promote the

results of the study in EU member states, the Mphasis project, which received funding from the Commission. The project helped to broaden the network of stakeholders interested in enhanced European cooperation on homelessness and to increase awareness of the potential added value of such enhanced cooperation.

## **The Future : Moving from Words to Action**

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Increasing attention in the NAPs to the issue of homelessness and the concrete results of the work on data collection led to greater receptiveness to the issue of homelessness in the Commission and amongst certain SPC members. Scepticism did not fully disappear, but there was less resistance to proposals for strategic EU intervention on the issue. Indeed a number of Commission officials saw it as their individual responsibility to push some proposals for concrete action through the heavy EU decision-making process.

In 2008 the SPC decided to make homelessness and housing exclusion the thematic focus of the Inclusion OMC for 2009 on the basis of a Commission proposal. So-called 'Light Years' were introduced in 2007, after the reform of the Inclusion OMC, their purpose being to allow for progress on specific social problems during the years that member states were not drafting their NAPs. The first Light Year focused on child poverty and was the key factor in the EU's renewed ambition to make progress on this issue.

As part of the 2009 Light Year, SPC members drafted reports on the state of homelessness and housing exclusion in their respective countries. These reports provide, for the first time, official, comprehensive information on the issue of homelessness. As state reports they will be publicly available and it goes without saying that they provide a solid and authoritative basis for stronger EU intervention on homelessness in the future. The reports are currently being analysed and conclusions will be integrated into the joint report to be adopted by the Spring Council in 2010. Conclusions need to go beyond the mere recognition of homelessness as a priority issue for the Inclusion OMC and they are expected to include a series of clear commitments for EU action on homelessness in the coming years.

At the time of writing there is, however, already some indication that the Commission and certain members of the SPC wish to downplay the importance of 2009's thematic focus. In 2008 there had been some opposition to having a single focus on homelessness and the SPC decided to enlarge the focus to include the wider issue of housing exclusion. This decision is difficult to understand as it stretches the focus further away from the actual areas of competence of SPC members, but the decision seems to have been prompted by an attempt to avoid targeting issues

at the extreme end of poverty for the reasons explained above. The reports now cover a vast and diverse policy area, which will undoubtedly complicate the process of making concrete recommendations.

In order to ensure that the EU moves away from simple agenda-setting and into concrete action on homelessness, FEANTSA is seeking EU support to extend opportunities for EU intervention to all relevant stakeholders that are not currently involved in the NAPs process in an official capacity. This is important as, regardless of the outcome of the thematic Light Year, the SPC and the Commission will depend on these stakeholders for instigating actual progress. As highlighted previously, the current governance structure of the Inclusion OMC does not allow for policy implementation on specific issues like homelessness.

But aside from the governance structure, it is important to have a common understanding of homelessness at the EU level that is based on solid expertise and knowledge. It is not beyond imagining that it will be impossible to distil a coherent line of EU action on homelessness from the SPC reports (due to the broadened focus they are extremely diverse and even contradictory in places). This might jeopardise future strategic EU action as the Commission is unlikely to take the lead on an issue without a sufficient basis of consensus from member states. That is why FEANTSA has lobbied strongly for a European consensus conference on homelessness to take place in 2010.

The established methodology of consensus conferencing allows for the building of a common basis for policy progress on issues that are somewhat controversial, such as homelessness. The consensus conference includes three important steps. First, the preparation of the conference. Representatives of all relevant stakeholders sit on a preparatory committee that selects a few key questions on which there is no European consensus, and for which a consensus would be required to allow for policy progress. Second, the actual consensus conference. The conference is a sort of public hearing in which a number of experts, selected by the preparatory committee, are heard on the key questions. Finally, the making of a consensus by the jury. The jury consists of charismatic figures who are not involved in the fight against homelessness and who are known and respected for their wise judgments. The jury attends the conference and, on the basis of the intervention of the experts and the discussion at the conference, makes a European consensus. All stakeholders agree before the start of the preparations to use the consensus to be presented by the jury as the basis of a strategic EU intervention on the issue of homelessness (see Loison-Leruste, 2008).

FEANTSA managed to find the necessary support at EU level for the consensus conference. In October 2008 the Round Table on Social Inclusion, the most prominent event of the Inclusion OMC, called for a consensus conference on home-

lessness. In November the Ministers of Housing of the different EU member states concluded that the organisation of a European consensus conference was necessary. The French Presidency in the second half of 2008 also strongly supported the call for a European consensus conference. In January 2009 Commissioner Vladimir Spidla confirmed that the Commission would be involved in the organisation of the consensus conference and agreed to support it politically and financially. It will be the first consensus conference under the OMC.

