



Event report

Tackling Health Inequalities through Investing in Housing

*Quality housing for population health and equity:
EU cross-sector collaboration amidst health and social crises*

- Held at the European Parliament on 22 January -

Evidences show that decent housing as an important **social and environmental determinant of health**¹ lies outside of the health sector². Nevertheless, neither health professionals nor health policy-makers are able to tackle health inequalities in the housing sector without the support and cooperation of their colleagues in the fields of housing. This recognition made the case for a joint seminar in collaboration between the **European Public Health Alliance**, the **Federation of public, cooperative and social housing** and the European Parliament **Urban Intergroup**.

The event focused **on the connection between health inequalities and affordable housing and emphasised that investment in good quality housing can bring returns in health and environmental outcomes.**

MEP Karima Delli, vice-president of the EP Urban intergroup which kindly hosted the event, deplored that the link between housing and health is too often overlooked at a European level. She highlighted that EU member states are seeking to reform their welfare states under serious budget constraints, **acknowledging the intricacies between health and housing** is necessary to promote more efficient spending in social and care services. **Karima Delli** is the rapporteur of the [EP own initiative report on social housing in the EU](#).

CECODHAS Vice-President **Özgür Öner** explained that *“investment in social infrastructures today will relieve public budgets for health and social assistance on the longer run”*. EPHA Secretary General **Monika Kosińska** announced that *“Improving housing for workers was one of public health’s first areas at its birth. We need to rethink these synergies to **ensure that we enjoy good quality public housing to reduce the impact of poverty and build healthy populations and communities,**”* said Monika Kosińska, *Secretary General of the European Public health Alliance (EPHA)*.

¹ Social and environmental determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age. They will affect their opportunities to be healthy, their risks to develop illnesses or suffer

² WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008) Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through an action on the social determinants of health. Final Report. Geneva: World Health Organisation.



MEASURING THE HOUSING COMPONENT OF HEALTH INEQUALITIES IN EUROPE

Matthias Braubach, *Technical Officer of WHO Europe Environment and Health*, coordinator of the WHO report on environmental health inequalities in Europe detailed the many [housing-related environmental disadvantages that impact on people's health](#): **lack of flush toilets, shower or bath, damp dwellings, excessive exposure to noise, difficulty in accessing recreational or green areas and thermal discomfort.** ³ Furthermore, **housing cost overburden has indirect negative health outcomes** as it dangerously limits families spending for other basic needs. According to a 2011 report⁴, inadequate housing accounts for 100 000 deaths per year in the WHO European region.

In all cases, **poor households are more exposed to these disadvantages** but depending on the issue and the countries, it can be a general problem (notably in new Member States). Also worth underlining is the fact that **housing-related inequalities are accumulative and clustered**. This means that population groups that combine socio-economic characteristics such as low income, being a single parent families and/or a large family have increased chances to be exposed to housing-related environmental disadvantages and that they are often affected by several types of inequalities at the same time.

Carlotta Balestra, *policy analyst in the Directorate of Statistics of the OECD*, introduced the results of an analysis by the OECD exploring the [determinants of housing and neighbourhood satisfaction](#) among a series of micro-data. She noted that **people who assess their health status as good, are much more likely to assess their housing situation as satisfactory.**

There are great discrepancies across EU countries in the risks of child-injury, pointed out **Morag MacKay** from *Childsafety Europe*, who highlighted [shortages in prevention policies concerning home safety of children.](#)

INVESTING IN HUMAN CAPITAL: HOUSING IS MORE THAN JUST A ROOF!

With the presentation of the OECD [Better Life Initiative](#), **Carlotta Balestra** stressed the importance of **beyond-GDP approach** and she proposed to shift from "[treasuring what you measure - the GDP - to measuring what you treasure](#)". The index compiles eleven indicators of human well-being among which housing, health and safety. Ms Balestra insisted that housing is not only about sheltering from bad weather: **quality housing increases people's self-esteem and social capital**. Having access to decent housing is at the basis of human dignity. She finally underlined that **well-being is sustainable overtime** because it builds up human, natural, economic and social capital that feeds into tomorrow's well-being.

³ Findings from the WHO report *Environmental Health Inequalities in Europe*, 2012.

⁴ WHO report *Environmental burden of disease associated with inadequate housing. Methods for quantifying health impacts of selected housing risks in the WHO European Region*, 2011.



EFFICIENT SPENDING: INVEST IN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE TODAY TO SAVE MONEY TOMORROW

This vision is likely to be endorsed by the up-coming Social Investment Package of the European Commission, suggested **Fritz von Nordheim**, from DG Employment and Social Affairs. Europe needs to put an end to the destruction of human capital triggered by today's soaring unemployment levels. **More emphasis should be put on social investment** because the quality of our labour force depends on the support we provide to people throughout their life. **M. von Nordheim** also recalled that the earlier you invest in somebody's life, the higher the returns in terms of reduction of inequalities and increase of capacities.

