

HOUSING POLICIES AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FINAL DOCUMENT PROPOSAL

1. The 15th informal and annual Meeting of Ministers of Housing of the Member States of the European Union, also attended by the EU-accession countries, was held in the city of Padua on November 27th and 28th, 2003. All Member States and accession countries attended the meeting.
2. The Ministers of the Member States welcomed the Ministers of the accession countries who joined their meeting for the first time.
3. The discussions of the Ministerial meeting focused on European integration and housing policy problems and prospects. Although housing is not under the direct competence of the EU, it has complex links with many important issues with EU policies such as: building norms and energy conservation, competition rules, consumer policies, taxation, for instance rules on VAT, finance policies (i.e. Basel II), social inclusion, NAPIncl and Joint Inclusion Memorandums for the accession countries, social and economic rights, statistics, structural funds, and promotion of research and technological development. The theme of this meeting is topical due to the fact that there are developments taking place in several of the aforementioned policy areas that can influence the housing sector.
4. The Ministers expressed their thanks to the Greek Government for having organized the first preparatory meeting, and the Italian Government for organizing the second preparatory meeting, of the European Housing focal points, which set the foundation for their discussions.
5. The Ministers thanked the European Housing Forum which organized in September 2003 a Round Table in Brussels concerning some of the most topical issues and the seminar “Member States Subsidies to Social Housing Undertakings Facing the EU Law” in November 2003 in Brussels. The Housing Ministers noted that such venues are valued by the Member States as their Focal Points have also been given the opportunity to participate.
6. The Ministers expressed their gratitude to those who contributed to the preparation of the meeting, including the European Commission for the presentation which they prepared for the meeting in Athens and to the Belgian and Italian delegations for the reports which they prepared for the Ministerial meeting.
7. The conclusions reached during the Meeting take the following into account:
 - the political declaration made during the 13th Meeting held in Brussels and Charleroi on 1-2 October 2001;
 - the conclusions reached at the 14th Meeting of Ministers held in Genval (Belgium) on 28 June 2002, in which housing is considered a question of fundamental importance closely linked to the concept of sustainable development;
 - the results obtained from the questionnaire on sustainable housing policies in Europe (the third conference on sustainable housing policies);
 - the summary report on the housing policies derived from the questionnaire distributed in Italy on the occasion of the preparatory meeting held in Athens on 9 June 2003;

- the summary report *Interactions between national housing policies and legislation, directives, initiatives, programmes and decisions of the European Union* produced by Belgium;
- the subsequent meetings held in Rome on 2 September, Brussels on 30 September, and again in Rome on 12 November 2003.

8. The European Ministers agreed it was important to recognise housing as one of the fundamental elements in the struggle against social alienation due to its effects on the health, physical safety and social well-being of the citizens, combined with the fact that the lack of adequate housing has negative effects at every level of people's lives and must therefore be considered a cause of social alienation. The Ministers discussed the question of the right to housing, and noted that whilst the principle of the right to housing is included in the legislation of most EU countries, the interpretation of the concept of a right to housing, and the contents and nature of this legislation, varies in the different EU Member States. They also noted the content of the document issued by the European Council in Salonika on 20 June 2003 in which the draft agreement institutes a European Constitution in Title IV, Art.II-34-3 "Social security and social assistance" which reads as follows:

"...in the struggle against social alienation and poverty, the Union recognises and accepts the right to social assistance and assistance in housing for the purpose of ensuring a dignified existence to all those who do not possess sufficient resources according to the methods established by European Union law and Member nation legislation and procedures".

9. The Ministers, in their support of the decisions made by the European Council in Lisbon in favour of social integration, and in recognition of the key role played by housing to the fight against social exclusion, emphasised the importance of the socio-economic questions and related problems caused primarily by greater flows of immigrants, the increased mobility of the citizenry, and demographic evolution are by now common to all European Union Member nations with evident and serious effects on sustainable urban growth.
10. Upon reading the reports prepared by Belgium and Italy, the Ministers noted that the Member States acknowledge that housing policies under national competence, are affected by several ever more binding European laws and other activities.
11. Ministers acknowledged that the positions of the Member States seem to converge in some cases. The Ministers welcome the European standards designed to create a common building products market by standardising national regulations through the definition of these products' main requirements and the Directive of Energy Performance of Buildings.
12. The Member States positions diverge on other matters, including the possibility of limiting VAT reductions to a number of services that require intensive labour. Some nations object to such provision on the grounds that it would have scarce effect on employment levels and housing expenditure.
13. The Ministers noted that the question of state aid - of whether or not public subsidies guaranteed to implement housing policies must conform to European regulations governing national assistance - is one which concerns several Member States. This question is currently examined by the European authorities on a case by case basis.

