European Observatory on Homelessness

Measures
to Achieve Social Mix
and their Impact on Access
to Housing for People
who are Homeless





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Introduction

"Social mix", "balanced communities", a "sane" mix of inhabitants, these objectives are increasingly found in housing policies across Europe, and indeed elsewhere in the world (e.g. in Canada, USA and Australia, see, for examples Rose, 2004; Arthurson, 2002; Randolph *et al*, 2004, Hulse & Stone, 2006). Although the concept is far from new (for a historical account comparing two epochs in British housing policy, see Cole & Goodshild, 2001), it has gained a far higher profile in recent years, with increased residualisation of social housing and high rates of unemployment and poverty amongst residents of the remaining social housing stock. In some countries one could even speak of a new dogma or a new orthodoxy (Wood, 2003).

A social mix within neighbourhoods or communities is supposed to promote social cohesion and to prevent the negative effects of "poverty of place" (Fitzpatrick, 2004), which is said to compound the disadvantages of those who are already economically marginalised. But this paper will contend that, in reality, the measures driven and legitimised by the concept of social mix often reduce poor and disadvantaged people's access to regular housing. So in the context of this paper, which seeks to consider these issues from the perspective of homeless people's well-being in particular, we have to ask: Is this concept (social mix) which is intended to promote social cohesion, in practice fostering the opposite (social exclusion)?

Deprived areas and balanced communities

There appears to be a broad consensus that spatial concentrations of poor and disadvantaged groups generate a range of negative effects. Notions of "underclass", "culture of poverty", social exclusion, and lack of "social capital", point to the widespread perception that in areas where predominantly poor people live together, they develop a culture of welfare dependency; lack positive role models of behaviour; are deprived of a social network which would help them to gain access to jobs via informal information sources; and are generally further marginalized in addition to their economic disadvantages. A poor neighbourhood image can stigmatise its inhabitants and undermine their job opportunities, a high level of deviant behaviour can heighten fear of crime and lead to a high level of resident dissatisfaction. Social unrest and riots in disadvantaged areas have attracted a lot of publicity over the last few decades. This all leads to widespread affirmative responses to questions like is it "worse to be poor in a poor area than in one that is socially mixed" (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001, p.2280) or "does 'concentration' of households in disadvantaged neighbourhoods lead to more adverse outcomes for residents than if they lived in other types of neighbourhood?" (Hulse & Stone 2006, p.33).

The positive advantages of social mix are viewed as the converse of the negative impacts listed above. For poorer groups, social mix is argued to:

- promote more social interaction and social cohesion;
- encourage mainstream norms and values;
- create social capital;
- open up job opportunities;
- overcome place-based stigma;
- · attract additional services to poorer neighbourhoods; and
- assist the sustainability of renewal/regeneration initiatives (Wood, 2003, p. 5).

While some of these effects are supported by empirical evidence, some are brought into question by a number of studies. We will come back to this point below.

Defining Social Mix. Not so easy as it appears

Very often the concept of social mix is used in an imprecise way without defining exactly what is meant (see also Kleinhans, 2004, p.374): What then are we talking about, when we speak about "social mix"?

- At what geographical level are we focusing? There can be an apparently good (statistical) mix in an area where we have one street which is dominated by social housing and another one where only owner occupiers live, and discrimination and stigmatisation between these groups can still take place (as analysed in depth, for example, by Ruming et al 2004). We can also focus on the street level or even on individual houses (a mix of income groups on this level is often called "pepper potting" and assumed to produce better results, see Jupp, 1999).
- What kind of mix are we talking about? "All neighbourhoods are, of course, 'mixed' to a degree but some are more 'mixed' than others." (Cole & Goodshild, 2001, p.351), and the mix can relate to a range of overlapping characteristics of inhabitants: age, household size, class, income, ethnicity, tenure etc. Ethnicity and age are specific topics which we will not focus upon in our discussion; instead, we will conconcentrate mainly on those policies which seek to mix economically disadvantaged people with those who are better off.¹ For our purposes, we are especially interested in those people who have been homeless in the past, are threatened by homelessness, or are still homeless and trying to gain access to mainstream housing. It should be noted, however, that homogenous neighbourhoods of rich people are seldom questioned: "The concept of social mix has never been extended to the rich, who still live in highly segregated areas." (Cole & Goodshild 2001, p.351).
- Another question relates to the level of "balance" which should characterise a social mix and "whether there is a critical level of concentration of poor households before area effects come into play" (Hulse & Stone, 2006, p.34). In Germany there has been some debate on the question of "tipping points" and "critical thresholds" for certain groups (including the poor). For immigrants recommendations like "not more than two foreigner households per entrance" (Hubert & Tomann, 1991, p.27) were not uncommon in the past. Some sociologists claim to have found a share of 10-15 per cent of "minority households" in a given area as "critical threshold" for a dramatic increase in conflicts in the neighbourhood and reasons for "established households" to leave the neighbourhood and thereby further concentrate those who are seen as the problem-

