

Housing Policy In The EU Member States

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Introduction, Housing: a Question for Europe?

Mixed progress

The recent UN Habitat II meeting in, by drawing attention to the appalling housing conditions facing billions of households in the poorer half of the globe, served to emphasise the relatively high average quality of housing within the European Union. At the same time there is a widespread view that housing and neighbourhood conditions for the poorest third of Europeans are neither as intolerable nor as socially divisive as for Americans, especially in the inner cities. In the Union as a whole, but with considerably more emphasis in northern and western Europe, governments have long promoted active housing policies, frequently absorbing from one to four per cent of GDP. And in every Union country, with two exceptions, there is an over-riding policy objective that adequate, affordable housing should be available to all, MacLennan and Williams (1990), McCrone and Stephens (1995).

The reality is, however, that almost every European government fails to achieve their laudable objective. This may reflect resource constraints for public spending, changing socio-economic patterns to which policy only responds slowly, demographic pressures and shocks (such as the vast, post-1989 influx of refugees into a ring of countries from Greece to Germany) or the inherent failure of, sometimes, expensive policy solutions. At the level of the individual the 1990s growth in homelessness and the apparent backlog of provision for the elderly, the disabled and a range of special needs are cause for concern. At neighbourhood and city level the recorded expansion, in many countries, of the economically and socially disadvantaged in both older, over-crowded and low amenity central city areas and in post war social housing estates is heightening concerns about the causes and consequences of social exclusion. At the national level housing market instability has, in the 1980s and 1990s, created particular difficulties for less

wealthy home-owners in Britain, Sweden, Finland, Spain and regions of other countries. And in some countries the priority given to curtailing public spending has prompted reductions in capital spending and led to major re-orientations of housing policy; for example, in Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK and most recently France. The same policy imperatives are now questioning support systems for rental payments. Much of Europe is uneasy with its housing policies and outcomes, Dieleman (1996).

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