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National strategy to prevent and tackle homelessness The pathway to a permanent home

Synthesis Report

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0. Abstract

The Norwegian strategy to combat homelessness was launched, as a national strategy, in 2004 (for the period 2005-2007) and identifies three primary objectives and five specific targets. It aims to prevent homelessness for people threatened with eviction and for people leaving prison or institutions. The strategy aims to improve the quality of night shelters by implementing quality agreements in service contracts. Finally, the initiative aims to reduce reliance on temporary accommodation and the length of time people stay there before obtaining permanent accommodation.

A significant feature of the national strategy to combat homelessness is that it is presented under the umbrella of a national housing policy whose aim is to ensure an efficiently functioning housing market. This indicates a structural analysis in which the aim is to provide housing for groups who are disadvantaged in the housing market and to provide measures to enable these groups to continue to live in their own homes. Homelessness is thus targeted as a housing issue and a problem of access to adequate and secure housing, in which the support needs of individual homeless people are one route to achieving and sustaining this goal.

The coordination of the strategy implementation has been devolved to the Housing Bank (Husbanken) in collaboration with the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs who both provide the main funding for initiatives under the strategy. Although it is a national strategy responsibility for its implementation lies with the 431 municipalities. Within the framework of the strategy municipalities are encouraged to prepare plans of action or strategies for the provision of housing support. By September 2005, half (228) of the 431 local authorities had received grants from the Husbanken to prepare these plans and 40% (178) had completed their plans.

Collaboration Agreements have been employed as the basis for action importantly between the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and the four key ministries. However, they have also been used as the basis for action between municipalities and the Correctional Services in relation to prisoner release protocols and housing. In addition to using collaboration agreements and protocols, networks and forums have been established and a peer review process initiated to monitor and evaluate local action.

In contrast to homeless strategies in other countries (e.g. see the Danish Peer Review 2005), this national strategy does not focus on specific target groups. Rather, the intention is to focus on people in vulnerable situations in the housing market. In this context, the prevention principles of the strategy together with the philosophy of providing permanent long-term housing with normal tenancies has resulted in improvements in organisational practice and in inter-agency working.

Monitoring information provided by Husbanken and a recent survey of homelessness indicates significant achievements in the early phase of the strategy. However, there is an indication from the survey results and from the municipalities reporting on these indicators that there may be a need to target the small to medium size local authorities (population 10,000 to 40,000) to make significant further progress in reducing these targets. This highlights the challenges to deliver a national strategy in the Norwegian context. First, there is the need to increase the institutional capacity of small rural authorities to deliver appropriate or new services. Second, there is the difficulty of providing services in rural communities in an economical and sustainable manner (especially for people with intensive support needs).

The Norwegian strategy presents a number of policies which could inform practice in other European countries. First, the role of the Husbanken as an executive agency in co-ordinating the strategy is a significant feature of implementation in a country with a large number of small predominantly rural local

authorities. Second, the use of the 'forums' to improve practice and develop competence especially of smaller rural authorities could have use elsewhere. However, the ability to support this approach with adequate funding especially, for example, in the form of competence grants targeted appropriately would seem to be necessary. Third, the use of standard template collaboration agreements to assist inter-agency working between different tiers of government or public and NGO sectors is a practice that could be implemented without significant financial costs. Finally, it is perhaps surprising that the use of quality standards for hostel accommodation and the use of quality agreements between purchaser and provider agencies is not more widely used or known in Europe.

1. The Issue

The Peer Review process has three main aims: mutual learning, improving the effectiveness of policies and strategies and facilitating the transfer of key components of policies or of institutional arrangements which have proved effective in combating poverty and social exclusion.

The discussion paper presented to the seminar held in Oslo on 7th-8th September described the basis of the Norwegian homeless strategy and provided an assessment of the key components and institutional arrangements on which it is based. The purpose of this report is to provide a synthesis of the discussions held during the seminar as well as the documents prepared by the peer review countries in order to assess issues of mutual learning and transferability in particular.

The key components of the Norwegian homelessness strategy can be described briefly. The strategy focuses on the factors that could weaken a person's position in the housing market and has three clear objectives – to prevent people from becoming homeless, to improve the quality of overnight shelters, to ensure homeless people receive offers of permanent housing without undue delay. Four particular groups of people are the target of these prevention policies; people under threat of eviction, people leaving prison, people living in overnight shelters, people living in temporary accommodation. The achievement of these objectives is measured against very specific targets over a tight time-scale to 2007.

