



Mediterranean City-to-City Migration

Dialogue, Knowledge and Action

Virtual Peer-Learning Event – Thematic paper

The Link between Homelessness and Migration; Fostering Inclusive Neighbourhoods

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This background document has been drafted for the purpose of the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration project (MC2CM) Peer-Learning event on “The link between homelessness and migration: achieving inclusive neighbourhoods”, taking place in Dortmund on 28 to 30 April 2021.

The document introduces general concepts and provides a basic framework for discussion on the link between homelessness and migration at city level. The examples provided are meant to be illustrative of some of the actions already taken in the field. The concepts introduced will be further developed and expanded during the course of meeting discussions.



1 Introduction


Homelessness is widely becoming a global human rights crisis that has an immense impact on the rights to life, security and dignity especially for the most vulnerable populations. It affects people in both urban and rural areas, where populations face the lack of affordable and social housing. Its causes are accumulative and include:

- Poverty,
- high- and rising-income inequality,
- limited access to land and property,
- limited access to credit and financing,
- high under- and un-employment,
- the proliferation of insecure and vulnerable jobs,
- discrimination and social exclusion,
- the lack of social protection,
- unplanned and rapid urbanisation,
- forced eviction due to hikes in rents,
- the high cost of energy or healthcare,
- shortage of affordable housing,
- privatization of public services, and
- investment speculation in housing.

While there might be individual, environmental, structural and institutional causes that can all contribute to homelessness, it is critical to understand homelessness as a societal rather than an individual failure.

The Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants¹ stated that homelessness is symptomatic of the failure of governments to address growing inequalities in income, wealth and access to land and property where housing is treated as a commodity rather than as a human right. Furthermore, adequate, affordable and well-located housing acts as a pathway to other human rights to work, education, health, and security. People experiencing homelessness across the globe face negative outcomes related to mortality, health, ability to earn a basic income and other basic elements of survival. This appears as the symptom as well as the cause of homelessness, thereby resulting in a vicious cycle for homeless groups. Therefore, housing issues are highly regarded on the Global Development Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals, through Target 11.1 regarding access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing by 2030, and the New Urban Agenda, have set an unprecedented recognition of how adequate housing can contribute to sustainable development and people's well-being.

¹ United Nations General Assembly, 2016, Draft resolution referred to the high-level plenary meeting on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants by the General Assembly at its seventieth session, New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, New York



The Mediterranean City to City Migration Project has already explored some of the most persistent issues faced by migrants. These issues involve the opportunities for better quality of life offered by cities in the fields of housing, basic services² and employment³. Additionally, the need for authorities and stakeholders to enact strategies for specific target groups such as refugees, migrant youth, civil society working with migrants in a wider framework of inclusion has been recognised.

This background paper is built on the aforementioned previous themes, and will start by defining homelessness and identifying the major drivers of the phenomenon, deepen the understanding of its complex causes, the challenges faced and the consequences of homelessness on migrant individuals, as well as propose policy discussion points in order to address migrant homelessness in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2 Definitions of Homelessness


There is no internationally agreed-upon definition of homelessness, which makes it difficult to provide data, cross-country comparison and policy solutions. Due to localised sets of policy circumstances, definitions of homelessness vary widely depending on language, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural contexts.

The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (UN DESA) has defined 'primary homelessness' as persons living without a shelter or living quarters, and 'secondary homelessness' as including persons with no place of usual residence. In some contexts, homelessness is understood as a lack of access to land as well as to shelter. The term 'literally homeless' is often used to denote the people staying in homeless shelters, on the streets or in other similar settings such as in abandoned buildings, in make-shift structures, in parks, etc. Within the group of people experiencing 'literal homelessness', it is common to distinguish between the 'unsheltered homeless' and the 'sheltered homeless'.

Unsheltered homelessness is also sometimes referred to as 'rough sleeping' or 'rooflessness'. Besides the 'literally homeless', there are many other persons who are often classified as 'precariously housed'. This term is often used to denote people living with a family member or friend for lack of alternatives or in temporary housing. While there is no formal definition, the term 'hidden homeless' may include those who are not in contact with any administrative support services, people who may not be eligible for support services, or may not be considered a priority case to access limited public support services; those living in unsustainable or inadequate housing such as in their car, with friends or family; those who may be residing in inadequate settlements such as slums, squatting in structures not intended for housing and those who relocate frequently.

