

rights first.brussels



Rights First: reconsidering support and access to social-welfare rights for the most vulnerable

Context

The Rights First project is part of the European programme for employment and social innovation "EaSI" 2014-2021, financed directly by the European Commission. The Joint Community Commission of the Brussels-Capital Region Government also makes a financial contribution. This programme aims at implementing its 2020 strategy to promote a high level of quality and sustainable employment, adequate and decent social protection in view of tackling social exclusion and poverty and improve the working conditions. It replies to an impetus to end homelessness by 2030.

The European Commission set up this programme seeking social innovations (services, products or models) as well as policy experimentation to meet social needs. Among all subjects that could end poverty and exclusion the European Commission keeps in its sights, they include ensuring minimum income, housing and employment for people to get a decent life and regain dignity. Needless to say the pandemic crisis challenging us for the last couple of years has put a strain on the progress made since 2014. Although acquired in all member states of the European Union, schemes of minimum income deserve to be reviewed and modernised. This is where the project Rights First is anchored.

"On the proposal of Minister Alain Maron, Minister of Social Action and Health, the Regional Executive body, the Joint Community Commission, also granted funding to the Rights First project. This project is directly linked to the objectives of the government's agreement for the 2019-2024 legislature as it activates effective recognition of rights, access to employment, and therefore access to sustainable housing. The financial support granted by the Joint Community Commission is also motivated by the innovative dimension of the project bringing together multiple actors.



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Every two years, bruss'help carries out a street count to estimate how many people are rough sleepers or living in inadequate housing (shelters, squats). In 2020, the estimate number 5313. Although causes of homelessness are multiple, it often results in experiencing the loss of social rights, which can lead to administrative disappearance. Some people have even never ever had access to such rights.

This phenomenon is recurrent for people officially present on Brussels' territory at a given time who end up being removed from the national registry due to the absence of a residential address or a reference address. To break this vicious circle, administrative support as well as support in finding accommodation and employment are essential.

The Rights First Project

The Rights First project targets several groups. It reviews the possibility of restoring the social-welfare rights of homeless people in irregular administrative situations in Brussels, to empower them to achieve their life goals in Belgium. It is also open, for instance, to people with incomes who are looking for decent housing.

Indeed, the project is based on 3 main principles: access to the minimum income, housing and employment solutions. It is a unique opportunity to reconsider ongoing process of coaching vulnerable people as well as policies to facilitate access to social rights. What is regularly questioned is the slowness of services at all levels and the complexity of the steps to be taken to regain a decent living situation.

Innovation being the key word of this project, it suggests new partnerships and new ways to ease integration policies within a post ante and ex post evaluation over the course of 30 months (from January 1st, 2022 to June 30th, 2024).

The aim is to simplify people's administrative situation so that they can receive an income and find housing or a new job as soon as possible. In the long term, this administrative simplification could be extended to a wider public.

Partners

Acting as the coordinator, [Bruss'help](#) ensure the smooth running of the of the Rights First project.

As a public authority, the Public Centres of Social Action (CPAS) play a crucial role in facilitating access to social rights, including the minimum income. Since they are 19 of them in the Brussels region alone, their umbrella body, the Federation of Public Centres of Social Action, will contribute to the debate on policy improvements. However, four public centres of social action from the municipalities of Forest, Brussels City, Auderghem and Saint-Gilles will take part in the evaluation process. Another public authority associated to the project is Actiris of which the expertise in assisting job seekers could be extended to homeless people.

Other service providers providing direct coaching to vulnerable people will add value to the project by sharing their own expertise.

- [DIOGENES](#), which specialises in working on the streets;
- [Hobo](#), which manages a day centre and offers job search support;
- [L'Ilot](#), which supplies long-term, affordable housing solutions for the Brussels homeless, as well as a support service for people who have been rehoused recently (S.Ac.A.Do);
- [New Samusocial](#), which manages various types of housing (emergency, transitional and a Housing First system).



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We also are delighted to have partnered with UK [Crisis](#), a British charity and [St Joan de Déu Serveis Socials](#) from Spain. Both have developed a holistic approach to address homelessness and will mentor the Belgian partners. Their expertise will definitely be an enrichment throughout the project.

How? The holistic approach:

The aim of the project is to support homeless people in Brussels¹ through a holistic approach and focusing particularly on:

- Administrative registration to reactivate social rights (residential address or reference address and minimum income);
- Support in finding and keeping a home;
- Integrating into the labour market.

To analyse integration paths, we will look at the starting conditions of the beneficiaries. Two main scenarios will be observed.

- The first one includes a homeless beneficiary, sleeping rough or using emergency or transit accommodation and is neither registered at the municipality (hence no contact with a CPAS) nor has access to social assistance, housing or employment services. In this case, the path will likely start with effective recognition of rights or by finding transit housing.
- In the second scenario, the beneficiary is homeless, might be living in a shelter or in transit housing and already has access to the minimum income because of a CPAS's assistance. This integration path suggests easing the access to the labour market through coaching, training and job hunting, coupled with support in finding stable housing.

Each scenario foresees exceptions as integration paths are not set in stone. That is why a holistic approach built on a new partnership will make the difference for a homeless person.

To strengthen the solidity of the approach, the project draws inspiration from the work of our European partners projects Crisis and Sant Joan de Deu. Peer support and trainings will be organised based on the intervention methodology in view of sharing practice and knowledge between the projects featuring complex situations and unsatisfactory results.

This means establishing and enhancing cooperation among the partners involved. Such partnership has the potential to cover the entire pathway that goes from the street or a short-term accommodation towards permanent housing and employment. This holistic approach on service delivery would facilitate effective recognition of rights to adequate minimum income and other cash benefits for homeless people who currently are with no recourse to public funds.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are central features in this project and will be carried out by an external expert. The monitoring and evaluation process will help to substantiate the project itself, its progress towards its objectives, its weaknesses and achievements, and how it should evolve to fulfil the beneficiaries' needs. Based on an ex-ante/ex-post approach, partners will be able to ensure sustainability of the outcome. Therefore, the evaluation will cover the new partnerships, the effectiveness and efficiency of accessing social rights as well as the satisfaction of beneficiaries involved.

¹ The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has developed ETHOS, a system that classifies the homeless according to their living or housing conditions: https://www.feantsa.org/download/fr_2525022567407186066.pdf

Innovation

Homelessness is an important thematic priority for social innovation. Homeless service providers can be key actors in social innovation and the sector needs support in developing, testing and scaling up innovations in order to combat homelessness and thus contribute towards progress within the objectives of the Social Rights' Pillars of the 2020 European strategy.

Each axis composing this project taken alone already presents multiple time and resource constraints. The Rights First project provides a more comprehensive answer and strengthen dialogue between homelessness services providers. The holistic approach encompassing rights to minimum income, housing and employment is new to the Brussels homelessness sector and has the potential to spread out over other thematic area to address homelessness such as health and education.

Furthermore, the partnerships are innovative for bringing together homeless service providers and public authorities and combines a variety of professions that are not normally in contact when it comes to addressing homelessness.

Rights First advocates for cross cutting work: professionals working with homeless people can innovate in taking their services beyond their traditional settings in order to improve accessibility and engagement.

Overall, there is much scope for social innovation to support the development, testing and dissemination of the holistic approach to service delivery that Rights First implements.

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