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Cover Photo: Sheep market in Sarajevo.

Photo: Magnus Hammar

Tunnel vision and the art of learning from others

I imagine that the learning processes for an organisation, and the willingness to learn from others, are at its peak when the organisation is being established and a few years afterwards, and then gradually declines. The IUT Secretariat has a lot of communication with newly established and rather fresh organisations. On the other hand, we have relatively few contacts with already well established member organisations. Of course, each organisation gains its own skills and knowledge through out the years. But, getting to know and learning about our members I dear say that many are afflicted by some degree of tunnel-vision.

The Swedish Union of Tenants was established in 1923. During these eighty years the organisation had gained a lot of experience, skills and professionalism. So, it has to be one of the best of its kind? Yes, perhaps among the best generally speaking, but perhaps not if the organisation is scrutinized more in detail. The 5 lawyers at the Stockholm branch which serves 140 000 members were mighty impressed when we informed them that the tenant association in Geneva employed 18 lawyers, for their 30 000 members! How could they afford that?

“Tenant participation and influence” is an often repeated mantra when the Swedish organisation formulates its strategies and aims. But, was I impressed by the level of grassroots representation and their loud engagement when I participated in TPAS’ annual meeting in Birmingham, and NAHT’s annual conference in Washington D.C.! The Germans attract their members through e.g. different membership benefits; discounts on insurances, car rentals, hotels, Internet etc. The Swedes are traditionally great at organizational skills and negotiating rents and other rental conditions. Many are those of our members which work embrace the major part of the social sphere in the neighbourhoods; employment, women issues, child care, drug prevention activities and environmental work.

Each and every IUT member possesses skills and experiences that others could learn about, and which could be of benefit to their own organisation.

Today, most of our communication is between the Secretariat and member organisations. I am sometimes asked by members to organise contacts with other IUT members, but in the future I wish that we could create better opportunities for contacts *between* our members. Contacts could be of a more social kind, with an educational part. Twinning as the British say. Or they could be more formalised, e.g. a study tour, or more often, a mix of both. We can of course learn from one another just by reading about a topic, but nothing beats meeting with real people with first hand experiences!

Going abroad this summer and want to meet the locals? Why not check the list of IUT members on the IUT website. Send them an e-mail or give them a call before you go.

Maybe that will be the beginning of a beautiful friendship!

Magnus Hammar
Secretary General, IUT



Calendar

May 8-9: Housing in Europe: General Interest and Social Cohesion. Athens, Greece

May 19-20: Workshop on Social Housing, organised by the Czech Gov., CECODHAS and UN/ECE. Prague, Czech Rep.

May 26-28: Making Cities Work – annual ENHR Conference. Tirana, Albania.

May 29-June 1: Congress of Confédération Nationale du Logement, CNL, in Creusot, France.

June 12-14: German Tenants’ Day / Assembly of the Deutscher Mieterbund, DMB, Erfurt, Germany.

August 1-3: TPAS Annual Conference. Birmingham, England

September 15-17: 64th Session of the UN / ECE Committee on Human Settlements. Geneva, Switzerland.

September 15-19: SABO Summer University, “Housing and Welfare in Europe”. The Hague, The Netherlands.

October 3-6: IUT east/central Europe meeting in Zagreb, Croatia.

October 6: International Tenants’ Day / UN World Habitat Day.

2004

June 26-29: International Housing Research Conference “Adequate & Affordable housing for all”. Toronto, Canada.

August 6-8: IUT Congress. Birmingham, England.



PHOTO: NINA RAMSMYR

Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen....!

By Magnus Hammar, IUT

Will the right wing majority manage to privatize the public housing stock in Denmark? The opposition is organizing its resistance and the public opinion is against a sell-out.

I love walking the narrow streets of Copenhagen. This city more or less managed to escape the European inner city demolition trend in the 1960's and 70's. The university is still situated in the city centre and there are cafés, bars and small restaurants everywhere. The city centre still holds plenty of residential buildings and in the evenings lights can be seen in the windows with people moving behind curtains. For a newcomer to Copenhagen, the sight of the mixed city population gives you the impression of a city with room for everyone. This has been the case up till now.

Selling, or not selling...

The right wing government has stated its intention to sell off the public housing stock (non-profit co-operatives) in Denmark, starting in 2003. Not a very unique trend...

There are about 500 000 public housing flats in the whole of Denmark, which corresponds to about 20 percent of the total stock. Copenhagen has a 50-50 distribution of private ownership versus rental, of which 20 percent is public and 80 is private rental.

