

A CONVERSATION WITH ISABEL BAPTISTA

During the Transnational Project Meeting in Lisbon, the HOOD partners had the opportunity to meet Isabel Baptista. Isabel Baptista (PT) is an independent researcher with over twenty years' poverty and social exclusion research experience, with particular expertise in homelessness and gender-based violence. She is the social inclusion leader of the Network Core Team of the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) and a member of the FEANTSA European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH). She has authored and co-authored several publications on homelessness, including the 2019 European Social Policy Network (ESPN) study on "National Policies to Fight Homelessness and Housing Exclusion", covering all EU Member States and seven non-EU European countries. Recently, she and has been part of the committee that developed the Portuguese Second National Strategy to Combat Homelessness (2017-2023).

The First Portuguese National Strategy

Portugal had already developed a national strategy to tackle homelessness in 2009. It was an important landmark at that time: it was the first time a southern European country had launched a national strategy. It also represented a shift as homelessness in Portugal started to be considered as a topic for public policies. For the first time, the strategy adopted a common definition of homelessness: the ETHOS definition.



It was important for building a strategy, and it was developed through a participatory process, by gathering people from different areas of government and several local authorities. However, the process was neither fully nor consistently accomplished. Even if officially launched, it never actually turn into legislation. For this reason, no additional services were neither provided nor required by the central government. In any case, at the local level, a strong intaking of the principles and priorities of the strategy has been developed. Even if without additional resources, local partners proposed local strategies and started to organize themselves without support from the central government.

The second National Strategy

The new strategy (National Strategy of Portugal for the Integration of the Homelessness People; ENIPSSA 2017-2023) maintained the ETHOS definition as a common definition of homelessness. It takes on board the same principles and methodological approach of the first strategy, improving them but also adding new ones. Among these it is important to mention:

- The strong emphasis on the housing component and the focus on Housing First and Housing Led approaches;
- The promotion of the case-management approach for the intervention;

- The strengthening of evaluation and data collection; implementation of a yearly national survey on homelessness;
- An impulse to move toward a preventive approach, developing integrated preventive services.

Another novelty consists in the translation of the National Strategy into legislation. The strategy was turned into law and all public authorities must implement new services and they benefited from new budget allocation to this end. Moreover, the presence of the local authorities in the core group of the national strategy has been enhanced: they participate directly in the development of the National Strategy.

Each local authority should develop its own local unit on homelessness, a novelty in Portugal. Additionally, rather than contacting with different professionals from different areas (housing, employment,...) homeless people started to be assigned with one sole case manager.

The importance of prevention

Across Europe, services for homeless people are still disproportionally focused on an emergency approach with little concern for prevention. Finland represents an interesting case study on this topic. Indeed, the country managed a consistent and progressive trajectory of change, moving from an emergency-based to a prevention-based services system for homeless people. They progressively established new priorities at the time they reached the previous ones and succeeded in deeply transforming their whole services system. Unfortunately, very few countries have comprehensive, integrative, preventive services. Prevention is part of the Portuguese second National Strategy, even if Isabel Baptista considers it could play a more central role.

“Prevention should be the largest component of the intervention system”

The literature and the experience sustain the importance of prevention to tackle homelessness. Political commitment to move in this direction is urgently needed. Moreover, all the literature evidence shows that the emergency sector should be small while prevention should be the largest component of the intervention system. Part of prevention also regards services of early detection. The early intervention approach, at the basis of the HOOD project, also aims at representing a step in the direction of a prevention-based system.

The issue of affordable housing



Finally, the last topic debated by Isabel Baptista and the HOOD members was the issue of affordable housing. The topic is still little debated, but it represents a main cause of homelessness. In Portugal, the lack of affordable housing is a serious problem that worsened over the last decade, especially in the bigger cities, due to gentrification and turistification. Again, the issue needs wider political recognition to be managed seriously. Over the past years, Portugal financed accessible rental programmes but the number of units released in the market at an affordable price is still too low. In the next years, governments and organisations engaged in the fight against homelessness should seriously debate and tackle the lack of affordable housing that is spreading all over Europe.

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