ROOF CITIES ENDING HOMELESSNESS FROM DIFFERENT STARTING POINTS: HOW TO ADOPT AND ADAPT KNOWN SOLUTIONS?

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"It's not only moving that creates new starting points. Sometimes all it takes is a subtle shift in perspective, an opening of the mind, an intentional pause and reset, or a new route to start to see new options and new possibilities".

Kristin Armstrong

The URBACT ROOF cities, all working towards ending homelessness with housing led/first solutions, all had very different starting points. They are located in specific geographical places with each their own history, present and future implications. They are of different cultures and habits and most of all, their local and national policies as well as their experience on housing first are at very different stages. A year before the end of this collaboration, I am reflecting on the progress done in each city and what is each city taking out of the project and from the testing activated in the last month. I will also look at how the collaboration between the cities has been of huge importance to the progress.

The URBACT method is based on cities creating networks and peer learning from one another. The network is structured in a way that the cities may bring different points of view and experiences. This process has created two main questions in the ROOF network. One regarding the possibility to advance from different starting points and another related to the adaptations of HF solutions to specific contexts.

Different Starting Points

In the beginning of the project we collected information from the cities to produce a baseline study. Regarding the experience in Housing First (HF) the cities represented different stages:

Four of the city partners have no or very little experience in Housing First. Timisoara has no formal Housing First, but some housing projects in the rural area are similar to it. **Poznan** and **Thessaloniki** have no HF experience. **Braga** only has a few active cases. Housing first in Thessaloniki is partially implemented through the Accommodation and Reintegration Program for a specific group of homeless. Braga already started in 2013 but the experience is still limited to 5 housed people.

Liège also began in 2013 and is now counting 40 housed people. **Toulouse Métropole** has housed 100 people in HF since 2012, and set up a new plan (in 2017) to scale up. **Ghent** is in the middle of the upscaling process, however, so far it has brought imbalance to the social workers-users ratio, causing a decline in success rates. Glasgow and Odense are the two cities in the ROOF network with a systemic change towards Housing Led solutions generally. They don't have temporary shelters for the homeless anymore and all solutions are housing based. These two cities are also in a scaling phase. The focus here may be for **Glasgow** on the non-decreasing numbers of roofless people and for **Odense** on keeping the quality and the fidelity of HF services. Glasgow, Odense and Ghent offer housing inside their social housing system while the other cities use housing from the private housing market.

Beyond the characteristics of the specific context and the experience with Housing First, some cities gain from a National strategy that includes (at least in terms of intentions), Housing First principles.

Adopting and adapting proven solutions locally without losing quality

Solutions for sustainable development generally and social solutions in particular, cannot just be copied and pasted in different contexts. One great solution in a specific city may be of inspiration to another city, but before one may say if it is a suitable solution, there should be a deep understanding of the local place and therefore adaptation methods. When adopting a solution, one should adapt without losing core values or main desirable outcomes.

In the case of Housing First, this point (adapting the solution) is somehow tricky. HF is a consolidated, evidenced based method that has a precise set of principles. Following the method exactly (keeping high fidelity) is more guarantee for success, say the main organisations promoting it. Adaptation may lead to less successful results. Without adaptation though there cannot be diffusion of the method to other contexts. Many cities (including some within the ROOF network) do not hold the initial requirements to even start Housing First; the method requires a certain welfare system in place, public housing, a social income system and good healthcare services. This may be a lot to tackle all at once and may create some frustration in cities that would like to start. It is easier to surrender to this difficulty and declare the non-readiness of the city to adopt HF, but the ROOF cities actually all took the opportunity to make something work in the direction and create some useful noise around it in order to start, scale out and scale up. The main question here is therefore: How to adapt solutions to the specific context without compromising the quality of the solution proposed? The key is to listen, learn from each other and do cherry picking.

Taking into consideration the first point, which mainly concerns the beginners cities, when we look at the advanced cities, what benefit may they get from this exchange? What may a city do if they already have a long time experience in the field? An advanced city may see it as its mission to assist beginners with their journey, but they also need a concrete motivation to participate and network. The advanced cities in the ROOF network worked in different directions. Sometimes combining the existing in new ways, sometimes

looking at the topic from a different perspective and generally working on long term quality endurance through stakeholders collaboration.