The Danish Tenants Organisation together with representatives of the public housing associations, and a majority of the Danes (57 percent in 2002), oppose this development.

The arguments from the government are similar to those in other countries; tenants really want to own their housing – a persisted argument even if polls show other results, and that owners take better care of their properties and common premises than renters. Experiences from other countries such as Sweden, the UK and countries in eastern Europe show increased segregation - as the offer is more attractive to those tenants with a higher income. Less attractive housing in less attractive areas are not easily sold. It is also estimated that direct housing costs will increase for new owners with more than 50 percent.

Another side effect is increased costs for the local authorities. By law, the Danish authorities have to assign housing to its citizens, and to immigrants. Without public or social

housing the authorities have to house the needy in hostels and hotels. In Sweden, several municipalities have been forced to buy back houses, houses they sold some years ago.

Public, but private

Public housing in Denmark, also referred to as co-operatives, is available for all citizens, with no income limits. Public housing on larger estates give priority to families with children. Individuals with special needs have priority to 25 percent of the stock. The public housing sector is actually private, in the sense that the formal owners are non-profit housing associations. Through a formalized decision-making process all tenants can have an influence on e.g. the budget; rents, investments and repairs.

Rents through the prime cost principal

In the public sector the prime cost principal means a system of no profits. The rent should cover costs for continuous and present maintenance. A budget deficit one year is cleared through rent raises the next year. Major repairs are planned for 10 years ahead and are all financed through rents.

Selling is expropriation

The Danish Tenants Association and other groups defending public housing soon discovered that this massive sale of public housing was actually the selling of private property, as the owners are the housing associations. The sale was defined as expropriation, which is prohibited by constitutional law.

On February 7 the news hit the front-pages in Denmark, and the Danish government has now backed and called for a time-out. The government's intention is to put forward a new report in May, but without consulting interest groups such as the National Association of Co-Operative Housing Societies or the Danish Tenants Association. The Danish conservative government has surely not yet backed from its intentions, and the battle is far from won.

.....
Questions: The Danish Tenant Organisation, llodk@llodk.dk.
Website: www.lejerneslo.dk



Spanish men prefer parents' home

Text: Magnus Hammar, IUT.

In the late 90's, 44 % of the Spanish men and 30 % of women aged 30 were still living with their parents. The two main reasons were lack of affordable housing, and lack of will to move out – due to convenience. On the other hand, only 5 % of 65-year olds lived alone in Spain, as compared to 20 % in Denmark.

Staying with mum and dad does not really promote a high birth-rate. The rate is now the lowest in the European Union, together with Italy with only 1,2 children per women.

The Spanish society and welfare system does not seem to go hand in hand with women's liberation. Spanish women tend to educate themselves longer and then continue with a career. Women are expected to stay at home with their children, with the assistance of grandmothers. Pre-schools are rare and expensive.

Finding an affordable flat in Madrid or Barcelona is not easy. The rental market is limited and considered as less worthy. Ownership is stimulated and tax breaks for home ownership are generous. Also, much of the rental-housing estates in e.g. Barcelona, which were built during the Franco regime in the 1950's 60's and 70's, were built in large quantities but with extremely poor quality and often without running water and other basic amenities. Flats of 17 m² - 25 m² were common. These houses were built to house the massive influx of rural people to the cities. Today, many immigrants from North Africa and Latin America occupy these tower blocks.

A new approach in Barcelona

In 1985, ten years after the death of Generalissimo Franco, the Spanish central state transferred its public housing stock to public housing companies. 80 000 flats in Catalonia were transferred to ADIGSA, which functions under the Department of Territorial Policy and Public Works.

A change in housing policy is visible and much money is now being invested in the rehabilitation of run-down suburban housing estates. The Catalanian state alone has invested 470 000 000 Euro on rehabilitating and repairing public housing in the period between 1985 and 2001. Be-

fore the start of rehabilitation, the crime rate was high and there was lack of services such as playgrounds, schools, and shops. Public transportation was inadequate.

ADIGSA's mission is to regulate and normalise the rights and duties of the residents in the public housing stock, to improve their lives by upgrading their homes and their urban environment.

In participation with neighbours and residents

ADIGSA works in close co-operation with FAVIBC, Federació d'Associacions de Veïns d'Habitatge Social de Catalunya¹. Since FAVIBC was established in 1989 the residents have increased their participation in all the processes to upgrade their physical and social environment. The residents in each estate have organised themselves in 140 resident/neighbour associations which make up FAVIBC. FAVIBC's charismatic leader and President, Mr Julio Regalado, supervises the office in Barcelona with a staff of 20 people. Another 80 craftsman are employed as technicians, carpenters, painters and decorators.

