

FINAL COMMUNIQUE

1. The 13th annual meeting of the Ministers of Housing of the Member States of the European Union, held in Brussels and Charleroi on 1st and 2nd October 2001 focused essentially on the following theme: "Housing policy as a way of reinforcing social cohesion". The Ministers highly appreciated the EU European Commission's participation.
2. Although housing policy is the exclusive responsibility of the European Union Member States, the Ministers considered that the annual meeting of housing ministers, a forum for comparing and exchanging information on the policies pursued, was useful and necessary. These meetings contribute to the formulation of measures to promote social cohesion, the environment and sustainable development, in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
3. The Ministers praised the preparatory work carried out by the Swedish Presidency. They acknowledged the work done at the seminars organised during the housing week held in Gävle from 26 to 29 March 2001 which laid the foundations for the discussions held at this 13th meeting of Housing Ministers.
4. Based on the summary report produced by the Belgian Presidency, the Ministers took note of the fact that most Member States are introducing cross-sector programmes in disadvantaged areas affected by a decline in the residential environment and by social exclusion. The programmes aim both to physically regenerate the residential environment and to improve the socio-economic conditions of residents. The Ministers noted that this approach recognised that policies that had in the past been solely intended to renovate the urban landscape of problem districts had in fact been able to slow the process of economic and social marginalisation of residents in these areas, but only to a certain extent.

The Ministers also recognised that Member States were adopting an increasingly broad based approach to problems relating to social exclusion, notably in terms of urban policy. The Ministers agreed that an integrated approach was necessary since it was now clear that social exclusion was not the result of a single factor, but rather an accumulation of different causes.

Lastly, the Ministers noted that programmes carried out in underprivileged areas were characterised by the aim of making residents partners in the development of their own areas. Thus residents either actively participate in the development of appropriate programmes and measures or are at least closely involved in the projects at different levels (information, consultation, participation, etc.). The Ministers supported this approach and insisted that the involvement of residents in such projects should not only be confined to the project implementation phase but should also occur at earlier stages, including the design stage, and later stages, for instance, monitoring projects to ensure the continuity of their positive effects.

5. The Ministers also listened to the comments of the experts appointed by the four successive Presidencies concerning innovative practices to reinforce social cohesion. In addition, they took note of the position of the NGOs (CECODHAS and FEANTSA) and of the conclusions of the colloquium organised by the Belgian Presidency in partnership with the European Housing Forum. Held in Liège on 24th and 25th September, this Colloquium, of which the Ministers underlined the quality of organisation and debates, dealt with housing as an instrument of social cohesion. The Ministers agreed that innovative experiences involving housing aimed at reinforcing social cohesion were extremely diverse as they mostly occurred at local level. They noted that the success of these experiences depended to a large extent on the determination of local players. The Ministers stressed the fact that Member States must set up frameworks to provide good conditions for implementing these practices.

The Ministers, in accordance with the final communiqué of the 12th meeting, repeated their strong support for the decisions made by the Council of Ministers in Lisbon to favour social inclusion, “the Council of Ministers invites the European Council and the Commission to integrate the promotion of solidarity in the policies of the Member States in matters of employment, education and training, health and housing; this integration being completed at Community level by means of the structural funds within the present budgetary framework”.

6. The Ministers welcome the recognition of housing as an instrument of social cohesion following the decisions of the European Council in Nice regarding the objectives of the European strategy to combat social exclusion and all forms of discrimination. They are delighted that amongst these objectives are included the following:

“1.2. b) To implement policies which aim to provide access for all to decent and sanitary housing conditions, as well as the basic services necessary to live normally having regard to local circumstances (electricity, water, heating, etc.).

- 2. b) To put in place policies which seek to prevent life crises which can lead to situations of social exclusion, such as indebtedness, exclusion from school and becoming homeless.”

Housing is one of the core elements in the combat against social exclusion. The Ministers considered that an access for all to decent and sanitary housing must be included in the national action plans formulated by Member States in the context of the above-mentioned strategy.

The Ministers noted that the Charter of Fundamental Rights announced at the Nice Council lays down in Article 34 §3 : “in order to combat social exclusion and poverty, the Union recognises and respects the right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices”

The Ministers note that a common objective is useful and must be achieved by all the Member States with regard to decent housing, ensuring common principles such as physical security, respect for health, adequate maintenance and a minimum level of comfort which are fundamental to human dignity. Furthermore, this objective should be included in the legislation of the Member States while taking into account their distinctive characteristics.

7. In line with the final communiqué of the 10th meeting of the Housing Ministers, the Ministers stated that they "reiterate their wish that the European Commission should support co-operation of Member States and the exchange of information in the field of housing policy, e.g. with regard to "The Fight Against Social Exclusion", to the extent that such co-operation and exchange of information is permitted by the Amsterdam Treaty". They noted that the Nice Treaty amends Article 137 of the Treaty establishing the European Community by adding "the fight against exclusion to the areas in which the Community must support and complete the action by Member States to achieve the objectives set down under Article 136 (which include improving living conditions and the fight against exclusion)".