14. Member States do not share the same opinion on the use of investment from the Structural Funds. There was a divergence of views on the way in which the policy on Structural Funds in relation to housing should develop in the future.
15. Lastly, the reports reveal that some Community activities cannot be applied in the same way in different nations. As an example, in most nations housing organisations that assume the responsibility for housing provision for particular categories of citizens - such as citizens in low income groups - are subjected to the regulations governing public tenders prescribed by European directives whether such companies are local agencies or public bodies. In some nations, however, the organisations entrusted with the management of public or social housing are structured in such a manner that the Community regulations are not applicable.
16. Considering the importance of housing for social inclusion, while noting that each Member nation adopts different housing policies – including national programmes to fund housing measures - which are reflected in their National Action Plans for social inclusion, the European Ministers hereby propose the diffusion and continuation of exchange of information at the informal Ministers meetings on housing on the policies adopted by each Member nation for the purpose of assessing best practice and its possible application especially with the new Member States where there are already many examples of co-operation at different levels.
17. After providing a positive assessment of the experience acquired thus far through the informal meetings held at European level, the European Housing Ministers agree on the following needs:
 - to recognise the value of continuing discussion and consultation with organisations – including non-governmental organisations - in the various nations operating in the field of housing.
 - that as regards social problems linked to housing and the solutions adopted, given that these are questions that regard all Member nations and must be supported by common experience and awareness, the Ministers agreed it was important to facilitate the exchange of such information and experience. For example, encouraging greater co-ordination between housing organisations and encouraging the mobility of personnel and professionals operating in the planning and management of housing construction can help to promote innovative forms of co-operation between nations that may render the experience acquired by different nations transferable whenever the need exists.
18. The Ministers asked the Netherlands to submit the underlying questionnaire of the Belgian report to the EU accession states and prepare an analysis of their responses to be presented for discussions at the next European Housing Ministers meeting, to be held in the Netherlands.
19. The Ministers expressed their thanks to Finland for reporting on progress regarding a study, agreed upon at the 14th meeting of the Ministers of Housing, in which the distribution of tasks regarding statistics, the contents of publications on statistics, and the collection, consistency and comparability of data are analysed. With regard to this study, a draft summary has been delivered which clearly shows that there is a need to reduce unnecessary overlap in compiling data, to enhance the comparability of data, to cover certain important areas in which data are lacking, and to improve access to housing statistics, data and websites. The Ministers noted the strong need for continuing coordination and

dissemination of housing statistics, and express the view that Finland should continue to take a lead in this matter.

20. The Ministers thanked Denmark for the production of “ Housing Statistics in the EU 2003” . They welcomed the Czech and Swedish proposal to take up the torch as regards the preparation of “ Housing Statistics in the EU 2004”. The Ministers expressed their satisfaction regarding the fact that the publication would continue to be published on a regular basis ensuring the systematic collection and exchange of updated information on housing statistics.
21. The Ministers also devoted part of their discussions to the recent developments in UN-Habitat and to the broader process of the implementation of the Habitat agenda in the EU context. The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment in promoting the Habitat agenda, with special emphasis to the basic goals of decent shelter for all and the sustainable development of human settlements.
22. The Ministers noted with appreciation the Irish proposal to host the next meeting of the Focal Points for Housing in Dublin on 24-25 June. The Ministers also note with appreciation Ireland’s willingness to organise the production of national housing progress reports in European Member States, as well as prepare a synthesis of these reports. These reports and the synthesis will permit a systematic exchange of updated information and experiences of the development of housing policies in the EU Member States.
23. The Ministers noted with appreciation that the Netherlands will organize the European Ministers conference on “Sustainable Refurbishment of High-Rise residential Buildings and Restructuring of Surrounding Areas”, to be held in Rotterdam in the second half of 2004. The afore mentioned theme was considered to be very topical in both the Member States and the EU-accession countries.