Employment leads to better housing

As everyone involved in rehabilitation of housing estates from the 60' and 70's knows, upgrading involves more than the physical environment. A sustainable development involves also social aspects, such as the opportunity of employment. Unemployment in Spain was 14 percent in 2002. Since 1997 FAVIBC has had a prime objective to create new jobs for

Some facts and figures²

Rental housing made up 18 percent of the total housing stock in 1999, of which only about 2 percent was social housing. 15 percent of the housing stock was empty in 1998, because of deterioration or being located in rural parts of Spain. Another 14 percent of the stock is second homes, summer houses, of which most are located on the Mediterranean coast, and on the Balearic and Canary Islands. This leaves almost 30 percent of the existing dwellings out of the main prime residence market.

Caritas³ estimates that about 4 percent of the population are inadequately housed, in overcrowded insufficient conditions. Another 0,7 percent live in shacks.

¹ Eng: Federation of Public Housing Residents' Association of Catalonia (Veïns is Catalanian and means neighbour)

² from RICS European housing review 2003

³ Caritas= Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 154 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations.



Mr José García,
President of the
Belgium Tenant
Association in
Brussels, and
Mr Julio
Regalado,
President of
FAVIBC,
Barcelona.

the people of the neighbourhoods. FAVIBC assists the residents in establishing small businesses, in order to change a dormant town into a lively neighbourhood. Other objectives have been the supplying of new shops and day care centres, working to improve public transportation and also to creating stronger links with local schools.

FAVIBC's action plan for 2003 involves three sectors. Firstly, social and health services, secondly, education targeting women and thirdly, groups such as the elderly, immigrants and the youth. There are plans for establishing libraries, youth centres and computer rooms.

Rents

Rents in both the private and social sector were strictly controlled until 1985, since then rents in the private sector have been negotiated between landlords and residents. Contracts signed before 1985 are still regulated, and fixed on the basis of adjustment clauses to initially agreed freely negotiated rents. Tenants in Barcelona pay 800-1000 Euro for a flat of 75 m² in the private sector, compared to 200-300 Euro in the social sector, without services and heating. To be eligible for a social flat there are certain criteria; E.g. household income may not exceed 1470 Euro, net. As many Spanish households include gainfully employed sons and daughters, many needy mums and dads find it difficult to qualify for their social flat where they have perhaps lived since the 60's and 70's. Many professional categories have relatively low salaries in Barcelona; A bus driver may earn, net, about 1200 Euro, a nurse only 1000 Euro and a cashier in a supermarket not more than 600 Euro.

More information: www.favibc.org



A new hope for Sarajevo

Text and photo: Magnus Hammar, IUT

On my way from Sarajevo airport to the city centre, Mr Huremović takes me on a sightseeing tour in his car. I look out to observe the surroundings. From watching television almost everyday between 1992 and 1995, I remember seeing shattered and overturned trams and houses with gaping black holes where the windows should have been. I remember men and women running from house to house, taking shelter behind tanks and walls. Yes, traces from the war are still fully visible, as almost no building was left unmarked when the war was over. Many houses in the city centre have now been repaired, with international assistance from the UN, EU and others. But still many hotels, army barracks and federal buildings, which were favourite targets for the Serbian troops, are still in complete devastation.

The next day we drive into residential areas with tower blocks from the 60's and 70's. Almost every building bears marks of grenades and bullets. Evidently, international solidarity reaches far, but not this far.

Eight stories and no lift

Mr Nenad Petrović (73) and his wife Miriana (68) moved into their two-room flat in Zenica, some three hours north of Sarajevo, when the house was ready in 1974. The 8-story tower block did not get severely hit during the war, but there has practically been no maintenance for the last twenty years. There were no repair funds available and the tenants had to do something to improve their house. Repairs started two years ago when Mr Petrović volunteered to become a house manager/house keeper. He now collects a monthly maintenance fee from the residents. Then Zenica Stan, the managing company, makes up renovation plans together with the residents.

Heading the list of repairs were the two lifts, which had not been functioning for many years. They are now repaired. The "rent", or maintenance fee, is depending on floor level. The higher up, the higher is the fee. Some residents ignore paying these fees, which explains why Mr Petrović often stays around the entrance and the lifts, hindering those who has not paid to use them!