The strategy is also characterized by some very specific institutional arrangements. First, it has evolved from a trial project involving seven key municipalities over several years. Second, it is a national strategy developed with the involvement of all the key Ministries. Third, a keyword of the strategy is collaboration involving stakeholders at central, regional and local level. Municipalities are the responsible statutory agency for carrying out the policy. The accent of the strategy is on enabling measures to facilitate implementation by local government and voluntary organizations. Fourth, a key to implementation is the funding and advice coming from the Husbanken and the Directorate of Health and Social Affairs. These bodies operate as arms-length executive agencies of government.

The strategy is underpinned by relatively generous financial resources that include system-oriented funding and funding targeted at the individual. The system level funding is focused on two distinct issues. First, to strengthen the social support offered to homeless people or drug addicts. Second, to develop the competence of municipalities by stimulating new services or cooperation between different levels of government.

The recent survey of homelessness indicates the growing importance of structural housing market factors evidenced by the increase in homeless persons with no additional problems registered.

2. Description of the Strategy

The Norwegian strategy to combat homelessness was launched, as a national strategy, in 2004 under the name “the pathway to a permanent home”. The strategy is established for the period 2005-2007 and identifies three primary objectives - to prevent people from becoming homeless, to improve the quality of overnight shelters and to ensure homeless people are re-housed without undue delay. These objectives are implemented by means of five specific targets - the reduction of evictions, ensuring that people released from prison or discharged from an institution can access permanent housing, ensuring that overnight shelters have a quality agreement with the municipality and ensuring that no-one has to remain in temporary accommodation for more than three months.

These key components of the strategy thus include issues of output and issues of process. The output issues relate to the prevention of homelessness, the quality of shelter accommodation and access to permanent housing. The process issues relate to the implementation of the policy by the use of co-ordination arrangements, collaboration agreements and protocols and a reliable evidence base to monitor progress against the specified targets.

A significant feature of the national strategy to combat homelessness is that it is presented under the umbrella of a national housing policy whose aim is to ensure an efficiently functioning housing market. This indicates a structural analysis in which the aim is to provide housing for groups who are disadvantaged in the housing market and to provide measures to enable these groups to continue to live in their own homes. Homelessness is thus targeted as a housing issue and a problem of access to adequate and secure housing, in which the support needs of individual homeless people are one route to achieving and sustaining this goal. This is in contrast to policies in some countries which perceive homelessness primarily as a problem of social policy. Thus, while four Ministries have collaborated in the preparation of the strategy, it is the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development that is the lead ministry rather than the Ministry of Social Affairs (as was formerly the case).

Although this is a national strategy developed by central government ministries and approved by Parliament, its implementation relies upon the large number (431) of relatively small municipalities (only 8 have populations over 50,000). The approach adopted by central government to facilitate this implementation has been an enabling strategy rather than one of legislative diktat and enforcement. In Norway, the principle of local governance is strong and decision-making functions have continued to be devolved to this smallest executive tier of government so that the municipalities are responsible for most of the welfare services provided to the public. This does, however, raise issues of institutional capacity and may account for the fact that the three tiers of government (national, county and municipality) have evolved a collaborative approach to the implementation of the homeless strategy.

Implementation of the strategy is co-ordinated by two executive agencies - the State Housing Bank (*Husbanken*), which has co-ordinating responsibility for implementation, and the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs (which has an important advisory and funding role). Since the launch of Project Homelessness in 2000 the *Husbanken* has been the responsible agency for co-ordinating the strategy on homelessness. Regional government offices (County Governors, Enforcement and Correctional Services) also play important implementation roles. The review and monitoring of the policy lies again with central government but the *Husbanken* and DHSA provide much of the evidence base on which that will depend.

These governance issues – the overall political consensus, the collaboration between the five ministries involved, the role of the *Husbanken* and the enabling approach adopted to implementation operating through the municipalities – are significant factors in the approach to the development and implementation of the strategy

Collaboration Agreements have been employed as the basis for action importantly between the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and the four key ministries. However, collaboration agreements have also been used as the basis for action between municipalities and the Correctional Services in relation to prisoner release protocols and housing. In addition to using collaboration agreements and protocols, networks and forums have been established. Contact forums involving the largest cities have arranged two peer reviews of elements of the strategy. Regional contact forums have been employed to facilitate coordination and feedback between regional offices of state bodies and the municipalities. In addition, the *Husbanken* coordinates 19 networks of municipalities in which around a quarter of municipalities participate.

Although the strategy has been developed within the framework of a national housing policy, the legal basis for action against homelessness remains the Social Services Act (1991). Within the framework of the strategy municipalities are encouraged to prepare plans of action or strategies for the provision of housing support. By September 2005, half (228) of the 431 local authorities had received grants from the *Husbanken* to prepare these plans and 40% (178) had completed their plans.

