

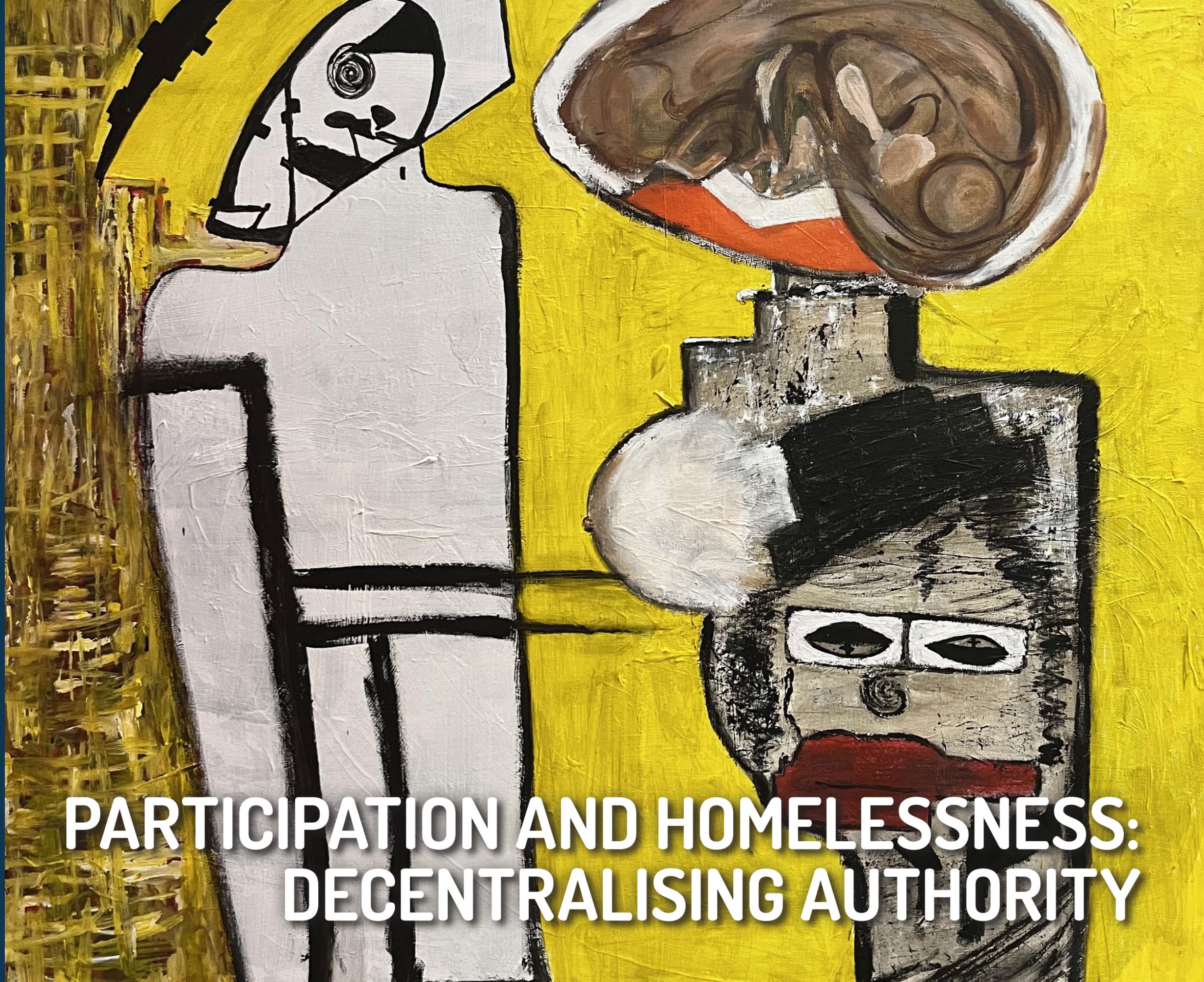
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# Homeless in Europe

A Magazine by FEANTSA



FEANTSA



## PARTICIPATION AND HOMELESSNESS: DECENTRALISING AUTHORITY

# CONTENTS

3	<b>Editorial</b> Words from FEANTSA
5	<b>Editorial</b> Words from Experience
7	<b>Editorial</b> Words from Experience
9	Empowering Voices: Focus Ireland's Lived Experience Ambassador Programme
14	Expertise Through Experience: Peer Work in Vienna
19	Service User Participation in France
24	From Protection to Participation: Enabling Co-Planning in the 'Hood' Project
29	Citizens without Housing: The Participation of Homeless People in the Making of Budapest's new Strategy on Homelessness
34	Participating to Transform Perspectives
39	Community of Kings (and Queens) of the Street
44	Interview with Two Members of le Syndicat des immenses

## WORDS FROM FEANTSA

At the root of social work sits a fundamental tension: how do we acknowledge and combat the systematic and social disempowerment of individuals without perpetuating this very disempowerment in our efforts? How do we avoid replicating the power dynamics that keep people marginalised while trying to promote their welfare and rights? Social actions such as the fight to end homelessness can, despite the best of intentions, inadvertently strip those it intends to help of their autonomy, dignity, and power. Navigating this tension underlies the practice of participation.

Giving voice to marginalised communities has long been central to grassroots and community-based social movements, such as the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement in the US. For many years now, it has been a priority of FEANTSA to listen to, and encourage the listening to and involvement of, people with experiences of homelessness in actions that concern them. In pursuit of this, we have previously examined the state of participation in homeless services and explored how organisations involved individuals with lived experience in decision-making and advocacy efforts. In both our actions and through dedicated publications we have explored the benefits achieved and the challenges faced in implementing participatory approaches.

As the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) continues towards the goal of ending homelessness in Europe by 2030, against the backdrop of at least 895,000 people living in homelessness throughout Europe, it remains necessary to reflect on the nature and structuring of services and policies, and the latent attitudes they may reveal. While planning activities aimed at lifting people from homelessness and preventing further homelessness, participation continues to offer us the opportunity to challenge our perceptions of the role and character of homeless social and policy work. Importantly, this must be done without tokenism – it is not enough to simply show those who have experienced homelessness in decision-making processes; we must listen to them, recognising their expertise and informed perspectives. As the articles in this edition illustrate, participation is a means to empower individuals, challenge stereotypes, and ultimately, shape a more open and inclusive world.

In this edition of our magazine, we take a deep dive into how homeless services have been implementing participation in recent years, bringing forward successful examples of real participation. We explore a collection of articles that spotlight the voices and experiences of those who have experienced homelessness, shedding light on how their active involvement is inspiring innovation within services, challenging stereotypes, and influencing policies on homelessness.

# EDITORIAL



By **Bryony Martin**, Communications and Events Officer, FEANTSA

The magazine begins with **neunerhaus'** Peer Campus in Vienna. The article explores how the campus empowers individuals with lived experience to become mentors for others recognising the guiding value of peers and their unique position and ability to support others through shared knowledge and experiences.

**Arrels Fundació** in Barcelona challenges norms by involving those with lived experience in a variety of roles from everyday operations to decision-making. They explore how participation, in particular visible participation, helps to dispel prejudices. **Focus Ireland's** Lived Experience Ambassador Programme (LEAP) humanises homelessness and influences policy through personal narratives. It gives participants the opportunity to push for their own rights and recognition, instilling them with greater self-confidence.

Participation may demonstrate its respect for lived experience by valuing self-direction. For example, **Kralji ulice** explain how they empower individuals and acknowledge their potentialities by letting their own desires and interests inform the activities of the association and the opportunities provided - leading to projects such as persons with lived experience guided tours of Ljubljana, and their street paper. In the article on **Budapest's "Home for everyone"** strategy, we learn how a series of forums and the creation of a *Council of Experts by Experience* helped generate a deeper sensation of citizenship and more effective policy responses. **The Erasmus+ "HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue"** project fosters autonomy and cooperative problem-solving by utilising an Enabling Co-planning approach. This article explains how the HOOD project consortium actively challenges traditional approaches (f.ex.: avoiding paternalistic, service worker-led aid), and allows people to dictate what will help them: asking beneficiaries to imagine themselves *happy*. It is not assumed that the organisation knows better than the individual.

Finally, we had the pleasure to guide an interview with YLDISS and Roberto, members of **Le Syndicat des immenses** about what they found to be the significance of participation, and what kind of barriers might impede access to participation. They expanded on the power of participation for combating prejudice and the invisibility of those in poverty in Belgium.

As you navigate through these articles, you may observe a common thread: participation not only prevents the reinforcement of marginalising power dynamics, but it is necessary for transformation. Numerous challenges remain for achieving real participation, such as limited funding opportunities and the need for broader policy changes for substantial progress, as explored in the articles within. We hope this edition of the magazine may serve as inspiration for how participation may be successfully implemented in our efforts ahead of the 2030 deadline. Ultimately, the respect we aspire to promote for those individuals both in situations of homelessness and with past experiences of homelessness, must begin within our services themselves. We must recognise the knowledge of those with lived experiences of homelessness as exactly that - knowledge.



# WORDS FROM EXPERIENCE

## THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION AND INVOLVEMENT OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Today, I work as a professional helping people who are experiencing homelessness. I have been there myself; homeless, unsafe, and feeling that I was not part of society.