Privatisation

Yugoslavia under Tito's communist regime was rather liberal when it came to private ownership. Even before 1991, 80 percent of the housing units in Yugoslavia were in private ownership. Only 20 percent was state owned, often through state owned manufacturing companies or by the railroad company. Housing was part of the salary, as in many other former socialist countries. Privatisation of state owned flats in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina started in



1998, when certificates as a means of payment were put into circulation. Today almost all of the flats have been transferred to the tenants. These certificates were issued in relation to the number of leasehold years. In Republica Srpska, the second of the three entities that make up the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina, privatisation started at the end of 2001. In the third entity, District Brcko, the process has not yet started.

Ownership and new responsibilities

Before privatisation public housing companies were assigned to deal with maintenance. Tenants were organised in House Councils but without any real influence on priorities. Consequently, the housing companies often spent the accumulated funds allowed for each building, on the old buildings, and failed to repair the houses from the 1960's and 70's. Since 1991, when tenants started to own their flats, the state did not contribute with any funds. Also, no one really knew who was responsible for the roof, the basement or other common premises. Time would show that this was a great problem, and the problem increased until people like Mr Petrović and Mr Kadić decided to do something about it.

Mr Halid Kadić greets us outside his 8-story tower block from 1982. He used to work for the railroads and is now in his 70's. Mr Kadić lives with his wife and granddaughter Amra in a two-room flat on the 6th floor. Even though the house is only 20 years old, it gives a shabby impression. Electricity is not working in the stair-well. One part of the façade, where a grenade struck, has been passably repaired. Like Mr Petrović, Mr Kadić also became tired of rubbish and broken glass and of the immobile lift. He started collecting money from his neighbours in order to cover repairs. But, too few of the residents were willing to pay the

required 7 Euro per month and Mr Kadic' gave up after a year. Walking up six floors was tough even for me – without shopping bags!

Today, the city of Zenica has assigned Zenica Stan as the managing company. But without money from the residents themselves, there was no sign of repairs in February 2003.

Returning refugees

Between 1992, until the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995, about 1.5 million people, one third of the population, fled and left their homes behind in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When returning home years later they often found that someone else had moved in – if the house was still there. In the Federation alone half of the houses were damaged and six percent of those were destroyed completely. Before moving back, often not without great difficulty, many papers had to be sorted out and signed and the occupying family must pack up and leave. Perhaps back to their house which had been occupied by another family...

900 000 people have returned to homes from which they fled or were expelled during the Bosnian war. 367 000 of those are living as 'minorities' in areas governed by former foes.¹

Costs and maintenance

Mr Kadic' receives a pension of about 100 Euro. When the bills are paid for heating, electricity, water, and garbage his wallet is left with 35 Euro. The extra cost of 7 Euro for maintenance is hard to bear for most residents in No. 21 Zenic'ke Brigade.

By the Law on Maintenance from 2001, every residential building, with two or more floors, is required to be assigned to a Managing Company. In Sarajevo there are 6 registered such companies, both private and municipal. The maintenance fee is determined on the basis of m² of useful area. A flat of 60 m² with no access to a lift is charged 7 Euro (0.125 Euro/m²) and 11 Euro (0.19 Euro/m²) with a lift. As the fees are fixed, the six companies can only compete for customers through quality.

The managing companies are allowed to keep a maximum of 20 percent for administration, salaries, etc.

BIHUSS does its part in reconstructing

Politically, housing is not on top of the agenda. Housing issues are decentralised to third level, the Cantonal level.² Each canton has its own housing regulations, and each Federation has its own laws.

Mr Mehmedalija Huremović, President of the Association of Tenants, BIHUSS, in Sarajevo, and his colleagues in the other Cantons, have committed themselves to the work of assisting tenants, and owners. In Bosnia and Herzegovina these two groups share most of the problems. BIHUSS plays an essential role of the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where solving the complex housing issue is perhaps one of the most crucial problems.

¹ International Crisis Group, December 2002

² 1 State, 3 Federations and 10 Cantons in the Fed. of B&H



Mr Kadic' outside his house in Zenica.



Miriana and Nenad Petrovic' enjoy a nice view over the hilly Bosnian landscape.



Mr Mehmedalija Huremović, President of BIHUSS Sarajevo.



Federal administrative buildings in Sarajevo were favourite targets.

JA zu fairen Mieten



MV
Mieterinnen- und Mieterverband
www.mieterverband.ch

This is where the people's initiative of the Swiss Tenants Association "YES to fair rents" applies. The initiative was presented in 1996 together with the requested 100'000 signatures which are needed for a referendum. The proposal will be put to the vote on May 18th.

New tenancy law for Switzerland?

