
Don't Look Away: How a Society without Homelessness is Possible

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Introduction

I am convinced that a society without homelessness is possible. I also believe that the unique contribution of social organisations is essential to achieving this. As well as the individual support they offer to people in challenging situations, these organisations are experts in forging new partnerships, driving innovation, and lobbying for change. While it is clear that there are essential structural and policy levers involved in ending homelessness, to me it is unthinkable that this can be achieved without also drawing on the creativity and engagement of the social sector.

So how do organisations like neunerhaus and others working in the field of homelessness bring about systemic change? This article presents projects and innovative approaches that demonstrate that things can and should be done differently. They show that the vision of a society without homelessness is not naïve or unrealistic. They encourage us all to think about the contribution we can make, both within our organisations and in cooperation with others, to bring about change in the areas of housing, politics, public administration, and social attitudes. Ending homelessness is possible and I hope the following examples inspire us all to think about the roles we can play.

Society Under Pressure: Rising Housing Costs and Stagnating Incomes

While people experiencing homelessness have different needs requiring individualised support, one thing is always true – homelessness can only be ended long-term if people have their own permanent and affordable home. The current situation in Austria is not only exacerbating the difficulties people experiencing homelessness have accessing housing, but trends regarding housing costs and incomes are increasing housing pressure across society.

In Vienna, average net rents across private, municipal, and non-profit housing have increased by around 50% from 2010 to 2020, across Austria the increase is 40% (Statistik Austria, 2022). Research from the Vienna University of Technology analysing real estate advertisements found that only one-fifth of advertised apartments in Vienna were affordable for a single-person household on an average income (TU Wien, 2021). Further, while housing costs are rising rapidly, between 2010 and 2020, the median gross annual income increased by only 22% (Statistik Austria, 2021). This steadily widening gap between increases in income and rent is increasingly affecting the middle class as well, resulting in growing housing pressure and making affordable housing a scarce commodity.

Housing market and income dynamics have a significant impact on poverty and homelessness in our society. For example, people with low incomes on fixed-term rental contracts are particularly at risk of becoming homeless, yet it is precisely these groups who struggle to find housing away from the overpriced private rental market. These structural developments indicate that the risk factors for homelessness are becoming more acute in society. If structural safety nets disappear because income lags behind rises in housing costs, or certain groups are structurally excluded from social benefits, personal crises can cause existentially threatening situations. Therefore, innovative ideas and bold approaches are needed now more than ever.

Housing First in Vienna

In Vienna, Housing First has been offered by several social organisations since 2012, funded by the Vienna Social Fund (FSW). The success of this approach in the city is shown in FSW's most recent strategy, which recalibrates support in Vienna toward supporting people in their own accommodation, using Housing First, and floating support approaches (Gutleiderer and Zierler, 2020). This new strategic direction is due to the cooperation of different stakeholders in public administration and the social and housing sectors, supported by lobbying on a national and international level.

Neunerhaus has driven the development of Housing First in Vienna from the beginning at a conceptual, strategic, and operational level. Following an international literature review (Halbartschlager et al., 2011) and an evaluated pilot project (Schmatz et al., 2015), neunerhaus lobbied with others for wider implementation. Neunerhaus also played a central role in the development of the 'Viennese model', which defined quality criteria based on international practice, and served as a guideline for both the funding agency and social organisations (Fonds Soziales Wien/neunerhaus, 2012). By mid-2022, neunerhaus alone had offered a total of 234

apartments to 522 people, including 232 children (neunerhaus, 2022). Rent stability is also remarkable, with 92% of households continuing to live in their Housing First apartments after support ends (neunerhaus, 2022). Alongside these statistics, reports from tenants highlight how having one's own apartment helps regain future perspectives, security, and self-determination.

Although the success of Housing First is undisputed, the existing services in Vienna are far from sufficient to end homelessness. The lack of affordable housing, and the reluctance of many actors in the housing sector to take responsibility for housing vulnerable groups means access to housing is very difficult, especially for people experiencing homelessness and those on low incomes. Formal barriers, such as the cost of rent and deposits, sit alongside informal barriers such as stigmatisation. Therefore, projects facilitating access to affordable housing in cooperation with key actors in the housing sector, as in the two examples below, are critical.

