

Housing issues and ‘new ways out of poverty’

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A secure and affordable housing situation is key to provide pathways out of poverty. And, to achieve effective and efficient results and success, a broad mobilisation on all levels (national, regional and local) and across various fields is necessary. These were some of the main findings from a broad discussion forum on the fight against poverty in Austria.

I will present some results from the National Awareness Rising and Mobilisation Project ‘AURORA. Together against Poverty.’ in Austria in 2007, funded by the EU DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities within the “Open Method of Coordination” of the Lisbon Process on Social Inclusion and Social Protection (published in 2008).

With the lead partner Volkshilfe Österreich, an Austrian NGO, and in a partnership of four institutions, I coordinated a discussion process on current and future social policies, integrating stakeholders and people affected from broad fields, which led to policy recommendations on the fight against poverty. It set a special focus on migrants, on the homeless and on poor older people in long term care. Part of the work programme was a written survey on opinions regarding EU and national social policies on expert level.

A further intensifying project – ‘AURORA plus. New Ways out of Poverty’ - was granted by the EU in the end of 2008 and will give us opportunities to broaden the exchange. Again, housing is one of the main issues addressed.

Earlier, present and future activities and dissemination (including the 2008 publication, in German, plus an English abstract) can be found on the German language website www.aurora-austria.eu.

Fight against poverty, prevention, housing loss, re-integration, exchange of practitioners, policy recommendation

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1. Introduction

A secure and affordable housing situation is key to provide pathways out of poverty. And, to achieve effective and efficient results and success, a broad mobilisation on all levels (national, regional and local) and across various fields is necessary. These were some of the main findings from a broad discussion forum on the fight against poverty in Austria.

An EU-funded project in 2007 and another running project (2009 to 2010) give the opportunity to discuss current change in Austria regarding the impact of the housing situation and the housing market on the threat by poverty and possible promising and innovative measures to fight those effects.

Those findings could contribute to the overarching theme of the 2009 ENHR conference ‘Changing Housing Markets: Integration and Segmentation’, especially referring to the ‘segmentation issue’.

Austria with its ‘corporatist welfare regime’ long-term housing policy, based on a broad system of dominant supply-sided measures in public funding for housing (subsidy loans), supplemented by demand-sided measures (means tested subsidies), and a huge stock of funded housing for rent (‘social housing’) in bigger cities is still providing a high level of secured and affordable housing. However, increasingly, restricted public budget in the social and the housing field could lead to an exclusion of broader groups from the housing market. Thus, early discussion on an eventually threatened level of quality would help to alert and motivate both the policy and the field level.

2. National awareness rising and mobilisation initiatives as a vehicle for discussion on housing issues

I will present some results from the National Awareness Rising and Mobilisation Project ‘AURORA. Together against Poverty.’ in Austria in 2007, funded by the EU DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities within the “Open Method of Coordination” of the Lisbon Process on Social Inclusion and Social Protection (published in 2008). Additionally, I will refer to another project, which started in 2009 – AURORA plus. New Ways out of Poverty’ and which builds on the findings from the earlier project.

A U R O R A . Together against Poverty. was a project funded by the EU, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities aimed at combating poverty, social exclusion and the lack of social protection.

With the lead partner Volkshilfe Österreich, an Austrian NGO, and in a partnership of four institutions, I coordinated a discussion process on current and future social policies, integrating stakeholders and people affected from broad fields, which led to policy recommendations on the fight against poverty. It set a special focus on migrants, on the homeless and on poor older people in long term care. Part of the work programme was a

written survey on opinions regarding EU and national social policies on expert level. The project was implemented in Austria within a **forum for open discourse**. (To read more about the approach and the methods, go to chapter 5.)

The outcome – a documentation on the main findings, the lessons learnt and the commonly developed policy recommendations – was published in 2008 and can be found on the website www.aurora-austria.eu (English abstract, German report).

In this paper, I mainly refer to the findings regarding housing and housing exclusion.

3. Main findings and policy recommendations

3.1 Key results on Social Protection and Inclusion

AURORA and its 'Forum for Open Discourse' was able to bring together a joyously big number of experts from the most diverse areas. Experts from administration on national, federal and municipal level engaged in vivid and result-oriented discussions with NGO representatives and universities/polytechnics, as well as with politicians of the respective regions within a well-structured framework. It was also possible to integrate affected people.

The results of the survey about the standard of knowledge and expectations regarding the relevant EU processes and most pressing challenges for social policy topped off the image of the general opinion. Furthermore, a broader public was repeatedly addressed through the placement of diverse contributions to the media.