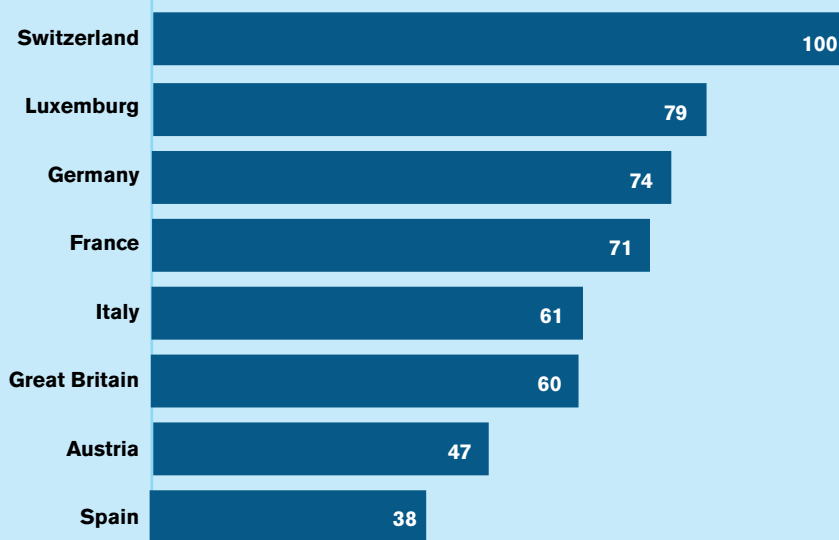
By Mr Jacob Trümpy, Mieterinnen- und Mieterverband, Zürich Switzerland

The current Swiss law applicable to renting is over thirty years old. Compared with the rest of Europe, protection for tenants in Switzerland is notably weak. The rents are the highest in Europe.

According to the present law, the Swiss landlords can raise rents based on the so called local and district standards, and adjust rents in line with those for comparable accommodations. In this way, rent follows market development. In this respect, there is a certain similarity to the law in Germany.

In addition, however, the landlord can also adjust the rent to the cost trend, for instance shift increased operating and maintenance costs onto the rent. The landlord may load an increase in mortgage interest rates onto the rent, which has proven to be particularly fatal in the past. This has resulted in rents increasing continually in times of increasing mortgage interest rates, while the benefit of any reduction in mortgage interest rates has only been passed on partially or not at all. Through this, the profits of the landlords run into billions of Swiss francs yearly.

Developments of rents in Europe, as converted to purchasing power.



A rental flat in Austria for half the costs compared to Switzerland.

SOURCE: EUROSTAT/FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS

The four most important elements of this initiative are:

- Rents will be uncoupled from the variable mortgage interest rate and newly bound to a reference interest rate.
- Starting rents can only be aligned with the average statistical rent of comparable apartments. This way, the upward pressure on prices when tenants change will be stemmed.
- When real estate is changing hands, the rents can also only be increased within the range of the average rent for comparable apartments. If the increase is greater than 10%, it must be graduated.
- Notices to quit are only possible for justified reasons. Contrary to today's law, the landlord will have the burden of proof.

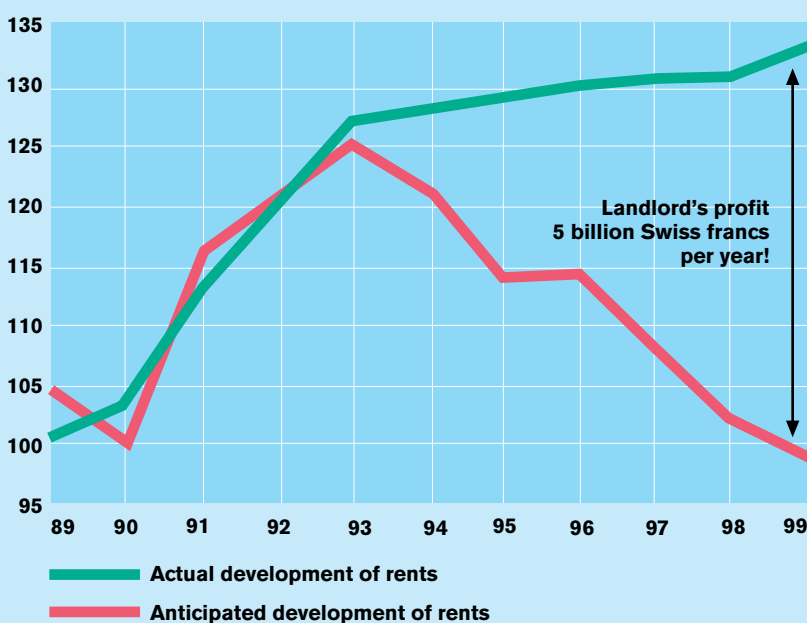
In comparison to other European countries, we in Switzerland also come far behind in relation to protection against termination. A German, an Italian or a Scandinavian tenant is in any case far better protected against unjustified notices to quit than the Swiss.

