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on housing and regional policy
(2006/2108(INI))

Committee on Regional Development

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MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on housing and regional policy (2006/2108(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the rules governing the Structural Funds for the period 2007-2013,
 - having regard to its resolution of 26 September 2006 on a thematic strategy for the urban environment¹,
 - having regard to its resolution of 13 October 2005 on the urban dimension in the context of enlargement²,
 - having regard to the Commission Communication on ‘Cohesion Policy and cities: the urban contribution to growth and jobs in the regions’ (COM(2006)0385),
 - having regard to the Commission Communication on ‘Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment’ (COM(2005)0718),
 - having regard to the Commission Green Paper of 22 June 2005 on ‘Energy Efficiency – or Doing More With Less’ (COM(2005)0265),
 - having regard to the Social Charter of the Council of Europe – revised version (ETS 163), signed in Strasbourg on 3 May 1996,
 - having regard to the European Charter on Housing adopted by the European Parliament's Urban Housing Intergroup on 26 April 2006
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development and the opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (A6-0000/2006),
- A. whereas the lack of decent housing at affordable prices directly affects the lives of citizens, restricting their options for social integration and mobility,
- B. whereas four out of five Europeans live in urban areas, whilst many European cities are experiencing great problems with housing – insufficient supply, soaring costs for purchase and maintenance, and buildings in a bad state of repair,
- C. whereas the issue of urban housing should be seen against the wider background of town planning and is therefore related to problems such as the impoverishment of certain areas, environmental degradation (air and water pollution, noise, waste, congestion, etc.),

¹ Texts Adopted under same date, P6_TA(2006)0367

² OJ C 233 E, 28.9.2006, p. 127.

operational problems in public services, accessibility, security, etc.,

- D. whereas difficulties in gaining access to housing are at the root of social segregation and ghettoisation,
 - E. whereas the combination of low income, high energy prices and inadequate heating and insulation systems results in poverty and energy exclusion,
 - F. whereas social exclusion runs counter to the European social model,
 - G. whereas the urban sprawl is causing numerous social and economic problems affecting transport (congestion of public transport, dependence on private cars), environmental protection (increased energy consumption, pollution) and the accessibility of services,
 - H. having regard to the importance of the regeneration of brownfield sites and the protection of greenfield sites,
 - I. whereas the financial instruments of the cohesion policy help to revive urban areas, by encouraging the redevelopment of public areas, the implementation of measures to improve safety and prevent delinquency, the development of measures to encourage the efficient use of water and energy, support for social integration, etc.,
 - J. having regard to the specific problems relating to large prefabricated buildings, in terms of both the quality of habitat and the difficulties stemming from the redevelopment of infrastructure (funding of maintenance and renovation work and research on appropriate techniques and technologies),
 - K. whereas the new ERDF regulation has made housing eligible for funding in the new Member States in a number of specific cases¹,
 - L. having regard to the problems relating to property ownership, especially those caused by the relatively recent privatisations in some Member States,
 - M. having regard to the 7th Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities,
 - N. having regard to the Jeremie (Joint European Resources for Micro to Medium Enterprises) and Jessica (Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas) financial initiatives established in cooperation with the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Investment Fund (EIF),
 - O. whereas the housing sector is an important source of employment in the field of construction, but also of renovation, conversion and local and financial services,
1. Considers that the right to decent housing at affordable prices is a fundamental right of each citizen of the European Union and one that is recognised in a number of international charters and constitutions of Member States;

¹ Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Regional Development Fund: Article 7(2) and Recitals 5 and 6.

2. Calls for the identification, at European level, of a series of minimum quality standards defining the concept of ‘decent housing’;
3. Stresses the importance for the EU of adopting a European housing charter based on the work of the European Parliament's Urban Housing Intergroup and on the charter approved by the political groups represented;
4. Insists on the need – in the context of the Lisbon strategy – to strengthen the right to housing benefit and to all social rights, so that worker mobility can become a reality;
5. Calls on the Commission to include housing in the debate on cities and the sustainable development of the regions, and in the work programme of the inter-services task force set up to coordinate policies affecting the urban dimension;
6. Stresses the importance of safety issues
 - relating to crime, especially in underprivileged areas
 - relating to buildings (construction and operating standards)
 - relating to electricity and gas infrastructure, but also to water and sewerage (safety of existing systems and of upgrading technologies);
7. Stresses the need to extend the debate on housing to housing in rural environments;
8. Encourages the Commission to refine its diagnosis in respect of the cost of housing, in order better to take into account the heterogeneity of housing occupation and to look at housing from the general perspective of the ageing population, the change in traditional family structures and the specific circumstances of young people;
9. Takes the view that, given the complexity of the issues affecting housing, an integrated approach – rooted in the principles of subsidiarity and proximity – should be adopted, to ensure the simultaneous introduction of various factors which would improve the quality of life and the attractiveness of urban environments;
10. Considers, furthermore, that such an approach will have a greater chance of success if it is taken by the local authorities, which can provide an overall view, optimal coordination of the policies and measures implemented in the urban area and a long-term vision of the development of the urban area; accordingly, encourages the Member States to involve cities in the programming and management of the structural funds designed to co-finance urban actions that are eligible under the operational programmes, and to delegate implementation to them;
11. Stresses the need for dialogue and consultation between the various tiers of local, regional and government authorities, in order to ensure that public action is consistent thanks to a coordination that is horizontal (between all Community housing policies), vertical (between those dealing with housing at various levels – European, national and local) and mixed (between the public authorities, social and economic interest groups and civil society);
12. Encourages a greater coordination of financial flows and policies affecting housing, in particular by ensuring that the actions supported by the ERDF, the Jessica and Jeremie

financial instruments, the 7th Framework Programme for research and development and the other Community, national and local measures concerning housing and urban redevelopment are complementary;