A very interesting balance of results emerged from this one-year process: A deficit of information on joint activities of the EU and Austria concerning social protection and inclusion was complained about, while the process itself and its national effects did raise positive expectations. Furthermore, the affirmative reactions from expert circles to the EU's proposals to Austria concerning the establishment of political focal points were remarkably plenty and good. A consensus about the most pressing areas of action crystallised from surveys and events, crossing all special areas: Adequate guaranteed minimum income as key to the struggle against poverty, considerably stronger development of **preventative measures**, protection of individual **dignity** in the design of measures, as well as **empowerment** – the strengthening of self-organizing abilities of the affected.

The urgent cross-section demand was, to put **priority** on the specific needs of **women** as a particularly affected group. Numerous of the detailed propositions developed hereupon are subject to this maxim. Other targeted vertices were focused on an improvement of accessibility to information, considerably greater participation measures and a higher degree of legally guaranteed participation in the design of politics and social planning for people affected. Also, more rights for affected groups and a better enforceability of established rights, as well as more respect for disadvantaged people were claimed.

Regarding the main issues homelessness, migration and long-term care and poverty of the aged, the report covers situation, critique and a broad lineup of propositions and

demands to diverse addressees. The project team hoped that all this would spark interest and produce an echo and that the established and valuable network could be productively used in the future, for the good of the addressees.

This was the reason why a slightly changed team, again including SRZ Center *for urban+regional research* and me as one of the initiative's applied for another EU funding, within the PROGRESS programme of the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. The project proposal AURORA plus. New Ways out of Poverty was successful. Thus, we are in another 'process of open discourse' now, until the end of 2010.

3.2 Key results on Housing and Homelessness

„Housing“ is a central basic need. Adequate housing provision constitutes an important premise for the participation in community life by job and social contacts, and is indispensable for the preservation of mental and physical health.

People affected by poverty frequently live in disordered and unsecured housing situations (damp, overcrowded, poorly heated and overpriced flats) and, very often, are threatened by eviction.

According to (incomplete) data of the BAWO (Austrian Association of Service Providers for the Homeless), about 1.200 to 1.300 persons can be estimated as sleeping rough. (Quite recently, up-to-date data on Austrian statistics about homelessness were published, see references (H. Schoibl) and www.bawo.at). About 50.000 persons live in services for the Homeless respectively services for refugees (2006).

In 2006, about 42.000 persons were threatened by eviction with an eviction procedure at the Courts (about 0,5% of the Austrian population). About 7.000 (about 17 from 100) were legally evicted. (For more detailed data on people contacted by prevention services during a year and on a record date (2006), plus the problems in counting, see also the study H. Schoibl mentioned above.)

Very often, homelessness is hidden (temporary stay with friends) - this hidden homelessness can be found especially frequently for women, adolescents, young adults and migrants.

In Austria in 2001, about 200.000 persons still lived in disordered and unhealthy substandard flats (National Census 2001). These data are expected to be considerably lower to date. Still, primarily migrants in speculation houses or in unacceptable mass accommodation are exploited by far overpriced rents.

Hence, the **key requests** and propositions from the AURORA. process of discourse in 2007 regarding the housing issue were as follows:

Sufficient new construction of affordable housing and access to affordable housing without initial down payment (contribution of own resources - very often people threatened by poverty cannot afford even small contributions to the construction costs).

Nation-wide prevention of eviction - visiting and following up. An important precondition for a successful prevention of eviction is the complete and direct transfer of data on eviction proceedings to the responsible service.

Implementation of the „Right to Housing“ by a new nation-wide advanced regulation of the respective funding and subsidies (harmonising Laender regulations), and by taking

into account the real housing costs – within the framework of the future need-oriented minimum payment.

‘Out-patient service and care’ in the own flat plus creation of appropriate corresponding structures.

A stronger attention to the needs of homeless women and creation of specific services for homeless women.

In the next ‘Austrian National Strategy Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion’: integration of requests regarding the fight against homelessness.

A stronger participation of people affected in the development of legislation, in social planning and in planning and implementation of services for the homeless.

More activating offers and job opportunities, which comply with individual skills. (Former) Homeless need more jobs structured according to their skills, e.g. a more variable work schedule, less hours/day... . Important: to provide a securing framework, there should be a possibility of income additional to social subsidies.

4. Approach and methods -

broad integration of stakeholders and people experiencing poverty, plus complementary methods

With the lead partner Volkshilfe Österreich, an Austrian NGO, and in a partnership of four institutions, I coordinated a discussion process on current and future social policies, integrating stakeholders and people affected from broad fields, which led to policy recommendations on the fight against poverty. It set a special focus on migrants, on the homeless and on poor older people in long term care. Part of the work programme was a written survey on opinions regarding EU and national social policies on expert level.

