Improving the Democratic Quality of EU Policy Making : What Role for the Participation of People Experiencing Homelessness ?

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❯ **Abstract_** *A lively debate emerged recently amongst FEANTSA members and other stakeholders about the role that people experiencing homelessness should (or should not) play in designing, implementing and evaluating homelessness strategies and policies at local, national and European levels. This think piece discusses the political participation of people experiencing homelessness in European policy-making processes from the perspective of deliberative democracy theory. With reference to the criteria for an ideal speech situation as developed by Jürgen Habermas, it examines the validity of some of the key arguments that are usually put forward against the political participation of homeless people at European level. It then looks at some practical barriers regarding the possible establishment of a European network of homeless people and compares these with the obstacles faced by other European organisations, such as FEANTSA. It concludes that from the perspective of deliberative democracy, there is little scope to oppose the political participation or mobilisation of homeless people at European level without implicitly questioning one's own legitimacy to participate in the political discourse. While homeless people would indeed face greater challenges in developing a European organisation than service-provider organisations, these obstacles are neither fundamentally different nor insurmountable.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Homelessness ; participation ; user organisation ; European Union policy making ; deliberative democracy ; Habermas ; social inclusion*

Introduction

The fight against homelessness has gained visibility on the European agenda in recent years. In the *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion*, for example, the European Commission (2010) calls on all member states to develop integrated national homelessness strategies and increase efforts to improve the quality of service provision for homeless people. In this context, a lively and rather controversial debate emerged amongst FEANTSA members and other stakeholders about the role people experiencing homelessness themselves should (or should not) play in designing, implementing and evaluating homelessness strategies and policies at local, national and European level (e.g. Allen, 2009; Anker, 2009; Paasche, 2009; Svejstrup Laurberg, 2009).

On the one hand there is an increasing understanding that the active involvement of homeless people within homelessness services as well as decision-making processes affecting these services at local level must be an essential part of any effective homelessness strategies (Allen, 2009; Paasche, 2009). Organisations working with homeless people are interested in tools to develop participatory practices further in their services, including the setting up of local service-user groups and service-user councils. FEANTSA responded to this increasing request for information by setting up a European participation working group that regularly produces information and practical tools for FEANTSA members. In addition, FEANTSA dedicated its annual theme 2009 to the issue of participation and homelessness and organised a European conference entitled 'Sharing the power – Working together: Participation as a tool to solve homelessness' (Paasche, 2009).

On the other hand there is sometimes a strong reluctance to promote the direct participation of people experiencing homelessness in broader policy debates at national and European levels. This scepticism also prevails with regard to the possible establishment of a European network of people experiencing homelessness that would complement the work of FEANTSA, the European network of homelessness service providers.

The concerns put forward around the involvement of service users in the political work at EU level or the setting up of a European network of homeless people are usually based on experiences at national and local level. Many attempts to increase the political involvement of people experiencing homelessness have been perceived as problematic (Allen, 2009) or merely tokenistic exercises. It would be wrong to neglect these experiences and the real challenges involved in creating opportunities for meaningful participation. However, there is a risk that by overemphasising the obstacles, the opportunities offered by the stronger involvement of homeless people in the fight against homelessness at European level are being neglected.

More importantly, an approach focusing on the barriers to participation risks side-lining general principles in relation to citizens' rights and values linked to democratic decision-making processes. If these democratic principles are not promoted and valued by FEANTSA and its member organisations, there is a risk of undermining the legitimacy of civil society organisations in general, including FEANTSA's own legitimacy to take part in decision-making processes at EU level.

I will argue from the perspective of democratic theory that the difference between the political mobilisation of homeless people and the political organisation of other interests groups, such as FEANTSA, is only a relative difference. But within this framework it is difficult to oppose the existence or development of such political participation or of a European network.

Theoretical Background : Deliberative Democracy at EU level

The main argument in this paper is inspired by theories of democracy, and more specifically by the concept of deliberative democracy and its application to the analysis of political processes at European level. Deliberative democracy was inter alia conceptualised by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In contrast to traditional political theory that emphasises the importance of voting in democratic decision-making processes, deliberative democracy highlights the need for a free and public deliberation in order to legitimise decisions.

According to Habermas, the aim is to create a communicative space that is undistorted by any kind of asymmetrical power relations and that allows its participants to identify the 'best' (i.e. 'rational') solution. A collective decision therefore is democratic, not because it is founded on the simple aggregation of interests, but because it is the result of a free exchange of arguments from and to those governed by the decision or their representatives. Habermas (1990, p.89) defined a number of rules in order to have an ideal speech situation.