13. Encourages the Member States concerned to use in full the funds made available for housing by the ERDF;
14. Confirms its support for the strengthening of the partnership between the public authorities, social and economic interest groups and civil society (public-private partnership - PPP);
15. Supports the Commission's campaign for sustainable energy, aiming to make European citizens aware of the need to reduce domestic consumption; also encourages the Commission to promote a wide-ranging information campaign, as part of its energy efficiency action plan;
16. Calls on the Commission to facilitate the widespread use in the housing sector of new technologies and more efficient building products enabling less energy to be consumed;
17. Calls on the Commission to take practical follow-up action to its pilot project in the social housing sector under the SAVE programme¹, in order to promote and disseminate the exemplary energy efficiency projects selected;
18. Stresses the importance of exchanging best practices in housing policy and encourages the Commission to develop thematic networks for housing along the lines of those established under the URBACT programme; welcomes with interest, therefore, the Commission's initiative 'Regions for economic change' (COM(2006)0675) and impatiently awaits the submission of the implementing arrangements for this initiative;
19. Encourages the Commission to set up a website to serve as a forum for cooperation and exchange of information and best practices similar to the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN);
20. Calls on the Commission to prepare a study showing how powers and responsibilities are divided between the national, regional and local levels, and setting out the legal framework for housing in the various Member States (EU-27); such a study would allow conscious decisions to be made and possible EU areas of action with regard to housing to be identified, in order to ensure that Community measures provide true added value compared to national, regional and local measures;
21. Supports strongly the idea of simplifying bureaucracy at all levels, in order to make spatial planning and management more effective;
22. Stresses the importance of training operators at the grass-roots level, with specific training in urban planning, and encourages training courses under the European Social Fund (ESF);

¹ SAVE - multiannual programme seeking to promote energy efficiency

23. Stresses how important it is for the spatial management authorities to take into account accessibility for disabled people when at the stage of framing spatial planning policies and planning what action to take;
24. Encourages the EIB and the Commission, under Jeremie, to establish a strategy for boosting the building sector, chiefly in the new Member States, which would constitute structural aid for developing housing and involve the mobilisation of local and regional resources geared to urban projects;
25. Encourages the national and local authorities to identify the different circumstances of the cities and territories in the Member States;
26. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and Commission, and to the governments of the Member States, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Although the Treaty does not vest the European Union with any specific powers with regard to housing, a large number of Community policies (in particular those concerning the environment, energy, transport, social affairs and measures to benefit the common market) have a direct or indirect impact on housing conditions in the various EU Member States.

Nevertheless, the ERDF regulation for the period 2007-2013 has made housing eligible for funding in the new Member States in a number of cases set out in Article 7(2) and Recitals 5 and 6, thereby shifting some of the responsibility to the EU.

Housing should also be seen from the wider perspective of the attractiveness of cities in terms of strengthening their growth and job creation potential, which thus also helps to implement the Lisbon Agenda. The contribution of cities to growth and employment has also been highlighted in the Community Strategic Guidelines on cohesion.

The European Parliament has expressed its views on this matter in a number of resolutions¹, advocating practical measures to boost the development of the urban environment and a greater sense of responsibility on the part of the local decision-makers responsible for drawing up management and urban transport plans to improve day-to-day life in their cities.

Furthermore, the European Housing Charter, adopted by the 'URBAN-Housing' Intergroup of the European Parliament on 26 April 2006, defines housing as a staple part of life, a fundamental social right underpinning the European social model and a source of human dignity.

We must therefore identify those factors which have an impact on housing, in order to implement a 'socially responsible' policy and make housing accessible to all. We have to find a solution to the problems of spatial segregation and 'ghettoisation' and meet the social and economic challenges relating to the ageing population, whilst placing housing in the broader context of the sustainable development of towns and cities.

This report seeks to focus the housing debate on three key issues:

1. the social dimension
2. the environmental and energy dimension
3. the coordination dimension.

1. Social dimension

The lack of decent housing at affordable prices, when housing is considered to be a fundamental right by the European Housing Charter, directly affects the lives of citizens, restricting their options for social integration and their choices in education, training and professional development.

¹ European Parliament resolution on the thematic strategy on the urban environment (2006/2061(INI)) and European Parliament resolution on the urban dimension in the context of enlargement (2004/2258(INI)).