The non-profit *neunerimmo GmbH*, founded in 2017 as a subsidiary of *neunerhaus*, is a bridge between the real estate sector and social organisations. *Neunerimmo* brokers, rents, and develops housing for people experiencing homelessness and people affected by poverty. As part of its portfolio, it also acquires affordable housing for Housing First. Through *neunerimmo*'s professional rent monitoring, which supports people to avoid rent arrears, Housing First is becoming an option for an increasing number of private landlords and housing developers in the non-profit or privately financed sector. Together with dozens of partners, *neunerimmo* has provided housing for almost 1 000 people since it was founded (*neunerimmo*, 2022).

Nationally, the "zuhaus ankommen" initiative aims to sustainably combat homelessness in Austria by providing housing to people at risk of poverty following Housing First principles. Financed by the Austrian Social Ministry and coordinated by BAWO, the national membership organisation for homelessness organisations, the project is implemented through a network of 12 Austrian social organisations and 50 non-profit property developers in different Austrian states. In its first year, the project allocated 246 apartments to 485 people who became homeless in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and have now regained access to permanent, affordable housing of their own (BAWO – Wohnen für alle, 2022). The project is an opportunity for social organisations and non-profit developers to work together on a sustainable solution to homelessness that can also serve as a model for society as a whole.

However, these initiatives alone will not be enough to end homelessness. This is why BAWO, alongside FEANTSA, is committed to ensuring that ending homelessness is anchored as a responsibility of housing policy in light of human rights obligations. This needs to be supported by appropriate policy incentives and regulations at the federal, state, and local levels. According to BAWO, 25 000 apart-

ments are needed to end homelessness in Austria by 2025 (BAWO – Wohnen für alle, 2021). Given the political will to implement the suitable parameters, this is not a naïve utopia, but a thoroughly realistic goal.

Lobbying to Close the Gap in Support

Vienna has a comprehensive system of support services for the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness. However social organisations working with people at the very margins of society are consistently confronted with gaps in support. Austria, like many European countries, has high requirements for foreign citizens accessing social benefits. Many people, including those living in Austria for many years, are excluded from housing and social benefits based on requirements around residency or employment status (Verband Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe, 2022). This therefore excludes them from the majority of homelessness support services in Vienna.

To fill this gap in provision, Vienna has implemented the so-called ‘Winter Package’, an additional 900 beds to ensure people experiencing homelessness have a place to stay in winter (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2021). This offers people the chance to stabilise over the winter; however, their situation is once again precarious once this support ends. If people are not accommodated in donation-based, basic emergency shelters, they are forced to sleep on the street until the next winter, or risk living in exploitative housing conditions (Unterlerchner et al., 2022). Against this background, different alliances are advocating for a year-round, full-day service. The Summer Package Initiative raised awareness of this issue in the summer of 2019 (Initiative Sommerpaket, 2019), and more recently, social organisations in Vienna have submitted a concrete proposal for implementation to the City of Vienna (Unterlerchner et al., 2022).

It is welcome that powerful lobbying is taking place on this issue, but we must ask ourselves how we are in a situation where vulnerable people are excluded from support services. One factor is the inadequate implementation of existing human rights obligations, as illustrated by a recent Amnesty International report (Amnesty International, 2022). Homelessness must be regarded as a violation of the human right to adequate housing. This right derives from the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which Austria has undertaken to implement. Despite this, the right to adequate housing in Austria is not enshrined in constitutional law, nor is there a nationwide legal basis for the provision of homelessness assistance. As a result, there continue to be gaps in support (Amnesty International, 2022).