1.   Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.

3.   No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).

Habermas's concept of an ideal speech situation as the foundation for democratic decision making has been criticised for various reasons. First, it has been criticised for assuming the possibility of a 'quasi-objective' (intersubjectively comprehensible) understanding of what is 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', that can be defined independently from the personal interests and situation of the people participating in the deliberation. Second, Habermas gave little guidance on possible ways to create spaces for an ideal speech situation and to make deliberative democracy work in practice. Nevertheless, Habermas's thinking and the concept of deliberative democracy in general gave a new impetus for the analysis of democracy and decision-making processes.

Deliberative Democracy in Practice: Measuring the Democratic Quality of EU Policy-Making Processes

The concept of deliberative democracy has been fruitful for the analysis of EU policy making. Decisions at European level are taken within the unique architecture of a supranational entity that differs to a certain extent from traditional democratic processes at national level. The Open Method of Coordination (OMC), for instance, is a unique policy-making method in areas where there is no or only limited legal competence at EU level, such as social inclusion and social protection.

The OMC is an intergovernmental process in which the European Parliament only plays a consultative role. Its main aim is to coordinate rather than harmonise policies based on commonly defined objectives, mutual learning and regular monitoring. It was always presented as an attempt to tackle the democratic deficit of EU policy making through involving a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society organisations. Due to this unique set-up, the OMC has become an interesting 'test case' for research on deliberative-democratic modes of governance (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004). The OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion is the main policy framework for the issue of homelessness at European level.

The following analysis is therefore based on the assumption that the principles of deliberative democracy are a valid normative framework in order to conceptualise democratic decision-making processes at EU level. With reference to the criteria for an ideal speech situation as developed by Habermas, I will first discuss the validity of some of the arguments that are usually put forward against the participation of homeless people at European level. I will then look at the more 'practical' barriers that are usually presented regarding the possible establishment of a European network and compare these with the barriers faced by other representative organisations at European level, such as FEANTSA.

Principal Considerations regarding the Participation of Homeless People at European Level

'Political participation at European level is not relevant for people experiencing homelessness'

Some people have expressed their scepticism about the relevance for homeless people of being involved in policy making at European level. And indeed, from the perspective of deliberative democracy, it would be possible to argue against homeless people's right to participate in decision-making processes at EU level if European policies had no impact whatsoever on them. In this case, homeless people would not be regarded as legitimate participants in the discourse as the collective decisions taken would not apply to them.

Given the work that FEANTSA has done over the last twenty years to demonstrate the direct and indirect impact of EU policies on homelessness and service provision for homeless people, it would be difficult to argue that EU policies do not matter (e.g. Spinnewijn, 2009; Frazer, 2009; FEANTSA, 2006). Questioning the legitimacy of political participation of homeless people on these grounds would also mean questioning the legitimacy of FEANTSA, an EU network that specifically deals with homelessness and housing exclusion at the European level.

But even if EU policies had no impact on homelessness, the fact that homeless people are living on the territory of the EU means they are governed by EU legislation in many areas of their lives. The argument of irrelevance of EU policies cannot therefore be used to disqualify homeless people from political participation.

'Homeless people risk saying things that are not true'

It is also argued that homeless people might not have all the necessary information or may not understand the complexity of an issue and therefore may say things that have proved to be wrong, for example through research. This argument is highly problematic from the point of view of deliberative democracy as it questions the ability of homeless people to make a rational contribution to the debate and undermines their status as 'subjects with the competence to speak and act' (Habermas, 1990, p.89). The idea of a deliberation is not that a person is allowed to say only things that are already accepted as the truth. On the contrary, the basis for the deliberation is the very exchange of arguments. In practice this would mean that any argument that could be challenged by integrating additional information or arguments should be challenged.

Questioning the ability of homeless people to participate in a political discussion also seems problematic given the fact that there is abundant evidence of homeless people being denied their citizenship rights. It is therefore likely that

homeless people would make claims regarding their citizenship rights and access to resources, including information resources, the very content of their political participation.

'Being homeless should not constitute the basis for a person's political participation'

Some people are also very sceptical about the use of the highly stigmatising attribute 'homeless' as a basis for the political participation of a person as it risks making homelessness, i.e. something that should be combated, an integral part of a person's identity (see also Allen, 2009, p.295).