This, in turn, has an impact on competitiveness, employment and economic development in general. Over the past ten years, housing prices have constantly increased in nearly all EU countries. This rise has led to a reduction in families' capacity to consume other goods, which, in the long term, curbs sustainable growth.

In particular, problems relating to housing accessibility and quality cause problems of social segregation – the most underprivileged continue flocking to problematic areas, while the better-off move to other areas. They are also a contributory factor to homelessness and problems relating to the social integration of migrants from both other regions of the EU and non-member states, not to mention the problem of the suburbs, which manifests itself in repeated violent upsurges in the cities of several Member States.

In this context, culture can be a precious tool for encouraging the integration of the various communities which make up the cities and their suburbs. The establishment of cultural centres or the implementation of cooperation projects between districts can thus foster intercultural dialogue, especially in the cities and suburbs with a high concentration of immigrants and in areas where integration problems are more marked. It is therefore important to include cultural activities in an integrated approach to planning and urban regeneration.

Social exclusion runs counter to the European social model, which is supposed to offer all citizens future prospects. We therefore need to ensure greater social cohesion and encourage, in particular, the integration of the young and the elderly. A key aspect of this is also to improve the relationship between historic centres and suburbs, between wealthy and underprivileged areas, between urban territory and the hinterland.

Moreover, the housing sector in itself is an importance source of employment in the field of construction, but also of renovation, conversion and local and financial services.

2. Environmental and energy dimension

The development strategy for urban housing should be seen against the wider background of a general urban development strategy. Housing problems are not restricted to issues concerning construction and spatial planning as such, but are also greatly influenced by bad town planning. Hence certain areas, affected by environmental degradation (air and water pollution, noise, waste, congestion, etc.) and operational problems in public services, accessibility, security, etc. become increasingly less attractive and ultimately impoverished.

This impoverishment is often exacerbated by energy problems. Although growing energy prices may result in a rationalisation of use (the establishment of measures and technologies to help save energy and the introduction of sustainable energy, development of new energy sources, etc.), the combination of low income, high energy prices and inadequate heating and insulation systems result in 'fuel poverty'¹ and energy exclusion. It is important to consider that the greatest potential for energy savings can be found in the housing sector, where this potential is estimated at 27% of energy used, as pointed out by the Commission in its energy action plan.

We should also consider the impact of the urban sprawl on the condition of cities. The

¹ 'Fuel poverty' is when more than 10% of income is devoted to paying energy bills.

abandonment of city centres and peri-urbanisation are causing numerous organisational problems which affect, amongst others, transport (congestion of public transport, dependence on private cars), environmental protection (increased energy consumption, pollution caused by individual cars) and accessibility of services; all this has an impact on the social and economic situation of the city and its inhabitants.

To make housing attractive, it is first necessary to have efficient, cheap and functional means of transport linking homes to workplaces. We therefore need to offer the entire population means of transport which replace private cars.

Moreover, it is essential for housing to have easy access to services (especially with regard to health and social affairs, training, shops and public authorities). Special attention should therefore be paid to underprivileged areas which often have few local services and are badly linked to more distant services.

Urban security also plays an important role in city attractiveness, which is why it is important to frame policies to combat crime, in particular in underprivileged areas. The renovation of public areas can, for example, prevent delinquency and provide greater security. In order to implement such policies, we need to have quality information and statistics so that the relevant policies can be better targeted.

The importance of the safety of the electricity and gas distribution infrastructure and the water and sewerage systems should also be stressed, with regard to both access, the safety of existing systems and the upgrading technologies used. This is particularly important in the new Member States of Central and Eastern Europe, where in most cases housing needs to be brought up to existing safety standards.

3. Coordination dimension

Given that the various problems are intertwined and pervasive, we therefore need to take an integrated approach, albeit one that is deeply rooted in the principles of subsidiarity and proximity, to ensure that different key factors are introduced simultaneously in order to provide quality of life in urban environments and make them more attractive; this should be done by using a common participative methodology in accordance with the Lisbon/Göteborg agenda.

Such an approach can be better adopted by the local authorities, which can provide an overall view, optimal coordination of the policies and measures implemented in the urban area and a long-term vision of development in the town/city.

In order to support this approach, the following types of coordination need to be implemented: horizontal (between all housing-related Community policies), vertical (between those dealing with housing at various levels – European, national and local) and mixed (between the public authorities, social and economic interest groups and civil society).

In addition, the cities, regions and Member States should have a mechanism whereby they can exchange experiences and best practices with regard to housing policy, based on the lessons learned from the URBACT programme, which now includes 17 thematic networks and several working groups.

In particular, we should promote and disseminate the best practices implemented by the national, regional and local authorities in order put the above-mentioned strategy into practice, whilst taking into account the different reference backgrounds. This mechanism will help to establish a cycle of lifelong learning and is an essential way in which Europe can provide added value.

However, given the complexity of the subject and the need to plan and to take an integrated approach at the local level, the added value and contribution the EU could provide in comparison with the national, regional and local authorities would not be to take legislative action, which might not meet the different needs of the cities, but rather to establish a support system for the exchange and transfer of best practices between the Member States.