
Re-inventing Soft Governance Mechanisms in the Field of Social Inclusion: Learning from the Europeanisation of Homelessness Policy?

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Introduction

In a thorough analysis of the impact of the Social OMC (Open Method of Coordination) on homelessness policies in the European Union, Liz Gosme's paper 'The Europeanisation of Homelessness Policy: Myth or Reality?' provides a timely opportunity – the EU is now almost halfway into the Europe 2020 Strategy – to reflect critically on the path and future of the social dimension of the EU2020. This article reviews the role of the Social OMC as a key driver of change in homelessness policies and approaches across the EU, highlighting the limitations of that process but also the emergence of innovative dynamics in homelessness policy-making at different levels during the last decade.

The author moves away from more restricted definitions of Europeanisation that identify it as change or adaptation at member state level to meet the requirements and/or consequences of European integration (O'Connor, 2009) or as 'reverberations' of EU policies in national arenas (Radaelli, 2003). Rather, the conceptual approach adopted in Gosme's article understands Europeanisation as "a three-tier process including top-down influencing of (sub-) national processes, bottom-up dynamics influencing EU policy, and horizontal cross-national developments" (Gosme, 2013, p.45). The evidence provided throughout the article on evolving dynamics in the homelessness policy arena at different levels of governance confirms the pertinence of that broader conceptual approach.

The author argues that the progress achieved by the increased interweaving of EU and national policy-making in the field of homelessness over the last decade is faced with a major challenge: the re-invention of governance mechanisms aimed at strengthening the vital role to be played by the Social OMC in ensuring effective delivery of policies and in strengthening the social dimension of Europe 2020.

Finally, the reader may find – as this reader did – that Gosme’s engagement in FEANTSA’s activities – on the crossroads between EU policy-making, and national and sub-national processes involving policy-makers, practitioners and researchers – gives her a privileged perspective on many of the dynamics described throughout the article, which contributes towards her thoughtful analysis of EU influence on homelessness policy development.

From Lisbon to Lisbon: Delivering on the EU Social Dimension?

In March 2000, the European Council held a special meeting in Lisbon to agree a new strategic goal for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy. The implementation of a new, open method of coordination, designed to help Member States to develop their own policies progressively, was among the Presidency’s conclusions in that special meeting: “Policies for combating social exclusion should be based on an open method of coordination combining national action plans and a Commission initiative for cooperation in this field to be presented by June 2000.” (European Council, 2000)

Since then, the Social OMC has undergone deep changes and encountered multiple challenges. Overall, it has been widely recognized that the Lisbon Strategy’s virtuous triangle, conceptualizing social cohesion, employment and economic growth as mutually interdependent sides of a knowledge-based economy, has been gradually ‘losing balance’.

The continued relative weakness of the social dimensions of EU policy has cross-cut the different stages of development of the Lisbon Strategy from the Lisbon Summit in 2000 to the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and the subsequent launching of the Europe 2020 Strategy in 2010. In a recent paper, Frazer *et al.* (2014, p.5) review some of the main factors that explain why “the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy has been disappointing” and identify “key policies and programmes that will need to be pursued by the EU and Member States” in order to restore balance to economic and social objectives and to achieve the Europe 2020 target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020.

FEANTSA and other European NGOs have also highlighted the rise in the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion between 2008¹ and 2013. According to available statistical data,² the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU27 increased from 116 million in 2008 to 121 million in 2013. In March 2014, the European Commission's Communication 'Taking Stock of the Europe 2020 Strategy' recognises that the EU has "drifted further away from its target – equivalent to a number of 96.4 million people by 2020 – and there is no sign of rapid progress to remedy this situation – the number of people at risk of poverty might remain close to 100 million by 2020. The situation is particularly aggravated in certain Member States and has been driven by increases in severe material deprivation and in the share of jobless households. The crisis has demonstrated the need for effective social protection systems" (European Commission, 2014, p.14).