In regional projects and with the inclusion of social organizations and the responsible social departments of the respective federal states specific measures for the fight against poverty were developed. Through several smaller projects affected groups were included in the process. In a socio-scientific survey the current state of knowledge as well as the standpoint of the professional public were determined.

A **media campaign** aimed at providing all the necessary information about selected points of focus for a broader public audience.

Two areas of action from the European Union's Lisbon Strategy formed the centre:

Social protection and social inclusion.

The topic of social protection includes the demand for high-quality and sustainable health care and long-term care that also has to be accessible to those threatened or affected by poverty. The focus lies on long-term care for older people, also including individuals affected as well as service providers from a migratory background.

In the topic of social inclusion measures for the support of those most severely affected by poverty – from homeless people or people threatened by homelessness, to migrants and minorities and people with multiple indication – were developed.

The special complex of problems for women and the associated necessity of specific services were explicitly considered.

The Volkshilfe Österreich (People's Aid Austria, NGO) implemented the project from February 2007 to January 2008 in collaboration with the partners SRZ Urban and Regional Research, BAWO Austrian Association of Service Providers for the Homeless, and Initiative Minderheiten (Initiative Minorities, NGO).

The social departments of the federal states of Carinthia, Styria, Upper Austria and Vienna, as well as the Association of Austrian Cities and Towns supported A U R O R A as regards content and finance.

The presented statements, findings and proposition are based on this broad exchange process, a forum including relevant stakeholders from politics and administration, NGOs, expert level and representatives of people affected. The process was structured and coordinated by, among others, the non-university institute SRZ Urban+Regional Research, i.e. the author of this paper. The institute also contributed a survey among the stakeholders involved, asking for statements regarding the European and Austrian Social Inclusion Policy.

We think that a structured discourse integrating the implementation level can be a helpful tool both for making academic research outcomes, national and European, accessible to a broader public and to animate innovation directly in the field.

4.1 Implementation of the 'discourse' – some examples

The topic of 'homelessness' was addressed in all four seminars of the project. Aside from this, the AURORA.-project was presented and thematised at several workshops of the partner BAWO (Austrian Association of Service Providers for the Homeless). Additionally, three more fields were addressed and elaborated:

1. Participation of the Homeless in social planning and implementation
2. Homelessness and access to the labour market
3. Impact of the future need-oriented minimum payment on the customers of the Homeless Services

Kick-off meeting Vienna

To organise an animating and realistic access to the issue of 'homelessness', members of the '11% K. Theater', a theatre project of the street journal AUGUSTIN, performed by (former) homeless people, were integrated in the planning and the implementation of the kick-off event in April 2007. In a half-an-hour performance the troupe presented its ideas on a „Super!Sozial!“-Service (super-social-service). Afterwards, the members of the troupe participated in workshops, the workshop on homelessness and others. Following the specifications of the project (networking among various issues and their representatives), some (former) homeless persons also participated in the working groups 'migration' and 'basic issues of social integration and fight against poverty'. In the workshop 'homelessness', people affected by homelessness were confronted with the fields of Social Planning, departments of municipalities, and with NGOs from diverse fields.

Graz Regional Workshop

The agenda of the workshop in Graz (June 2007) provided a special focus on ‘Services for the Homeless’.

Firstly, the topic ‘services for the homeless’ was discussed in a theory-based keynote to standards for the services (H. Schoibl, see homepage, in German), then in a plenary discussion with representatives of local and Laender policy (including the Graz City Counsellor for Housing, universities as well as local and national NGOs. Finally, according to the three main fields in social work with the homeless, working groups discussed ‘prevention’, ‘fight of and mitigation of homelessness’ and ‘re-habitation’, and brought their conclusion to the final podium.

Linz Regional Workshop

The Linz Workshop focused on the ‘need of long-term care and threat of poverty’. The issue ‘homelessness’ was marginally integrated in the presentations and working groups on ‘housing types for the elderly’ and ‘older migrants’.

Final meeting Klagenfurt – ,Taking Stock’

The final meeting involved the presentation and discussion of the key findings of the project including the presentation of the results for the field of services for the homeless.

Subsequently, there were intense discussions on the demand of re-installation of effective upper levels for rents instead of the current legislation. Especially the representative of the ‘Young Economy’ voted against it. Finally, all discussants agreed on the urgent need of more construction of affordable housing and to subsidise the first down payments to people on low income, without repayment.

In the working group ‘participation of people affected’, representatives of organisations of people affected within the services for the homeless discussed processes of participation and their short-term implementation. The project team provided innovative European experience and concepts.

Workshop with (former) homeless people

Towards the end of the project, within the framework of the project ‘People experiencing poverty’ the Austrian ‘Armutskonferenz’ (Anti-Poverty Network) invited one of the project coordinators to present the outcomes of the AURORA project in a workshop with (former) homeless people, and there was a vivid discussion on the findings and recommendations. This discussion could also be included into the final report.

