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**OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
on
COMBATING HOMELESSNESS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS ISSUES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty and social exclusion, and should therefore be paid more attention in the EU's Social Protection and Inclusion Strategy. It is wrong for the European Union to have high levels of homelessness. The European Year 2010 on fighting poverty and social exclusion is a good moment to raise awareness for this persistent problem, which risks becoming worse in the context of the economic crisis. Any initiatives to tackle this problem should of course be conceived in a long-term perspective, reaching beyond the year 2010 and the current crisis.
- The Committee points to the key role of local and regional authorities when it comes to taking practical and vigorous action to combat homelessness. They bear the real responsibility and also have substantial experience, and in many cases effective methods and programmes geared to both pre-emptive and acute and long-term measures. This increases the need for a clearer division of responsibilities between the various authorities and levels of government. It is also worth noting here that homelessness can be concentrated in certain regions of a country or in certain countries. European-level and national mechanisms are therefore needed to provide financial support for regions where homelessness is particularly acute not least in the interest of territorial and social cohesion.

Rapporteur

Tore Hult (SE/PES), Vice-president of Alingsås Municipal Council, Sweden

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Background and premises

1. The Committee notes that it will be impossible to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion, which is a cornerstone of EU policy, if some of the EU's population are homeless and therefore do not have the means to develop personally and professionally. The Committee stresses that homelessness is a particularly serious issue for children and young people.
2. Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty and social exclusion, and should therefore be paid more attention in the EU's Social Protection and Inclusion Strategy. It is wrong for the European Union to have high levels of homelessness. The European Year 2010 on fighting poverty and social exclusion is a good moment to raise awareness for this persistent problem, which risks becoming worse in the context of the economic crisis. Any initiatives to tackle this problem should of course be conceived in a long-term perspective, reaching beyond the year 2010 and the current crisis.
3. The basis for discussion must be that the EU Member States are facing a shared problem. Homelessness afflicts individuals regardless of their level of education, cultural background or previous economic circumstances, and it occurs in all the EU Member States. We therefore need joint measures to prevent and reduce homelessness.
4. Homelessness is the cause of major personal tragedies, and also has significant social costs. If the number of homeless people were reduced, those social costs would also fall, more people would be integrated into society, and thus Europe would progress.
5. The Committee points out that homelessness is caused by a conjunction of circumstances and should therefore not be seen as being caused exclusively by personal issues.
6. The Committee stresses that homelessness is caused by a combination of factors such as a lack of affordable housing, low-paid work, substance abuse, deficiencies in the substance abuse rehabilitation system, mental health problems, sickness, domestic violence, unemployment, problematic personal relationships, poverty, release from prison and re-integration into society, as well as changes and cuts in welfare support. A particularly important factor is property owners' view of the homeless and the extent to which they can help to find ways of providing accommodation for the homeless. Coordination and a combination of different measures are needed in order for efforts to succeed.
7. There is a need to understand much better why homelessness arises and what mechanisms cause it to persist. Such an understanding is the basis for adopting effective measures in different policy spheres.
8. The Committee regards homelessness as a serious problem and believes that efforts are needed at several levels, partly preventive and awareness-raising measures but also, and not least, measures to improve incentives to build housing.
9. The Committee points to the key role of local and regional authorities when it comes to taking practical and vigorous action to combat homelessness. They bear the real responsibility and also have substantial experience, and in many cases effective methods and programmes geared to both pre-emptive and acute and long-term measures. This increases the need for a clearer division of responsibilities between the various authorities and levels of government. It is also worth noting here that homelessness can be concentrated in certain regions of a country or in certain countries. European-level and national mechanisms are therefore needed to provide financial support for regions where homelessness is particularly acute not least in the interest of territorial and social cohesion.
10. The Committee believes that a general homelessness strategy requires that the EU institutions be more active in supporting progress and monitoring measures taken. The subsidiarity principle must nevertheless be respected and the key role of local and regional authorities recognised.
11. The Committee notes that international declarations and national laws demonstrate an increasing wish to raise awareness of homelessness as a major social problem. The right to housing is enshrined in many countries' constitutions.
12. Many of the proposals and measures outlined here are based on this important shared principle and the existing framework, which means that the most pressing issues surrounding homelessness can be addressed without creating new legal instruments.

