Social housing in the European Union

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs adopted the report by Karima DELLI (Greens/EFA, FR) on social housing in the European Union.

Promoting the social and economic role of social housing: Members recall that access to housing is a fundamental right in the European Union. However, this right is threatened because there is a shortage of affordable social housing, as well as because of the continuing economic and social crisis. In fact, on its own, the market is increasingly incapable of meeting the need for affordable homes, in particular in densely populated urban areas. Moreover rising housing and energy costs are aggravating the risks of disease, poverty and social exclusion. As a consequence, Members call for measures to address these challenges. They express particular concern about the direct and indirect impact of some austerity measures in the context of the current social and economic crisis – such as cuts in housing benefit and social services, the taxation of social housing providers, the cancellation of new housing projects and the selling-off of parts of national social housing stocks.

In this context, **Members urge compliance with Article 14 of and Protocol No 26 annexed to the TFEU**, under which public authorities are free to determine how the social housing sector is organised and funded. This intervention represents the way for public authorities to respond to the shortcomings of the market in accordance with Articles 16, 30 and 31 of the European Social Charter.

Towards a European Social Housing Policy: Members call on the Commission to:

- **set out a European social housing action framework** for housing policy in such a way as to ensure consistency between the various policy instruments the EU uses to address this issue (State aid, structural funding, energy policy, action to combat poverty and social exclusion, health policy);
- bring socio-economic indicators, such as social housing investment, within the scheme of the European Semester;
- clarify the definition of social housing, bearing in mind that it is conceived and managed in different ways in the Member States.

Members stress the need to monitor social investment as part of a ‘social investment pact’ modelled on the Euro Plus Pact and designed to strengthen the Union’s economic and budgetary governance and on **the need for social investment targets for the Member States to meet** with a view to attaining the social, employment and education objectives laid down under the Europe 2020 strategy.

Members also welcome the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and the Council seeking to impose restrictions on credit agreements relating to residential property and hence **contain excessive household debt**. They call on the Member States to prevent evicted households from being forced to keep up their mortgage repayments, to ensure that the **dramatic social consequences of evictions** are effectively dealt with and to find a solution to the social hardship caused to those most affected by the economic crisis and by unemployment.

Members call on the Council to convene a meeting of the **housing ministers of the Member States at least once a year** to discuss the impact of various EU policies on housing policy and ensure that the economic, social and environmental aspects of the housing sector are mainstreamed more efficiently at EU level.

They propose the **establishment of a European Housing Observatory** to step up exchanges of good practices, and to develop qualitative and quantitative knowledge about the housing situation in the various countries. Other measures are proposed including giving greater importance to housing and related services under the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Strategy.

Encouraging investment to boost local employment and the green economy:

Members consider that investment in social housing should be considered not only as an expenditure but also as a productive investment. They, therefore, encourage the Member States to start a dialogue with the construction industry in order to develop a better business environment for, and better regulation of, social housing. They underline, in this regard, the considerable leverage effect on investment resulting from the direct impact of the Structural Funds in the social housing sector in the period 2007-2013 and take the view that **the amounts to be allocated to the Cohesion Funds under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2014-2020 should not be less than the amounts under the current MFF**. Members welcome the fact that measures to promote energy efficiency and renewable energy use in social and affordable housing will be eligible under ERDF and Cohesion Funds. They stress that residential and commercial buildings account for **40% of final energy consumption and total CO2 emissions in Europe**, and that environmentally sustainable building leads to a reduction in building costs and time. In this context, they call for an adequate budget for the 2014-2020 MFF by mobilising all the necessary tools for this: new integrated development tools (**Community-Led Local Development** and Integrated Territorial Investment), grants from the Horizon 2020 programme and the use of financial instruments and technical assistance programmes offered by the Structural Funds, the EIB, the EBRD, and the European Energy Efficiency Fund (EEEF).

The green economy: Members call for the access of young people to new 'green' jobs and 'green industries' to be made easier. They note that the 'green' sector can provide a plurality of different employment opportunities, in particular in SMEs or at local level drawing on the European Social Fund (ESF).

Combating poverty and promoting inclusion and social cohesion: Members call on the Member States and the Commission to support and promote innovatory exchanges of good practices in upholding the right to housing for particularly vulnerable and marginalised groups. They expect the Commission to examine **to what extent direct support by housing allowances, or indirect support by social housing itself, is a more effective measure to provide affordable housing for social groups who cannot cover their housing needs**. Noting that many Member States, faced with budgetary imbalances, are suspending operations, programmes and actions designed to facilitate home acquisition, Members call on them to **draw up integrated policies for promoting social inclusion, as well as for guaranteeing universal access to decent, healthy and affordable housing**.

Such policies should aim to:

- support good-quality and healthy social and 'very social' housing;
- establish clear, minimum housing quality standards, particularly for social housing;
- promote linkages between social housing expansion programmes and policies for access to other essential public services and services of general interest;
- address the difficulties commonly encountered by highly vulnerable sections of the population in seeking access to decent housing;
- schemes reinforcing security of tenure;
- implement effective prevention policies, in cooperation with organisations of tenants;
- prepare specific programmes for the **homeless** based on assessments of the local situation, taking into account the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) model;
- promote and fund self-building programmes.

Measures are also sought to take into account gender specificity and to address the housing needs of the **aged** while respecting the principles of fairness and impartiality in the allocation of housing. Members point out that social housing should be structured to **avoid both gentrification and ghettoisation**. Concerning women, in particular those who are victims of violence, Members call for affordable solutions to alternative forms of emergency and temporary housing to be found and for an increase in the number of shelters and rehabilitation centres for victims. They also call for measures in favour of single mothers, single parents, young families, large families, migrant women, disabled persons and all vulnerable groups.

Combating energy poverty: Members express concern about the growing incidence of energy poverty, which affects 50-125 million Europeans, and which is caused mainly by a combination of low household incomes, poor-quality heating and insulation, and disproportionately high energy costs. They call on the Commission and the Member States to make sure that the deepening of the internal energy market goes hand in hand with measures to protect vulnerable consumers. They believe that the **right of access to energy is essential** if people are to lead a life of dignity and call for measures to be taken to:

- set up specific financial schemes regarding energy costs for the most vulnerable households;
- establish specific regional or national funds to reduce energy poverty;
- support incentives and instructive measures to help residents save energy consumption;
- make use of effective, long-term financial leverage to make residential buildings more energy efficient, in both urban and rural areas by introducing incentive measures at European level;
- introduce grants to install energy efficient solutions and microgeneration of renwable energies in social housing;
- encourage energy efficiency measures with a view to combating respiratory infections and allergies;
- provide better information to households by means of targeted information campaigns.