The *Husbanken* and the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs (DHSA) provide the main funding for initiatives associated with the homeless strategy. These financial measures include grants to municipal authorities and NGOs (system measures) and grants and loans to individuals (individual measures). Although a range of disadvantaged people qualify for individual assistance the *Husbanken* states that homeless people are the top priority for loans and grants. The DHSA grant to improve or develop social support services for homeless people and substance abusers amounted, in 2006, to €6 million. A proportion of the grants for mental health, substance abuse and resource intensive users is also directed to the prevention of homelessness under the strategy. The *Husbanken* competence grant is aimed at the development of new projects, innovative projects and inter-agency working. Almost 40% of the total budget of €8.3 million is targeted at homeless initiatives within the strategy related to housing support and prevention. The rental flats grant, which amounts to €25 million in the current year, provides one-fifth of the capital cost of rental housing projects where homeless people are the target group.

Three surveys of homelessness have been undertaken (in 1996, 2003, 2005) and the survey planned in 2007 will allow the baseline data to be monitored. Specific research based evidence (funded under the strategy as well as by individual Ministries) can also be drawn upon. While there is a concern about the completeness and quality of data provided by the municipalities, the *Husbanken* is addressing this capacity issue by funding a data collection system called 'Bokart' which is currently used in 67 (of the 431) municipalities (Kristensen, 2004). In this context 'evidence-based' means the attempt to develop policies based on available evidence and research; this does not imply that this evidence is accurate, reliable or sufficient. The scale and nature of homelessness is described in the report of the most recent survey on homelessness (Norwegian Building Research Institute, 2006).

Since a quarter of the homeless were identified in the 2005 survey as being subject to eviction (and findings indicate that, for these people, eviction was the main cause of their homelessness) the target to reduce this figure by half (if achieved) will make a significant impact on the prevention of homelessness and of recurring homelessness. The survey also shows that a quarter of the homeless has been released from prison or discharged from an institution and hence the target to ensure that these people do not need to rely on temporary accommodation is also significant in the prevention of homelessness. A quarter of the homeless live in overnight shelters and the strategy aims to ensure that these shelters meet an adequate standard of provision; though the definition of adequate standard is under discussion.

Monitoring information, provided by *Husbanken*, in relation to these performance targets compared to the 2004 baseline shows some significant results in the first year of operation of the strategy. The

eviction target resulted in a 20% reduction compared to 2004 against an aim of halving these indicators. The proportion of people spending time in temporary accommodation on release from prison or institution also shows some reduction. No statistical information is available (at the time of writing) on the proportion of people spending more than three months in temporary accommodation in 2005 but the indications are that municipalities are finding it difficult to achieve this goal and that, overall, the use of temporary accommodation has been increasing.

This brief overview indicates significant achievements. However, there is an indication from the survey results and from the municipalities reporting on these indicators that there may be a need to target the small to medium size local authorities (population 10,000 to 40,000) to make significant further progress in reducing these targets. For example, the 2005 survey indicates that half of homeless people in these smaller authorities had experienced eviction. Furthermore, the increase in (or recognition of) the numbers living temporarily with family and friends (especially among the younger age groups) raises issues in relation to the acceptability of shelter accommodation and the adequacy of the level of provision of temporary or supported accommodation. This is also significant since this younger age group are also over-represented in the eviction statistics.

The responsible Ministries have to address a number of constraints that can influence the effective implementation of the strategy. Structural constraints affecting the strategy include the lack of social housing and of supported accommodation. This constraint is manifest in findings from the homelessness surveys which indicate an increase in the number of homeless people whose only problem is lack of permanent (affordable) housing as well as the reported increase in the use of temporary accommodation. Institutional constraints revolve around the difficulty, in a national strategy developed by central government ministries, in engaging a large number of small mainly rural authorities. Implementation at local level requires training and investment in organisational competence which will take time to operate. This is evidenced in the number of municipalities yet to participate in the networks and the lack of applications for available grants reported by *Husbanken* and the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs. Constraints related to specific strategic targets revolve around the time-scale needed to phase out temporary accommodation and to improve the quality of shelter accommodation. The homeless surveys found that one-third of people in temporary accommodation remain for longer than the three month maximum target.

3. The Governance and Housing Context

Discussion of the extent to which homeless policies or institutional arrangements have applicability in different countries requires an understanding of the differences in governance and housing market structures in those countries.