If people experiencing homelessness have the same rights to take part in political processes and form groups as any other citizen group in Europe, this right is obviously not an obligation. And, as for any citizen, it does not necessarily mean that the basis for their participation must be based on their experience of homelessness. They might equally decide to use other forms of political participation and engage in other groups such as political parties. Nevertheless, if homeless people have an interest to be more involved in political processes at EU level as 'homeless people', this at least needs to be tolerated by the other participants in the discourse.

As the third of Habermas's principles states, 'everyone has the right to express his attitudes, desires and needs' (Habermas, 1990, p.89). In practice this means that a participant in the discourse might not approve of the fact that somebody else is politically active as a 'homeless person'. Such a participant also has the right to confront the homeless person with his or her arguments and engage in a debate about it. But it is not possible for the participant to deny homeless people's right to use the attribute 'homeless' as the basis for their political participation without possibly raising questions regarding his or her own 'legitimate' basis for participation in the deliberation.

'Involving homeless people will make the decision making more complicated'

According to Habermas's criteria for the ideal speech situation as the basis for an effective decision, adding a relevant stakeholder (i.e. somebody governed by the decisions taken) to the debate will only increase the democratic quality of the outcome. The risk that adding another stakeholder to the debate might make the decision-making process more complicated or potentially ineffective could also be interpreted as an indicator for the relevance of the participation. If everybody agrees, then the additional stakeholder will only help to reconfirm the dominant position. And if the participation of a more diverse group of stakeholders creates conflict and disagreement, it is likely that the decision taken beforehand was of poor quality and would probably be ineffective in practice as the people governed by the decision did not have ownership of it.

Creating a European Representative Organisation for Homeless People or Homeless Service Providers – a Fundamental Difference?

Besides the theoretical considerations regarding the political participation of homeless people discussed above, it is necessary to examine some of the more practical obstacles that are regularly brought forward in the debates around homeless people's involvement at European level. The obstacles mainly concern the possibility of setting up a European network of homeless people. The idea for such a network recently emerged at a meeting of around forty service users on the occasion of FEANTSA's European Conference in Copenhagen (Bay-Petersen, 2009). The participants at the meeting were quite enthusiastic about the possibility of having such a network and requested further support from the already existing network of service providers, FEANTSA.

Although FEANTSA has expressed its political support for such a network, there was also a lot of scepticism about the feasibility of such a project. It cannot be denied that homeless people would need to overcome several real challenges before setting up a more formal structure at European level. I will argue, however, that these barriers, despite being possibly greater, are not specific to the political organisation of homeless people but were and continue to be challenges for already existing European networks, including FEANTSA.

'The network would not be representative of all homeless people'

Given the diversity of profiles of people that experience a period of homelessness during their lives, it would be very difficult for any homelessness network to represent all possible situations and aspects of homelessness in one organisation. It is in particular challenging to represent the groups that are usually the most vulnerable and the least represented through already existing structures, such as rough sleepers or people with serious mental health and addiction issues (Anker, 2009, p.278). Moreover, due to the transient nature of homelessness, it is a real challenge to ensure a level of continuity and stability in the membership of any homelessness network and to work with former homeless people without losing 'authenticity' (Allen, 2009, p.293; Anker, 2009, p.282).

However, there is no predefined basis for measuring the 'representative quality' or 'authenticity' of European networks for homeless people. As there is currently no network at European level that specifically purports to represent homeless people, the setting up of such a network will be a first step, irrespective of its relative representativeness. Also, FEANTSA did not start off as the organisation that it is today with more than 100 members in thirty European countries. And if we take the group of service users that were present at the conference in Copenhagen as the

basis for such a potential network, one could argue that they do represent a variety of homelessness situations, including both former and current service users, from at least ten different countries.

Just as FEANTSA defined its membership criteria and mission statement, it would be up to the potential European network of homeless people to define its own aims and objectives and to balance the relationship and democratic control within the organisation between present service users, former service users and/or professional staff with no experience of homelessness (see also Svejstrup Laurberg, 2009).

The debate on representativeness is also linked to arguments about the membership of the organisation and claims that such a European network would be a premature development.