I moved into a housing unit that implements the Housing First model. The model unconditionally provides an independent rental flat with its own rental contract for a person experiencing homelessness and support if needed and wanted. The time I moved in, I didn't even want to belong to society or even be a part of it. Back then, I found living that way easier because society didn't treat me very kindly. After doing a lot of work on the road to recovery, I realized that the housing unit had a big impact on my life and who I am today: an adult who pays taxes and is interested in social impact. It was not realistic that I would have been jumping for joy involving myself in social impact immediately, right after getting my own place. This road to recovery, my personal growth, has happened slowly. It has taken its own time.

Building a long-term hope and motivation that has been done with me, has been crucial to my path. It hasn't been done by force, but by giving me an opportunity to enjoy and the possibility to influence my own environment.

I started my community work by cleaning and planting flowers in the housing unit's front yard. Doesn't sound big? For me, the experience was extremely meaningful! It was easier to do things for the common good than thinking about myself first. Only later I learned how to put myself first. And that's how I ended up leaving my earlier life, into a new and scary world I didn't know much about.

In Tupa, our organisation's temporary accommodation unit, the residents participate in environmental work to maintain the neighbourhood clean and safe, not only for themselves but also for others. Environmental work includes meeting and talking to neighbours, collecting drug paraphernalia and other trash, taking care of plants etc. I started doing small tasks myself in the housing unit to benefit the other residents, and I believe that the involvement and participation benefitted me, the residents of Tupa as well as everyone else in the society.

# EDITORIAL



By **Tii Judén**, Expert by Experience, Vva ry/No Fixed Abode, Finland

Everyone has the ability to involve themselves; sometimes the complicity is visible even by sitting quietly in group activities. This may look minimalistic, especially from the point of view of measuring effectiveness, but for a person quietly participating in group activities just saying “Good morning” or asking for a cup of tea can be a big leap in involvement as well as in participation.

Nowadays, workwise, I try to motivate people so they can be active individuals in their own lives and in communities rather than being passive bystanders. In our organisation we have started group activities for women who have experienced homelessness. These women have participated in planning and organising the things they want to do with us for their own well-being, for example, beauty care, art classes, and cooking together. It is important for each of us to be able to be a part of deciding on things that concern us.

For many years I have wanted to help people who are still living the life I have lived. I feel that nowadays I am doing something meaningful for people who are experiencing what I used to. Their needs and voices should be heard and taken into account. Each of us should have a place in society, and the society needs all of us. After falling from the path, hope is the only thing that takes a person back on track.



## WORDS FROM EXPERIENCE

### THE SENSE OF GENUINE EQUALITY IS A KEY ROLE OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISATIONS WHICH OFFER HOMELESS SERVICES

I worked as a member of FEANTSA's Participation working group between the years 2007-2017. The group created participation tool-kits, arranged seminars and trained people all over Europe in participation. But the most important choice of the project was that half of the people in the group had lived experience of homelessness and half had a professional status.

In organisations there are different levels of participation; from been asked your opinion to full participation and shared power. Of course, some people have more structural power, but we all have the power of interaction. In our Housing unit "The house of Fellows" (The first

Housing first Unit in Finland) I asked a resident at the beginning: "What actions would you like to participate in?" He stared at me for a long time, eventually replying "Now I would like to participate in my own life, nothing else."

In my own organisation, which was founded by the homeless themselves, we have used participation since day one. Participation penetrates the whole organisation from the ground level to the top. One fourth of our paid staff has experienced homelessness and we have a team of experts who train and mentor professionals and experts by experience nationally in Finland. Our first executive manager has experience of homelessness. My boss has experience of homelessness. First, he contacted our organisation by sending notes under the door. Gradually he came into our services and one day he was offered a paid job and after he retired, he was asked to be the chair of the organisation.

We once received a large donation from the city photo exhibition and some people were a little suspicious that the money would simply go to some overall expenses. We told the donor to tell people that we used the money to hire two people who had experience of homelessness to work with us.

# EDITORIAL



By **Sanna Tiivola**, Executive Manager, Vva ry/No Fixed Abode, Finland

We participated in a competition to create a housing first unit together with Y-foundation in the first period of the Finnish national program to end homelessness. The city of Helsinki offered to the winner the building and land where the unit could be established. Our group consisted of a person experiencing homelessness, residents of a housing first unit, staff of both organisations, an architect and a constructor. A member of a group and a resident in our housing unit asked me if he could do a work practice period at the same time - I can still remember the worker from employment services phoning me to say “How come this person’s title is the project manager?”

There are many stories like this, but the main offer to people who come to our organisation and services is the opportunity to feel genuinely equal, otherwise people don’t feel that the power and resources are shared. Full participation means access to the same possibilities that everyone else has.



# EMPOWERING VOICES: FOCUS IRELAND'S LIVED EXPERIENCE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

Focus Ireland's Lived Experience Ambassador Programme (LEAP) was initiated in 2021 to empower individuals who've experienced homelessness. These ambassadors provide unique insights, dispel misconceptions, and inform policies. They emphasize the several benefits of the programme, including personal empowerment, humanising homelessness, and influencing policy, while acknowledging the challenges such as emotional tolls and securing sustainable funding. Overall, LEAP highlights the value of personal narratives in addressing homelessness and promoting lasting change.



By **Louise Bayliss**, Campaign Coordinator, Focus Ireland, Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

Ireland is in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis. There are almost 12,000 people officially registered as homeless, including 3,700 children. Focus Ireland was established in 1985, after a research project on the needs of women experiencing homelessness in Dublin during the 1980s. Throughout its existence, Focus Ireland has consistently prioritised the experiences and needs of the people it serves, recognising the significance of involving individuals with lived experience of homelessness in shaping homelessness services. We already had a peer research programme for over five years, which successfully highlighted the benefit of co-production of knowledge, but we recognised that to effectively combat homelessness and create lasting change, we needed to take a novel approach. This led to the introduction of the Lived Experience Ambassador Programme in 2021, a groundbreaking initiative that aims to empower individuals who have experienced homelessness to become advocates for change. This article explores the reasons behind the inception of the programme, its benefits, outcomes, and the challenges encountered in its implementation.

## THE BIRTH OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

Focus Ireland's decision to introduce the Lived Experience Ambassador Programme (LEAP) stemmed from the realisation that those who have experienced homelessness possess unique insights and perspectives that cannot be replicated by policymakers, academics, or advocates who haven't lived through such circumstances. We believed that we could learn from our ambassadors' experiential knowledge and, crucially, we could challenge the public perception of homelessness.

But we didn't want to limit people's identity to having experienced homelessness; it is only a chapter in someone's life that they will want to move on from. Talking to Jenny Smith from the Australian Council for Homeless Persons on her visit to Ireland gave us a model we could adapt to allow people to contribute, learn new skills, and then move on with their lives.

The programme aims to give a voice to those whose voices are often overlooked, allowing them to share their stories and personal experiences with homelessness. The programme aims to empower people to take back control of the narrative surrounding their lives and experiences and cultivate a sense of ownership and responsibility in shaping homelessness policies and dispelling negative stereotypes.

## THE LAUNCH OF LEAP

We launched LEAP in October 2021 with five ambassadors, all of whom had directly experienced homelessness. Our five ambassadors ranged in age from 24 to 53 and are now in stable accommodation. Illustrating the multi-faceted complexity of homelessness, our ambassadors had not only experienced homelessness, but there were also experiences of growing up in care, addiction, and domestic violence within the group. The Irish Times<sup>1</sup> covered the launch extensively, featuring a multi-page spread in their weekend edition. The programme was sponsored by Bord Gáis Energy, and this provided the financial resources required to ensure that the ambassadors received laptops, training, and payment for each event they attended.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/i-didn-t-go-through-all-this-for-pain-for-nothing-1.4691686>

## BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES

- a) **Personal Empowerment:** One of the key benefits of the Lived Experience Ambassador Programme was the personal empowerment it offered to participants. By becoming ambassadors, individuals who had experienced homelessness regained confidence and self-esteem,<sup>2</sup> breaking the stigmas associated with their past experiences. Our ambassadors overcame personal challenges around public speaking and are comfortable in advocating to people in positions of power and authority.
- b) **Humanising Homelessness:** The programme effectively humanised homelessness, putting faces and stories to what was often seen as a faceless issue.<sup>3</sup> When people heard firsthand accounts from those who had experienced homelessness, it helped dispel misconceptions and stereotypes, fostering compassion and empathy among the public.
- c) **Policy and Advocacy Impact:** By involving Lived Experience Ambassadors in policy discussions and advocacy efforts, Focus Ireland gained a fresh perspective on the issue. These ambassadors offered valuable insights into the challenges faced by the homeless population and proposed practical solutions, which may have a direct impact on shaping more effective policies and support services.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Healy, C., & McKendry, S. (2019). Constructing agency in post-traumatic recovery: Stories of adults living with mental illness and homelessness. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 27(2), e279-e286.

<sup>3</sup> Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Goodley, D. (2007). Disabled people, research and social change: Challenges facing critical disability studies. In N. Watson, A. Roulstone, & C. Thomas (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (pp. 487-502). Routledge.

- d) **Greater Community Engagement:** The programme facilitated greater community engagement as Lived Experience Ambassadors shared their stories at various events, workshops, and seminars. Their authentic and relatable narratives resonated with the public, leading to increased community support and understanding.
- e) **Encouraging and Inspiring Others:** The Lived Experience Ambassadors served as living proof that homelessness need not be a life sentence. Their stories of resilience and determination inspired others facing similar struggles to seek help and find hope in challenging times.