[Drawing from the example of social housing in Northern Ireland](#), **Joe Frey**, *Head of Research at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive*, explained that if investment in energy efficiency of buildings had failed to take place in the past years, fuel poverty would have gone up by 50%. He also presented the results of a study undertaken by the Building Research Establishment: investments of nearly € 600 million to reduce category 1 hazards in the housing stock in the UK would cut down health expenditure by € 40 million per annum and thus have a payback period of 13 years.

CAPITALIZING ON SYNERGIES TO IMPROVE SERVICE COVERAGE AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Dr Chris Handy, *CEO of the Accord Group*, advocated for a **renewed partnership between social housing providers and healthcare services**. The Accord Housing Group endeavours to [open up new horizons](#) with initiatives such as [Direct Health](#), where Accord Group acquired an independent healthcare company in order to increase home-care and residential support provided to tenants.

Undertaking combined health-housing action proves very efficient when it comes to targeting marginalized communities. **Deyan Kolev**, from the *NGO Amalipe*, pointed to some [de-segregating projects for the Roma in Bulgaria](#) that implemented integrated approaches - notably with housing and health dimensions - with support from EU funds. According to him, these are pilot models that should be implemented on a national basis. **Natalia Rogaczewska** from the Danish *BL housing association* explained how a [Danish non-profit housing organization trains voluntary tenants](#) to become Health Ambassadors and run seminars among tenants to promote healthy eating regimes and lifestyle. Finally, **Dr Pascale Estecahandy**, *National Technical Coordinator of the "Un chez soi d'abord" programme*, submitted encouraging results from a [French experimental programme for reintegration of homeless people](#) based on the "housing first" model.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION:

- *Rethink the relationship between end users and service providers*

According to **Claire Roumet** changes come from the ground. The policies that work are the ones that take people and make them act. Therefore public services should not be a place where people go but public services should interconnect each other and go towards people.

- *Reconsider social spending as an investment for future human capital*. The crisis is too often used as a false excuse to mitigate what can be done in particular for marginalised groups like Roma people,



depleted **Michel Verschaegen** from *DG Justice*. Member States need to continue to spend on social issues and budgetary adjustments in all Member States should be implemented after consulting with relevant stakeholders in order not to put social services in jeopardy.

- *Combine general and targeted action to improve living conditions for all.* More efforts can be made to ensure affordable and quality housing for all as well as to reduce fuel poverty. Measures to increase energy efficiency of buildings will be absolutely vital in the context of rising energy prices and decreasing disposable income. Although this has been identified as a fundamental investment effort, inadequate ventilation has important health negative outcomes and should not be disregarded.

- *Continue research and collect more data in order to better identify the most vulnerable groups.* Both WHO and OECD plan to collect and harmonize more data about housing conditions and affordability. In the field of fuel poverty, trying to [define vulnerable energy consumers](#) needs to go further than the income element, contended **Kyriakos Gialoglou**, from *DG Health and Consumers*. Vulnerability has to do with situations that potentially concern everybody. A report from the Vulnerable Consumers Working Group is expected by the end of 2013.

- *Integrating approaches and better coordination of initiatives* were two points that were repeatedly called for by speakers, notably when it comes to initiatives funded by the EU. **Andor Urmos** (for **Wladyslaw Piskorz**) from *DG Regional and Urban Policy* warned that for the [next period 2014-2020](#), the EC will be expecting more consistency between national policies and the operational programmes.

- *Addressing homelessness by making accessible advice centres, as well as counselling and rehabilitation programmes.* Homelessness is the extreme form of deprivation of housing. By presenting the different elements of the Social Investment Package, **Fritz von Nordheim** from *DG EMPL* highlighted the importance of investing in social infrastructure, as well.

At the end of the event, a roundtable discussion was held with the active participation of MEPs [Alejandro Cercas \(Spain, S&D\)](#), shadow rapporteur of the EP report on social housing, [Jean Lambert \(UK, Greens/EFA\)](#) and [Françoise Castex \(France, S&D\)](#). The following issues were discussed:

- *Could and should the EU do more for quality housing sector supporting health equity? What could be done, when, by whom and to what end?*
- *What do we need to make it happen? Research, funds, collaboration, political will, social movement, leadership?*
- *How can the European elections 2014 help change the paradigm of social investment*

View the main messages of the MEPs in the EPHA-CECODHAS Housing Europe Joint press statement "**Fighting an uneven battle - without tackling poor housing, the race against social exclusion risks stumbling**":

- on [CECODHAS Housing Europe website](#)
- on [EPHA website](#)