Many empirical studies focus on tenure as an indicator for different economic strata. While there are good practical reasons for doing so, caution is needed especially in countries with a considerable income mix within each tenure.

atic groups (Eichener, 1998: 42; ² for critical voices see Bartelheimer, 1998; Becker, 1988, 1997; Dangschat 2000, p.12, 28). The debate and the terminology used are sometimes reminiscent of a discussion on pH-neutral liquids (where the question arises, who is to be classified as an alkaline solution and who as an acid)³ or the discussion on waste limits in the chemical industry.

The empirical evidence: More social cohesion by social mix?

It was mentioned already that there is a lack of empirical evidence for some of the alleged positive effects of social mix. An oft-quoted example is that middle-income owner occupiers generally spend more time away from their housing estates than lower income social housing residents, who tend to be much less mobile. If more of the former are introduced in estates formerly dominated by social housing then there is likely to be less social contact amongst residents instead of more. These results are confirmed by a number of empirical studies (e.g. by Atkinson & Kintrea, 2000; and Jupp, 1999 for the UK; and by Arthurson, 2002 for Australia). This also calls into question the assumption that middle-income residents would function as role models to those who are unemployed and marginalised, or would increase "social capital" and job opportunities for them.⁴

A number of authors highlight the probability that placing residents with different income levels in the same neighbourhood may create tensions and conflicts rather than social cohesion (Arthurson, 2002, p.247; Jupp, 1999, 61ff.; Cole & Goodshild 2001, p.352; Ruming *et al.* 2004).⁵ Arthurson (2002, p.248) documents an example where public tenants relocated from a larger public housing estate to 'dispersed' public housing "felt socially isolated due to more obvious class differences emerging between themselves and other residents than were evident on the public housing estate." For ex-homeless people this might be a very important issue,

² Galster (2007a) argues that evidence from the U.S. "prove compelling" "the equity and efficiency rationale for reducing the neighbourhoods with over 20 % poverty rate and correspondingly increasing those with less than 10 % poverty." He claims that in contrast to these results the evidence for Europe does not proof positive net effect for all groups involved ("social efficiency"), but that avoiding concentrations of disadvantaged individuals has (under certain conditions) positive effects for the poorer groups and is justified solely by "equity" grounds. See also his theoretical analysis of different types of neighbourhood effects (Galster 2007b).

³ Cf. Becker 1988 and 1997.

Some authors argue that at least for the children the social mix at school is of vital importance and fostered by a geographical social mix (if better-off households send their children to local schools; Tunstall &Fenton 2006: 14).

⁵ However it could be argued that while there might be less (social) conflicts in homogenous areas, more such conflicts are to be expected between internally homogenous communities on a regional or national level.

because a hostile neighbourhood could make their effort to sustain a tenancy and to reintegrate themselves into a "settled" life much more difficult than one which is more tolerant and where people are more familiar with the day-to-day problems of living with poverty and unemployment (on the importance of neighbourhood for the re-integration of former rough-sleepers see also Dane, 1998).

It should also be acknowledged that the underlying causes of many of the negative aspects of deprived areas are structural problems like unemployment and poverty (Cheshire, 2007). These problems are of course not solved by thinning out the concentrations of poor tenants without tackling poverty itself and providing a sufficient basic income. Instead, such strategies dilute social problems without solving them, and disperse the unemployed without tackling the problems of structural unemployment. Indeed, some authors even argue, that diversification strategies might tend to decrease rather than increase integration chances. They might destroy existing and cohesive community networks in poor areas and they might reduce public awareness of problems which have to be tackled:

"Dispersing public tenants is advantageous because it takes attention away from crime, high unemployment, poverty and other social problems experienced by a particular sector of the population. However, in reality, the situation is paradoxical because disadvantaged public tenants will still exist but be rendered less visible through dispersal. (..) At least where disadvantage is concentrated and visible, it means some action has to be taken by government (...). The alternative for disadvantaged tenants might be worse when they are dispersed or rendered invisible in a new mixed income community. It could easily become a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'" (Arthurson 2002, p.255).