**“The programme aims to give a voice to those whose voices are often overlooked, allowing them to share their stories and personal experiences with homelessness.”**

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The powerful storytelling of the five ambassadors resonated deeply with people. As a result, our ambassadors have been invited to appear on live TV and radio, sharing their experiences and the work of Focus Ireland with a wider audience. They received many speaking invitations and their stories appeared in multiple newspaper articles. They have been invited on stage by musicians such as Dermot Kennedy and Christy Moore and spoke to participants at some of our fundraising events. They also told their stories of homelessness through photovoice research, which culminated in a weeklong photography exhibition in the National Museum of Ireland and a beautifully printed book.

Importantly, one of the ambassadors had the opportunity to speak at a parliamentary committee, providing invaluable insights to policymakers. By elevating the voices of those who had experienced homelessness and poor policy firsthand, policymakers could see the value of involving service users in decision-making processes.

The impact of LEAP extended beyond the programme itself. Focus Ireland's dedication to involving service users resulted in the recruitment of six paid peer support workers. Two of the LEAP ambassadors were successful in securing these roles, contributing their valuable perspectives to the organisation's day-to-day operations, and offering support to other service users.

“By empowering individuals who have experienced homelessness, the programme humanises the issue, raises awareness, and influences policy and support systems.”

## CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

While the Lived Experience Ambassador Programme brought about several positive changes, it also faced its share of challenges during implementation.

- a) **Emotional Toll:** Sharing personal experiences of homelessness can be emotionally draining for ambassadors, as it involves reliving past traumas. Focus Ireland recognised the importance of providing psychological support and counselling to ensure the well-being of participants.
- b) **Managing Expectations:** It was essential to manage expectations, among the Lived Experience Ambassadors. Not every policy recommendation or advocacy effort would yield immediate results, and progress in addressing homelessness can be slow and incremental.
- c) **Balancing Diversity of Voices:** We were conscious that we needed to ensure that LEAP represented diverse experiences. Each individual's story was unique, and it was crucial to avoid tokenising or homogenising their narratives. We hired a writer, Geoff Power, who worked with each individual to ensure that they were happy with the story they were sharing and that they felt in control of their story.
- d) **Sustainable Funding:** Securing sustainable funding for the programme will be an ongoing concern, as financial resources are necessary to maintain the initiative's continuity and effectiveness and to ensure the ambassadors get the support they need.

## CONCLUSION

Focus Ireland's Lived Experience Ambassador Programme demonstrates the power of personal stories in driving social change. By empowering individuals who have experienced homelessness, the programme humanises the issue, raises awareness, and influences policy and support systems. The initiative has proven to be an effective platform for challenging public perceptions and our work towards a future where homelessness becomes a thing of the past. While the programme encountered challenges, we believe that its positive impact and contribution to Ireland's battle against homelessness makes it a worthwhile endeavour. As the initiative continues to evolve, it reinforces our belief that listening to the voices of those directly affected can lead to innovative and lasting solutions.

# EXPERTISE THROUGH EXPERIENCE: PEER WORK IN VIENNA

In Vienna, formalised peer work within homelessness services has become a significant part of the city's strategy. In this article, neunerhaus offer insight into their Peer Campus, which offers certified peer work training, employment support, and serves as a think-tank for peer work development. The perspective of Burkhard Weissl, a peer at the campus, highlights the value of peer work for its impact on individuals with lived experiences of homelessness, and its potential to make societal systems more humane and responsive to people's needs.



By **Burkhard Weissl**, Peer Worker, neunerhaus Peer Campus  
and **Paula Reid**, Health and Participation Lead, neunerhaus, Austria

While informal peer support between people experiencing homelessness has always existed, it was not until recently that peer work was formalised in homelessness services in Vienna. Through the effective collaboration and commitment of many different partners across the homelessness sector and beyond, it is now an established part of the city's strategy. This article will first outline the work of the neunerhaus Peer Campus and other stakeholders to embed peer work in homelessness support services in Vienna. In the second part of the article, a peer worker in the neunerhaus Peer Campus will give their perspective on the importance of this work and the potential of peers to transform the system.

## THE NEUNERHAUS PEER CAMPUS

The neunerhaus Peer Campus is a hub for peer work organised and operated by neunerhaus, a social organisation based in Vienna. The Peer Campus is financed by the Vienna Social Fund (FSW) from the city of Vienna and works in close coordination with the FSW, homelessness organisations, and other stakeholders.

The neunerhaus Peer Campus works in three areas to support the development of peer work in Vienna. The first area is education and training; every year the Peer Campus offers a free certified peer work training course to people with experience of homelessness. Participants complete various study modules, undertake an internship in homelessness services, participate in study groups, and develop a final project. Once peers graduate, they can take part in further training for an in-depth focus on specific topics.

The second area of work is supporting peers while they look for work and once they enter employment. Peers are a new profession within homelessness services and bring a new professional expertise and competence into the system, through their direct experience of homelessness. To support the development of a professional identity, the Peer Campus offers peers working in different organisations opportunities to network, find mutual support and share experiences. The Peer Campus also offers support to organisations employing peers to ensure good structures are in place for the integration of peers into interdisciplinary teams.

The third element of the Peer Campus' work is a think-tank on the topic of peer work. This brings together theory and practice to raise the visibility and status of peer work in homelessness services. It also creates space for exchange with people interested in peer work nationally and internationally.

## REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTING PEER WORK IN HOMELESSNESS SERVICES IN VIENNA

Establishing peer work requires close collaboration and openness from funders, homelessness organisations, and other stakeholders to change the culture and structure of their work. There have been many examples of this in the development of peer work in Vienna. The curriculum for the training course, for example, was developed by a working group of homelessness organisations in consultation with people with direct experience of homelessness. Collaboration with public authorities is also important - recognition of the course by the Austrian public employment service means people can continue

to receive social security benefits during the course, and do not have to be available for work. Successfully embedding peer work in the system also requires partner organisations to offer internships during the training and paid roles for graduates. This is supported by the FSW, who have made peer work an explicit part of their strategy for homelessness organisations, and who provide initial funding to organisations creating new roles for peers.

Peers must also be involved in the entire process of systematically implementing peer work from the beginning. Their expertise can shape not only the organisations they are working within but the system as a whole. Embedding peer work in services is an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and adaptation, and the more peers are trained and employed, the more the structure and culture of homelessness services can be transformed.

## A PEER'S PERSPECTIVE

Burkhard Weissl graduated from the peer certification course in 2020 and joined the neunerhaus Peer Campus team in 2021. Here he gives his insights into the role and importance of peer work in homelessness services:

“I am a peer. I love peer work. Even if I wasn't a peer I would be a fan of peer work, assuming I knew about it. Peer work can do a lot. Peers are people with valuable life experiences. Peers are there for people in need, with a lot of heart and commitment. Peers drive necessary changes and shake people and the system up.

“Embedding peer work in services is an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and adaptation, and the more peers are trained and employed, the more the structure and culture of homelessness services can be transformed.”

I would do it again! Become homeless? No, not ever! But give up my old identity in search of myself, yes. Suddenly I was standing there, having lost almost everything, but not my dignity. Little by little, I internalised what I would call the pride of the streets. This particular pride comes from the experiences that you do not have with a secure place to live. It refers to the daily struggle for survival, defying life day after day, wringing another day out without knowing how to go on. As a peer, it is possible to be proud of experiences which our society usually sees as reasons for shame.

I once had a secure job and stable housing. When I lost it, my life quickly fell apart. Today I have a secure job and stable housing again and after all the instability and uncertainty I have experienced, I never thought I could feel safe again. But now, without the expectations and pressures of my former life, and this new feeling of security, everything makes sense and I'm living the life I want to lead. For that I feel an enormous sense of joy and gratitude.

Peer work makes this security more attainable for people experiencing homelessness. Once someone has made it into the peer training, employment as a peer is already within reach. A professional peer identity develops. In my internship, I was able to try out my new role as a peer and experience being part of a team. For me, it was uplifting to be a colleague working alongside social workers, rather than someone needing their support. At the same time, I was deeply touched to accompany people experiencing homelessness in a professional role, to stand by their side and support them as a trusted person. This strengthened my self-confidence, which I sometimes had to struggle for in the team. With the peer certificate in hand, a dream can come true... Who doesn't want to be useful, to be seen as a valuable member of society? And even more so after the degrading experiences and stigma of homelessness.

The dream also means being able to say, 'I see and recognise you in your need. I am here for you.' For peers, the people they support are not simply people using a service, but people with a shared painful experience, even if the peer's own experience lies in the past. For now, the question is: how can I use the knowledge I have gained through my experience? Some peers answer this question by simply doing the work, others first ask themselves questions and think about what is needed for the further development of the peer role. Together as peers we work on the peer project. Diversity among peers is the best driver for development, because it challenges us to open ourselves up to other views and perspectives. This is true not only for teams in which peers are working but also for peers themselves. Peers need each other to grow, to reflect together, and to develop and maintain the peer identity in interdisciplinary teams.

This also involves dealing with many questions that surround peer work and that are often asked very directly: some are curious, open, encouraging; others are doubtful or even disparaging. There is media interest in peer work, and often the question is 'How do people who have experienced homelessness work as professionals?'. The answer: 'Just like everyone else'. Where peer work is already established, however, there is praise and recognition that peers' knowledge and experience is valuable. Peers know how to make a virtue out of necessity. That is not to be underestimated.