Against this background, the implementation of a year-round, all-day service for everyone experiencing homelessness in Vienna would be an important step in implementing Austria's signing of the 2021 'Lisbon Declaration'. The right to adequate housing for everyone in Austria must also be enshrined in the Constitution, alongside a wider social discussion around issues relating to needs, exclusions, standards, freedom of choice, etc. (Reinprecht and Kachapova, 2021). There is freedom to implement changes without waiting on legal clarifications at national or EU level – this was demonstrated by positive changes to service provision during the pandemic, where, for example, the 'Winter Package' was extended to the warmer months. The first steps have therefore been taken, but must be made permanent by political stakeholders, and others must follow promptly.

Experience helps: Peer work as a “missing link”

For a society to succeed in ending homelessness, it needs the expertise and participation of people with experience of homelessness. They know first-hand the practical exclusions from the housing market and homelessness services, the impact of marginalisation and stigmatisation, and what qualities are needed for support services to be effective. The experiences of people experiencing homelessness must also be included in the development of overarching human rights-based strategies to end homelessness, as Amnesty International rightly calls for (Amnesty International, 2022). Special consideration should be given to the experiences of particularly marginalised groups, including women, migrants, destitute EU citizens, young adults, and LGBTQI+ persons. But stakeholder participation can go far beyond consultation. Designing support services from scratch and integrating people who have formerly experienced homelessness in all steps of service delivery is a powerful statement for inclusion. This is precisely the goal of peer work.

Peer work has been implemented in the homelessness sector in Vienna since 2019. Every year around 20 people with current or former experience of homelessness are trained as peer workers in a certificate course recognised by the Austrian Public Employment Service. The high diversity of participants in the course, whether in terms of age, gender, nationality, professional experience, health status, etc., is indicative of the breadth of experiences in the field of homelessness. The certificate course is funded by the Vienna Social Fund (FSW) and delivered by the neunerhaus Peer Campus. After an initial application and selection process, the course consists of seven modules, a multi-week internship, and a final thesis. Participation in the course is free and interest in the course regularly exceeds the places available, indicative of the importance of vocational prospects as a route out of homelessness. In the four courses held so far, 62 peer workers have been trained. Around

two thirds are now employed in homelessness services in Vienna, showing how a tailor-made programme can result in successful labour market integration, particularly for people with precarious work and education histories.

People who have formerly experienced homelessness, as peers, change their perception of themselves and their experiences through training and subsequent employment. They recognise that they have acquired skills that allow them to successfully navigate difficult situations. Building on this insight, they can provide support to people currently experiencing homelessness in a way incomparable to other professional groups. Peer workers translate, mediate, connect, and build bridges in many different directions.

On an individual level, the connection between peer workers and people using homelessness services facilitates successful support. Peer workers show that a way out of homelessness is possible and inspire hope in people facing difficult situations, even if these have lasted for years. In terms of concrete support, peers facilitate access to homelessness services, health care, and social services, as well as to the labour market, if applicable, through their unique position between staff and people using the service.

The inclusion of peer workers also increases the effectiveness of homelessness services. Their feedback helps services continuously review and adapt to be accessible and fit for purpose. The inclusion of peer workers has a particularly important impact on transforming cultures within homelessness services. It not only supports the end of homelessness, but also ensures that support services are participatory and dignified.

System Effectiveness and (re)Thinking Radically: The Role of Social Organisations

To achieve a society without homelessness, the contribution of many stakeholders is needed, and social organisations play a significant role. They are the linchpin between services offered at an individual level and structural solutions lobbied for, decided, and financed at a political level. Social organisations can be agents of change, influencing the way social problems are defined and how vulnerable people are helped – even beyond the boundaries of their own organisation. They can have a substantial impact at the systemic level if they explicitly understand this form of social impact as part of their mission. To achieve this, there are in my experience a number of crucial factors.

– *Self-critical analysis*

The more a self-critical culture is anchored in an organisation, and the more diverse feedback from users, staffs and cooperation partners is welcome, the more likely it is that a true assessment of the current situation can be made. This may result in the conclusion that the current models are no longer suitable or sufficient.

