

# A CONVERSATION WITH ISABEL BAPTISTA

During the Transnational Project Meeting in Lisbon, the HOOD partners had the opportunity to meet Professor 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. Currently, she is a member of the FEANTSA European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH) and has been part of the committee that developed the Portuguese Second National Strategy to Combat Homelessness of 2017.

## The First Portuguese National Strategy

Portugal has 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 country had launched a national strategy. It represented a shift in considering homelessness in Portugal as a topic of public policies. For the first time, the strategy adopted a common definition of homelessness: the ETHOS definition.



However, in 2009 the process was not fully accomplished neither consistent. It was important in terms of building a strategy, developed through a participatory process, gathering people from different areas of government and several local authorities. Nevertheless, the strategy (2009-2015) was never translated into a legal document. It was officially launched, but never actually turn into legislation. For this reason, no additional services were provided neither required by the central government. At the local level, a strong intaking of the principles of the strategies and the priorities 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, improving them and adding new ones. Among these it is important to mention:

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

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

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

Each local authority should develop a homelessness unit, something new in Portugal. Thus, homeless people will stop moving from a case manager to another, belonging to different areas (housing, employment, ...).

## The importance of prevention

Prevention is mentioned in the second National Strategy, but is still too marginal, according to Isabel Baptista. In the whole of 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 a services system for homeless people emergency-based to a prevention-based one. They progressively established new priorities at the time they reached the first one and succeeded in deeply transforming their whole services system. Unfortunately, very few countries have comprehensive, integrative, preventive services.

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

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

## The issue of affordable housing



Finally, the last topic debated by Professor Isabel Baptista and the HOOD members was the issue of affordable housing. The topic is still few debated, but it represents a main cause of homelessness. In Portugal, the lack of affordable housing is a serious problem, that has got worst over the last decade, overall in the big 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 programs, but the number of units released in the market at an affordable price is still too few. In the next years, governments and organisations engaged in the fight against homelessness should seriously debate and face the lack of affordable housing that is spreading all over Europe.

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