This argument can be extended in relation to the often expected increase of public services if formerly poor areas are mixed: "In relation to public services, the argument could be reversed. Often specialised services are targeted directly at those localities with the greatest need. If tenure diversification changes the social mix, additional resources might be lost." (Wood, 2003, p.8)

However, there is evidence for a reduction of social stigma and attraction of shops and other services to formerly deprived areas through policies of diversification and regeneration, and it should be acknowledged that "poverty of place" is not only a question of social inclusion or rather exclusion but also one of social (in)justice, because it places an additional burden on those who are forced to live in highly stigmatized areas which suffer disproportionately high rates of crime and violence (Fitzpatrick 2004, p.11; Atkinson & Kintrea, 2002). Having said that, it is also important to acknowledge that there are many social housing estates in Europe where a surprisingly high level of tenant satisfaction can be found and – in contrast

to the public debate on "problem estates" and "dreadful enclosures" – none or very few of the negative connotations often attributed to social housing are in evidence (De Decker & Pannecoucke 2002, 2004).

All in all poor and diverse areas can have positive and negative attributes in the eyes of their inhabitants (for a good overview see Atkinson & Kintrea, 2004, p.451), but there are some areas where very few people really want to live if they are not forced to. This brings us to the point that enforced segregation is much worse than segregation which is to a large extent a result of choice. We do not have to agree on whether "social mix", or at least "deconcentrating poverty", is a good or bad thing to achieve a consensus that enforced segregation in very deprived areas is something which should be avoided, if possible.

Strategies on Social Mix and Homelessness: Fostering Integration or Exclusion?

There are a number of strategies available to achieve social mix. But, the three basic options are to move wealthier people into poorer areas; to move poorer people into wealthier areas; and to ensure a mix of wealthier and poorer groups in new developments.

One of the most pertinent questions in our current policy context is then, whether strategies for social mix open up new and better options for disadvantaged people in assisting them to gain access to a wider selection of housing areas, or if these strategies lead to a reduction of housing options for the poor and to even more serious concentrations of those most disadvantaged in accommodation outside the regular housing market.

A key problem here is that strategies on social mix usually focus on reducing concentrations of poor and disadvantaged people in specific areas rather than increasing their share of housing in those areas where there are homogenous populations with medium or higher incomes. This obviously leads to a reduction in housing options for those groups who are to be "diluted". Strategies like replacing a part of social housing in larger estates by building owner occupied housing in these areas, or allowing higher income households to move into social housing who would normally not qualify to live there, are clearly reducing the availability of social housing to those

⁶ It should be noted that many critical arguments brought forward are related to strategies taken in order to achieve social mix in areas with a long history of deprivation. Authors who are strongly in favour of deconcentrating poverty can agree that this is difficult, but still insist that being poor in a poor area is worse (and difficult to change) because it has negative impacts on cultural patterns and long term life chances. While qualitative evidence is claimed to proof this, quantitative evidence is weak.

most in need of it. The same is true for "choice based" allocation strategies as opposed to "needs based" procedures, if "need" does not continue to be the main rationing criterion. All of these strategies only make sense where there exists either a surplus of affordable and accessible housing for those in greatest need, or where complementary strategies are implemented to increase the options and the chances for poor and disadvantaged people to find housing elsewhere.

But regeneration projects and policies for increasing social mix seldom point in this direction: The availability of social housing for those in greatest need of it is very often reduced without adequate replacement. The overall stock of social housing is often diminished and waiting lists for the remaining stock increased. Arthurson (2002, p.256) points to an example in Australia where "for every three public housing sales in regeneration only one replacement can be purchased elsewhere." In Germany, where the number of new social housing completions is moving towards zero, every "release" of social housing obligations in order to increase social mix further diminishes the stock available to those entitled to it.

Likewise there is much talk of maximum quotas for "minority groups" in specific areas, but there is little consideration of minimum quotas or nomination rights for these groups elsewhere. The primary effect of quotas and barriers is to narrow even further the already restricted choices disadvantaged groups have on the housing market. Under the prevailing conditions for the lower housing market segment, barriers and quotas mean that an already insufficient supply of accommodation for certain groups of people is arbitrarily reduced even further (see the same argument for migrants in Häußermann & Siebel, 2001).