The locus of responsibility for homelessness policies in housing or in social affairs ministries may, in itself, be a significant factor influencing the transfer of components of policy. Hence the Norwegian policy is structured within the framework of housing policy in which a key element is to address the situation of people who are in a weak position in the housing market.

Equally, the development of a national strategy on homelessness may be difficult to achieve in countries with a federal structure where responsibility for housing and social affairs are devolved to regional level or do not exist on the same tier of government. *Austria, Germany and Spain* have a federal (or autonomous regional) structure of government. The policy context in these countries can be exemplified by Austria which has nine regions each with different social acts, policies and strategies for homelessness. "A current question has been and still is, which of the (federal) ministries is responsible for developing a strategy to combat homelessness or to co-ordinate the different regions" (Kitzman,

2006). This situation creates difficulties in ensuring federal responsibility or funding for homeless projects (although the Ministry for Social Affairs finances the centre for secure housing in Vienna suggesting that federal involvement does occur). *Sweden and Denmark* are similar to Norway in having a very decentralised structure where responsibility for social activities is vested at regional or local level. Hence the Department of Social Affairs (Denmark) or Health and Welfare (Sweden) are responsible for policy development, and fulfil an enabling role in which the numerous local (or regional) authorities (271 in Sweden and 290 in Denmark plus 13 regions) implement policy using enabling legislation. *Estonia, Romania and Slovenia* are all countries in transition to a market economy. Homelessness as a social phenomenon is only recently recognised as an issue (in part through the implementation of the Joint Inclusion Memorandum) and responsibility for policy development is not always clearly defined or understood at national level. There is an issue of local authority capacity in dealing with such issues and NGOs have been important in developing the embryonic shelter infrastructure. Policies tend to focus on developing the shelter infrastructure rather than on prevention strategies.

Housing market factors, and especially the level of rental housing or of publicly allocated housing, will affect the extent to which policies of prevention or reintegration of homeless people can be realised. Table 1 summarises some key indicators that may provide a context for our consideration of the transferability of aspects of the Norwegian experience. Of the peer review countries, Sweden and Denmark spend a relatively larger proportion of total benefits on housing and social exclusion. Germany, Sweden, Austria and Denmark have larger rental housing sectors compared to Norway and the other peer countries. Households in Spain, Sweden and Denmark spend a relatively larger proportion of their household budget on housing.

The autonomous role of municipalities, the large number of small and medium sized municipalities as well as the enabling approach to implement a national strategy are all factors that have led to the development of 'soft measures' of coordination and collaboration in Norway. These have included the use of networks, and of forums of stakeholders as well as peer reviews and guidance. While these soft measures were positively commented upon by participant countries there was recognition that the coordinating role of the Husbanken (together with a generous resource base) was a key to their success. The Husbanken is a unique institution in Europe.

Table 1: Comparison of the Peer Review Countries on Selected Indicators

Peer Country	Pop'n 2004	Housing and Socially excluded (1)	Housing Consumption as share of total household consumption (2)	Rental Housing % (3)	Housing Policy Aims (4)
EU-25	455.45	3.5			
Norway	4.59	n.a	25.1 (5)	23	Stimulating a well functioning housing market; Providing housing for groups that are disadvantaged on the housing market
Germany	82.54	2.5	25.1	55	Promote owner-occupation and to address increased regional differentiation of housing markets
Spain	38.19	1.7	31.4	11	Central Government housing finance plans have aimed to increase proportion of rented dwellings in the stock
Romania	22.33	n.a	n.a	na	National Strategy for Housing (2001-2004) aims to facilitate access to the market for specific categories, especially young individuals and families; provide incentives for private investment in housing; enhance the role of the National Housing Agency as a developer and a funding institution.
Sweden	8.98	4.0	28.9	39	Give everyone the opportunity to live in good housing at reasonable cost; ecologically and socially sustainable development
Austria	8.11	1.7	19.1	39	Principle of society's responsibility for housing supply and housing as a basic human need not subject to free market mechanisms
Denmark	5.39	5.7	28.6	40	Comprehensive supply of housing to ensure good and healthy housing for all the population
Slovenia	1.99	2.6	19.7	9	Housing Programme aim to build 10,000 new dwellings annually including social housing needs (2000-2009)
Estonia	1.35	2.2	22.9	Na	Legal and institutional regulation and support to allow owners, tenants and citizen-initiated housing organizations to solve housing problems independently

Notes: (1) % of total benefits, 2001 (Source: Eurostat - Esspros); (2) European Housing Statistics Table 4.2; (3) European Housing Statistics Table 3.5; (4) EHS Table 5.1; (5) Statistics Norway 2001

4. Components of Policy and Institutional Arrangements

This section identifies the key policy aspects and institutional arrangements discussed in the country papers or in the seminar that may have relevance for other countries. Discussion of their specific relevance and the context of transferability is presented in the following section.