The homelessness sector has had to be self-critical and admit that established forms of support in place for decades no longer work, and that homelessness cannot be ended comprehensively and sustainably by social organisations alone in the way it has been dealt with up to now. Such a realisation can of course be confronting in the everyday work of those involved in delivering support services, but it opens up a space for discourse in order to think radically about new solutions.

– *Mobilising for change with an attractive vision*

Social organisations being inspired by radical approaches opens up new perspectives and creates energy away from business as usual. In homelessness services, working with Housing First principles has demonstrated that it is not just a matter of providing help and support to individuals, but that it must be about the bigger picture in socio-political terms, about permanently ending destitution, and achieving a society free of homelessness. In the last ten years or so, this vision has mobilised many actors in Vienna and Austria and triggered concrete steps towards realising this vision. The direct involvement of the experience of peer workers has been an additional catalyst.

– *Implementing ambitious pilot projects*

We have all experienced great ideas with energy behind them that peter out in the face of daily business and responsibilities. Courageous managers and financial flexibility are needed to follow up on these ideas and invest in innovation, as well as stable structures to support the implementation of new projects. For organisations committed to research, innovation, developing new concepts, finding partners and implementing pilot projects, suitable organisational structures and processes are needed to manage these alongside existing work. Pilot projects implement a large vision on a smaller scale, showing that it can be a practical reality.

In piloting the peer worker training, the interplay of several factors made it successful: preparatory work on the content of the course with different partners who concretised the project idea and spread the vision within the homelessness sector. Suitable funding channels financed the very first certificate course, networking and communication activities won supporters, activated multipliers, and allowed us to engage in critical professional discourse. Last but not least, there were people who – even in the face of obstacles and resistance – were not

dissuaded from their belief that training peer workers was feasible and could have an individual and systemic impact. This courageous approach has been rewarded by the fact that peer workers in homelessness services have become an integral part of the service landscape in Vienna within only five years.

– *Mainstreaming pilot projects with partners*

One pilot project alone has rarely triggered structural change. And yet, ambitious pilot projects can change the larger picture. Pilot projects are particularly effective when they are carried out with partners and transcend the boundaries of one's own organisation. If the initial results are promising, then it is possible to convince other multipliers to continue to drive it forward.

As an example, Housing First started as a small pilot project in Vienna and now there are many cooperations between non-profit housing associations and social organisations. Actors from the housing industry have been systematically linked with social organisations, the relevant umbrella organisations have been won over as supporters for the approach, and the administration has been convinced to provide financial support for the implementation of a new model.

– *Networks and alliances*

Changing social realities can be difficult and it can be more effective to explore networks and alliances to lobby for common goals and to address different audiences. In the example of lobbying for year-round provision for particularly vulnerable groups, it is important to acknowledge that substantive and permanent improvements are not yet underway. Structural changes require staying power. However, preparing facts collectively, sharing knowledge, and concretising the necessary next steps contributes to support at various levels, builds up social pressure, and encourages decision-makers to act courageously.

– *Intuition and creativity*

The role of intuition and creativity in creating change should not be underestimated, and organisations would do well to develop these competencies; using intuition to grasp the right moment for an issue or a project, to know how to design it, and to identify enthusiastic stakeholders inside and outside the organisation to take responsibility for it. Creativity can bring new ideas to life, link them to existing challenges, and enjoy overcoming the countless hurdles faced when implementing innovative projects. Intuition and creativity are not limited to the achievements of individuals, but are most effective when the culture and climate of an organisation allows them to thrive.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that we are in challenging times and that the impact of the pandemic, war, and rising costs on the people we support is, and will remain, significant. However, challenging times can also be catalysts for change. They force people to think creatively, challenge the status quo, and break down boundaries, at both the organisational and systemic level. Radical approaches in the social sector can change organisational cultures, empower people supported by homelessness services, and embolden key players across the social, housing, and political sectors to act. We all have a role to play in ending homelessness, but I believe social organisations have the necessary qualities to be the pioneers. Now, more than ever, we need to use our expertise, tenacity, and spirit of innovation to show what can be achieved.

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