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POLICY BRIEF

Learning from housing and migrant rights activists – the importance of housing justice

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Access to sustainable housing for beneficiaries of international protection and other migrants must not be an isolated policy area, but strongly linked to the overall housing market in European cities.
- Policymakers should push for more inclusive housing markets in general, while at the same time working to address the specific challenges faces by beneficiaries of international protection and other migrants in finding sustainable housing.
- Policymakers should adopt a social inclusiveness perspective when formulating and implementing housing policies and include migrant, activists, and local stakeholders in these processes.
- Support platforms for knowledge exchange between activists, migrants, and local, regional, national, and European policy-making and legislative bodies.
- National policymakers should give local actors more flexibility to implement housing policies, as they are best placed to understand the specificities and needs of local contexts, and because local action tends to be more effective than national schemes.
- Implement long-term funding strategies to grassroots initiated housing initiatives.
- Support innovativeness but do not include as precondition for funding.

Since 2015, forced migration has been on the frontline of EU politics. The reception and integration of people who arrived, during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, but also those arriving today, have posed challenges on administrations, civil society, and immigrants themselves. Despite political initiatives and integration programs, migrants still struggle to become included into the local communities and the social and economic life in their new countries of residence – something which is highly correlated with the difficulties they face in finding sustainable housing.

The right to housing is among the social rights that promote integration. It is one of the human rights declared in several international documents and conventions and applies to everyone regardless of their migration status.

Recent research shows, however, that access to affordable housing remains a vast problem to many newcomers and beneficiaries of international protection. Migration policies and regulations, coupled with the lack of political will and the existence of discriminatory practices among authorities and housing

providers, constitute obstacles for newcomers' access to housing.

The MERGING public report on multilevel governance of refugee housing in Europe D7.1 ((Bousiou & Spehar, 2021) shows how housing markets in Europe are difficult to navigate for refugees due to the high cost of housing, scarce availability of housing in the larger cities and frequently discrimination.

To emphasize the scale of this problem, 25% of people that received a refugee status or an international protection in France are homeless, due to the saturation of the social housing market, and to different attribution policies across counties/cities (Dihal, 2021).

Lack of housing is not only a severe problem, but it also impacts other opportunities in life such as work, education, health, and social life. Housing thus constitutes a key pathway for migrants' dignity, inclusion, and a good life.

Learning from housing and migrants' rights activists

Against this background, it is of utter importance to critically review and improve existing institutional and policy frameworks for the governance of housing for beneficiaries of international protection and other migrants, but also to learn from innovative ideas for making housing accessible and affordable for these groups.



Figure 1. Refugees Welcome March in Trento Italy 2015. Photo Christina Hansen

As shown in a previous MERGING report (Bousiou and Spehar 2021), grass roots initiatives by activists play a significant role in housing and integration policies and practices and fill governmental gaps in providing housing for newcomers. They can offer flexibility and locally adapted approaches and responses to the increasing need for housing for newcomers (especially since 2015) and thus contribute to integration processes.

Activists are known for being radical thinkers and innovative practitioners; activists' strengths and abilities are to think and act counter hegemonically, meaning they can create visionary ideas of another better world (Hansen, 2019).

It is worth accentuating that despite multiple structural and political obstacles for newcomers to access affordable and decent housing, people from the civil society, such as activists, have nevertheless found ways to support them and finding solutions in this process. They also provide essential support services (juridical support, food, housing etc) where state authorities fail to deliver equality and justice.

To learn from activists' experiences as well as to brainstorm innovative ideas for making housing accessible and affordable for newcomers, we conducted a stakeholder workshop in September 2023, with activists from Sweden, France, Spain, and Italy. Focusing on this group of stakeholders enabled us to approach a more complete picture of the barriers and possible solutions to housing challenges in relation to migration.

The activists in the workshop represented a variety of organizations and activities across the four countries¹. The organizations applied different methods and implemented different kind of projects and activities in accordance with their ideological foundations, which varied among the organizations. For example, some organizations use more radical tactics such as direct action and squatting, and other use methods that are not considered confrontational, such as housing migrants in your own home.

An alarming housing situation

The workshop discussions confirmed an alarming situation for many people and a suffering from precarity on the housing market, homelessness, racism, discrimination, and restrictive migration policies.

¹ The organisations represented in the stakeholder workshop on 21 September, 2023:

- PAH (Plataforma de Afectadas por la Hipoteca (<https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/>),
- Provienda (<https://www.provienda.org/>),
- The Swedish Union of Tenants (<https://www.hyresgastforeningen.se/var-politik/hyresgasternas->

- [val/](https://www.agapegoteborg.se/)),
- Agape (<https://www.agapegoteborg.se/>),
- Movimento Identità Trans (<https://mit-italia.it/>)
- Refugees Welcome Italia (<https://refugees-welcome.it/>)
- CUM (Coordination Urgence Migrants, <https://www.coordination-urgence-migrants.org/>)

This situation was seen in the light of the general housing situation in many major cities in Europe. Among the activists there was consensus that the current housing markets in their countries disadvantages socially vulnerable groups and that this is created and amplified by mechanisms relating to the deregulation and commodification of the housing market. These experiences are in line with what critical urban scholars find, namely that housing has been deregulated and commodified in the context of market economy and neoliberal policies throughout Europe, which have created a housing shortage and a lack of affordable housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). It is important to note, though, that it is not the housing market that suffers from this general lack of housing. Rather, what we see is a housing market that creates housing shortage for some groups (Boverket, 2023; Listerborn, 2018), namely low-income groups which include, among others, newcomers, students, elders, and single-parent households (especially mother-only households).

Within this context, we see that activists both try to mobilize for social change but also to find solutions beyond this system. In this work, we also see that they face many challenges, some of which could be overcome by the support of policy-makers on various levels.