The FEANTSA shadow peer review paper suggests that, while the Norwegian strategy is not based on a rights based approach, it does meet many of the elements that their member organisations have identified in a toolkit of approaches to developing homeless strategies. Such issues we may regard as the context for developing homeless strategies in all countries and, accordingly, will not be considered in detail here. These approaches include a national legal framework, political commitment supported by adequate funding, involvement of all relevant departments and stakeholders, evidence based policies and clear mechanisms of local delivery. Taking this as a necessary backcloth against which strategies are developed, a number of specific policy approaches and institutional arrangements can be identified that may have relevance for other countries.

The papers prepared by the peer review countries identified a number of issues that could have relevance to improve homelessness policies in those countries. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Strategy components of relevance to each peer review country

Transfer Element	Country	Comment
<i>Policy Aspects</i>		
Mainstreaming homeless policies in housing policy	Denmark	“focusing on the individual’s position in the housing market and the goal to maintain or improve their position”
Hostel Quality Agreements	Spain	“guidelines on quality standards which contribute to establish quality agreement among Regional Governments, local authorities and shelter providers”
Temporary accommodation	Austria	“to phase out temporary accommodation”
Access to (support to sustain) permanent housing	Estonia	“Prevention of tenancy debts and decreasing the number of evictions”
	Spain	“solutions directed to provide permanent housing .. instead of the search for institutional solutions that perpetuate homeless reclusion in shelters”
<i>Institutional Arrangements</i>		
Coordinating or Implementation Agency	Austria	“the Husbanken role of a national co-ordinating agency”
	Spain	“to establish an inter-administrative cooperation framework able to generate more preventative actions”
	Sweden	“Stronger appearance of the state sector (through different agencies) on the local level”
Collaboration Agreements	Slovenia	“The cooperation of different institutions”
	Romania	“the national coordination between Norwegian government’s representatives and all the other institutional actors”

5. Relevance of strategy components to other national contexts

This section presents the key issues of policy and institutional arrangements identified above in the national context of the peer review countries.

Austria

The country of Austria has a federal structure. Nine regional governments are responsible for homeless strategies, and every region has a social service act. The following statements have to be considered in this context. A current question in Austria has been, and still is, which of the ministries is responsible for developing a strategy to combat homelessness or to coordinate the different regions of the country. Therefore, it is very difficult to get money for projects dealing with homeless people from ministries responsible for the whole country.

The increase of homeless people in recent years in Austria is related to the fact that rent costs have increased more than income over the last five years and taxes have also risen. Prevention of eviction has therefore also been a target of specific projects especially in Vienna. However, every institution dealing with the prevention of eviction has created its own targets and evaluates differently. Vienna has conducted surveys on the sustainability of eviction prevention strategies which indicate that about 25% of people assisted need help and advice a second time.

The Norwegian policy aiming to phase out temporary accommodation is of interest to the Austrian situation and could be transferred in the context where there is a supply of permanent housing. One of the main differences between Austria and nearly all other countries are the municipality flats, especially in Vienna where 27% of all flats are owned and run by the City. Thus the City of Vienna possesses a pool of relatively cheap council housing available for permanent rent to assist with re-housing homeless people and people evicted from their housing.

While quality standards exist for newly built Austrian hostels, it would be necessary to determine the main standards on a European level.

In the context of developing and improving homeless strategies in Austria the Norwegian situation emphasises the need to:

- develop a national strategy with the involvement of all relevant ministries;
- establish a co-ordinating agency with clear responsibilities;
- establish clear targets and rules how to measure the outcomes of the strategy.

Denmark

As in Norway, for the last 6-8 years the most socially marginalised people, including the homeless, have been the objects of widespread attention from all political parties in Denmark. The Danish parliament has generally agreed that this is a priority policy area. Coming into power in 2001, the current government has set the major political goal of significantly enhancing the activities targeted at the most socially marginalised people (i.e. the homeless, drug abusers, alcohol abusers, prostitutes and the mentally disabled). In March 2002, the government introduced its action programme for the activities, "Our common responsibility". While the Norwegian strategy prioritises those who are in a weak situation in the housing market, the objective of 'Our common responsibility' action programme prioritises the most vulnerable groups by focussing primarily on solving a range of specific, acute problems.