Gosme's article argues that Europe, namely through the Social OMC, has played an important role as a driver of homelessness policy changes in the last decade. Given the particularly challenging context in which such changes have occurred – as illustrated briefly in the previous paragraphs – we will draw on the analysis provided by the author and critically reflect on some of the conditions that contributed to such positive evolution in the field of homelessness.

Learning from Progress in the Homelessness Arena

The setting of EU common objectives – and the explicit reference to housing and homelessness therein – is seen by the author as an opportunity for action, and has been seen by some interest groups as a sign of potential support from Europe. However, the extent to which such an opportunity has actually been taken on board by different stakeholders at national and subnational levels has certainly varied across countries.

The example of Portugal may help to illustrate this. Following the adoption of the EU common objectives, there was increased public and political attention on the development of more comprehensive and integrated policies in the social arena – namely as regards the fight against poverty and social exclusion. However, and in spite of the adoption in 2009 of the First National Homelessness Strategy, homelessness has never truly reached the status of a recognised public or political issue. The role of social partners, for instance, is of crucial importance in this respect. Baptista (2009) argues that Portuguese civil society has been characterised by a high level of fragmentation and a low level of organisation. In the homelessness

¹ The reference year for the EU target, given the lag of EU-SILC data

² See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/income_social_inclusion_living_conditions/data/database

arena, the participation of NGOs and other relevant service providers in decision-making processes is extremely limited. Their ability to organise themselves in a coherent way in order to profit from external 'legitimising' opportunities for action in this specific field is even more limited (Baptista, 2013).

Gosme rightly argues that the signs from Europe – the setting up of common EU social objectives and of the Social OMC mechanisms – have been vehicles for agenda-setting in the homelessness arena. However, it would be interesting to identify among the different countries 'touched' by that early EU impetus, the existence of 'lower level' key drivers (e.g., at national and sub-national levels) that have the potential to transform agenda-setting processes into processes that lead to actual policy change (Dery, 2000). Drawing specifically on the Portuguese situation, we would argue that the configuration of the homelessness sector and its capacity to dialogue with and influence national level policy-making processes would be one of those lower level key factors.

The presence and appropriateness of such lower level key drivers may be of particular relevance to keeping up momentum when, at EU level, some of the initial impetus given by the Lisbon Strategy to the social inclusion process is waning. The development of bottom-up dynamics at the national level, fostered by an increasing stakeholder dialogue in the Social OMC, was particularly relevant at that stage (Gosme, 2013). Once again, there may have been some geographical imbalance as regards the likelihood of participation in that dialogue. Whether the latter issues have shaped the integration of (some) national priorities in the EU agenda would, in our opinion, be an interesting question to add to the discussion raised in Gosme's article.

Nonetheless, the argument put forward by Gosme that the new EU2020 'architecture' is reducing the potential for countries to influence the EU social policy agenda is particularly relevant. In fact, the new national reporting mechanism, focused on the production of National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and on 'occasional' National Social Reports (NSRs), has clearly restricted the scope for pushing forward social policy priorities, including in the homelessness field. In those countries where such priorities were already well established at the national level, EU level constraints may have had limited impact on the strategic development of homelessness policies. In others, however, where such national level processes are more recent and are embedded in challenging contexts (Baptista and Perista, 2013), those EU level changes have contributed to relevant setbacks in the implementation of strategic approaches to homelessness.

Moreover, the new EU2020 reporting on social inclusion includes "national priority setting through annual country-specific recommendations" (Gosme, 2013, p.50), which has focused particularly on macroeconomic stability, thus restricting the scope for enhancing social policy priorities. This new model for enhancing national priority

setting has become particularly restrictive as regards social inclusion priorities in the so-called 'programme' or 'Troika' countries. In fact, taking the example of Portugal again, the country-specific recommendations issued over the last three years have been limited to the compliance and implementation of measures established in the Memorandum of Understanding, the focus of which was primarily on the stabilisation of the budget deficit. The severe social consequences of the economic crisis and of consolidation packages were not considered relevant within the new 'guidelines', paving the way for national governments to address them with piecemeal solutions, rather than pursuing or consolidating strategic approaches to socially relevant challenges (Baptista, 2011; Baptista, 2012; Baptista and Perista, 2013).