As peers, we want to do more than simply tackle prejudices and fight stigma! We can be more than 'just another professional group' in homelessness support services. It is also not just about having us involved. We want to set things in motion. Our difficult experiences drive us to change things for the better, in the system and in society. Making things better for people affected by poverty and exclusion means making them better for everyone. We must ensure that this is recognised on a societal level.

Every system has its own rules and ways of working. Life often goes against these. Systems require people to adapt to them, but this often does not work because people are individuals and not machines. Failure is human – in fact, failing within a system can mean success in being human, and vice versa.

Peerwork brings the daily reality of people experiencing marginalisation into the heart of the system. A contradiction on one hand, but at the same time an act of reconciliation, perhaps reparation. A great opportunity to make a system more human and bring it closer to people's needs. And this is something that is not just effective in the homelessness sector, but that can work in many other systems."

**“Making things better for people affected by poverty and exclusion means making them better for everyone.”**



# SERVICE USER PARTICIPATION IN FRANCE

Embodying the principles of participation, Cités Caritas (France) offers us the perspectives of Marie-Lucine, Jean-Pierre, and Daniel, three individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Through their voices, the article delves into the benefits of participation, both those experienced by participants and structural benefits, and outlines the necessary elements for its success, including training, clearer expectations, and better communication. The article underlines the importance of participation in creating meaningful change, and signals towards greater inclusion of participation at the national level.



By **Marthe Yohn**, Director of ESMS, France, in collaboration with all French FEANTSA members

The participation of people with lived experience is recognised as being key to shaping and bringing about policy change. It is also seen as a powerful way to promote empowerment and change perspectives. The approach, which has been implemented in various fields, also applies to homelessness, as a guiding principle that runs through service provision. Service user voice and service user participation are also enshrined in the legislation governing organisations promoting social inclusion in France, through the 2002-2 law that redefined the provision of healthcare and support, and which aims to empower service users. Many initiatives also make it possible to "work with" people and "bring people in". This can be by letting their voice be heard (through consultation), by offering a space for co-production of services (joint decision-making where everyone has an equal say) or by making it easier for them to be involved. All these initiatives are guided by an understanding of the benefits of participation for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole.

Participation takes different forms. It can mean **representation** on different decision-making or governance bodies ([HCDL](#), HCTS, COMED, CNLE, CNPA, *Conseils de la Vie sociale* (CVS)<sup>1</sup>, provider Boards, etc.), allowing people to contribute to the development of policies and the monitoring of their implementation. It can also mean "active engagement" through **involvement in activities** such as volunteering.

However, participation does not happen organically. To make participation possible, certain conditions must be met. These include listening, trust, respect, and universal positive regard. Several good practice guides have been published (e.g., Inclusion and "[doing together](#)", Service user participation, [Words without filters: Observations and recommendations by low-income households on the policies that concern them](#) (in French)). They all demonstrate the need to create specific spaces for participation so that it can work well.

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1 Resident, family and staff advisory councils in supported housing schemes.



Resident engagement allows changes to be made in line with people's needs and is also a tool for lobbying for bigger changes."

In this article, we wanted to give the floor to three people with lived experience of homelessness and experience of participation: Marie-Lucine, a member of the *Conseil national des personnes accueillies* (National service user advisory board, CNPA); Jean-Pierre, volunteer at *La Cloche* charity; and Daniel, formerly elected to the *Conseil de la Vie sociale* of a CHRS (supported accommodation scheme). Each outlines their experience of participation.

When asked how they felt about being "active participants", Marie-Lucine, Jean-Pierre, and Daniel all agreed that it was necessary and beneficial, both for themselves ("it increases your self-esteem and develops your skills"), and for their peers, as they saw themselves as spokespersons helping professionals and decision-makers to understand the reality of underserved populations. "We know because we have been there," says Marie-Lucine, "so we can explain the difficulties service users face" and this helps "to stop [others] speaking for them". "It is important to speak up, it can help those who do not know how to stand up for themselves". What is important though, they say, is understanding how the system works being able to make yourself heard: "you have to dare to speak up, be confident and know how to formulate an argument"; "you have to fight to be listened to – at times it is as if you don't have the right to speak" says Marie-Lucine. "You have to know the terminology and understand the role you need to play in your organisation." Daniel shares "feeling at ease in a debate," and his "knowledge of administrative subjects" thanks to his training as a lawyer. But, often, service users' opinions seem not to be taken into consideration: "a lot of people think we're worthless and not clever enough". Feeling judged and being subjected to the gaze of the other is also very present in their experience: "the way they look at the residents... they judge them a lot", says Marie-Lucine. "They don't really listen; they are condescending". To participate fully, people must feel comfortable and feel that they can really express themselves.

Another obstacle to be aware of is the need to manage participants' expectations. "When we give our views, we want things to change. How can we stay positive when we see that nothing changes?" Daniel explains that he stopped taking part in the CVS because it wasn't making any difference: "When I ask for something, I want it to happen. We are blamed for the lack of results when it isn't up to us. Plus, we have to deal with demands that are not always reasonable." When asked what would help enable effective participation, Marie-Lucine says that there should be "more time given to cases seen by the DALO committee<sup>2</sup>". People may feel cheated by participation that doesn't go anywhere, so it is necessary to clarify what these bodies are actually able to do so as not to create frustration, disillusionment, or resignation. It is essential to communicate well, to "explain why it takes so long," says Daniel.

Everyone should have a say and be supported to do this. To make this possible, training and support are essential tools. Not only must we "help [participants] understand what the authorities are for and how they work", but also increase the involvement of people with lived experience in the training of social workers, so that they value and make use of knowledge gained through experience, suggests Rachel Cohen of The Salvation Army. Services should also be sure to involve users from the outset, to avoid "only consulting people once policies have already been developed", say the interviewees.

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2 A committee that agrees whether a person has a priority need to be rehoused.

Participation through resident engagement seems a better guarantee of people having an equal say. Examples of this form of participation include La Cloche charity's consultative councils (meeting with service users who have volunteered to organise activities locally) and how the Secours Catholique (SCCF) runs its family accommodation. Resident engagement allows changes to be made in line with people's needs and is also a tool for lobbying for bigger changes, says an SCCF representative. "More and more people who sleep rough or have slept rough or are in insecure housing want to be part of service user boards. This is a powerful lobbying tool that means representatives and service providers can change the way they operate. In many day centres managed by the SCCF, people with experience of rough sleeping are very involved in welcoming and supporting service users". In addition to being a tool to develop employability and help people make social connections, participation through resident engagement gives people

an established place in society and contributes to skills sharing. Above all, it ensures that these skills are valued and recognised. Jean-Pierre, who leads a training course called 'Aller vers' (reaching out), stresses that becoming a volunteer has brought him a lot: "it has done me good, has made me feel useful". He wanted to give something back: "when you see that you can help people, it's invigorating. It's something positive, which means a lot in a life where there is often more negative than positive." It is an investment that allows people to regain a sense of dignity: "no one knows who among us is on the street and who isn't and that's important". Daniel feels the same; joining the CVS in his accommodation kept him busy and made him feel he "wasn't totally useless and that [his] skills were recognised by the various services [he] had to deal with. When you find yourself on the street, you need to know that it's only temporary. Being part of something helps with that".

“Participation will have been worth it when we can talk about people without labelling them.”

However, it's not enough just to involve a few people experiencing homelessness. "Everyone on the street should rise up," says Jean-Pierre, "we shouldn't be satisfied with the status quo." "Participation will have been worth it when we can talk about people without labelling them. We have all gone through difficult times, but that doesn't define us", says Marie-Lucine.

To make this participation possible, several elements must be brought together. First impressions are really important – as Jean-Pierre says, "what is important is that there is no criticism, contemptuous looks, or hasty judgement". In his accommodation, "[he] was lucky to meet people who never made [him] feel that [they] were different from one another". The approach taken and the activities related to it are also important; Jean-Pierre mentions "getting together and talking to each other, activities, games, meetings" as examples of meeting spaces that make people feel comfortable and help them express themselves. It can be difficult to get involved unless people have the information and the means to participate, "especially when you are on the street" or experiencing poverty. "Giving out free bus tickets" is important. However, "it takes time" and you have to have the time to devote to it and have the headspace for it too - "some people don't want to participate because of their situation. They are wrapped up in their own problems".

Lastly, Marie-Lucine raises the question of how to give recognition to resident engagement, through listening to what people say, but also covering their out-of-pocket costs and potentially formalising the skills people develop through resident engagement with a qualification or certificate (such as a degree equivalent based on work experience (VAE), or recognising it as peer work, training of trainers/facilitators, etc.). She is thinking about service user representatives' future and how they might further benefit from their experience and contribution.

Service user participation is proving to be an exciting subject and a challenge, where the obstacles seem to relate to how the system is organised and to professionals, but also to the people with lived experience themselves - their expectations, and how useful they feel it is for themselves and their community. However, these exchanges are valued differently at local and at national level. At local level, service user engagement is beneficial and has results, while at national level, it seems people with lived experience will only be able to participate in national bodies if it is made mandatory and made effective by prior work on the obstacles to be removed and the tools to use to facilitate their participation.

# FROM PROTECTION TO PARTICIPATION: ENABLING CO- PLANNING IN THE 'HOOD' PROJECT

The Erasmus+ "HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue" project challenges traditional approaches to homelessness by prioritising participation over protection. The project focuses on Enabling Co-planning, beneficiaries are empowered to envision a 'happier future' and chart their own paths. This approach fosters autonomy and cooperative problem-solving. It involves transforming organisational practices to redistribute power and avoid paternalistic treatment of those in homelessness. While effective on a personal level, the article acknowledges that broader policy changes are vital to combat homelessness and marginalisation effectively.