² MC2CM background Paper The Enjoyment of Basic Services under Human Rights, 2016

³ MC2CM, Background Paper on Employment and Entrepreneurship, Madrid, 2016



An Expert Meeting Group co-organised in Nairobi by UN-Habitat and UNDESA has recommended to devise a definition of homelessness that is:

- **Inclusive:** the definition should look at the social, physical, and security domain to ensure that no one is left behind. It should capture everyone, including: people living in temporary or crisis accommodation; people living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation; and people who lack access to affordable housing.
- **Politically sensitive:** the definition should differentiate amongst degrees and types of homelessness, given that no form of homelessness is acceptable. The definition should account for the differences in the socioeconomic context of countries to holistically address any potential manifestation of homelessness.
- **Shaped around homelessness as a societal failure:** homelessness should be viewed as a societal, rather than an individual flaw. As human rights issue, homelessness sits at the intersection of public health, housing affordability, domestic violence, mental illness, substance misuse, urbanization, racial and gender discrimination and unemployment. More so, it reflects the structural inequality and discrimination toward those who are denied their rights to adequate housing.


3 What causes homelessness among migrants?

The causes of homelessness incorporate a combination of individual, structural and institutional factors including elements in both categories that are specific to migrant populations. Due to conflict, natural disasters, and climate change, among other reasons, migration is often spontaneous; therefore, host cities are frequently found trying to accommodate additional populations without the advantage of long-term planning and equitable distribution of resources. This frequently results in migrants, including refugees, living in overcrowded conditions or informal settlements.

Structural factors that cause homelessness amongst migrants are deeply embedded in broad social and economic structures, including:

- the lack of affordable and adequate, public or social housing;
- minimum access to labour markets and unemployment;
- lack access to social services and protection;
- social exclusion;
- discriminatory practices by private landlords and authorities.

Many migrants face formal exclusion to welfare, housing services and labour markets as a result of national policies which aim to create a *hostile* environment to deter migrants from their cities. More so, policy frameworks governing migrants' access to welfare and housing-related services are often tiered, with certain migrants accessing greater rights than others due to factors such as their migratory status and length of residence. These discriminatory practices often lead migrants to work in irregular employment and live in precarious conditions, therefore becoming susceptible to forced evictions and homelessness. Moreover, they are also vulnerable to exploitation by landlords and various authorities as they are more likely to be uninformed of their rights. Their undocumented status can bring about humiliation, criminalisation and added stigma, resulting in most migrants being unwilling to make use of their entitlements, challenge abusive rental practices, and turn to support services.



The specific challenges that migrants face to access adequate housing have also been highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing. She has noted, for example, that there is often little coordination between migration and housing programmes.

In her “Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing” she also stresses even greater challenges for migrants in irregular situations as in many countries irregular migration continues to be criminalized and in some, renting accommodation to migrants in an irregular situation is a criminal offence. Furthermore, homeless shelters are sometimes restricted to nationals or to documented migrants and may be required to report their clients to the authorities, effectively preventing migrants from using their services.

SPECIFIC CAUSES FOR VULNERABLE MIGRATION GROUPS

Migrants are often classified as a homogenous group within homeless populations. However, people have different needs intersecting with characteristics like age, gender, legal situation, country of origin, level of education, etc.

WOMEN

While women are a small, albeit growing, proportion of the homeless migrant population, they are more likely than men to experience homelessness as a result of changing gender roles and expectations, as well as domestic violence. In certain circumstances, migrant women are forced to depend on male family members to renew residency permits or to access housing through formal markets. In the case of refugee camps, women live in open tents and camps, most often without adequate facilities and are compelled to move to cities in search for opportunities despite the risk of ending up on the streets. Female homeless even face increased danger from abuse, kidnapping and trafficking, therefore taking up a large portion of those in hidden homelessness which are harder to account for.

MIGRANT YOUTH/MINORS

Many migrant children and youth come from traumatic experiences including but not limited to abuse, mental illness and poverty. In many cases, shelters do not have services tailored to fit youth needs. More so, migrant children may not receive continued support upon turning 18, depending on their migrant status. Furthermore, often access to school for youngsters is subject to a proof of residence, which prevent young people leaving in informal setting from enjoying their right to education. These young people are highly vulnerable to homelessness and exploitation should they no longer gain support⁴.