'*Setting up a European network is premature as it requires the existence of national umbrella organisations*'

There is the argument that the establishment of a European network would make sense only if there were already national and regional umbrella organisations in place. This is currently not the case for homeless people. A likely scenario would therefore be that the European network of homeless people would also accept local organisations of service users or even individual members. This will really only be a problem for the organisation if the number of members becomes so high that it will not be possible to manage the network in an effective way. Otherwise there are examples of other European networks that have individuals as members (e.g. Mental Health Europe) or at least a large numbers of local organisations (e.g. EASPD – European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities).

The question of membership will also depend on the type of organisation the network would like to be. Is it 'just' a network that sees its main roles as to facilitate transnational exchanges between its members and to offer input to EU policies as 'a voice of homeless people' or will it claim to be a representative for 'the homeless population in Europe'.

Either way the challenge of representativeness and of determining the form of membership are not specific to an organisation of homeless people but will be an ongoing debate in most or even all EU networks. What is more, possible solutions can be imagined, including the idea of phasing out individual members or local member organisations once more representative organisations have been created at regional or even national level, not least with the help of the European network.

'Homeless people lack the necessary resources'

The lack of resources in its widest sense is obviously one of the biggest challenges for homeless people seeking to organise themselves (Allen, 2009, pp.291–2) and possibly to establish a representative organisation at European level.

For many homeless people, a home is their most obvious need and they will want to have this need met before they even consider becoming politically active. However, the conference in Copenhagen demonstrated that despite their difficult living situation, it was possible for some – though certainly not all – homeless people to come to Copenhagen and take part in the debates at European level. A possible way to overcome this barrier used at national level is again to work with a number of former homeless people who are often quite motivated to stay involved and to help other people who are still experiencing homelessness (Anker, 2009, p.282).

It is also not true to say that homeless people have no resources. For example, the existence of an informal network based on an email distribution list constitutes a resource for some homeless people. Another resource is FEANTSA and in particular the participation working group that decided to support the informal network of service users by facilitating the communication and coordination of this network and looking for possible funding resources. With the help of these limited resources, it is possible to imagine securing the necessary funding for a further meeting of the people involved in the first meeting of homeless service users in Copenhagen.

'Once homelessness has been ended, there will be no need for service user organisations'

While important steps have been taken in a number of countries to work towards ending homelessness, no country has yet managed to put this into practice. What is more, participation, including user organisations, can be an important tool in ending homelessness. Participation helps making policies more effective as they will be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of homeless people. Contributing their specific expertise to policy making will also empower homeless people and may prevent their relapse into homelessness.

And ending homelessness does not mean that there are literally no homeless people anymore. It will mean that the focus will change to preventing homelessness in the first place and on supporting people in housing rather than in hostels and shelters. This change will require significant adjustments not only for user organisations but for those providing services for homeless people. Both will still have a role to play, although it is likely to be different from their present role.

Conclusions

From a purely theoretic point of view, there is little scope to oppose the political participation or mobilisation of homeless people at European level. This does not mean that the participation in policy processes at European level will necessarily be a priority for the majority of homeless people or that everybody has to welcome the fact that homeless people are organised as 'homeless people' at European level and not participating through other formations, such as political parties. However, there is a risk that by voicing objections in principle to the political participation of homeless people at European level, a person will implicitly put into question his or her own legitimacy and that of many other stakeholders working in the area of homelessness, including service providers for homeless people.

Homeless people must overcome a number of more 'practical' barriers to be able to participate in decision-making processes at EU level or to set up a European representative organisation. These barriers might also be greater than those faced by other European networks. For example, it will take longer to organise homeless people than to organise homeless service providers and it will require more resources than were needed to set up FEANTSA. And while it is already difficult for the staff of FEANTSA to draw the right balance between understanding the reality of homeless service provision and EU lobbying, drawing this balance between the reality 'on the streets' and abstract European policy processes might be even more challenging for the potential staff of a European network of homeless people.

It is clear that all of these barriers are neither insurmountable nor specific to the political organisation of homeless people. People do have resources, including networks, enthusiasm and the ability to find creative solutions.

A network of homeless people may challenge some of the dominant discourses at European level and the ways in which European institutions consult with 'relevant' stakeholders and collect 'evidence and expertise'. A possible rethinking of the way the institutions consult and cooperate with non-governmental organisations is not necessarily bad news for FEANTSA and there might indeed be an opportunity to work together with homeless people on issues of common concern. In this respect FEANTSA as well as other well-established European networks (e.g. the European Anti Poverty Network) might realise that sharing a bit of their power will actually benefit service users and service providers alike.

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