Eight referendums on May 18

Will we win this referendum in the country where 70 percent of the population live in rented accommodations? It is of course difficult to make a prognosis. Although there is a majority of tenants, this is off-set by a high proportion of foreigners, who live mostly in rented apartments. In addition, for the passing of a public initiative, not only the majority of the votes but also the majority of the 23 cantons are required. Small rural cantons with traditionally conservative voters could, in this case, override the cities. Vote participation at referendums in Switzerland is normally below 50 percent. The coming plebiscite is also special in that no less than eight referendums are coming to the vote simultaneously. The voting citizen is not only going to give his opinion on protection of tenants, but also on a wide variety of questions regarding such as health insurance, atomic energy and other issues.

Of course we hope that the tenants in other countries will keep their fingers crossed for us in this particular referendum!

Development of rents in Switzerland 1989-1999
Index October 1989=100



From bad to worse in Slovenia

Many tenants in Slovenia find it difficult to enjoy their countries' "super success story" from being one of the most prosperous countries to enter the EU in 2004.

The Slovenian government is adding more amendments to the Housing Act which makes it possible for house owners to move the tenants without a culpable reason. Yes, the owners have to provide them with a new dwelling, but the present regulations give very weak rights for the tenants to appeal the eviction and to oppose to the proposed new accommodation. Owners can terminate a lease contract without having to provide a substitute flat if e.g. the tenant settles operating expenses or the rent with a delay; the tenant does not admit the owner into the flat twice a year; the tenant brings a new family member into the flat without permission, etc. After over 50 years in the same flat with necessary facilities, tenants are now moved into housing units with common toilets and bathrooms. Those tenants who are openly opposing the development are harassed by their landlords through visits and telephone calls. Rents have gone up by 37 % during the last two years. 78 000 tenants in municipal flats and 17 000 in resituated flats, most of them in Ljubljana, do not sleep well.

An appeal concerning the unsatisfactory situation will be submitted to the Council of Europe.

Housing and the European Union

Abstract of an article by Mr Hubert S. van Eyk, the Netherlands. The full article can be found on www.iut.nu / Archive

Ministers responsible for Housing in the European Union member states have been meeting annually since 13 years. Several times – in 1994, 1997 and 2002 – they have done so together with a number of colleagues from the EU-accession countries.



Mr Hubert S. van Eyk.

It would therefore seem a likely assumption that the European Union – in some way – deals with housing issues; why would such meetings at high political level otherwise take place?

Nevertheless, the Housing Ministers at these meetings have clearly stated that they have no need for an EU mandate in the field of housing.

Furthermore, the European Commission, which participated in a number of these ministerial meetings, stated that it too had no need for a formal EU-mandate for housing (contrary to its involvement in many other policy areas, such as health, safety, social security, reinforcement of administrative and judicial capacity, indirect taxation (VAT), certain statistics, energy, education, environment, etc. etc.). In other words: there is no legal base for a European policy of housing. This is comparable to physical (spatial) planning policy for which the European Union neither has such a formal mandate.

Reality vs. theory

In spite of this mutual “detachment”, practice shows that there are indeed a number of important linkages between national housing and the EU. This then gives rise to the question of how the EU and EU-Member States actually relate in the field of housing, and of whether there are undercurrent developments, if any, slowly moving towards some kind of mandate of the EU in this field.

To my best knowledge, there has hardly ever been an open – national or international – fundamental discussion on whether or not housing should be a field of competence of the EU. There have been a few efforts to show how housing issues relate to the specific EU-legislation and programmes, but discussions have stopped short of that.

In this article I would like to carry this further on by also pointing out some seeming inconsistencies and new developments. I expect that such a discussion will, at last, be held in the second half of 2003 when the EU Housing Ministers

will meet in Italy to discuss “Housing policies and European integration: problems and prospects”.

This article is meant as a contribution to this discussion in Europe.

The Treaty and housing

The tasks of the European Community are enumerated in Article 2 of the Treaty. Improvement of housing conditions is not mentioned there. But a number of tasks are mentioned there of which housing can indeed be considered to be an aspect, such as the achievement of a high level of social protection and improvement of the quality of the environment, the raising of the standard of living and the quality of life, and social cohesion and solidarity among Member States.

Article 2 and 3 of the Treaty include a number of “activities” of the European Union but where, again, housing is not mentioned.