By **Silvia Stefani**, PhD in Social Science, Project Manager of the Erasmus+ "HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue"

## HOMELESS'S OPEN DIALOGUE

The Erasmus+ project 'HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue' (Project No. 2020-1-IT02-KA204-079491) started with a question we asked ourselves three years ago: do our projects really put people experiencing homelessness at the centre? or, does our desire to protect these individuals lead us to exclude them from participating in the decisions which shape their lives?

From this uncertainty arose the three-year HOOD project, now nearing its conclusion. The HOOD partnership comprises two academic partners: the University of Turin, specifically the Di.VI Study Center (for Rights and Independent Life), and CESIS, Centro de Estudos e Intervenção Social of Lisbon; and four operational partners: the Greek NGO Klimaka; Projekt UDENFOR, a Copenhagen-based NGO; Sant Joan De Déu Serveis Socials Barcelona, a large Catalan organisation; and the Italian Ufficio Pio Foundation, the project leader. Moreover, HOOD has four associate partners: FEANTSA, Fio.PSD (the Italian Federation of Organizations for Homeless People), the Spanish HOGAR Sí, and the Humanities Department of the University of Trieste.

This group – diverse in nationality, size, and manner of intervention – has been working together for three years to re-conceptualise educational planning with people experiencing homelessness, to create paths of empowerment and participation for them. In this article we will reflect on people experiencing homelessness' participation in both the *helping relationship* and in educational planning, starting from the HOOD experience.

## MOVING BEYOND 'PROTECTIVE' PLANNING

Thanks to the HOOD project, we developed a greater awareness of our way of working – of the features, limits, and potential of our respective organisations – and reflected more deeply on our educational and relational practices. We realised that the 'personalised' educational plans we developed were often constructed from a predefined set of options - a limited menu from which people could choose, but not escape. Furthermore, despite our dedication to the principle of placing beneficiaries at the centre of our projects, we felt the professional obligation to 'guide, evaluate and judge' their paths and choices. This is the traditional 'protective' educational approach: it assumes that we, as social workers, have a better vision than the beneficiaries do of their situation, choices, and the paths they should follow, and so we should assume the responsibility of guiding their decisions. This approach poses a big problem: an educational path designed by a social worker intent on 'protecting' the individual from potential risks cannot become a path of empowerment. We do not deny the effectiveness and importance of planning of this kind, but we need to underline that it has a different aim than empowering people with a sense of self-determination.



To allow people to express and follow their desires while trusting us, we must recognise and eliminate all the elements in the helping relationship that take power away from the individual.”

Unsurprisingly, we discovered that homeless people themselves were used to this ‘protective’ approach. On the one hand, they often internalised the implicit duty to accept any type of proposal coming from social services, regardless of their real wishes. In fact, many services expect and positively evaluate a ‘compliant’ attitude, considering it an expression of willingness, while in our re-evaluation of the training process, ‘compliance’ has increasingly appeared to us as a surrender of decision-making power by the beneficiary. On the other hand, we have also seen that some people anticipate this type of approach: most homeless people expect a solution to be quickly proposed and they rely on the social worker to decide for them, in a disempowering framework. Moving beyond this model of a supportive relationship and taking a different direction requires significant effort on the part of everyone involved.

## ENABLING CO-PLANNING AND DIALOGIC PRACTICES

The Enabling Co-planning approach was created by the research group of the DiVI Study Center of the University of Turin as a strategy for working with people with disabilities. The UNITO team drew inspiration from the Open Dialogue approach developed by the Finnish psychologist Jaakko Seikkula in the field of mental health and adapted its dialogic practices for pedagogical settings. Enabling Co-planning therefore offers a model of educational planning that is aimed at restoring power to the beneficiaries of the helping relationship, with the goal of enabling them to participate fully in citizenship, unhindered by forms of segregation, and to develop their potential.

Compared to a 'protective' approach, Enabling Co-planning re-centres our activity as social workers: we have discovered that the main work to be done is not on the beneficiaries, but on ourselves, our educational practices, our intervention spaces, and our organisations. The basic assumption we share is that none of the parties involved in the helping relationship has a complete vision of the situation: understanding and analysing is necessarily a cooperative venture.

Building on this foundation, we begin co-planning a path with each person experiencing homelessness by making a specific request: 'Imagine yourself happy five years from now.' We do not ask the beneficiary to imagine a plausible future, but a happy, desirable future. It's a question people in homelessness rarely hear, and it arouses a range of responses. Some react with wonder and enthusiasm, others need time – even days – to respond, while still others are wary and full of resistance. As social workers we have learned to listen to people's dreams without guiding, evaluating, or judging; we also welcome dreams that seem impossible or absurd.

This is because the dream performs a double function in Enabling Co-planning. First, it becomes an 'engine': the beneficiary's awareness that the goal is their own vision of a happy future propels them along the path, step by step. Secondly, the dream is a 'rudder' controlled by the beneficiary, a reminder that we have entrusted the choice of the goal of the educational path to them, and they ultimately steer the course. As social workers we accompany people on their chosen path: we help each person to imagine the steps that can lead to that happy future, we identify resources that will support those steps, and we map the person's social network to enhance the potential of their connections and relationships.

While each person's dream is the guiding element here, achieving the dream is not the core of Enabling Co-planning. What is important is the process of working toward a goal, which becomes truly empowering if it enables the person to discover, learn, and choose. If the dream is unattainable – as often happens – it is vital that the social worker does not step in to provide a 'reality check'; rather, reality itself will deliver the news while offering a learning opportunity as compensation. We have found that when we support the beneficiaries in the face of these small and large disappointments, they autonomously decide how to re-orient their objectives in directions that are more suitable and accessible.

To build this kind of enabling relationship, a constant redistribution of power is necessary. To allow people to express and follow their desires while trusting us, we must recognise and eliminate all the elements in the helping relationship that take power away from the individual. These elements range from places – agencies and offices whose names impose a category on the beneficiary, desks that mark hierarchies of power – to the language we use. The jargon of social work creates distance and deprives people who are not fluent in it of the ability to define and tell their own stories. Even the caseworker's file can be transformed from a symbol of power into a tool of empowerment: we have learned to share with individuals everything we write about them. Moreover, we have learned how to redistribute power through organisational practices: for example, we try to always invite people to network meetings that concern them, and when this is not possible, we agree with them beforehand on what we will say at the meeting, becoming a spokesperson who voices the beneficiary's wishes. It is vital to recognise that this type of engagement requires the involvement of the entire organisation in which we work. It is not enough to change our practices and mindset as individual professionals; the context in which we operate must support the transition from a logic of protection to one of participation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The path of maximising participation which we have described in this article is an ongoing process which has personally transformed us and continues to challenge us. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise how this type of work clashes with the realities of a world in which homeless people are too often profoundly marginalised – a fact which makes the pursuit of every dream very complex. The approach we have developed focuses on the level of the helping relationship, and it is a potent device which gives power back to people, making them the designers of their own paths. However, this operation cannot be separated from the broader work carried out on the political level, including policymaking aimed at multiplying accessible and safe housing, forms of income, and spaces for care, sociality, and relationships within our societies. To keep walking in this direction, it is important that we too, as social workers, continue to nourish the dream of a better, more inclusive, and equal future for our organisations and for the societies we inhabit and build daily.

“It is not enough to change our practices and mindset as individual professionals; the context in which we operate must support the transition from a logic of protection to one of participation.”

# CITIZENS WITHOUT HOUSING: THE PARTICIPATION OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN THE MAKING OF BUDAPEST'S NEW STRATEGY ON HOMELESSNESS

Budapest's "Home for everyone" strategy on homelessness emphasises housing solutions over charitable responses. Actively involving homeless citizens, the strategy has held 14 forums and established a Council of Experts by Experience. This approach enriched the strategy by emphasising housing solutions and addressing personal vulnerabilities. The participation of homeless individuals in crafting the strategy fosters their sense of citizenship and aids in developing more suitable policy responses to homelessness.



By **Bálint Misetics**, Senior Advisor to the Mayor of Budapest on Housing and Social Policy, Hungary

The Municipality of Budapest has recently adopted a new ten-year strategy on homelessness with a goal of reorienting homelessness policy towards the provision of affordable housing. In this article, Bálint Missetics discusses the various ways in which homeless people were involved in and contributed to the process of strategy making.

The charitable and punitive responses to homelessness might appear as opposites of each other – and this opposition has a certain validity of course since the provision of soup kitchens and shelters is a more compassionate response than police harassment. But homelessness is about the lack of housing, and you cannot pay your rent with compassion. Logically, decreasing homelessness is possible only if the number of people who exit homelessness exceeds the number of those who lose their homes. It necessitates prevention and increasing the access of homeless people to affordable housing. The provision of shelters does neither.

The charitable understanding of homeless people as hopeless, vulnerable indigents in need of care, and the kind of vilifying, sometimes dehumanising discourse that tends to accompany the criminalisation of homelessness are also very different. However, neither is particularly conducive to the understanding that those who lack housing are also citizens, who have valuable experiences of the actual functioning – and dysfunction – of homelessness policies, as well as well-informed opinions and legitimate expectations about how it should be changed and should therefore be involved in process of decision making.