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

Undocumented migrants with irregular migrant status receive little to no mainstream social support and may be subject to removal should they seek to access it. Undocumented migrants also face great difficulties in the housing sector as cities can enforce restrictive policies which require landlords and employers to check residency permits and face discrimination from service providers or fear disclosure to immigration authorities⁵.

⁴ Council of Europe and UNHCR. (2014). *Unaccompanied and separated asylum-seeking and refugee children turning eighteen: What to celebrate?* Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

⁵ FEANTSA.(2014). *Free Movement of EU citizens and access to social assistance: Guidance for homeless service providers*, Brussels: FEANTSA.

4 Constraints for migrants to access adequate housing

Migrants often find themselves in a disadvantaged situation to access housing compared to the native-born populations. In the 28 EU countries⁶, migrants are disproportionately dependent on private rentals, more likely to be uninformed of their rights, as well as discriminated against. In the Mediterranean region particularly, limitations migrants may face include:

- Greater obstacles to access public housing or housing benefits;
- Higher likelihood to live in substandard, dismally serviced and poorly located accommodations at a higher rental cost burden than the national average;
- Higher likelihood to live in overcrowded conditions;
- Higher likelihood to spend higher proportion of their income on rent.

The following are some of the constraints faced by migrants in accessing adequate housing.

Migrants are often spatially segregated

Migrants are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations, including to violations of their right to adequate housing such as forced evictions. Inadequate planning, combined with influxes of migrant populations, contributes directly to long-term social and spatial segregation within urban areas. When faced with no other choice, migrant populations, including refugees, will ultimately use available land to settle, namely areas that lack proper tenure and ownership. Often, such places are located in areas prone to natural hazards, or on unsuitable land for housing, adjacent to roads, railways, riverbeds, slopes, etc. Furthermore, poverty and marginalisation intersect and are often concentrated in specific locations. Housing location, in fact, often affects the experiences and opportunities that people may have – including access to jobs, services, transport, education, civic and political participation. Spatial inequalities in cities perpetuate other forms of social, economic, political or cultural inequality.

Migrants can be excluded from already limited local resources


Population flows towards urban areas can result in added constraints towards the access to land, housing and basic services. Growing demand for these limited resources can cause social tension between host populations and migrants. The United Nations⁷ also points to rural-urban migration adding challenges relative to the urban management of resources such as electricity, solid-waste and wastewater management, as well as the provision of potable water, thus posing increased ecological and public health challenges within local administrations. Additionally, migrants are faced with more difficulties when trying to access subsidies and social benefits. All of the above are fundamental for adequate housing.

Migrants are often not considered in decision making and not included in participatory processes

Local and national authorities are generally lacking sufficient financial resources and technical skills to facilitate migrant inclusion in planning processes. Migrants are not included in participatory processes, their needs and interests are not known, and therefore, not taken into account.

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migrant_integration_statistics_-_housing

⁷ Habitat III, 2015, Issue Paper 15 Urban Resilience, New York



Moreover, this situation triggers a vicious cycle as migrants without adequate housing are more difficult to reach for local authorities, as compared to settled persons. Inclusion may be achieved through the management of urban areas that support equitability and inclusion (UN-Habitat & UNESCO, 2015) in order to achieve the realization of the migrants' rights as well as with adequate participatory processes specific to target groups. In certain countries, such as Germany or Austria, where decentralisation is strong, integration is above all a local and provincial issue. As a result, these countries have developed an important series of integration practices⁸ at the local level that are based on access to rights and strongly based on participatory approaches that included migrants.

Migrants have more difficulties affording adequate housing

Several studies⁹ have illustrated the various levels at which cities are coping with the integration of migrants: for instance, property ownership can be used as an indicator of migrants' long-term settlement in the country. Rental tenure can also be used as an indicator of protection from discrimination on the rental market. Across Europe, migrant households are three times less likely to be homeowners, especially in destinations such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Belgium.

A study commissioned by the EU found that the housing cost overburden rate for non-EU citizens saw a significant increase from 2013 to 2014. 30% of non-EU citizens in working age were overburdened by renting costs, compared to 11% among nationals¹⁰. The housing cost overburden rate allows policymakers to assess how housing costs affects migrants' poverty and quality of life¹¹.

Migrants are prone to live in overcrowded situations

Nearly 1 in 4 people in deprived or overcrowded homes in OECD countries live in a migrant household. In the EU, overcrowding is understood as the ratio between household rooms and number of household members¹². The United Nations understands that a dwelling unit is considered to provide sufficient living area for household members if there are fewer than three persons per habitable room¹³. EU-wide, the overcrowding rate among those born outside the EU and aged 20-64 stands at 25%, compared with 17% for the native-born. The levels are higher (40-55 per cent) in Central and Southeast Europe (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary and Poland) and lower (<10%) in Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and the Netherlands¹⁴.