In Germany the critique of segregation and spatial concentration of "problem households" caused by municipal allocation of social housing has increasingly led to the abolition of housing departments and municipal allocation procedures, leaving it to social housing landlords to choose among those households with low incomes eligible for social housing. But in practice, and not only in Germany, the perspectives of housing providers about social mix are contradictory as far as people who are particularly disadvantaged are concerned. While the allocation of housing for disadvantaged groups in certain neighbourhoods is rejected because of a concentration of poor households in these areas, the same households are rejected in other areas with a lower share of disadvantaged households because of the alleged risk they pose to a "stable neighbourhood" there. Or as Cole & Goodshild (2001, p. 358) put it: "Housing agencies generally find it easier to define and recognize the problems associated with imbalance rather than the advantages of balance as a social ideal." The consequences are often intensified efforts to exclude potentially troublesome tenants from the regular housing stock altogether.

"Under the discourse of inclusivity, the 'balanced' community became paradoxically a means of leaving some unwanted participants out." (ibid, p.354).

Last but not least critical voices question not only the coherence of the goal of "balanced social mix" but also its achievability. The instruments to influence the process of segregation are severely restricted. Barthelheimer (1998) argues for Germany that the state has never before been in such a weak position concerning its influence over the decisions of individual households on where to live. It is a fact that most people prefer to have neighbours of a similar background to themselves. People with higher incomes are mostly able to procure that and live in highly segregated areas. This inevitably leads to a higher proportion of poor people in the remaining segments of the housing stock (for the UK see evidence quoted in Cole, 2007).

The recent social reforms in Germany (called the Hartz reforms) have increased considerably the proportion of long-term unemployed households relying on social benefits for their housing costs. Full housing costs are only covered for benefit recipients insofar as these costs are deemed "appropriate", a situation which will tend to increase the concentration of poor and unemployed people into those segments of the housing market with low rents. One of the few straightforward measures to reduce segregation and to increase the options of benefit recipients in a housing market dominated by private rented housing would be to meet higher rents in areas with lower proportions of poor people (and with a higher general rent level). But even this measure is very rarely implemented by municipalities because of its financial implications (but examples can be found in Hamburg and Bremen).

Other positive actions would be to ensure a greater mix of richer and poorer groups in new developments by including a certain percentage of affordable housing (and some countries have legal instruments to achieve that), although there will be a lot of resistance from private developers and in many European countries new construction does not contribute significantly to the overall housing stock.

If we accept that positive results are rarely achieved by the discourse on social mix (i.e. a widening of the housing options for poor and disadvantaged households), and that, quite the reverse, the discourse is often used for legitimising increased exclusion of people who are marginalised already, we should also insist that there is a need to tackle the social risks faced by disadvantaged households wherever these households happen to live. Very often the negative descriptions of run down estates show very clearly a lack of material resources to be invested in these areas, with regards to social and educational infrastructure, transport facilities, etc.

A German study on the function of different instruments for creating balanced communities concludes with a similar recommendation:

"Under the present conditions it is not possible to use 'dispersal' as a means of resolving the emerging conflict of objectives between the public aim of providing housing on the one side, and, on the other, the interest in preventing further concentration of disadvantaged households in neighbourhoods characterized by older housing that are still available to them, or in large housing estates on the fringes of the cites. It follows from this that there is a need to change the entire approach and instead to accept the segregation which prevails in Germany – to an (as yet) comparatively undramatic degree – and to make the social reality in residential neighbourhoods the starting point for improving housing and living conditions. Housing and urban development policies should therefore focus less on achieving balanced occupancy profiles, and more on safeguarding, creating and restoring a stable social fabric in residential areas." (Sautter et al. 2002, p.32 of English summary).

Conclusion: More – not less – housing options for the poor and disadvantaged

As we have seen, the debate on social mix and, especially, the strategies developed to achieve social mix, can have serious consequences for those trying to gain access to any form of regular self-contained housing, i.e. for homeless people. The (under certain circumstances legitimate) aim of preventing a spatial concentration of marginalised and disadvantaged people often results in blocking their access to certain segments of the housing market, usually those few segments which would normally be accessible for them because they are affordable, and because nomination rights can allow local authorities to put some pressure on landlords to allocate housing to these groups. One result of this may be a much more dramatic and uncontrolled concentration of such households in old and dilapidated estates of private landowners or in temporary accommodation for the homeless. This most likely has worse consequences for the people involved than allocating them social housing in areas dominated by poor people. It might also add to the even greater challenge for municipalities to find places where they can establish shelters for homeless people without being confronted with NIMBY reactions.

The main question for local strategies legitimized by the aim of promoting social mix should therefore always be: Do these strategies increase or decrease the chances and options of those most in need to get access to adequate permanent housing?

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This Think Piece was first published in the European Journal of Homelessness, Volume 1, December 2007. The Journal can be downloaded from FEANTSA's website www.feantsa.org.

FEANTSA is supported financially by the European Commission.

The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and the Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

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