*Home for everyone*, Budapest's new ten-year strategy on homelessness<sup>1</sup>, adopted by the Municipality of Budapest in 2022, attempts

1 Throughout the article, in accordance with the scope of the strategy (but opposed to the legal definition of the term in Hungary) "homelessness" is understood as to include the homelessness of families as well as of adult persons without children.

to break away from both misconceptions about homelessness. The process of strategy-making provided plenty of opportunities for numerous homeless citizens to make their voices heard. And in terms of its policy content, the strategy established that – as opposed to the dominant policy response to homelessness which is restricted to the provision of shelters, day centres, and outreach services – much more attention and many more resources should be dedicated to housing: to the prevention of its loss, and to the provision of affordable housing to enable homeless people to exit homelessness.

## THE RATIONALES FOR PARTICIPATION

One of the basic principles of strategy-making was the involvement of homeless people in the process. This basic principle had four main rationales. First and foremost, it was understood to be the duty of the Municipality to provide opportunities for participation to those citizens who are most directly affected by the problems and policies that constitute the subject of the strategy. Second, the principle was also motivated by an understanding that participative methods can enhance the quality of the outcome of policy-making processes.

Third, homeless people's access to the kind of deliberative events that such participative methods entail was held to be of *intrinsic value*. Last but not least, the participation of homeless people was also a *political statement* about the membership of homeless people in the community of citizens of equal worth – an axiom which is frequently overshadowed in the public discourse and by the day-to-day operation of homeless services alike.

## THE METHODS OF PARTICIPATION

The preparation and compilation of Budapest's new strategy on homelessness provided plenty of opportunities for participation to those with an experience of homelessness. Throughout the preparation phase, the Municipality of Budapest organised 13 well-advertised participatory forums in overnight shelters, temporary hostels, temporary homes for families, day centres, and one forum among formerly homeless tenants of the Municipality. Some of these events were held in the Municipality's own establishments, whereas others were organised in cooperation with the many NGOs and religious organisations which also provide services to homeless people.

The 14 forums could reach 221 people with an experience of homelessness. In some of the forums, the Mayor of Budapest or the deputy mayor in charge of social and housing policies was also present, which provided the participants with a rare opportunity to personally and directly address the Municipality's highest-level officeholders with their grievances, opinions and wants.

The forums allowed for the involvement of a relatively large number of people in homelessness, but they usually provided limited opportunity for the thorough discussion of problems or recommendations raised by the participants or for the in-depth exchange of their personal experiences. It was for this reason that the process of strategy-making also included the establishment of the Council of Experts by Experience. The goal of the Council was to provide – through a two-day workshop consisting of plenary sessions and small-group exercises – an opportunity for a group of homeless people to gain more insight into the most important problems and dilemmas of the process of strategy making, and to create a space where they can express and discuss their observations, thoughts, and proposals in more detail.

“It was understood to be the **duty** of the Municipality to provide opportunities for participation to those citizens who are most directly affected by the problems and policies that constitute the subject of the strategy.”

The members of the Council of Experts by Experience were selected through an open call advertised through large, colourful posters in virtually all establishments that provide services to homeless individuals or families in the city. The selection process was meant to ensure a correspondence between the composition of the Council and the homeless population of Budapest in terms of age and educational level, and to facilitate – through the different living situations of the participants – the representation of the variety of their experiences.

From the 71 applications, 25 people were able to participate in the interactive workshops. The workshops were co-facilitated by two experienced, formerly homeless activists. Members of the Council

 Some of the results of the participation enhanced the **validity and credibility** of the overall policy orientation of the strategy.”

were also provided with hard copies of the strategy’s preliminary version for comments, were invited to share their conclusions directly with the Mayor, and delegated one of their members to speak at the City Assembly when it debated and voted on the final version of the strategy.

## THE RESULTS OF PARTICIPATION

Some of the results of the participation enhanced the *validity* and *credibility* of the overall policy orientation of the strategy. The excessive focus on the personal vulnerabilities (mental illness, addiction) of homeless people which often characterises the professional or academic discourse on homelessness can be counterbalanced by theoretical arguments and empirical studies, but they can be also challenged by how homeless people themselves connect their personal experiences to the structural problems of housing affordability in general, and, in particular, to the scarcity of affordable rental units:

*“I am 73 years old, I have my pension, which is enough for food and clothing, but I don’t have 150,000 forints [~ €400] for rent. I did not get a municipal flat for 11 years; I have been living here in this room for ten years now. I cannot step forward. I have four grandchildren who cannot even visit me here. I am still working, but I cannot step forward.”*

*“We applied for [municipal] flats as well, when we were there with the kids. But we did not win, because the ratio is bad: there are way too many applicants for way too few flats. This is where the municipality, the government should act, to create new social housing. Because otherwise a lot of people will remain homeless until they die.”*

Other frequently voiced concerns underlined the *untenability* and urgency of those practical problems with the current homeless assistance system which decision makers, service providers and social workers are obviously aware of, but might sometimes accept as intractable by now. Participants, for example, provided instructive personal experiences about the variety of ways in which frequent bedbug infections affect their lives:

*“I came to this shelter specifically because I heard that there are no bugs here, so I don’t have to show up to work fully covered with [bedbug] bites. I cannot even change clothing like that, because if they see it, they immediately wonder, whether I have a skin infection, or what? These little things can cause huge problems in a workplace.”*

*“My little son is in daycare, so that I could work 6 or 8 hours – I work as a cleaner now in an office. [...] But I am not allowed to bring a change of clothes to him, because we live in a [temporary home for families], and they think that there are bedbugs here”.*

Finally, the participation of homeless people in the process of strategy-making also unearthed experiences which would be impossible to gather by consulting data or the opinions of social workers alone. In every single forum, for example, at least one of the participants gave voice to his or her experiences of humiliation or discriminatory treatment *within* and by the homeless assistance system:

*“If you say something, they kick you out.”*

*“They say that if you don’t like it, you can go elsewhere.”*

## ON HOW WE SEE EACH OTHER

All “homeless services” and “homeless policies” face the obvious limitation of trying to directly ameliorate a problem which is ultimately the consequence of the overall structure of wealth and income inequalities, without being able to address these inequalities. However, another important obstacle to more effective and more equitable policy responses to homelessness relates to the social construction and public perception of “the homeless” as another group of people – who for some inexplicable reasons need not, or cannot, be housed as the rest of the citizenry.

As we have seen, providing opportunities for people in homeless to present and express themselves not only as *clients*, but as *citizens* whose voices matter – and *who matter* – is valuable not only because of its ability to contribute to more appropriate policy responses, but also because of its potential in cultivating an understanding of “the homeless” which is the prerequisite of any truly suitable policy response. Participation should therefore not be ignored as a cornerstone of effective and comprehensive strategies on homelessness.

# PARTICIPATING TO TRANSFORM PERSPECTIVES

People with lived experience of homelessness should be able to participate in the decisions which “shape their lives”. That’s what Arrels Fundació argue in this article. Outline their experience with promoting the involvement of individuals with lived experience of homelessness, including opening spaces within its organisation, from its day-to-day functioning to the decision-making bodies. Participation raises awareness, and challenge societal prejudices. The article emphasises how such participation empowers individuals and transforms perspectives, ultimately aiding in the mission to end homelessness.



By **Bob Walker**, Head of the Street Team, Arrels,  
and **Silvia Torralba**, Communications Teams Technician, Arrels, Spain

Providing support for management and logistical tasks, working in reception areas, managing the internal mail service, deciding what we do and how we will do it in our occupational workshop, working on the Management Team and the Board of Trustees - in recent years at Arrels we have opened all these spaces and more for the involvement and participation of people who have lived on the streets. They actively collaborate in the day-to-day running of the organisation and are key players in raising public awareness, transforming views, and breaking down prejudices towards homelessness.

When Arrels was born, more than three decades ago, it was clear that our mission should be based on three important pillars: to accompany and care for people living on the streets in Barcelona, to raise awareness among citizens, and to transform unfair situations through political and social advocacy. Since then, we have done all this through various projects and actions, but particularly by promoting the involvement of a diverse range of people.

Workers, volunteers, partners and donors, educational centres, concerned neighbours, businesses, political parties... Achieving #nobodysleepingonthestreet will only be possible if everyone gets involved. However, about thirteen years ago, we realised that people with lived experience were participating in the decisions that affected their lives and our accompaniment, but we needed to open spaces in the organisation so that they could actively contribute from their experience.

‘There were specific experiences, but until then it had not been taken into account in a cross-sectional way. The first step was to create a team in which workers, volunteers and people with experience living on the streets began to discuss what participation meant for us. For a whole year, workshops were held for the organisation's workers and

volunteers, because they needed to understand and know more about homelessness. The challenge was to go from participating by decorating our day centre or writing a text for the magazine to participating in the decisions that affect the services we offer at Arrels,’ explains Ferran Busquets, current director of Arrels.

Currently, the entity's internal mail service operates thanks to the participation of people we accompany, others collaborate in the maintenance and logistics of our centres. In our Pere Barnés home, which houses people with a fragile state of health, the 40 people that reside there are involved in the daily running of the facility (reception, laundry, cleaning of common areas, accompanying other people, etc...), each within their ability. The people who participate in the occupational workshop elaborate and give ideas on new products and decide on the functioning of the group in the assemblies. The advice service in our open centre is led by a worker with lived experience. The voice of people who have been homeless is also heard in Arrels' Ethical Reflection and Action Group and the organisation's decision-making bodies, such as the Management Team and the Board of Trustees.