But anyone who is informed about what housing policy in the Member States is all about can easily infer that there are, in fact, clear links with housing. For instance, with reference to:

a. “*The prohibition, as between Member States, of (—) restrictions on the import and export of goods and of all other measures having equivalent effect*”. This also refers to building products, for example, and, therefore, refers to housing construction where such products are used. The housing construction sector is one of the largest construction sub-sectors in all countries.

b. “*(.....) the abolition (.....), as between Member States, of obstacles to the free movement of (...) persons (...)*”. This gives rise to question whether local government can implement (restrictive) housing allocation rules, which exist in the Netherlands.

c. “*a system ensuring that competition in the internal market is not distorted*”. This certainly also refers to competition in the house building sector, and the often very large projects in this field in government designated urban expansion areas in the Netherlands.

d. “*policy in the social sphere (...)*”. Housing is one of the most important fields within social policy. In the Netherlands some one million households receive individual rent allowance involving a total amount of state subsidization of some _ 450 million.

e. “*the strengthening of economic and social cohesion*”. Adequate, accessible, affordable and decent housing contributes very significantly to social cohesion.

f. “*a contribution to the strengthening of consumer protec-*

– an uneasy and unclear relationship

tion”. House occupants can be seen as consumers. They have a strong interest to be protected as such in obtaining mortgages to buy or improve their dwelling, in being protected by secure occupancy and by a fair rent policy. (Mr Van Eyk’s list contains more “links”)

EU-Directives and housing

Contrary to the absence of housing as an explicit theme in the Treaty, there are a number of important EU-Directives and the like where housing is indeed mentioned. A few examples;

- The EU-Directive on Construction Products, which is aimed at harmonising national legislation with regard to building products. It is important from a housing and social perspective in that it sets certain minimal standards for the quality of housing, such as constructional safety, fire prevention, etc
- The recommendation of the European Commission concerning the need to provide information on mortgages.
- The (proposal for a) Directive on energy performance in buildings, including residential buildings.
- The Directive for government procurements, which is of importance for housing associations which play a very important role in the provision of social housing in e.g. the Netherlands.
- EU legislation on freedom of capital movement and free competition is an issue which is relevant in the Netherlands in relation to a Dutch legal provision on restricting/ regulating international investments of housing associations. The question here is, of course, whether such restrictions are in compliance with EU legislation.

EU-enlargement and housing

An important decision was taken by European Housing Ministers at a meeting on “sustainable housing policies” in June 2002 in Belgium. In the final Communiqué of that meeting, where 26 European countries were represented, paragraph 4 reads:

“(…) The Ministers noted more specifically that the problem of sustainable refurbishment and restructuring of high-rise residential buildings and surrounding areas was a very pressing one affecting a large proportion of the population. They considered that it is necessary to tackle this element in order to avoid social problems. Therefore, they agreed that a closer analysis of this topic (from an operational and economic point of view) is to be prepared with the co-operation of the European Commission and the interested countries. The results of this analysis should be presented to the 4th European Ministers conference on sustainable housing during the second semester of 2004”.

It has never occurred before that housing – or at least such a socially, economically and ecologically important part of

the housing sector – has been put on the European ministerial agenda as a serious problem by so many countries.

(Mr van Eyk then examines the links to housing in; European programmes (subsidies), The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the context of exchanging EU-information.)

Conclusions and possible prospects

I am not implying to argue that the EU should obtain a housing mandate. The Member States are fully capable to develop and implement housing policies within their own borders, national, regional or local. Subsidiarity is, therefore, fully in place according to me.

But what I do want to say is that housing should be more explicitly and consistently taken into account by the European Commission. The present situation seems to be one in which the European Commission is hiding behind its own competencies leaving out housing but nevertheless dealing with it. This does not make for transparency in European policy and makes it difficult for the Housing Ministries in the Member States to clearly and fully take the work of the European Commission into account. If the Commission and the Member States would look straight into each others eyes, the social, economic, environmental and political-administrative importance of the housing sector would thereby become clearer.

It is my opinion that the accession countries – with their severe housing problems – will contribute to put housing policy higher on the European political agenda because housing in these countries, as never before, is increasingly seen as a barrier to achieve social and economic cohesion *between* the EU-countries. An important stimulus to this will be the next Pan-European Ministers conference on “sustainable housing policies” which is planned to be held in the second half of 2004, during the EU-presidency of the Netherlands.

This, together with the significant proposal of Italy to explicitly deal with “Housing and European integration: problems and prospects” as a special theme at the next Housing Ministers conference in the second semester of 2003, could, if my assessment is correct, lead to more clarity and a more sound relationship between national housing Ministers and the European Commission.

