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107th plenary session, 25-26 June 2014

OPINION

A European homelessness strategy

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- finds it completely unacceptable that in 2014 people are still risking their health and lives by living on the street in our communities. The fact that we have some 3 million homeless people, who are supported by social welfare systems but in many cases are off their radar or are inadequately protected by them, is unworthy of the EU;
- points out that every Member State should have a national homelessness strategy, possibly complemented by regional strategies, clearly identifying responsibilities for data collection, monitoring and implementation; therefore calls on the Member States to draw up comprehensive homelessness strategies, which should include a definition of national services to deal with the problem, together with a definition of clear and transparent objectives that are binding upon them with regard to the EU, as well as evaluation models so that the results of each EU Member State's strategy can be assessed transparently;
- points out that Member States and in particular local and regional authorities are directly responsible for dealing with homelessness; however, while keeping the subsidiarity principle in mind, the European Commission can play a stronger role in developing policies, establishing cooperation at European level, and disseminating best practices;
- reiterates its call for a European social housing action framework;
- states that poverty and homelessness are not crimes. In view of this, criminalisation of homeless people in some Member States together with the introduction and application of socially insensitive local rules in violation of human rights is an affront to the principle of equal treatment and to human dignity.

Rapporteur

Gábor Bihary (HU/PES), Member of Budapest General Assembly

Reference document

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions – A European homelessness strategy

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. finds it completely unacceptable that in 2014 people are still risking their health and lives by living on the street in our communities. The fact that we have some 3 million homeless people, who are supported by social welfare systems but in many cases are off their radar or are inadequately protected by them, is unworthy of the EU;
2. notes that homelessness is the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion¹, and violates human dignity and rights, given that housing is a fundamental human need;
3. reiterates² in this context its call for a European social housing action framework in order to:
 - ensure consistency with Fundamental Rights and between EU policies which impact housing;
 - guarantee compliance with the EU Treaty under which public authorities are free to determine how social housing is organised and which households are eligible;
 - promote social mix;
 - support the social housing's contracyclical economic role, in particular through the reduction of energy dependency and the support to local employment;
4. recognises that the EU Member States have the world's most advanced social protection safety net; at the same time, homelessness has increased in practically all Member States due to several factors such as the impact of the economic crisis, societal changes, discrimination against minorities or badly regulated migration issues. In addition there is insufficient social housing and affordable housing in some countries.;
5. emphasises that there is a high return on investments to reduce homelessness, given the long term savings on social expenditure on dealing the problem;
6. stresses the need for EU-level action to address the challenge of poor and vulnerable EU citizens moving across national borders within the EU. Social mobility has contributed to transnational homelessness, a problem that cannot be resolved at national, regional or local level, or by reducing the mobility of EU citizens;
7. points out that Member States and in particular local and regional authorities are directly responsible for dealing with homelessness; however, while keeping the subsidiarity principle

¹ CdR 18/2010 final.

² CdR 71/2011 final.

in mind, the European Commission can play a stronger role in developing policies, establishing cooperation at European level, and disseminating best practices. The EU needs to step up its efforts to complement and support efforts by Member States and local and regional authorities, in the spirit of the European Platform against poverty and social exclusion³;

8. points out that every Member State should have a national homelessness strategy, possibly complemented by regional strategies, clearly identifying responsibilities for data collection, monitoring and implementation; therefore calls on the Member States to draw up comprehensive homelessness strategies, which should include a definition of national services to deal with the problem, together with a definition of clear and transparent objectives that are binding upon them with regard to the EU, as well as evaluation models so that the results of each EU Member State's strategy can be assessed transparently;
9. emphasises that such comprehensive homelessness strategies should refer to the role of local and regional authorities and civil society; at the same time, in the interests of good governance they should clarify the division of tasks and the allocation of resources between different levels of governance;
10. warns that some EU Member States have had difficulty in implementing their homelessness strategies because in practical terms they lack multi-level governance;
11. welcomes the European Parliament's previous and recent resolutions on the EU's homelessness strategy⁴ calling on the Member States to make progress on implementing the target of overcoming homelessness by 2015;
12. points out that the level of homelessness and its causes vary from one Member State and even region to another, which means that local and regional authorities should be involved in framing a homelessness strategy. The choice of approach should be determined by the causes of this problem. Local authorities are best placed to gather expertise here, as they are in direct contact with it;
13. welcomes in this context the work carried out by the HABITACT network on homelessness, www.habitact.eu, which is a network of local/regional authorities driving social innovation in the field of homelessness, through integrated homeless strategies;
14. agrees with the European Parliament's call to the Commission to establish a high-level expert group to support it in the preparation and further development of an EU homelessness strategy; emphasises the importance of participation by representatives of local and regional authorities in this expert group;