## **BREAKING DOWN PREJUDICES THROUGH PARTICIPATION**

For us, participation is a tool that allows us to promote the self-esteem and autonomy of the person; to make them aware that things can change internally (in the functioning of the organisation) and in society. The pillars of our mission which are committed to raising awareness and making a social impact would be unthinkable without the involvement, vision and participation of people who know what it means to be homeless.

One example is the awareness-raising work we do every year with four thousand children and young people with the participation of volunteers and people who have lived on the streets. 'It's important to change the way we look at things. When you are on the street, people see you and run away, some change sidewalks and are afraid of you. In the talks we organise, what you can conclude from my story is that you don't always have to stay there, you can change if you want to and if they help you. This surprises the kids because many of them thought that people are homeless because they want to be, and that's not always the case,' explains Juan Carlos González, who for years has shared his experience with students.

In recent years, we have raised awareness and broken down prejudices in many different ways: talking about shelters, hygiene, love or friendship through the Twitter account @Placido\_Mo; organising routes through different places in Barcelona in which people who have lived on the street act as guides and explain their experience; covering the facades of different buildings in the city with large photographs and murals that have as protagonists people who have lived on the streets; making artistic interventions at an art centre to attract citizens' attention with the message *Homeless go home*; using YouTube to make literary reviews through the channel StreetTubers; and providing the experience and point of view of people who have lived on the street when we organise campaigns and awareness-raising actions and when we talk to the media. All these projects and actions have been possible thanks to the involvement of people who are, or have been, in a homeless situation.

 We realised that people with lived experience were participating in the decisions that affected their lives and our accompaniment, but we needed to open spaces in the organisation so that they could actively contribute from their experience.”

Art, design, and the performing arts are, without a doubt, some of the formulas that we believe are most effective for changing opinions and breaking down prejudices towards homelessness. It is also a way for people with experience being homeless to participate. 'On the one hand, the person learns to approach the artistic world, to be in contact with beauty, sensitivity, and creativity. On the other hand, you discover that the other person has something to contribute and that the relationship between you and him is on equal terms,' summarizes Rocío Alonso, head of the Arrels occupational workshop.

When, in 2017, we took the play *L'últim crit* (The Last Shout) to the theatre, the roles of the people who had been homeless, the volunteers and workers of Arrels, and the professional actors and actresses were blurred, challenging the audience. A year later, the impact was similar when we premiered *Sis Personatges* (Six Characters) in one of the most important theatres in the city, and when we premiered the film *Sense Sostre* (Roofless), in which the main protagonist and some supporting actors were people with lived experience.

The first message of many of the artistic actions we carry out concerns the experience of living on the streets to change society's view towards homeless people. This implies making a great effort to confront lived situations, transform them into words or images and express what we want to transmit. Miquel Fuster is the best example of all this. He was an illustrator and, before being homeless, he worked in a publishing house drawing comics. After that, he lived on the street for 15 years, but he never stopped drawing. That helped him later, when he finally managed to have a home, to tell his experiences in a series of four comics entitled *Miguel, 15 años en la calle* (Miguel, 15 years being homeless). He produced drawings, gave numerous talks, and participated in conferences and projects; he did it as an activist, to tirelessly explain to everyone that no one should have to live on the street.

**The pillars of our mission which are committed to raising awareness and making a social impact would be unthinkable without the involvement, vision and participation of people who know what it means to be homeless.”**

## SOME CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES

Since we became aware of the importance and the need for the participation of people who have lived on the street, we have tried to promote it in a cross-sectional way in our entity. This implies changing internal views; dedicating time; motivating, without forcing anyone; and knowing that there are some people with unstable situations and therefore their participation may change. In these years we have generated spaces and we have also encountered limitations and difficulties. However, we believe that we can still move forward and encourage more participation and involvement of people, individually and collectively, both internally in Arrels and to transform the general public's views.

With this intention, for example, we have exchanged knowledge with other entities in Spain and included it in a report that last year was sent to the Spanish government to influence the future national homelessness strategy. Also, we have participated in international meetings, such as the European project Homeless Talk, which aims to reduce prejudices, empower homeless people so that they can transmit their experience and raise awareness, and spread good practices on participation that can be useful to other organisations and entities.

# COMMUNITY OF KINGS (AND QUEENS) OF THE STREET

**K**ralji ulice (Kings of the Street) has actively involved individuals with lived experience of homelessness since its beginnings. Nineteen years on, they offer numerous opportunities for participation, focusing on the desires and interests of the individual, from as working on their street paper, in the educative day centre, or giving tours of Ljubljana, and even offer employment through a public works initiative. Quotes from peers Matic and Taubi highlight the effective and crucial role participation plays in empowering its members.



By **Hana Kosan**, President, Kralji ulice, Slovenia

It all began in December 2004, when a group of social pedagogy students at the Faculty of Education Ljubljana, together with their professor Dr Špela Razpotnik, decided to spend 24 hours with homeless people on the streets on a cold winter day, within the framework of the subject 'Working with the homeless'. They were warmly accepted by the people they met on the street, and consequently, they began to look for further activities in this field. The following months were full of meetings, developing relationships, and discussions about future plans. They conducted interviews, collected graphic materials, took photos, visited secret sleeping places, and built networks. Simultaneously, relationships and coalitions with professional workers of different disciplines (social workers, social pedagogues, journalists, anthropologists, artists, medical doctors, and psychologists) began to be established. The idea of a street paper emerged and in May 2005 the first issue of *Kralji ulice* (Kings of the Street), the first Slovenian street paper for homelessness and related social issues, was printed and sold by the homeless people.

In 2005, the project took an official form through the creation of an association which, in its very name, emphasises the importance of the inclusion of people with experiences of homelessness - *Association for help and self-help of homeless people, Kings of the Street*.

## BEING PART OF THE ASSOCIATION

People experiencing homelessness can participate in the association on different levels and with the intensity they choose. A key guideline for support work is starting from the individual, their needs and desires, with the assumption that it is these individuals who have the potential

for power and creativity, which, in a supportive and empowering environment, can become an important asset not only for them but for the community as a whole.

"We strive to ensure that users are not just 'consumers' of our services but have an active role in the creation of the association." The emphasis is not only on strengthening peer support, but also on enabling equal involvement and leadership in the activities of the association: "When I came to your door, you didn't ask me about my problems, what all was wrong with me, but a member of staff first offered me a cigarette. We started talking and when I mentioned what I was interested in, he immediately invited me to come to the workshop tomorrow, where I could teach them something. After a long time, I felt accepted and worthy," said Matic.

When people are involved in our association, we encourage them to identify for themselves what they are interested in, and it is the role of the professionals to present them with the possibilities, to encourage them in their choices, and to find solutions to implement the suggestions. We feel it is important to help people regain a sense of belonging, value, and inclusion, in addition to dealing with their living situation (i.e., finding accommodation, dealing with status and bureaucratic issues etc.) "What I like most about my work at the association, both as a volunteer before and now as an employee, is that I have a certain responsibility. That you trust me to do the tasks, that you trust me with the keys, let's say...I know that I would be completely lost again if I didn't have some chance to do something meaningful. And because of my experience, but also because of my age, I don't get those opportunities anymore," added Matic.



**“We strive to ensure that users are not just “consumers” of our services but have an active role in the creation of the association.”**

## INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES

People can get involved in a wide range of activities, but we would highlight the following:

### Street newspaper

The original aim of our newspaper is a more active and socially acceptable participation of this hidden and mostly socially excluded population in public life, without utopian expectations for an immediate solution to the problems that cause homelessness or for a change in their way of life. The newspaper has a very diverse community of creators, bringing together people with different skills, social backgrounds, and interests. The newspaper allows people to talk about homelessness through first-person narratives; it provides a space for co-creation from different life experiences, where none is more important than the other. The Editorial Board represents the members who are most active in the creation of the newspaper, with more than half of the current membership having experienced homelessness or social exclusion. We also hold regular street vendor meetings to discuss different situations and suggest improvements.

### University under the stars

One of the activities in our day centre is also an open form of education, through the organisation of social, cultural, and educational workshops, including the training of social and other skills through music, theatre, sport, video, language, sewing, computer workshops and so forth. *University under the Stars* works on the principle that everyone can suggest activities they can lead, or people can tell us what they want to learn, and we try to find the person who can pass on the knowledge. Mentoring is provided by staff or peer support to guide the activity.

### Invisible Lublana

The project started as an initiative of a long-standing member of ours, who at the time was staying in a residential support programme. Our guides have personal experience of homelessness. They don't show you traditional tourist spots, but instead, they will take you through their authentic life stories to a joint exploration of the city. "Tours are places where we can talk about ourselves and our problems then and today. Where we can open the eyes and souls of the people who walk with us. I think tours are a lesson and a warning to all who go with us and most of all to ourselves in self-reminder of where we have been. And where we no longer want to return," says Taubi.

### Volunteering

In 2023, 85 people with experiences of homelessness are volunteering in our association and involved in various support activities of the association. They do a variety of different jobs; after the initial interview, we encourage people to suggest which area they would like to be involved in and to which activity they would like to contribute. For example, they may help in the day centre, work as peer supporters, help clean the neighbourhood, lead workshops, help with cleaning, help with janitorial and technical tasks, and much more. In Slovenia, people who are receiving social assistance money are entitled to a work activity allowance, but most of our volunteers do more hours of voluntary work than is required for said allowance because it is important for them to be actively involved in the association. For many, it is also their first activity and commitment after a long time, which can also serve as an incentive for different employment options.