In Denmark, the Ministry of Social Affairs has the overall responsibility for most welfare initiatives, including programmes aimed at the homeless. Unlike Norway, it is the regional authorities that are responsible for the more specialised assistance including services for the homeless either providing them directly or by contract with NGOs. Danish legislation is broad and flexible, so that it does not

require constant amendment. This enabling approach is similar to the Norwegian model. Regional and local authorities are responsible for fleshing out the legislation and making services available to citizens.

The Collective Responsibility initiative has been implemented through the use of special programme funds to which local and regional authorities could apply for support for new projects. The latest programme provides a full grant for initial project costs and fully funds the operating expenses for two years with increasing self-financing required each year from the third year onward (commencing at 20% and increasing incrementally by the same amount).

In Denmark, there is political consensus on involving the users – the citizens – and consulting them on local policies. This is also true when it comes to the homeless. In the social affairs context, many groups have associations and organisations to advocate their causes, but until now the homeless have had no networks or nationwide associations to speak on their behalf. This is why the Ministry of Social Affairs has supported the setup of a user organisation for the homeless and has succeeded in establishing an association consisting of formerly and currently homeless people in 10 of the 13 regions.

Danish experience in implementing 'Our collective responsibility' has pointed to the following lessons:

Evidence based policies

- The effort to invoke the performance management system in this field
- The need to establish accurate statistics
- The need for targeted research

Quality Standards

- The need for standards for quality/locally decided policy on homelessness within the framework of the national policy
- The need for state driven increase in staff qualifications

Focus on Prevention

- Focus on preventing evictions
- The focusing on care leaving/transitions

Inter-agency Coordination

- The never ending need for co-ordination between all stakeholders.

Similar challenges exist in terms of supporting the enabling bodies (the municipalities and regions). This conflict is apparently not solved in the Norwegian approach. For a national strategy to work effectively requires that the state is prepared to allocate sufficient funding which will justify a top down driven policy on implementation. One element of the Norwegian strategy which is very interesting for Denmark is

- Focusing on the individual's position in the housing market and the goal to maintain that position and if possible improve it.

Sweden

As in Norway the independent municipalities at the local level (290 municipalities) have the main responsibility for persons that are homeless. It is mainly the municipal social services that according to the Social Service Act provide services to persons that are homeless. There is also a municipal responsibility to ensure sufficient housing for the inhabitants of the municipality. This responsibility will, according to the ministry of sustainable development, become more pronounced. There is an ongoing project similar to the Norwegian Project Homelessness. The project supports different local initiatives

and is also responsible for the national mappings of homelessness that are to take place every second year. The current project will end in 2008. During the spring budget process it was stated that more resources will be put into the effort to combat homelessness.

The latest national mapping on homelessness in Sweden was conducted in spring 2005 (Sociastyrrelsen 2006). A higher proportion of the homeless in Sweden than in Norway were sleeping rough (6 %) but fewer were in short time shelters. As in Norway many persons are in institutions or live involuntarily with friends and family. There are a growing number of homeless women and homeless persons born outside Sweden.

It is evident that the Norwegian strategy to prevent homelessness is highly relevant to the Swedish context. The wider and more strategic approach taken by Norway, if transferred, could probably lead to both a more focused and holistic approach in the work to combat homelessness and its effects in Sweden.

Although there are differences especially in relation to political commitment and to cooperation of the ministries and the local government organisations as well as in housing market structures, the two countries have many similarities. Hence many aspects of the Norwegian strategy seem to be quite easily transferable to the Swedish context. One area of difference is the apparently stronger role of the state sector (through different agencies) on the local level – this might increase the chances of successful implementation on the local level. In Sweden there is no such agency as the Norwegian State Housing Bank that seems to have had a major role in the Norwegian strategy.

When the latest national mapping was published (in January 2006) there was an increased focus on homelessness as a housing problem and not only an individual social problem. There was also a concern about the fact the homelessness in Sweden is increasing and that “homeless” is becoming a more heterogeneous group. To that extent there has been recently a shift from a focus on individual problems to more of a focus on the housing situation in Sweden though it has further to travel. The concept of prevention is also high on the agenda in Sweden but not necessarily yet a focus of debates.

Since one of the four main targets of the coming Swedish NAP will be – “homelessness and the access of housing, the Norwegian strategy might therefore become highly relevant to Sweden in the short term in fulfilling the objectives of the NAP”.

Spain

Until recently, in Spain, the issue of homelessness has been considered a problem affecting only a relatively small and marginal group of individuals who display inefficient and inadequate behaviour. The strategy necessary to deal with this group was to address their personal problems and refer them to the relevant social or community services. The latter were only available to those considered worthy of receiving them and who met the entitlement requirements.

