

Event Report

The right to housing: Future perspectives of a European Housing policy for a more social Europe

On the occasion of the International Tenant's Day/UN World Habitat Day on the 5th of October 2009, the International Union of Tenants (IUT) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) organised a symposium entitled "The right to housing - Future perspectives of a European Housing policy for a more social Europe". The event was a follow-up to the conference "Decent housing for a social Europe - Could European structural funds be the answer for the Eastern European housing sector?" which was hosted jointly by FES and IUT earlier this year. Complementary to the first conference, where the opening of the European Structural Funds for energetic refurbishment and its consequences for the Eastern European Housing market have been discussed, the aim of this symposium was to propose and to discuss concrete steps which can be made in order to implement the right to housing at the European level. The purpose of housing rights is to achieve full prevention of homelessness and to provide tenants with appropriate and decent housing (which means an affordable, energy-efficient and healthy residential environment for an affordable and fair rent). The current European standards on the right to housing according to the European Social Charter (accessibility, adequacy, prevention and reduction of homelessness, and affordability) only fulfil the minimum requirements on adequate housing. These and other international obligations like the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) should be further developed as well as recognised and involved in the implementation of housing rights by the nation states in order to protect people from homelessness, social exclusion and fuel poverty.

In times of economic and financial crisis, many people across Europe are experiencing a great housing need. Due to the rising costs for housing and energy there are already 78 million people (16% of the European population) affected by the risk of poverty - therefore housing rights are strongly gaining relevance. **Anke Fuchs**, the president of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, declared in her opening speech that the right to housing is a fundamental right. Although housing policy is within the competence of the Member States, the institutional, political and legislative actions must be taken at the European level in order to ensure affordable and adequate housing for all citizens. Referring to this, Anke Fuchs underlined that the year 2009 is a crucial year for Europe: The European Parliament elections in June, the upcoming renewal of the European Commission in November and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty are milestones to pave the way for institutional and political changes in Europe. These events offer a great opportunity to contribute to a more social and fair Europe and open a window of opportunity to obtain a new housing policy at the European level. This is especially important against the background, that housing policy is linked closely to many policy areas, which fall under the jurisdiction of the European Union - such as social policy, regional development or energy and climate policy.

In the following discussion, which was chaired by **Dr. Franz-Georg Rips**, the director and president of the German Union of Tenants, the respective speakers of the symposium examined future perspectives for a European Housing policy from their respective thematic background.

Lauri Sivonen, the adviser to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, paid his attention to the legitimate perspective of the housing policy. He underlined that housing rights can inspire and develop meaningful and effective responses to homelessness, and promote equality and non-discrimination in housing systems. Mr. Sivonen noted that the expression 'right to housing' is usually considered to refer to a cluster of more specific rights related to adequate housing and living conditions. Nevertheless, in general terms, Mr. Sivonen defined it as 'the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity'. He highlighted, that without adequate housing, it would be very difficult to exercise the right to privacy and family life at all. In his speech, Mr. Sivonen introduced the core international instruments for the right to housing such as The UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the revised European Social Charter. He also outlined several recommendations published by the Commissioner in June 2009. These recommendations instruct the member states on how to implement their international obligations regarding housing rights.

The president of the Swedish union of tenants, **Barbro Engman**, talked about the advantages of the Swedish rental system and introduced the Swedish model for housing policy, which has recently been revised by the Swedish government. Ms. Engman emphasized that the question about decent and affordable housing is of great importance and high up on the Swedish political agenda. Moreover, the European Commission and the European Parliament take greater part in housing related issues than ever before. The opening of the structural funds and the energy efficiency directive prove that housing policy is becoming a more and more important aspect on the political agenda of the EU. Ms. Engman stated furthermore, that in the light of the current financial downturns, the tenancy is a stable and comfortable way of living in difficult times. She hopes that the financial crisis will lead to an increase of the rental sector and put an end to social differences and poverty. In her opinion, the rental market is a great opportunity to make housing available for everyone. Housing is a social right and housing policy must create the conditions for everyone to live in decent dwellings at reasonable costs as well as in stimulating and safe environment.

The European Parliament was represented by the Members of Parliament **Constance Krehl** and **Silvia Tica**. Constance Krehl, who is member of the Committee on Regional Development, presented realistic insights on the opening of the structural funds for energetic refurbishments in social housing. She pointed out, that the amount of 350 billion Euro, which is foreseen for the period from 2007 till 2013, is actually not much when it has to be divided between all the member states and that the money is hardly sufficient for all energetic renovations needed. This is especially true considering the fact that only up to 4% for the old member states and up to 6% for the new member states can be used from the structural funds for energetic renovations. Another problem is, that the opening of the funds did not provide 'fresh' money: if the member states or regions want to use money from the structural funds, they would have to reallocate funds from their operational programs, which have been foreseen e.g. for education, infrastructure or research – for very

understandable reasons the member states are not willing to do this. Constanze Krehl pleaded for a comprehensive structural policy for all member states – until now the concentration has been on the Eastern European member states which receive 82% of the funds at the moment. Furthermore she declared, that the cohesion policy should focus on a few core topics in the future rather than to fund a broad range of topics. One focus should be urban development and housing policy. For this reason, Ms. Krehl advised all unions of tenants to start negotiating with the European institutions and national government about their interests in the near future. The planning process for the next period of structural funds from 2014 on has already started and Ms. Krehl offered to represent the interests of tenants in the European Parliament.

Silvia Ticau, who is the rapporteur for the European Energy Performance of Buildings Directives (EPBD) for the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy in European Parliament, emphasized the great impact of this new directive for tenants all over Europe. The EPBD requires all EU countries to enhance their building regulations and to introduce energy certification schemes for buildings. This will in turn affect building standards towards changing for better energy efficiency. Ms. Ticau underlined that the cheapest and the fastest way to reduce the emissions (the European Union has decided to cut the emissions by 20% until the year 2020) is to increase energy efficiency in the building sector.

To sum up, the conference gave a great opportunity to see which regulations and instruments on the right to housing already exist at the national and at the EU level and how they can be further developed among experts, politicians and civil society actors.

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