As regards bottom-up dynamics influencing EU policy, one particularly powerful example described in Gosme's article is the increased use of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS). ETHOS has made a very important contribution to both European and international discussion on the definition of homelessness and housing exclusion (Amore *et al.*, 2011; Edgar, 2012; Roman, 2012) Evidence on the extensive use of ETHOS as a reference benchmark for the definition of homelessness in Europe is abundant (Homeless Agency, 2009; MPHASIS, 2009; Busch-Geertsema, 2010; European Consensus Conference, 2010; Pleace *et al.*, 2011; Pleace and Bretherton, 2013).

The author points out that one of the strengths of this example of Europeanisation of homelessness policy lies in the fact that the development of ETHOS arose from "a real need from the ground". We would argue that, in addition to this, another asset was the fact that the development of the ETHOS conceptual and operational model was based on – and further developed through – research: a sound starting point for effective policy development. The rapid and consistent dissemination of ETHOS, and the fruitful debate around its conceptualisation and operationalization, has made a major contribution to policy improvements in the measurement of homelessness, both at the national level and in comparative EU terms. The ETHOS example could therefore create a stronger impetus for the development of sound and reliable research in other areas of social policy development, including in the field of homelessness and other EU social dimensions.

Similarly, the development of Housing First and Housing Led initiatives are also paving the way for important changes in policy development and in the provision of services in different EU countries. Here, too, the operation and dissemination of Housing First and Housing Led initiatives have been progressing alongside research based on evaluation and monitoring (Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Benjaminsen, 2013) and on a constructive dialogue between both sides of the Atlantic and within Europe (Pleace, 2011; Busch-Geertsema, 2012; Löfstrand, 2012; Tsemberis, 2012).

In her article, Gosme describes several EU funded research projects, which highlight the potential of such transnational partnerships and research dialogue in reinforcing cross-national dynamics. Although there is clear evidence of the impact of such cooperation mechanisms in local policy and in service delivery, I believe that such impact largely depends on the 'hosting' conditions of the countries or of other local contexts – namely the pivotal role of research in sustained policy developments.

Conclusions

The scope of the challenges facing the EU's commitment to building an inclusive and cohesive society and to strengthening the social investment approach could hardly be covered by an analysis of any single key area of EU social policy. However, the issues that Gosme raises concerning the Europeanisation of homelessness policy are an important contribution to the debate on how to effectively deliver on the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy (Frazer *et al.*, 2014), and lessons learnt in the field of homelessness may prove important in other areas of social inclusion. The emergence of innovative dynamics in policy-making, which involve a wide range of public and private stakeholders and a growing convergence towards adopting strategic approaches to social problems, is vital for both the homelessness arena and other social dimensions.

Gosme's paper provides useful evidence on how specific soft governance mechanisms have been embraced by, and enhanced at different levels of homelessness policy and practice within a challenging European context. Her critical analysis opens the door to a conversation about hidden factors that can either facilitate or hinder sustainable and consistent progress in the implementation of strategic approaches to complex problems within a diverse EU territory. Geographical imbalances arising from institutional configurations and from different levels of investment in evidence-based policy-making still persist within this Europeanisation of homelessness policy. The discussion on the key role of the EU in fostering (sub)national developments in social policy approaches and in embracing national priorities within the social inclusion process may also contribute to reframing a strengthened social OMC, which could "benefit from the emergence of Europeanised policy clusters" (Gosme, 2013, p.56). Such an approach could prove useful in addressing the above-mentioned imbalances within a strong framework of cooperation between local, national and EU governance, underpinned by proper policy evaluation.

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