### Integration into active employment policy

As an association, we regularly engage in active employment policy, which means that every year we employ 3-5 people with experience of homelessness. It is so-called public works for the long-term unemployed, co-financed by the state. Most of the time, the most active members of the association are recruited, with mentoring and tailoring the job to the needs and current abilities of the individual being key. We also run a second-hand shop that operates on the principle of social entrepreneurship. If the funding allows us to do so, many stay in employment for a longer period. For many, it is also a positive experience that allows them to expand their social network and job opportunities outside our association. And we always remain there to support people if that's what they want.

“It is important to help us feel useful and accepted. Both, inside and outside the association.”

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY?

“Kings of the Street as an association to help social problems is very much a part of my life. Although, to be quite honest, when I found out about them, I refused to work with them because I didn't have the time. But life goes on and things change. So, after a few years, because of my community service job, I came to Kralji ulice to join their theatre group and I was hooked. I have stayed at Kralji ulice until now and it's been more than ten years. How did I find myself? Simple, I've loved writing and being involved in theatre since I was a kid, so I found a place here where I was accepted. It wasn't difficult for me because I already had the mileage. Because of my open and crazy nature, I brought my two other projects to the association, and they were well received; one of them, Invisible Lublana in particular, and the other one, book signing or leaving books with dedications at bus stops, which is more personal, but as I know, very well received.

So, what do I think of Kralji ulice? It is an extremely necessary association for socially stamped people. It is important to help us feel useful and accepted. Both, inside and outside the association. We just need to remember that results and successes don't come overnight. They didn't happen for me either. But here is the important role of the association, to stand by and, when someone (including me) stumbles, to help, to accelerate so that he does not fall to the ground but gets up and continues where he stumbled. We learn from our mistakes because nobody is perfect. Not even KU employees.”, Taubi concludes.

**Y**LDISS and Roberto, members of Le Syndicat des immenses, share their experiences with homelessness and involvement in the organisation. They emphasise the need to combat prejudice and stigmatisation, and call for transparency and integrity; feeling valued and respected is crucial. They highlight the vulnerability of undocumented individuals and the invisibility of some Belgians in poverty. Involving Experts by Experience in institutions is essential to address their needs, emphasising the importance of equal treatment and long-term project involvement.

# INTERVIEW WITH TWO MEMBERS OF LE SYNDICAT DES IMMENSES<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In English, we could say Giant = G.I.A.N.T. = Gifted Individual, Although Needy and Troubled.



By **Laurent d'Ursel**, codirector of DoucheFLUX and secretary of Le Syndicat des immenses, Belgium

**Can you briefly share with us your life story: what was your experience of homelessness like, and how did you get in contact with Le Syndicat des immenses<sup>2</sup>?**

**YLDISS:** I'm 61, I'm Belgian and I come from a bourgeois family. I've got three brothers and my father had to leave Algeria when I was a child. We spent four years there and it was a great experience! We came back to Belgium in 1972. When I finished secondary school, I received a scholarship to pursue my studies. By then, my father was an alcoholic and my mother was not very rich. I moved to Paris when I was 17 where I started studying. I met my husband during my studies in Paris and we went to live in Lebanon. Unfortunately, my husband and my children died during a bombing. After that, I lived in different countries, moving from one to the other. When I came back to Belgium, I started working for the European Commission. But due to the death of relatives, I started to suffer from severe depression, and I lost my housing. This was the beginning of my homelessness journey. I met a member of *Le Syndicat des immenses* on the 17<sup>th</sup> October, the International Day against Poverty. This was the start of a new adventure.

**Roberto:** It all really began with the passing of my mother. I had a lot of downs. I found myself homeless several times in several countries. I have been living in Belgium for 30 years now. I had to move several times. At one point, I even had to couch surf at a neighbour's apartment. I've been evicted many times. When I was evicted at the end of 2019,

the social agency let me down and I found myself homeless. I had no support from my family and my daughters. I went to live in a shelter, but I suffered from physical and psychological harassment. After that I lived shortly in very poor housing, but it was a nightmare and I ended up on the streets. From there on out it was a downward spiral. I had a lot of problems with social workers. But when I arrived at DoucheFLUX, I met capable social workers for the first time. I got to know *Le Syndicat des immenses* during the Covid-19 lockdown. Here I found a place that allows me to share my ideas and my anger against social injustice.

**Could you explain shortly what is Le Syndicat des immenses, what are the activities implemented, how you started engaging with Le Syndicat des immenses, and what is your role there?**

**YLDISS:** It's a political association that advocates against poverty. Our most important demand is 'housing for all.' We do a lot of demonstrations. We are a gathering of 'Experts by Experience,' and we want to make the world understand that we are all equal. We want to change the perceptions of homeless people. I am the representative of the syndicate at the COCOM (Brussels Municipalities' Advisory Commission that helps vulnerable people).

**Roberto:** It's an agglomeration of a minority of poor people. Some are here for their own interests; others want to help others. I am still looking for my exact role. It changes daily.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://syndicatdesimmenses.be/>

**Why do you think that the work of Les immenses (advocacy, representation, awareness raising etc.) is important? Why is it especially imperative to have representation of people with lived experience in all activities that concern them?**

**YLDISS:** Our work is very important in the fight against prejudice and the stigmatisation of homeless people. People generally think that we are responsible for our situation; we must be alcoholics and must have done something that justifies our homelessness. But this is not true. Some of us are former lawyers, builders, doctors, etc. This can happen to anybody. We want to make society understand that it is important to know people before judging them. Our experience enables us to raise awareness among decision makers. People seem to think that we are lazy, but we live under a lot of stress. Everything takes time: going to DoucheFLUX to take a shower, looking for a job, finding a place with Internet to send applications... Everything takes time.

**Roberto:** It allows you to keep an open mind. Transparency and integrity are key principles of the syndicate. It is essential to raise awareness about our experiences to touch the heart and emotions of the public and the decision makers.

**In some cases, it can be difficult to ensure participation and representation of people with lived experience of homelessness - what do you think is needed to engage people and facilitate their involvement?**

**YLDISS:** To give people a communication tool (Internet, telephone...). To give some financial incentives to motivate them to engage in the project (for example, FEANTSA has offered financial compensation for

this interview at the request of the syndicate). All work deserves to be rewarded. It is also important to involve people with experience in long-term projects (for example, the opening of a day shelter). People who have experienced homelessness need to feel valued and useful. On the contrary, they should not feel exploited. But they also need to feel motivated when they engage in initiatives, and not only do it for money.

**In your opinion, what does real participation look like? When do you feel valued?**

**YLDISS:** I need to feel listened to and not humiliated. People generally ask themselves what we have done wrong to be where we are. They usually listen to the service providers and social assistants, but not to the people concerned - to us! People assume that we have done something bad to deserve our situation. Respect is essential and mutual exchange is a must.

**What do you think of the diversity of people with lived experience that are currently involved in activism and representation (at Le Syndicat or in general), do you think that specific groups face additional barriers?**

**YLDISS:** I would say that women and undocumented people are the most vulnerable. The latter always fear to be expelled and are therefore afraid to talk. They don't dare to go to the police even when they are harassed. There is a clear lack of communication.

**Roberto:** I am often shocked by Belgians who fell into poverty and are so ashamed of their situation. They can't pay their bills and hide themselves. They have no social contacts and are generally invisible. It is very sad.

*What experiences has Le Syndicat had with the authorities and how do you see the responsibility of the government? The European Commission has set up in 2021 a European Platform for Combatting Homelessness and all the EU member states have committed to work towards this goal – what should be their priority and how do you think that people with experience can be best represented in this initiative?*

**YLDISS:** Even though the syndicate is relatively young, it is well represented in the political sphere. We are in the middle of an election year so we will need to see what happens after that. Nonetheless, it is essential to involve a large number of people living in precarious conditions, Experts by Experience, in all institutions and administrations, may they be private or public. To really understand the needs of people living in vulnerable situations, we need to involve those with direct experience.

**Roberto:** Too many decision makers are disconnected from the realities of the people they are supposed to work with and help. I don't believe in this new European platform. It's not concrete enough and too political. We (in organisations and institutions) need to work with psychologists, therapists and others who know about our experiences and who can communicate about these issues.

*What would be your last word?*

**YLDISS:** Respect us, consider us as experts in our fields. We should be treated as equals. Involve us in long term projects.

**Roberto:** Let's pray! Because the worst is yet to come, considering the rise of unemployment and migration, among others.



**Raha Farahnaz**, who is also known as **Nazzi**, was living in the Arlington House hostel in Camden Town until recently and has been successfully rehoused into her own flat in north London. She still attends the art group run at Arlington House run by One Support.

Cafe Art is a social enterprise helping people with lived experience of homelessness. We rent out art by people who are homeless or have recently been homeless. Profits from the rental of the art goes to the artists. Founded in 2012, Cafe Art started by hanging art in cafes and also runs the MYLONDON photography project, producing cards and calendars. It has recently set up a charity called MyWorld Creative Projects.

Find out more: [cafeart.org.uk](http://cafeart.org.uk)





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**European Federation of National Organisations  
Working with the Homeless**

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels, Belgium  
T +32 (0)2 538 66 69 • [information@feantsa.org](mailto:information@feantsa.org)