Learning and cherry picking from each other to make progress

URBACT offers the great opportunity to exchange knowledge and experience. The ROOF cities are listening to and learning from each other, to then take away the aspects that are useful in their city context. The 4 cities with the less experienced starting point in Housing first took the advantage of different strategies. **Timisoara understood from the more advanced cities that it all begins with advocacy and knowledge. Timisoara** is now working on training and on creating a HF knowledge in culture within the local relevant stakeholders. They are translating documents and hosting expert sessions. In the next phase they will publish a Housing First website to continue this work. The decision was to explain and train about HF, as it is with all its principles, even though the welfare system is unable to guarantee all that it is needed. It is used though as a vision and as a lighthouse to move towards. **Poznan** saw how good data is needed

to build good policies. Poznan now aims to bring useful and powerful data about homelessness to the frontline. For that reason they are developing a new app for counting the homeless. Data collection, which is at the heart of the ROOFproject, is a first step towards awareness and better services. The development of the app is time consuming and involves slow procedures due to the technical skills needed from another department. As frustrating as slow progress may be for our partners, this in itself is progress; for the first time the IT department and the housing department need to collaborate on a project. Other cities were inspired to improve their services and venture towards new target groups. **Thessaloniki** chose to work on combining existing services and competences in new ways. They recognised the possibility to adapt specific social programs to a different target group. This resulted in creating new collaborations between

stakeholders and opening a relatively easy path to introduce HF without starting from scratch. By allowing a more fragile population to have access to housing they are actually getting closer to HF principles. **Braga** is also adapting an existing service and is fitting it into a new target group. Braga focuses on job inclusion and is working together with the social innovation hub, using the entrepreneurial mindset they have been developing in recent years. Braga already has a group of very well prepared social operators that are working in the direction of HF. This is a good opportunity to allow an activity to prove this direction and hopefully allow the desired scale-up.

The 3 cities in the middle starting point, saw and took the opportunity to improve, reinforce and communicate their activities. **Ghent**, with the issue of maintaining the quality through scaling up, is investing in creating new working teams that use different methodologies. While doing this they are reinforcing a collaborative approach and are taking in consideration a systemic change towards improving HF support. **Toulouse Métropole** and **Liège** are focusing on communication especially towards private market landlords. On the one hand they are making it easier for landlords to rent safely to homeless people and for homeless people to find a home. On the other hand, creating social housing possibilities within the private rental market is also generating a change of perception in the general public about homelessness.

It was a little more complicated to know from the start how the more advanced cities, Glasgow and Odense would be able to develop and evolve within and benefit from the ROOF network. **Glasgow** adopted two interesting ways in moving forward. The first was embedded in the choice to join the project with the Economic innovation department rather than the social affairs or housing. This allowed the project to already push towards solutions that are more related to social innovation generally and can form a good starting point to explore new and unexpected solutions. The second was to focus on a place based storytelling approach in order to prevent homelessness by engaging different stakeholders, all located in a micro-context.

Odense arrived with the most advanced systemic Housing First approach already up and running. Here, there is high fidelity to the principles of HF and the main matter is how to keep them in place, up-to-date and make sure that

the stakeholders involved are ever more convinced and competent. The progress is being made by finding new ways of involvement and co-design with the team in order to guarantee long term quality. In Odense the focus is on creating very engaging and collaborative ways to work with the operational team and to come up with ideas to improve and guarantee the project. A collective brainstorm produced a dossier with many new ideas on how to maintain and improve the services.

Towards Integrated Action Plans

The exchange between the cities has been the most insightful part of the ROOFNetwork, as reported by all cities. Two other factors were described as extremely important for progress: political support and a good local group (ULG) of stakeholders. Progress was made on the IAP, in cities that have seen political support or were at a good political momentum. This has allowed some cities to accelerate and also fit into the national/regional strategic plans. A well engaged ULG group is another accelerating factor. In some cities it is reported that ULG members are helping the city move forward through strong engagement as well as passion and belief in the Housing First method.

ROOFcities are now working on their Integrated Action Plans (IAP) and on the advocacy trajectory that will help deliver and implement the IAP. Each city will describe the future steps in order to progress further. Each city will also peer review the other ones and by combining more and less advanced cities in the review process we hope to gain a good balance between adaptation and fidelity of HF application in the different context. The ongoing advocacy work, and the success of ROOF in the different cities needs to find good visibility. It is necessary for the end result to be shared on a local level. We are working with all cities on the creation of a local final event. It was also decided to organise a final meeting in Liège and Ghent on cities ending homelessness with the help of the EU, aimed at the brand new European Platform for Combatting homelessness and at the upcoming Belgian presidency of the council of the EU in 2024. The nearby presence of Brussels allows a cantata to the European parliament. The final results and their presentation in the different contexts will show the concrete work done by 9 different cities. It is our hope that this will be of inspiration on how cities, nations and Europe could move towards ending homelessness.

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