³ CdR 402/2010 final.

⁴ P7_TA(2011)0383 and P7_TA(2014)0043.

15. notes that the Commission has already published a Commission Staff Working Document⁵ providing guidance on confronting homelessness but regrets the low level of European ambition of this text. Indeed, a European strategy is needed, providing a toolkit that local and regional authorities, NGOs and their volunteers can use effectively in practice, as well as enabling the exchange and dissemination of good practices, and legal action to prevent the criminalisation of homelessness and to severely repress abhorrent acts of hostility, violence or persecution directed against them;
16. emphatically states that poverty and homelessness are not crimes. In view of this, criminalisation of homeless people in some Member States together with the introduction and application of socially insensitive local rules in violation of human rights is an affront to the principle of equal treatment and to human dignity;
17. calls for greater recognition and support at local, regional, national and EU level for the work of civil society organisations defending the rights and interests of the homeless, who are vulnerable and in a poor position to defend their rights;
18. hopes that in no Member State – in breach of the law, or through changes to the law which go in the same direction – individuals are exposed to police threats solely because they are homeless;
19. supports activities by civil society organisations, European associations and umbrella groups operating in Member States to assist the homeless, make them aware of their rights, and encourage the development of an inclusive social environment and social awareness enabling the majority of people to empathise with situation of homeless people and conducive to measures, including in terms of community funding, to overcome the problem;
20. calls on the Member States and the Council Presidency to ensure that homelessness regularly features on the agenda of ministerial roundtable discussions. The Committee of the Regions would also like to emphasise the importance of including representatives of local and regional authorities in such meetings, and also calls on the European Commission to provide logistical and financial support for such meetings;
21. emphasises the importance of the EU homelessness strategy prioritising housing-led/housing-first approaches, and paying special attention to cross-border homelessness, as well as homelessness affecting women and minors;
22. emphasises the link between managing homelessness and regional development, EU funding instruments (e.g. ESF, ERDF)⁶, as well as the issues of social inclusion and human rights;

⁵ SWD(2013) 42 final.

⁶ CdR 1999/2013 final.

there is also a close correlation with the Europe 2020 strategy objective of lifting 20 million people out of poverty⁷;

23. reminds the regions in the Member States particularly affected by homelessness to make use of European funding and programmes for the needy, such as the European Social Fund (ESF), when drawing up operational programmes. These can improve the situation of homeless people and open the door to integrating them in society and labour markets;
24. emphasises the importance of preventive action at local and regional level, through early identification of persons at risk of homelessness and tailor-made support measures protecting them from expulsion, together with immediate assistance for those who have already lost their homes. Coordinated structural measures in areas of wellbeing such as housing, employment, education, the family and related policies on are therefore needed;
25. points out that an integrated approach is needed, with closer cooperation between welfare and healthcare systems in order to prevent a catastrophic deterioration in the quality of life and thus the health of the newly homeless, particularly in the case of persons who have been institutionalised in the past;
26. stresses that care for the homeless must start in the street, as detection and treatment of any mental illness or substance misuse cannot wait for their housing problem to be resolved;
27. stresses the importance of providing sufficient assistance, for example in the form of providing housing facilities, which can help to prevent homelessness;
28. underlines that for their efforts to be effective, the parties involved in combating homelessness need appropriate funding and support from the Member States and the European Union enabling effective steps to provide employment services and training for homeless people, at the same time as encouraging them to look for work or stay in employment if they already have a job;
29. feels that, vocational training, retraining, adult education and lifelong learning in general are particularly effective in preventing homelessness, even though they only have an indirect impact. Properly structured training leading to real employment is a good investment from the point of view of both individuals and society, and can achieve lasting results in helping homeless people to get out of a difficult situation. Education is often an indispensable basic requirement, but it is crucial that people should be motivated themselves to take long-term and proactive measures to lift themselves up to the position of active player in society. Cooperation with the persons concerned and their active involvement are essential if their lives are to be improved;

7

CdR 26/2013 final.