Moreover, the temporary shelters that are provided by cities, namely for refugees and homeless persons, are often overcrowded and do not cater to the specific needs of particular groups such as women and girls. Overcrowding situations in shelters or dormitories particularly affect women's and girls' dignity, privacy and/or personal security.

⁸ MC2CM background Paper on Social, Inter-cultural, Interreligious Dialogue, Lisbon, 2016

⁹ http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_lvho07c&lang=en

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migrant_integration_statistics_-_housing

¹¹ <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dybr.htm>

¹² A person is therefore considered as living in an overcrowded dwelling if the household does not have at its disposal a minimum number of rooms equal to: one room for the household; one room per couple in the household; one room for each single person aged 18 or more; one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17 years of age; one room for each single person between 12 and 17 years of age and not included in the previous category; one room per pair of children under 12 years of age.

¹³ Urban Indicators Guidelines: Monitoring the Habitat Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals – UN-HABITAT 2009

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migrant_integration_statistics_-_housing

5 Migrant Homelessness and Human Rights

Article 13 of the Human Rights Declaration posits the freedom of movement, ‘the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country at any time’. Migrant populations need to be ensured equal human rights to the rest of society, paying particular attention to most disadvantaged and marginalized migrant groups. This is clearly stated by the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants.

Adequate, affordable, well-located housing acts as a pathway to other human rights. The lack of adequate housing therefore inhibits proper access to these rights and better opportunities. Migrants are often disproportionately concentrated in poor residential areas characterised by sub-standard housing conditions, limited employment opportunities, inadequate access to health care facilities, under-resourced schools, often exposure to crime and violence. Inadequate planning combined with sudden and unpredictable influxes of migrant groups contributes these conditions.

When unable to access adequate and affordable housing, migrants use any available land to settle, often in peripheral urban areas lacking proper tenure and ownership, and often prone to natural hazards. As these areas tend to have poor accessibility, migrants living there also have limited access to employment, education and health, and limited interaction with host communities. Homelessness is an extreme violation of the rights to adequate housing, the rights to life, to security of person, to health, to protection of the home and family and to freedom from inhumane treatment. On an individual level, migrants may experience abandonment, despair, erosion of self-esteem, denial of dignity, serious health consequences and loss of life, stigmatization, social exclusion and criminalization. In addition, those who are particularly vulnerable such as women and youth can experience multiple discrimination, higher levels of assault and loss of education. Governments, national and local, have an obligation to prevent homelessness.

6 Key factors for successful integration of migrants

UN-Habitat promotes an approach to housing as a means to achieve sustainable, inclusive, resilient and safe urbanization. ‘Housing at the Centre’ is the conceptual framework of action that aims to shift the focus from building houses to a holistic framework for housing development, orchestrated with urban planning practice and placing people and human rights at the forefront of urban sustainable development. This is in the hopes of producing new and more sustainable housing solutions, especially for groups in vulnerable situations such as migrants, including refugees¹⁵.

Moreover, the **New Urban Agenda** recognizes the vital role of urbanization in achieving sustainable development.

*We commit to promote equitable and affordable access to **sustainable basic physical and social infrastructure for all, without discrimination, including affordable serviced land, housing, modern and renewable energy, safe drinking water and sanitation, safe, nutritious and adequate food, waste disposal, sustainable mobility, healthcare and family planning, education, culture, and information and communication technologies.***

¹⁵ MC2CM background Paper Social housing and urban planning: inclusive cities for migrants, Amman, 2017

We further commit to ensure that these services are responsive to the rights and needs of women, children and youth, older persons and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples and local communities as appropriate, and others that are in vulnerable situations. In this regard, we encourage the elimination of legal, institutional, socio-economic, or physical barriers.¹⁶

This role is reflected strongly in **Agenda 2030** where SDG 11 aims to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. Both agendas encourage Governments to implement holistic responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by migration for sustainable urban development. Migration is an essential parameter to be considered in housing policy development and social integration in cities.