13. There is no common European definition of homelessness, and the Committee would therefore urge the Member States as far as possible to use the ETHOS typology (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion). This should make it possible to compare situations in the Member States and results of different initiatives. Homelessness is defined in this typology as:
 - *being without a roof over one's head* (no shelter of any kind, sleeping in the street);
 - *having no fixed abode* (e.g. living in temporary accommodation for the homeless, hostels, other shared accommodation for certain groups of people, supported housing);
 - *insecure housing* (accommodation without a secure lease or lodging with family or friends because one has no accommodation of one's own);
 - *living in substandard accommodation* (e.g. in a hovel, a dwelling without sanitary facilities or that is condemned under national law, a caravan or cabin that is not intended for year-round habitation, or overcrowded accommodation).
14. The Committee believes that combating homelessness must remain a priority among the EU's social inclusion policy measures. One important reason for this is that the Social Protection Committee (SPC) identified homelessness and housing exclusion as its thematic focus for 2009. In particular, 2010 as the EU Year for Combating Poverty, is an excellent occasion to step up efforts to combat homelessness, as the most extreme form of exclusion.
15. Good-quality, affordable accommodation is a primary personal good and right. The Member States must therefore make every effort and adopt measures to help find housing for everybody who is entitled to such support under national law..
16. In addition to the obvious social consequences for the victims of homelessness, it is necessary to mention the socio-economic benefits that result from people having housing and work.
17. The Committee draws attention to the direct and indirect economic costs of homelessness for the local and regional authorities of the Member States. Most relevant are obviously the direct costs in the form of specific or general resources needed to deal with homelessness. Another cost is the loss of tax revenue from gainful employment. To sum up, homelessness is an obstacle to economic growth in many countries and to the sustainable society we want to create that is also described in the Europe 2020 strategy.
18. Statistics on these economic implications support the use of prevention programmes, which are inexpensive when set against the total costs of homelessness.

Committee of the Regions recommendations

19. The Committee thinks that the Member States should recognise the significance of this social problem and that further steps are necessary to intensify ongoing efforts. A basic prerequisite for the success of efforts to combat homelessness is coordination between the initiatives of all levels of government involved (local, regional, national and intergovernmental).
20. The main difficulty in combating homelessness is that a wide range of policies have to be pursued and responsibility shared between different public authorities. To be effective, the fight against homelessness must include, inter alia, urban planning policy, housing construction, social policy, employment and health, including mental health. This means encouraging contractual and regional agreements between the authorities responsible for financing housing, for issuing building permits and for social support arrangements.
21. The Committee stresses that pre-emptive, acute and future measures must be provided for so as to ensure that the situation improves.
22. The Committee believes that current knowledge about the causes of homelessness does not allow policies to be drawn up which give full consideration to the diversity of people who are homeless and the different ways in which they can end up on the street. Furthermore, systems for dealing with these people often result in individuals being assigned to artificial categories based on whether they fit one or other profile. The ability of homeless people to participate fully in society is undermined by this lack of knowledge.
23. The Committee of the Regions believes that it is necessary now to get beyond this view of things and

- adopt a human and personalised approach based on each individual's own lifecourse, so as to provide appropriate responses. This means implementing programmes to combat homelessness as closely as possible to the people concerned. The local and regional authorities therefore have a key role to play.
24. The Committee of the Regions therefore sees the need to optimise and expand statistical tools. Data harmonisation at European level must be promoted by extending the work on the ETHOS typology and more generally supporting comparative approaches between the Member States. It is also necessary to encourage reform of existing tools so as to favour lifecourse-based approaches, taking account of the factors that have resulted in a person being homeless, that create the on/off phenomenon and that contribute to definitive resolution of the problem.
 25. The Committee calls on local and regional authorities to organise a wide cooperative effort and institutional coordination in different areas in order to improve overarching measures and monitoring of homelessness. What is needed is long-term cooperation between different local and regional authorities and long-term strategies, which together can eradicate the problem and its causes, because short term or ad hoc measures will not suffice.
 26. Many Member States lack both reliable official data on the extent of homelessness, as well as information on effective measures to tackle the problem. The Committee of the Regions urges the Member States to work together through the EU in order to develop an overarching, integrated homelessness strategy and then to ensure that such a strategy is underpinned by the national policy-framing that is needed in order for it to be effective.
 27. Housing is a primary personal good and a basic prerequisite for an individual's integration into society and the labour market. The Committee of the Regions therefore urges the Commission to consider more closely the principle of the right to adequate accommodation and how such a right could be formulated.
 28. The Committee sees a need for robust measures to combat homelessness. A common political position on homelessness is necessary to create the foundation for future efforts. Otherwise there is a risk that measures will be fragmented and poorly coordinated. Existing initiatives in many local and regional authorities should be further developed and publicised. National and international models and methods are needed to prevent homelessness. General measures to raise public awareness are also critical to promoting a joint effort.
 29. The Committee stresses the need to counter the view in society that homelessness is a matter that concerns only the individual affected. More nuanced views of the causes of homelessness are needed and its consequences for society must be examined. It would therefore be appropriate for the Commission to take measures to create a more nuanced picture.
 30. The Committee urges local and regional authorities to consider the right to housing as one of the primary personal goods, and to get involved in research on the causes of homelessness, and on its consequences and costs. A better understanding of homelessness should form the basis for efforts and preventive measures, which will then make it possible to assess whether what has been done has had an effect.
 31. In the Committee's view, the total expertise accumulated so far is thinly disseminated and poorly used by public authorities. A more strategic plan should be drawn up on how information can reach the right level.
 32. The economic arguments for combating homelessness must be further elaborated. It should be possible to prepare a number of new reports over the next few years. The growing expertise can then be the basis for further efforts.
 33. The Committee recommends that a permanent system for identifying good practice be set up at EU level. It stresses the need for local and regional authorities to exchange examples of good practice in relation to awareness-raising initiatives, preventive measures, staff training and targeted support for different categories of homeless people.
 34. The Committee has a very positive view of the initiatives and projects that are being organised by local and regional authorities to combat homelessness, but notes that exchange of good practice must be stepped up. This could be done through a quality programme for exchanging staff who work directly on homelessness in the different Member States. Such an exchange programme should be adequately funded and it should be possible to develop it into a new type of exchange service within the Union.
 35. The Committee points to the need for a better understanding of the prevalence and patterns of