Figure 2. Miro board with sticky notes from step 5 of the workshop.

Challenges

The challenges faced by housing and migrant's rights activists include internal challenges, such as shortcomings in their own organizational structures and activism and difficulties in organizing a diverse set of people of whom many do not share the same language. It also includes external challenges, expressed as different forms of institutional and political oppression and barriers. This includes conflicts with public or private institutions, who hinder their work of providing shelter for newcomers and other people in vulnerable

conditions. For example, in Sweden, the activists expressed a sense of a severe backlash, as the contemporary liberal-conservative (supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats) government's, in their view, dismantling of the welfare system and anti-immigration propositions. Furthermore, the Swedish activists experience that journalists are lacking in their ability to pose the necessary critical questions to politicians.

A major challenge in the work of activists is that many of their initiatives are temporary and short-term, which also research shows (see, e.g., Hansen, 2019). For example, hosting newcomers in your own home is burdensome for the hosts, it gives the newcomers a lack of privacy and freedom and puts them in a position of dependency on the host. Also squatting is a short-term solution, and it may be violent in character and cause traumatic experiences for beneficiaries and associations that support them.

Solutions

Possible solutions discussed in the workshop revolved mostly around the urgency and necessity of government-imposed restriction and regulations of the housing market to increase the affordable housing stock, but it was also suggested to build collective ownership in housing and start building alternative lasting ownership structures beyond free market principles and exclusive housing policies.

Concrete measures to support just housing

More concrete measures suggested to increase housing justice was to create a National Housing Fund to guarantee funds for people without means as to prevent and avoid evictions as much as possible. Rental intermediations, where associations act as official intermediaries between the private landlord and the migrants, was also put forward as a possible solution, to overcome discrimination of migrants and to strengthen the position of vulnerable groups in the housing market, as well as building platforms for mediation and endorsement between vulnerable tenants and private owners. To effectively empower newcomers against housing exclusion, it was also emphasised that institutions must provide wide and accessible information of available rights and services and ensure digital and language accessibility to administrative procedures.

More far-going measures suggested was to decriminalize housing squatting of vacant dwellings in situations of extreme and urgent social needs, to legislate against discrimination and harassment in the housing market, and to create a legal framework that oblige employers of migrant labour workers to provide decent housing for their employees.

Other solutions proposed related to migration and integration policies more generally, such as favouring permanent residence permits rather than temporary, the right to housing for undocumented migrants, increasing legal and administrative security, speeding up the administrative procedure upon newcomers' arrival, promote early detection of risk of housing exclusion with social services before the housing exclusion becomes a reality, enable young newcomers to faster enrol at the university and benefit from rooms and support available to students, and transforming accommodation systems for refugees from isolated centres into housing solutions in the community, in particular in diverse neighbourhoods with residents of multiple social backgrounds, to enable the building of social relationships with inhabitants of various backgrounds.

Inclusion and empowerment

Several discussions on possible solutions also revolved around measures to increase newcomers' inclusion, empowerment, and self-representation, for instance by creating large assemblies among the local population, that can contribute to building social relationships, organise politically, create powerful social movements, build alliances across organisations and movements, and to join forces on the European level. A call for legal frameworks for local housing associations to rise and consolidate was also suggested (e.g. Catalonia Region legislation), which would enable a stronger movement for the right to housing with more possibilities of political impact.

The activists also see an urgent need to change the contemporary narrative of migrants as “our” enemies. Instead, institutions and politicians should work to create a narrative of solidarity and fight against racist and far-right sentiments locally and nationally.

Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

Concluding, our results show that access of migrants to sustainable housing is not an isolated policy area and must be seen in the light of a general housing situation in many major cities in Europe. Among the activists there is consensus that the housing market

disadvantages socially vulnerable groups and that this is created and amplified by mechanisms relating to the deregulation and commodification of the housing market. These experiences are in line with what critical urban scholars find.

In terms of supporting sustainable housing for migrants, these results can translate to a need for policymakers involved in housing and integration of migrants to push for more inclusive housing markets in general, while at the same time working to address the specific challenges faces by migrants, such as racism, discrimination and lack of networks and access to information about the housing market. In this process, the added value of engaging activists and migrants themselves should be recognized.

Given current governmental gaps in providing housing for newcomers, it also translates into a need for policymakers to support grassroot initiatives. This

must be done with a long-term perspective where innovativeness is supported but not a precondition for funding, as this can prevent continuation of already existing successful initiatives.

Finally, it also translates to a need to support platforms for knowledge exchange between activists, migrants, and local, regional, national and European policy-making and legislative bodies.



Figure 3 Social housing for immigrants, Cinq Toits in Paris, France.
Source: MERGING

About MERGING

MERGING is an international interdisciplinary study of immigrant integration and social inclusion through participatory housing initiatives in Spain, France, Italy and Sweden. MERGING reviews existing knowledge, integration policies and initiatives in which housing has a central place. It provides evidence-based policy recommendations with the aim to facilitate policy and practice innovation for immigrant integration in Europe, among other. Furthermore, the project aspires to study the feasibility of participatory immigrant housing through the construction of pilot housing to implement, test and evaluate them in three European countries (Spain, France, Sweden).

MERGING focuses on policies and practices related to a specific part of immigrant population – refugees and beneficiaries of international protection, including subsidiary protection and protection based on humanitarian grounds.

This policy brief is based on the analysis of the governance of housing for immigrants in different local contexts in Europe. It draws on studies of participatory housing examples from France, Italy, Spain and Sweden, qualitative interviews with stakeholders, policy analysis, literature review and other case relevant document analysis.

More information: www.merging-housing-project.eu

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