

FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

12th Informal Meeting of European Union Housing Ministers

Paris, 25- 26 September 2000

"Public policies concerning access to housing"

- 1) The 12th annual meeting of European Union Housing Ministers, which convened in Paris from 25 to 26 September 2000, was mainly devoted to "public policies concerning access to housing".
- 2) The Ministers wished to state that although housing policy falls strictly under the competence of the Member States, there needs to be a debate on the problems at hand, followed by an exchange of information as to the solutions brought to these problems. They were pleased to note that the annual meeting of the Housing Ministers offered the opportunity for such discussions.
- 3) Specific data collected for this meeting on the housing situation in European countries, help give an overall vision of the development of public policies and the housing markets in each country, and which topical subjects have an influence on these policies.
- 4) The Ministers underlined the fact that the division of responsibilities between the public sector and the private sector varies from one country to another depending on the goals of the housing policy, the institutional context, the type of structures and who is involved. However, the public sector's contribution in terms of creating a legislative framework, controlling economic instruments and correcting imperfections in the market is still very necessary. It helps implement the different types of measures so vital to allowing population groups, whose problems cannot be solved by the market alone, to have access to proper and financially affordable housing and services.
- 5) Ministers were given a briefing on the papers presented by various experts last spring in Lisbon during the International Forum organised by Portugal. They also heard the position of NGOs on access to housing. On this point, they underlined the essential role played by public policies mostly in terms of developing housing supply, and more particularly making housing (social or private) accessible to low income households, providing assistance (financial, fiscal, etc.) to households incapable of covering housing expenses much higher than their resources, and more specifically, helping certain categories of households in difficulty to have access to housing or stay in their present dwelling.
- 6) They noted that the local housing situation in most countries is quite contrasted: weakened markets in areas of economic and demographic decline, and tight markets often in high-growth areas. Whereas public policies must diversify their action in order to boost the construction of dwellings where needed and allow for the regeneration of problem areas, these policies must be included within the framework of sustainable development and urban regeneration. The Ministers also noted the need to develop already-existing urban areas, rather than open up new spaces for development.
- 7) The Ministers noted the growing problem of segregation in larger European cities, where more urban areas are divided into well functioning areas and deprived areas. Urban policies, where the city is seen as a whole and focus is put on both the problems and potentials of an area, are important tools in the fight against and prevention of urban segregation because they promote a social mix.

The Ministers expressed strong support for the Lisbon European Council decisions to promote social inclusion: « The European Council invites the Council and the Commission to : mainstream the promotion of social inclusion in Member States' employment, education and training, health and housing policies, this being complemented at Community level by action under the Structural Funds within the present budgetary framework. »

Housing is one of the key factors in the fight against social exclusion. The Ministers emphasised that access to adequate and affordable housing for all should be one of the priorities in the social inclusion policies of the Member States.

- 8) The Ministers devoted part of their work to the preparation of the Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, "Istanbul + 5", which will be held in New York in 2001. The European Union, which took an active part during the Habitat II meeting in Istanbul, 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. It is important that the "Istanbul + 5" development process focus on following-up and evaluating the Habitat agenda, as well as preserving and furthering the important advances made in Istanbul in 1996. The Special Session should be devoted notably to a constructive exchange of ideas and good practices through thematic presentations, and the implementation of the Habitat agenda by a wide range of Habitat partners, including representatives of local governments and NGOs.
- 9) The Ministers welcomed the edition of "Housing Statistics in the European Union 2000" presented by the Netherlands during the meeting; it is now also available on the Internet (www.euhousing.org).
They expressed their appreciation of Finland's willingness to take the lead in preparing the next edition of "Housing Statistics in the European Union" which will be published in the course of 2001.
The Ministers expressed their wish to continue the publication of annual national progress reports on housing developments in the EU Member States.
- 10) The Ministers identified important subjects of common interest. The objective of this proposal is to stimulate targeted exchange of information and experience including relevant research between the Member States. The Ministers wished to see a representative from the European Commission participating at the next meetings in order to allow a debate on the interaction between EU policies and national housing policies. Consequently, the Ministers asked that the European Commission, in the same way as the Member States, designate again a "focal point" for housing.
- 11) Other areas of common interest have been identified :
 - (a) Strengthening the position of housing consumers in the planning process in a broad sense (from urban planning development of projects to the construction of dwellings and effective quality control of the building process).

- (b) Achieving a balance in the housing market. (Rising house prices is a current phenomenon in many countries experiencing strong economic growth. It is unclear what the macro-economic effects will be).
 - (c) The position of social (institutional) landlords (housing associations, etc.).
 - (d) The relationship between the social and the physical development of weak urban areas. Instruments aimed at stabilising these urban areas?
 - (e) Housing and health and environment:
 - The demands of an ageing/greying population require new and adapted forms of housing combined with health care and services.
 - Issues related to housing and the disabled.
 - Sustainable buildings. Minimise the use of raw materials, resources and the buildings' influence on the environment during their life cycle.
 - The influence that building quality has on health.
 - (f) possibilities of housing for the homeless
 - (g) Issues related to the habitat of nomadic people.
 - (h) Financial systems: the positive and negative side effects that subsidies, taxes, and rent control have on the balance of the housing market.
 - (i) Access to housing for all: guarantees provided to different players (tenant, lessor, buyer, lending institution); specific provisions supporting certain categories of households; mediation and assistance arrangements, etc.
 - (j) Better knowledge of the housing vacancy phenomenon represents a challenge.
- Different ways of managing collective ownership of housing buildings.

- 12) The Ministers congratulated the French Presidency on the quality of this meeting's preparation.

At the invitation of Belgium, which will take over the Presidency of the European Union during the second half of 2001, the Ministers agreed that the next annual meeting of the Housing Ministers would take place in Brussels, on 25-28 September 2001.

This meeting, as an extension of the Paris meeting, will look further into the topic of access to housing.

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