homelessness in the EU. For example, it would be useful to have data broken down by gender, age, nationality, social conditions and other key indicators. Without such information it will be difficult to frame the economic and social strategies that are needed to address homelessness. The Committee recommends that statistics be based on the definition of homelessness approved by FEANTSA. The Commission should be asked to address this issue soon.

36. The Committee believes that homelessness, by affecting a primary personal good, violates the fundamental rights of the individual and their human dignity and right to control their own life. Homelessness is most serious in the case of children, who have often no power to change their situation. The Commission should therefore look into options for the Member States to introduce some form of guarantee at national level that homelessness will be eradicated for children under 18. An assessment should be made as to whether to include the disabled under these provisions.
37. It cannot be emphasised enough that lack of housing is a problem in itself. More consideration should be given to the positive results of experiments with the Housing First approach, provided that homeless people are offered not only housing but also support, in order to address the other problems that go hand in hand with homelessness.
38. Various initiatives and information campaigns must be undertaken with property owners. A fundamental principle in combating homelessness should be the shared concept of universal and equal human dignity and people's wish to improve their situation and contribute to social development. Property owners are particularly important in efforts to avert lack of housing. Incentives should be created to provide accommodation for homeless people.
39. The Committee points out that more emphasis must be placed on training and upskilling among those working on homelessness. In countries that provide special training for professionals working in schools, the legal system, healthcare, mental health, the social services and the police, significant progress has been made towards strengthening efforts to combat homelessness at an early stage. More resources should be earmarked for training when planning for the next Structural Fund period.
40. The Committee stresses the importance of the preventive work done by local and regional authorities, but points out that emergency relief is also needed. Temporary accommodation must be available. After all, it is unacceptable for homeless people to remain stuck in the shelter system. Certain countries have adopted a strategy to close all general shelters for the homeless, who instead are to be immediately offered solutions adapted to their needs. Preventing evictions is of crucial importance here.
41. Local and regional authorities should improve their support for the voluntary sector. Homelessness is a structural and policy problem that all public authorities must engage with, but where voluntary organisations also play an important role. Thought should be given to how the European Union can help voluntary organisations to play a more prominent role. The European Year of Volunteering 2011 should be used as an opportunity to raise awareness and explore new forms of cooperating with voluntary organisations on this important issue.
42. The Committee recommends that special economic programmes be introduced at EU level designed to underpin national and local/regional efforts to combat homelessness, as well as developing quality criteria. Exchanging experience must be encouraged in order to optimise the impact and application of resources. The Committee therefore recommends that more account be taken of this issue in the context of future EU funding.
43. The Committee proposes that local and regional authorities be given the opportunity to draw up programmes to integrate homeless people into society and the labour market by introducing incentives for employers to recruit them. In the same way, local and regional authorities can encourage integration through training initiatives designed to strengthen homeless people's place in society. The positive experience with such measures must be more widely publicised.
44. Measures intended to promote information about homelessness must be more structured.
45. The Committee suggests that a European homelessness centre be set up as the coordinating body that is currently lacking. Its main tasks would be to ensure coordination, but it would also help to build knowledge and develop joint strategies. The Committee urges the European Commission to look into the possibility of setting up such a body, which would also be responsible for monitoring the situation of homeless people in the Member States. The role of the centre should be to coordinate and support

reforms in the Member States, for instance through exchange of best practice. It is worth noting that efforts at EU level could have real added value if the open coordination method for social protection and social inclusion is used.

46. The Committee considers that female homelessness is continuously on the rise, and that the particularly vulnerable situation of homeless women needs to be taken into account in its socio-economic and work-related aspects, and with regard to the problems that continue to exist in access to services. This matter needs to be dealt with specifically by the Member States.

Brussels, 6 October 2010.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Mercedes Bresso

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Combating homelessness
Reference document	/
Legal basis	
Procedural basis	Own-initiative opinion (Rule 42)
Date of Council referral / Commission letter	N/A
Bureau decision	2 December 2009
Commission responsible	Commission for Economic and Social Policy (ECOS)
Rapporteur	Tore Hult (SE/PES), Vice-President of Alingsås Municipal Council, Sweden
Analysis	20 December 2009
Discussed in commission	24 February 2010
Date adopted in commission	22 June 2010
Result of vote in commission	By majority
Date adopted in plenary	6 October 2010
Previous Committee opinions	Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 3 June 1999 on <i>Housing and the homeless</i> – CdR 376/98 fin

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