A key difference in the profile of the homeless between the two countries is the dominance of homeless foreigners that exist in Spain and the large proportion (one-third) of homeless people that are living rough. This last figure can only be explained by the inadequate cover of basic needs provided in the social protection system where direct benefits for accommodation are not contemplated and where the shelter network has been overwhelmed by the growth in homelessness (partly due to immigration).

As in Norway, it seems important also in Spain to move toward a more structural approach, less centred on specific populations and targeted not only on the emergency needs of people affected by the problem, but also to establish an inter-administrative cooperation framework capable of generating more preventative action.

Nevertheless, since there are significant differences between Norway and Spain, care is required when transferring initiatives. For example:

- If in Norway the experience of Project Homelessness resulted in houses as the main solution, in Spain solutions are still understood primarily in terms of the need for more shelters.
- There is not any state agency with similar financial capacity and housing resources as Norwegian State Housing Bank that could play an effective role in administrative coordination and implementation.
- Housing planning in Spain must take into account the fact that the main actors in this field are the private companies. Mortgages are the key factor of business of the Spanish private banking and home ownership is the dominant tenure.
- To develop strategies and goals on a national scale and to make municipalities assume responsibilities for their implementation is difficult in the Spanish case since social services administration is the responsibility of Regional Governments and many municipalities must rely upon real estate development for finance.

Some measures in the Norwegian strategy that could more easily be transferred to Spain include:

- guidelines on quality standards and which contributes to establish quality agreement among Regional Governments, local authorities and shelter providers
- local level projects focused on preventing the homelessness impact of evictions, organizing the cooperation frame among tribunals, social services and housing owners; the INED survey suggests 19.3% of the homeless are in this category.
- A collaboration agreement among the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Interior (Home Office) to improve the cooperation between social services and the General Directory of Penitentiary Institutions to prevent homelessness after being released from prison. According to the INE's survey, 6% of homeless people interviewed were in the street after leaving jail.

Given the decentralised administrative framework in Spain, the enabling approach providing funding to stimulate local initiatives could be of benefit. This governance structure means the Central government's role is more focused on stimulating initiatives, generating consensus, encouraging innovation and proposing new horizons. Hence benefit can be achieved by the focus on soft measures such as the organization of meetings, forums and national seminars; the generation of local networks; financing research, supporting development of educational programs to improve professional capacity among services.

Romania

The homelessness phenomenon in Romania has become a research topic only recently. Studies suggest around 15,000 in the country but the international NGO "Medécins sans Frontières" estimates the number of people living on the streets of Bucharest alone (population 2.2 million) to be 5,000. Homelessness then is mostly about rough sleeping rather than other categories of homeless. Rough sleeping has grown during the last decade and affects street children (estimated 1,300 in 2004) as well as adults.

However, many more people are *at risk* of becoming homeless. Young people living in child protection institutions often lack skills for adult and social life. One of the most important problems relates to people at risk as a consequence of the evolution of Romanian housing market. Privatisation has resulted in a drastic reduction of the number of social houses while the public funds for building new houses have been decreased dramatically. The transition period triggered a spectacular growth in utility

costs resulting in an increasing risk of eviction. Despite legal safeguards, a special category of people in risk is represented by the persons affected by the restitution process of nationalised buildings to their initial owners. The Roma population represent a vulnerable group as a result of their poverty, the unclear legal situation of the houses they inhabit, isolation of Roma communities and the limited availability of public housing.

The Joint Inclusion Memorandum identifies guidelines including:

- The drastic reduction of the homeless phenomenon, mainly through building a network of emergency centres and social houses, increasing the number of shelters;
- Prevention of evictions due to the incapacity to pay the utilities;
- Development of a viable program for building social houses for the vulnerable (e.g. young people, young families, large families);
- Developing shelters for young persons presently living in the child protection system.

The Government will provide financial support to establish 50 shelters under a national three-year program beginning in 2006. An important context is that there is no agreed official definition related to the homeless phenomenon. It is therefore necessary to develop a methodology of precise identification of homeless persons, their number, their profile and location. In order to sustain the efforts of local authorities to build a data base on the homeless an electronic computer program is being tested.

The Norwegian strategy presents many dimensions at a strategic level and many good practice rules, but for Romania the most important aspect is about the national coordination between central government's representatives and all the other institutional actors. Although a national strategy requires significant efforts from the state for proper implementation, the real participation of the autonomous municipalities is crucial.