FEANTSA is hopeful that the Commission and the SPC will relate the conclusions of the thematic Light Year to the expected results of the consensus conference, as this may help to overcome scepticism about ambitious EU intervention on the issue of homelessness.

## **Conclusion: An OMC on Homelessness**

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As described above, the EU context has changed dramatically over the last few years and a new approach on the issue of homelessness is required of the European Commission.

The joint report adopted by the Council in March 2009 clearly identifies homelessness as a priority and calls for sustained efforts to tackle it as one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion. The SPC selected homelessness and housing exclusion as the thematic focus of the OMC in 2009. The European Parliament called for an end to street homelessness by 2015 (in a Written Declaration adopted in April 2008) and also called for more attention to homelessness as an urgent policy issue both at EU and member state level.

The EU Round Table on Social Inclusion in October 2008 called for the EU to be more proactive in addressing homelessness and suggested the organisation of a European consensus conference on homelessness in 2010. The Ministers of Housing of all member states called upon the EU in November 2008 to ensure significant progress on homelessness by means of a clear and sustained focus in the OMC. There is also a growing concern about homelessness within member states and a widespread consensus, at least at the level of the responsible civil servants in the different ministries, that the EU has a role to play in the fight against homelessness. This less visible 'public' demand for EU action on homelessness is often overlooked by the Commission and the SPC. It is clear that the relatively superficial attention paid to homelessness in the NAPs hides the growing interest of relevant public stakeholders for engagement in a European dynamic around the issue of homelessness.

The political momentum to take a big step forward on the issue of homelessness is undoubtedly present at the EU level, but it seems there is still a degree of hesitation within the Commission around converting this momentum into an actual plan. The tendency remains in the Commission, especially in its higher ranks, to anticipate a lack of support by member states' delegates in the SPC for a focus on homelessness, although this seems to be slowly changing.

It is also possible that the Commission has its own reasons for not being entirely supportive and is hiding behind the presumed lack of support from member states to cover another agenda. It is well known that some people in the Commission, supported by certain member states and European NGOs, do not want a focus on homelessness because such a focus is not in line with their social policy ambitions for the EU.

The lack of ambition in the Commission might also be the result of fear and uncertainty about how to steer a focus on homelessness in the OMC. It is true that there is not yet a common understanding of what homelessness is and how to address it most effectively. It is extremely difficult for the Commission to take up the role of promoter and evaluator of homelessness policies when there is no explicit common understanding of certain basic questions, such as what the aims of public policies addressing homelessness are or what progress has been made in the fight against homelessness.

This is why FEANTSA suggested organising a European consensus conference on homelessness. The conference is a much stronger and more strategic instrument than the peer reviews introduced a few years ago to strengthen the OMC. It allows for the effective participation of all stakeholders without losing focus on outcomes, which was sometimes a problem with the participatory processes under the OMC. It also promotes ownership of the results amongst all relevant stakeholders, which has not always been the case with decisions of the Commission and SPC under the Inclusion OMC.

The Commission and the SPC must accept that the NAPs can no longer be the sole basis for policy progress in the Inclusion OMC. During the first phases of the OMC the NAPs allowed for the identification of themes of common interest in different member states, such as child poverty, homelessness and overindebtedness. Prolonging the agenda-setting phase makes little sense; it will blur the focus and complicate the effective management of the OMC. There is an urgent need to move to the implementation phase to show that the OMC can offer more than vague commitments to defending the European social model and can have a real impact on policy development in the different member states.

If this step is not taken, the most relevant stakeholders – those who can bring about progress on social inclusion policies in the member states – will lose interest and cease being involved. In fact, this process has already begun in spite of efforts in previous years to raise awareness about the OMC. We must not be blind to the fact that involvement in the OMC is limited to a relatively small inner circle of stakeholders, several of which depend heavily on the continuation of the OMC in its current format for their survival, and to ensure that they do not lose power.

Progress on specific themes is possible and will help to raise the social profile of the EU. Focusing on specific themes might even be a more effective way to develop the role of the EU as a serious social policy player. To make such an approach work, the Commission and the SPC have to involve the European NGOs that have been funded under PROGRESS as real, strategic partners; they must develop and actively support new tools under the OMC, such as the consensus conference, which are separate to the NAPs, common objectives and common indicators; and they must take on a more ambitious role in the development, implementation and evaluation of social inclusion policies in different member states.

Specific EU strategies around those themes that have been identified as priorities should therefore be developed. These strategies should have clear common objectives and involve the development of clusters of (European) stakeholders and of activities such as studies, peer reviews and data collection around the different themes. Why not strengthen the Inclusion OMC by launching a limited set of thematic OMCs? FEANTSA is certainly ready for an OMC on homelessness.

