

Housing Solutions Platform (2019)

50 Out-of-the-Box Housing Solutions to Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

FEANTSA's publication *50 Out-of-the-Box Housing Solutions* is a set of creative ways to approach the problem of homelessness. Solutions presented here come from various contexts and established traditions through a variety of funding sources and partners. Most projects described in the publication are based on a holistic approach, i.e. do not solve the problem of homelessness without considering other needs or the wider context. Individual needs, such as social, cultural and the need to belong to a community are often taken into account along with broader aspects – ecology, urban development needs, energy sustainability. Many projects work closely with other service organisations, since housing alone is not enough, social assistance and other support is provided as well. Project activities often rely on the input of a multidisciplinary team. Often, in a sense, projects address the problems of loneliness and isolation, with the aim of creation of or integration into the community.

Some are community projects, which are not limited to the aspect of living within the community, but combine life in the community with responding to the needs and use of the existing support system. Some projects use welfare mechanisms that are not entirely developed in Lithuania, which could make it difficult to directly transfer the idea into the Lithuanian context. Like the Home for All Alliance (Denmark) project, in which homeless young people who want to study are accommodated in student dormitories, on the grounds of support available to the students. However, there are projects with mechanisms of operation more easily transferrable to the Lithuanian context, such as the Lazare co-housing project (Belgium). The latter is especially fascinating for the fact that it is about community involvement and is a community-led initiative. Although this aspect fascinates the most, at the same time it sounds like a considerable challenge in the Lithuanian context. There are rather few expressions of communality in our society, therefore such close interactions with one of the most vulnerable groups in society may appear quite unconventional.

Manifestations of communality bring together other projects whose primary goal is not necessarily to build a community. One of the projects that I found innovative and unexpected, but also in a way about community and solidarity, was the BLOCK project (Seattle, USA), where the owners allow the construction of a building and a

stranger to live in their home area (backyard). However, the fact that the project is initiated by architects would also pose a challenge. While these projects leave an impression, it seems that it would be a big challenge to transfer them to the Lithuanian context.

This publication presents several projects, which are initiated and implemented by architects and pursue social goals. For example, the largest passive house in the world in Spain – the Bilbao-Bolueta project or the L'autre Soi project (France) which aim to combat urban segregation. These projects are truly ambitious, progressive, combining the social and cultural needs of society with other issues, such as ecology and urban renewal. In Lithuania, of course, there would probably be no need for projects of this scale, cities are not so large and vulnerable people are not so concentrated in specific large areas. In addition, projects of this kind require relatively large financial resources, political will, a lot of human resources and competencies, which would be a challenge to mobilize with limited finances, especially if the project in Lithuania was initiated by the non-governmental sector.

The most attention-drawing projects are the ones that mobilize and utilize private sector real estate, or vacant real estate in order to help vulnerable groups. In addition, these projects also combine housing with social assistance. For example, projects by the Eurométropole de Strasbourg (France) or the Empty Homes Initiative (Ireland) in which vacant real estate has been employed to accommodate low and middle-income families. Also, the social agency in Belgium and the Neunerimm (Austria) project, which bring together different partners and stakeholders. The latter projects would be a little more difficult to transfer to the Lithuanian context due to the different real estate market situation, especially in terms of legal rent and the availability of social housing. In Lithuania, the fund of social housing is very small, there are very few legally rented dwellings, therefore, similar mediation services would probably not be as effective or necessary.

Given the existing financial possibilities, needs and legal basis, I think that, the Eurométropole de Strasbourg (France) or the Empty Homes Initiative (Ireland) projects could probably be applied in the Lithuanian context as well. There is a lack of social housing in Lithuania, many low-income families are waiting in line for up to 15 years, depending on the municipality, and it is difficult for them to legally rent housing using targeted benefits to compensate for rent. Thus, projects of this kind could bring benefit not only to large but, also, to smaller municipalities. Putting vacant real estate in use could at least partially contribute to solving this problem, however, questionably to what extent. Municipalities in large cities have relatively few unused assets. Only the private property to which real estate taxes are applied gets added to the lists of unused and/or abandoned property. These taxes are not applied to apartments, blocks of flats, or private houses, where the value does not

exceed a certain threshold, and therefore these types of real estate are not included in the unused or abandoned property lists. In order to transfer experience, atypical solutions would probably be needed, as was done in the project of the Eurométropole de Strasbourg (France). In order to motivate property owners to participate in the project, tax breaks and subsidies were applied in exchange for participation in the project and agreement to lease the property to low-income people.

The projects presented in the publication are truly inspiring. However, looking at the described projects in general and assessing the possibilities to transfer them to the Lithuanian context, one's attention is inevitably drawn to the possible challenges. The most recurring challenges I have identified relate to funding, competencies and a lack of various forms of cooperation. Many projects combine different sources of funding, both private and public. In Lithuania, it would be quite difficult to secure diverse funding. Low funding of the social sector in general, as well as low financial support to the non-governmental organisations, means that this sector is rather weak and it is difficult to attract highly qualified professionals essential for the administration and implementation of more complex projects. NGOs are still too rarely seen as potential partners to be involved in the provision of social services. Looking at the projects described in the publication, it comes to attention that frequently a project is based on cooperation between organisations, often between different sectors. In this way, sustainable and innovative projects based on a holistic approach are being implemented. Focusing solely on tackling homelessness may not bring the desired results. These projects illustrate that the success of the project and achievement of the intended results depend on taking into account various needs, a multidisciplinary team, partnership, and the use of external resources.

Aida Karčiauskienė
Caritas Vilnius