30. emphasises the importance of ensuring that the emergency or provisional shelters operated by local authorities, charities, churches and civil society organisations are clean, accessible locally or at least regionally, and that they meet users' needs; feels, however, that the most desirable solutions are housing-led, including for instance, the "housing first" approach;
31. points out that it is of crucial importance for the homeless and people on low incomes to have access to affordable permanent housing. It is certainly true that this can only be achieved if the requisite partnerships can be established between all stakeholders, in line with local circumstances;
32. is in favour of other targeted efforts at EU level through relevant EU sectoral policies, in particular in the fields of the economy, finance, social security, regional development, health, human rights, youth, gender equality, migration and integration;
33. supports further integration of homelessness issues into the Europe 2020 strategy implementation process, where necessary flanked by country-specific recommendations for national action, particularly in Member States where urgent progress is needed on homelessness;
34. would like the Commission, as well as formulating country-specific recommendations, to encourage further efforts by Member States and the inclusion of homelessness issues in national reform programmes;
35. emphasises that comprehensive and comparable data on homelessness must be collected, without stigmatising the persons concerned. These data should be differentiated with regard to the causes for homelessness and the intensity of the phenomenon and have a regional breakdown at least at NUTS 2 level. Such a database would be a prerequisite for ensuring that development policies have an impact, and ultimately fully overcoming homelessness;
36. argues that, since action at local and regional level has a decisive role to play in reducing homelessness, the EU should look at overall effectiveness, considering in which cases it would be worth using other funding instruments (such as PROGRESS, the E@SI, JESSICA, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, LEADER, and the Aid for the Most Deprived Programme) beyond the ESF and the ERDF to tackle homelessness;
37. encourages the Member States to use the relevant European funds and to ensure transition between social inclusion and integration of labour markets, in order to improve the situation of homeless people;
38. it is important to encourage volunteering in the provision of services to the homeless and involve them in resolving social issues, raising general awareness of the problems of this community and, all in all, integrating them into social inclusion processes;

39. participation mechanisms specifically geared to the homeless need to be strengthened, enabling them to be genuinely involved, facilitating joint decision-making by all stakeholders and, in short, improving the quality of service by letting them take charge of their social integration process.

Brussels, 26 June 2014

The president
of the Committee of the Regions

Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso

The secretary-general ad interim
of the Committee of the Regions

Daniel Janssens

II. PROCEDURE

Title	A European homelessness strategy
Reference(s)	N/A
Legal basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Procedural basis	Own-initiative opinion (Rule 41 b ii of the Rules of procedure)
Date of Council and European Parliament referrals	N/A
Date of Bureau's decision	1 April 2014
Commission responsible	Economic and Social Policy (ECOS)
Rapporteur	Gábor Bihary (HU/PES) Member of Budapest General Assembly
Analysis	2 April 2014
Discussed in commission	16 May 2014
Date adopted by commission	16 May 2014
Result of the vote in commission	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	26 June 2014
Previous Committee opinions	Opinion on Combating homelessness, CdR 18/2010 fin ⁸ Opinion on the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion, CdR 402/2010 fin ⁹ Opinion on a European agenda for social housing, CdR 71/2011 fin ¹⁰ Opinion on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, CDR26-2013_00_00_TRA_AC ¹¹ Opinion on The EU Social Investment Package, CDR1999-2013_00_00_TRA_AC ¹²
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A

8 [OJ C 15, 18.1.2011, p. 41.](#)

9 [OJ C 166, 7.6.2011, p. 18.](#)

10 [OJ C 9, 11.1.2012, p. 4.](#)

11 [OJ C 139, 17.5.2013, p. 59.](#)

12 [OJ C 356, 5.12.2013, p. 60.](#)