The Ministers noted that during the European Council of Nice the Heads of States approved the objectives of combating poverty and social exclusion. The Member States were invited to develop their priorities in relation to these objectives and to submit by June 2001 a national action plan covering a two-year period and defining indicators and monitoring mechanisms to measure progress. In their national action plans most countries have integrated housing as a means of combating poverty and social exclusion. According to the understanding of the ministers it should be ensured that such integration continues in the future.

The Ministers noted that at the European Councils in Lisbon and Feira, the Member States decided that an open method of coordination would combine national action plans with a community support programme. The Social Protection Committee would play a key role in following up this initiative. On employment matters it would work closely with the Employment Committee. In addition to this, the Member States were invited to undertake cooperation at the European level in order to bring about a better understanding of the problem of exclusion, to promote exchanges of good practice, and to seek to develop common approaches and compatibility in regard to indicators; the Action Programme proposed by the Commission would support this cooperation.

The Ministers noted the conclusions of the European Council meeting in Göteborg in which the Union's sustainable development strategies were a central issue. In its conclusions, it was stated that in order to improve policy coordination at the level of Member States, the European Council invites Member States to draw up their own national sustainable development strategies. Social cohesion is one of the elements of these strategies.

The Ministers noted that although there are many aspects in our society which lead to social exclusion, this should not be seen as “a law of nature”. A lack of policies, or inappropriate policies, can increase social exclusion whereas good policies can have a very positive effect. Housing policy can combat social exclusion by promoting a social mix of residents, a mix of different types of housing units, and a mix of different forms of ownership.

The Ministers noted that one of the most extreme manifestations of social exclusion is homelessness. This is pointed out in the conclusions of the Nice European Council. Experiences in the EU countries show that concrete results can be achieved in this field through carefully considered packages of policies.

8. The Ministers took note of the Commission’s recommendation of defining the guidelines relating to the harmonisation of information to be given to borrowers by lenders offering home loans. These guidelines are intended to assist consumers to compare loan offers made to citizens by different mortgage-lenders on the market, including those in another Member State. This would enable private individuals to take a decision in full knowledge of the facts. The Ministers wish to be associated with this type of recommendation where housing is concerned.
9. The Ministers took note of the own-initiative opinion by the Economic and Social Committee on “Strengthening of the law governing concessions and public/private partnership contracts”. They consider that this type of partnership may be the answer in certain cases where it is necessary to mobilise special means in order to respond to housing needs. They draw the Commission’s attention to the diversity of local situations and on the need to respond to these with ad hoc formulas. By the same token, they insist on the fact that any possible EU initiative in this field allows different types of partnerships. Nevertheless, in line with the final communiqué of the 12th meeting of Housing Ministers, they state that “ the essential role played by public policies mostly in terms of developing housing supply (...) helping certain categories of households in difficulty to have access to housing or stay in their present dwelling”. Public housing can only reach the different assigned objectives by means of specific regulations.

10. The Ministers devoted part of their discussions to the conclusions of the special session to review and appraise the implementation of the Habitat Agenda (Habitat II +5) which took place in New York between the 6th and 8th June 2001. They thanked the Swedish Presidency for the work conducted during the special session, in which consensus was achieved on a declaration. European Union countries, headed by the Swedish Presidency, published a report on their experiences in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, which was presented at a special session. They noted that the goals and principles of adequate shelter for all and the development of sustainable human settlements in an urban world, as set out in the Habitat Agenda, were reiterated in the declaration on cities and other human settlements adopted at the end of the special session.

The Ministers underlined, in accordance with the final communiqué of the 10th meeting of Housing Ministers, that "every possible means should be used in the realisation of the Habitat Agenda", and more specifically that implementation should be regularly evaluated.

The Ministers also underlined the fact that the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and the pursuit of sustainable development are intimately linked and interdependent, and that the development of human settlements is a key factor for sustainable development. They stress the importance of coordination between urban renewal and housing policies.

The European Union should pay attention to these different interrelationships at the world summit on sustainable development to be held in Johannesburg in 2002. In line with the final communiqué of the 12th meeting of Housing Ministers, the Ministers agreed that the "The European Union (...) must continue to make its voice heard, and thus take part in the construction of a process that will improve the situation of human settlements around the world".

11. The Ministers were pleased to see the publication of statistics on housing in the European Union, thanks to a Finnish initiative. The statistics will shortly be available on the Internet site <http://www.euhousing.org>. They welcomed the Belgian proposal to take up the torch as regards the preparation of European Union housing statistics to be published in 2002.

They hoped that "regular national reports on housing developments in European countries" would continue to be published each year to permit a systematic exchange of updated information on the development of housing policies in the European Union.

12. The Ministers welcomed Belgium's invitation to participate, building on the 2nd conference held in the Netherlands in 1997, in the 3rd European Conference of Housing Ministers concerning "sustainable" housing policies, to be held in the first half of 2002, where the Eastern European countries will be invited.

They also welcomed Denmark's proposal to organise a meeting at civil servant level on 3rd and 4th October 2002 to discuss mixed ownership and atypical forms of housing occupation to combat social exclusion. They thank Spain for organising, during the first semester of 2002, the preparatory meeting for this session.

The Ministers thanked Italy, which will take on the Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2003, for hosting the meeting of Housing Ministers. In accordance with the final communiqués of previous meetings, they pointed out that a forum for debate permitting an exchange of views and of experience is necessary in order to understand better housing issues and national housing policies in the Member States of the European Union.