Inclusion of migrants in relevant national action plans and strategies such as national public housing strategies is also a necessity to ensure equal access for all to land, housing, employment opportunities and services. This requires the strengthening of anti-discriminatory practices and reinforcement of a general atmosphere of tolerance (UN-Habitat & UNESCO, 2015), coupled with integrated, sustainable, and participatory urban planning. Migrant population needs to be actively engaged in the public sphere of the host society through measures such as participatory decision-making at the local level.


CASE STUDY: STARTBLOK HOUSING PROJECT- THE NETHERLANDS

Startblok is a modular social housing project for young refugees and youth living in the Netherlands, developed at a former sports ground located in Amsterdam New West. The project consists of 565 housing units for rent, comprising of studios and multi-person apartments, to be leased for five years. In order to qualify for housing, residents have to be 18-28 years old. Tenants are encouraged to help manage their living environment by participating in social and general management. It entails coordinating social initiatives, activities and events, as well as daily tasks such as participating in the selection of future tenants and maintenance works.

The underlying idea of the *Startblok* project is that tenants help each other have a good start into society. As such, solidarity is enhanced in various ways:

- Buddy project- couples a foreigner to a Dutch youth with similar interests. . Buddies are matched before moving to *Startblok* so that they can start getting to know each other prior to moving into the premises. They are expected to exchange skills, knowledge and support each other.
- Tenants with private bedrooms in their apartment share a kitchen, bathroom and living room with one to three people. Attention is paid to always have refugees live with Dutch youth to foster communication and sharing.
- All tenants are organised in ‘living groups’, that participate in activities together. Each living group has two self-appointed managers and is provided with a common space to carry social activities.

¹⁶ Habitat III, 2016, New Urban Agenda, Outcome Document, Quito



In order to ignite the conversation about the role of cities play in the above-mentioned issues, this background paper proposes the following discussion points for policy-making:

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS AMONGST MIGRANTS

- Highlight the key role of cities in the international/national migration agenda;
- Ensure interdepartmental coordination between migration and housing programmes;
- Generate joint global and regional programs on migrants and cities, with a strong focus on local authorities, urban and housing policy development under human rights frameworks;
- Strengthen evidence-base knowledge on access to adequate housing;
- Development of joint normative tools, capacity building modules and field operations;
- Prohibit discrimination in the access to housing on grounds of nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion and eliminate legal and administrative barriers;
- Promote conditions for access to publicly supported and organised housing that does not indirectly discriminate against migrants - through awareness raising, multilingual services, reporting discriminatory practices, etc.
- Protect individual welfare and public health by facilitating the access of all, including migrants and refugees, to basic health services;
- Promote a diverse economy and support new labour opportunities involving local entrepreneurship, innovative economic sectors and vocational training as efficient tools to foster access to employment;
- Explore innovative and more sustainable housing development and finance solutions and invest in funding opportunities in order to obtain additional resources needed to facilitate migrant and refugee access to adequate housing.



7 Conclusions

Addressing the structural causes of homelessness such as inequality, unemployment, underemployment, discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, lack of affordable housing, forced evictions, displacement, are critical for policy-makers, local government authorities and homelessness services. More so, identifying the situation for individual migrants is distinct on a structural level, notably concerning access to social services and employment, which can affect their vulnerability to homelessness.

Tackling homelessness requires a multi-disciplinary approach that incorporates social issues and understanding of how adequate housing serves as a pathway to other rights. In order to fully address those who are homeless, in all aspects, a definition of homelessness is needed that is inclusive, politically sensitive, and seen as a social failure rather than an individual one. The definition should look at the social, physical and security domain of homelessness and take into consideration its diversity and variety of forms across countries.

Concrete strategies and interventions are needed to address these structural causes, including but not limited to, recognizing the right to adequate housing for migrants and asylum seekers, irrespective of migrant status; equal access to opportunities and public services; eliminating discriminatory laws and protection of human rights; de-criminalise renting accommodation to migrants in an irregular situation; and the development of specialised, targeted services for particular sub-groups of the homeless.

A city's ability to respond to migrant fluxes and local governments capability to mitigate the rapid changes occurring will depend upon the adequacy of migration policies linked to housing. In addition to the city's capacity to undertake practical solutions that will reckon with how migration transforms, expands and diversifies urban space. Migrant inclusion in cities is an important element that can shape the economic, social, and cultural vibrancy of cities. Well-directed migration policies have the power to contribute to the flow of money, increase public revenue, knowledge and ideas between cities of origin and destination, as well as enhancing social cohesion and livelihoods in the entire community.