Estonia

Homelessness as a social phenomenon in Estonia has been recognised since the mid-1990s. During this time, Estonian housing reform (the privatisation of national and municipal living space and the returning process of nationalised dwellings) commenced. Though general structural changes in society may be understood as the cause of homelessness, it is still perceived in Estonia mainly as a problem of the individual. The main factor causing homelessness is alcoholism and this is an increasing problem (in particular among the young).

Differences between the two countries in relation to governance, economic structure and resources as well as the development of homeless service infrastructure mean that transfer of the strategic components of the Norwegian policy is a theoretical exercise. However, some concrete policies or lessons could be applicable. The general results of implementing the strategy that could benefit Estonian homeless policies can be identified particularly in relation to:

1. Better financing of social and housing policies;
2. Clearer division of roles among different stakeholders
3. More and better services for the subjects of social assistance.
4. More solidarity in society and more developed informal structures (e.g. volunteers, NGOs)
5. More professionalism of the social workers.

6. Conclusions and lessons learnt

Facilitating the transfer of key components of the relevant policies, institutional arrangements, approaches and methods that have proved effective in combating social exclusion is probably the most ambitious goal of each peer review. Resource constraints as well as differences in governance, housing market structures and homelessness profiles highlight the need for caution when considering the transfer of effective policies from one country to another.

- It was argued that the development of a **comprehensive homeless strategy** at national or regional level as appropriate should be promoted generally. This would be in line with the priorities established by the Council of Ministers of Social Affairs in 2005
- Participants all agreed that a “**housing first**” approach is desirable – i.e. tackling homelessness within the wider context of ensuring adequate housing for all could be a way forward to achieve more political commitment. Housing agencies and environment ministries also have a part to play in combating homelessness, which is not just a social issue.
- It was generally agreed that **some of the Norwegian “soft measures” are transferable**, without raising issues of funding. Local forums on the Norwegian model could spell significant progress in other European cities, and this is something that might be promoted by the European Commission.
- **Quality standards** for accommodation and services are important and need more research and discussion, but international standards would be difficult to set, due to the big differences in available resources and infrastructures. An additional problem in some countries is that accommodation of the “night shelter” type has, in theory, been abolished. It would be difficult to impose official standards for something that is no longer supposed to exist.
- On the issue of **phasing out “temporary accommodation”**, it first had to be noted that the phrase means different things in different countries. The aim should not be so much to phase the accommodation out as to shorten the length of time that people stay in it. So the bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation should be eliminated as far as possible. This objective also places the emphasis on the notion that the approach of homelessness strategies should be to solve the problem not manage it.
- The idea of specifically addressing the accommodation needs of **released prisoners** was a new one to many participants. They would take this point home with them for further reflection on how to tackle the issue in their own countries. Most participants agreed that previously institutionalised people are at particular risk of homelessness.
- All agreed that **it is possible for even the most marginalised people to be empowered** and to improve their lives. The Norwegian strategy is seen as a successful example of this approach.
- The Norwegian emphasis on **preventive measures** against homelessness which led to cost savings for municipalities was another issue to take home for more consideration.
- The setting of clear **targets** supported by relevant evidence for the reduction of homelessness met with varying degrees of scepticism, depending on the scale of the problem in the country concerned. The important thing was to measure the progress achieved, and targets could always be adjusted if they were found to be unrealistic. Thus while targets are useful as a monitoring tool they need to be realistic and adjusted over the cycle of acceptable time-periods.

- The idea that landlords should give the social services advance notice of **evictions** caused much debate. In particular, the increasing importance of evictions as a cause of homelessness (associated with indebtedness rather than other problems) was identified in several countries. However, there was more diverse opinion regarding precise approaches to dealing with indebtedness and preventing eviction. No consensus was reached on this point, and there were doubts about the legal implications in some countries.
- The role of Husbanken was admired, and there was agreement that **one single agency should take the lead** in the fight against homelessness in each country. This would not pose any particular problems for countries with federal structures or autonomous regions, as the single agency could be constituted at the level appropriate to each country's structures.
- The **coordination of health and homelessness**, in the Norwegian strategy, had not worked so well as other aspects of the policy. This was reflected in many other countries experience and also merited further action.
- **Political commitment** is an important factor in the Norwegian strategy, but would be more difficult to secure in some other countries. Mainstreaming might be one way forward, by including the housing issue within strategies on other questions.
- The Norwegian strategy is very well funded. As **limited resources** are a problem in some of the other countries, this could make it difficult to transfer completely the Norwegian experience. One suggestion was to take just some parts of the strategy and at least start with local and may be less comprehensive pilot projects.

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