Note: The author of this article is a civil servant at the Netherlands Ministry of Housing c.a. in The Netherlands. He has written this article on a personal basis; the Ministry is in no way responsible for its contents. He invites comments on this article which can be sent by e-mail to: h.vaneyk@minvrom.nl.

A social housing crisis in France.

The Abbé Pierre Foundation reports that the present shortage of social housing is the worst in 50 years. The foundation criticises the government for insufficiently construction. There is need for at least 80 000 new flats, of which 30 000 in the category of social housing. Also 40 000 units have been demolished during the last 5 years.

The government seems to think that poverty disappears if bad quality housing is demolished, says M. Doutreligne, Director of the Foundation. The housing shortage not only touches the low-income households. Also, families with average incomes are affected when rents in e.g. Paris increased with 6 % in 2002.

SOURCE: AFP

Budget cuts in order to fund Bush's war program

On February 13, Congress adopted HUD's fiscal year 2003 budget. In addition, the Bush administration recently announced its fiscal year 2004 budget proposal. Congress had begun its review of this proposal. These budgets propose dramatic cuts in housing funds for Public Housing and Section 8 tenants. The budget cuts divert funds away from programs for working and poor people in order to fund Bush's war program and tax cuts for the rich.

SOURCE: NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF HUD TENANTS

Challenging housing reforms in Russia

The Russian government has been asked by the Council of Europe that by September 2003 to table a draft law with the DUMA, the Russian parliament, in the process of ratifying the European Social Charter. Already, the DUMA has serious doubts with a whole series of articles, among them article 31, the right to housing.

Reform of the Russian housing market and associated services is a gigantic task. The latter covers urban heating and water services, maintenance and repairs. These services are today provided by the public sector. In the harsh climate such as Russia's the lack of care arising from financial difficulties has resulted in a degradation of housing stock and heating networks. This winter heating failures and collapses affected over 17 million people in 30 cities.

SOURCE: DEVELOPMENTS, NEWSLETTER OF DG III, COUNCIL OF EUROPE, MARCH 2003.

Berlin, renters' heaven

The Housing supplement in the Berliner Zeitung on April 3 contained 8 pages of flats to rent.

How about a 4-room flat of 135 m² (1450 ft²) with two bathrooms and overlooking a park, to rent for 1300 Euro/month (US\$ 1396)? Or perhaps a more modest studio of 50 m² (540 ft²) in Frie-

drichshain, for less than 217 Euro/month (232\$US)? When Berlin became the united Germany's capital in 1999, this was expected to create a massive demand for new housing in Berlin. But, plenty of old attractive flats with low rents in eastern Berlin, together with recession, created a heaven for renters. 90 % of the Berliners still prefer to rent their flats.

Cries heard on Iceland

The situation for low income households, and for persons with no or low incomes, on Iceland, has for many years been neglected. In an attempt to deal with the difficult housing situation, the director of Social Affairs in the city of Reykjavik summoned a working group representing various NGO:s to lay a foundation for a new social direction in housing. Also, the tenants were represented through the Tenants Organisation of Iceland. From 1965 to 1998 there was a social housing scheme which was then abolished, and was replaced by nothing. The act in 1998 was the underlying cause for the bad housing situation. A Swedish housing expert that visited Reykjavik in 2002 described the situation as "the Wild West".

FOR MORE INFO: www.husaleiga.is

Educational

SABO, Swedish Association of Municipal Housing Companies, together with research institutes in the Netherlands and Scotland, invite representatives from the academic and NGO-sector, to SABO's 17:th summer university. This year's theme is the Future of Housing and Welfare in Europe, which includes e.g. ageing populations and social dimensions. What role can housing organisations in European countries play and how can we learn from each other?

Where and when: Hague, The Netherlands, September 15-19.

More information: www.sabo.se, go to "English". E-mail: stig.dedring@sabo.se alt.vogels@otb.tudelft.nl



European Housing Forum

This year's agenda will focus on *social inclusion and the sharing of best practice across the enlarging EU*. The Forum brings together 10 pan-European organisations from across the whole spectrum of housing; homelessness, house builders, social housing, tenants and researchers. The EU-meeting in Italy in September/October will discuss European integration and housing. The European Housing Forum, EHF, continues to push at the EU-level for more integrated approaches on social exclusion, discrimination and sustainable urban development which incorporate the issue of housing. IUT is one of members of the EHF.

Fore more information:
www.europeanhousingforum.com, or contact the IUT Secretariat.