6. Further action – ongoing projects and initiatives

In the final report, the conclusions of the AURORA project also included some self-critique and first propositions how a project like this could be further developed, to profit from and build on the built ‘community’ and the level of discussion until then.

Within the mix of contacted and integrated people, a further project should include broader fields, such as the economy and its representing bodies (especially regarding job initiatives for those furthest from the labour market), the housing field (poverty is strongly linked to inadequate housing situations; especially the social housing field and

the non- or limited profit housing associations should be better integrated), and also broader lobbying institutions.

Another important mission for future projects should be to proceed more ambitiously in the integration and participation of people affected, after good experiences with the first step in this project.

Of course, future challenges were seen in the upcoming problems on the housing and then the financial market. However, the extent to which 'the crisis' would affect the global society was unimaginable at the time.

As mentioned before, this encouraged the team to apply for another project funding within the new PROGRESS programme of the Open Method of Coordination / Social Protection and Social Inclusion process.

A further intensifying two-year project – 'AURORA plus. New Ways out of Poverty' - was then granted by the EU in the end of 2008 and now gives us the opportunities to broaden the exchange. Again, housing is one of the main issues addressed (alongside 'people on minimum payment – active inclusion', 'poverty of women', and 'migratory background' as a transversal issue).

The project activity will also build links to activities and events during the '2010 year of the fight against poverty', on the national and the European level. This will provide a better visibility for the issue.

The discussion in the Kick Off Event last April built on the findings of the first project and already integrated some new focuses.

In extension to the considerations in the first project, this one intends to concentrate more strongly on structural criteria of the housing market, which could cause excluding effects, or which obviously already do. This means we are broadening our view to include not only the special situation of those already excluded.

Thus, the project addresses: people threatened by poverty and threatened / affected by housing loss.

And the mission is to look for 'new ways of homelessness / secured housing'.

The questions proposed regarding 'threat of the housing situation and homelessness' to be discussed in the plenary (including the minister for Employment and Social affairs) and in the working group on housing were:

- Access to housing
- Affordability
- Loss of housing
- 'Housing first!' concept.

First results, brought to the fore by the working group on housing in the kick-off event: Homelessness is a consequence of poverty and at the same time produces further poverty.

- Ways out of homelessness:
- The *future need-oriented minimum payment* should also secure against threat of housing loss.
- Prevention of eviction prevents homelessness.
- Individual housing allowances should be broadly accessible (cancel constraints widely)
- Access to housing for all – also non-EU-citizens. Lowering the down payment for a better accession.
- Housing assistance for individual housing problems.
- Cap for housing costs: effective upper level for rents.
- ‚Housing First!‘: creation of sufficient housing infrastructure.

One of three planned Regional Thematic Workshops, in September 2009 will focus on the housing issue, and will include a broad range of participants, from European experts to those working in the field on the local level and people affected.

Participation of affected people and inclusion of their critical input will also take place, by the help of a structured discussion process in ‘focus groups’ (developed and carried out by the Institut für Gesellschafts- und Sozialpolitik of the Johann Kepler University Linz, Bettina Leibetseder, whose results will then be discussed in the Thematic Workshop.

The author of this paper will also be able to both integrate knowledge and experience in other European cities and ‘export’ Austrian findings within a network project on social housing – SUITE The Housing Project – within the URBACT II Programme, funded by the ERDF Structural Funds. She is Lead Expert of the network, including 9 European cities from old and new member states. FEANTSA the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, IUT International Union of Tenants, CECODHAS The European Liaison Committee for Social Housing and EUROCITIES working group on housing are members of the Board of Counsellors of the network.

The author would be happy if future conferences of the ENHR would again provide the opportunity to present further findings from the ambitious exchange process of AURORA plus, which will be finished by the end of 2010.

7. Outlook – an evidence-based approach

As a ‘*ceterum censeo*’, I’d like to return to mind that there is still a (currently not commonly active) working group on ‘Prevention of Homelessness’, which was founded in an ESF Exploratory Workshop in York in 2006 (funded by the ESF European Science Foundation), and which developed an ambitious research plan for a project on ‘Homelessness prevention: Models of governance’ (HOPE, 2007). Unfortunately, the application to EUROCORES in 2007 wasn’t successful, but we think that the issue is still a burning question and should be investigated in a broad European context. I’d like to encourage the colleagues to restart an initiative.

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SUITE The Housing Project (2008 to 2011) URBACT II Network, funded by DG Regio within the ERDF URBACT II Programme (2008 – 2013), (Lead Partner: City of Santiago de Compostela, Lead Expert: Heidrun Feigelfeld). www.urbact.eu .