The COR notes that the proposal to include Turkey in the programmes during the current programming period will enable preparatory measures to be undertaken with a view to supporting Turkey's participation in the future programmes.

In conclusion, the COR supports the Commission's proposal to open the current programming period (1995-1999) of the Socrates, Leonardo and Youth programmes to include Turkey.

Brussels, 3 June 1999.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Manfred DAMMEYER

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Housing and the homeless'

(1999/C 293/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the decision of its bureau of 16 September 1998 under the fourth paragraph of Article 198c of the Treaty establishing the European Community to draw up an opinion on the subject and to direct Commission 4 for Spatial Planning, Urban Issues, Energy and Environment to prepare the opinion;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 376/98 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 4 on 4 February 1999 (rapporteur: Mr François Geindre),

adopted the following opinion at its 29th plenary session on 2 and 3 June 1999 (meeting of 3 June) unanimously.

1. **Introduction**

The Committee of the Regions has for some time wished to address the issue of homelessness. Although homelessness assumes different forms from country to country in the EU, and may not at first sight appear to fall within the Community's remit, the presence of homeless people in our towns and cities nevertheless remains one of the most serious signs of social exclusion in the European Union, primarily affecting local and regional authorities. This opinion basically reflects the point of view of these authorities.

1.1. *The basis for EU action on the homeless*

1.1.1.   Homelessness is one of the core issues in Community discussions on housing. It is also tied in with the desire to strengthen European social policy, and is encompassed by European initiatives and programmes to combat exclusion, as well as by guidelines for urban policy.

1.1.2.   A number of legal bases may be invoked to underpin action to assist and provide care for homeless people.

1.1.3.   Title XIV of the Treaty establishing the European Community (Maastricht) is concerned with economic and social cohesion, with Articles 130a to 130e governing Community action to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least-favoured regions (provisions organizing the machinery of the structural funds).

1.1.4.   Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, which will apply once the Treaty itself comes into force, aims to combat inequality and discrimination in access to the employment market. It will open the door to assistance for projects designed to prevent and reverse the processes of social exclusion. Article 137 of the Amsterdam Treaty will provide explicit authority to act in the field of social exclusion. At present, the EU has to fall back on Article 235 of the Treaty establishing the European Community which, subject to Council unanimity, allows action to be taken where there is no specific provision in the Treaty. This state of affairs sometimes produces deadlock which is extremely damaging to Community social policy.

1.1.5. The reform of the structural funds, currently under discussion between the Member States and the Commission, should enable unemployment and social exclusion to be combated more effectively on a European scale. The level of intervention envisaged entails explicit reference (in the draft framework regulation) to promoting social integration and equality of opportunity. The draft regulation promotes an integrated approach to development, and, in particular, 'consistency between the operations of the various Funds and the Community's priorities, the strategy for employment, the economic and social policies of the Member States and the regional policies of the Member States.'

1.1.6. Two other aspects need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the Commission's adoption on 15 October 1998 of the reports on the European strategy for employment, with the 1999 guidelines placing the emphasis on five key areas, one of which is opening up the labour market to all, including the disabled and ethnic minorities. Secondly, the world day against poverty on 17 October 1998, on which occasion the social affairs commissioner, Mr Flynn, stated that Community policy had to be improved, using the legal basis of Article 137, in order to boost the capacity for vocational integration: 17 % of EU households lived on incomes below the poverty line.

1.1.7. Concerns about the situation of the most disadvantaged members of society, including the homeless, are progressively finding a more prominent place in European Union discussions and policy.

1.2. *COR recommendations*

1.2.1. The present opinion looks at homelessness in the EU from all points of view. It contains five recommendations and observations, which should be affirmed right away.

1.2.2. In view of the seriousness and & complexity of the homelessness problem, the Committee of the Regions:

(i) recommends that the European Union continue to support research into homelessness,

(ii) proposes consolidating arrangements at EU level to exchange knowledge and initiatives between local authorities, based on existing networks,

(iii) recommends that ESF objectives specifically cover this issue,

(iv) calls upon the European institutions to give further consideration to the principle of a right to adequate accommodation,

(v) wishes to draw attention to the question of cohesion and European integration in relation to the problem of the Community's proximity to less-advantaged countries.

2. **General comments**

2.1. Since the mid-1980s, the homeless have assumed a highly visible presence in the public areas of EU cities. The problem is not a new one, but has taken on a new dimension, especially because extreme forms of poverty are unanimously judged to be unacceptable in a society of plenty. The position and living conditions of homeless people are everywhere viewed as an affront to human rights.

2.2. Over the last fifteen years or so homeless people, caught in the process of social exclusion, have been the object of public reaction ranging from the hostile to the sympathetic, a barrage of media and scientific attention (numerous articles, reports, research and publications), and official concern (more vigorous pursuance of adequate accommodation, development of structured policies and/or one-off arrangements).

2.3. The problem of homelessness goes to the very heart of the socio-economic and cultural make-up of each European country. It is handled locally, giving rise to reactions which invariably run the gamut from repression to solidarity. While official action on the homeless does receive broad public backing in the various countries, at the same time it has to come to terms with a degree of ambiguity in popular sentiment, with local people calling for the homeless to be either taken in or dispatched elsewhere.

2.4. None of the difficulties revolving around homelessness (access to housing, begging, behavioural problems, integration into work, access to health care) can be dealt with as a purely local responsibility. What is really needed is cooperation between local and regional bodies on an unprecedented scale, bearing in mind the blurring of national borders.

2.5. The question of homelessness is by no means a secondary or side issue. It is a key problem to which there is no short-term solution. The aim of ensuring greater economic and social cohesion across the European Union necessarily involves taking account of this sensitive area, which is bound to remain a feature of daily life in European towns at the beginning of the 21st century. The Committee of the Regions calls for every effort to be made to avoid this state of affairs being accepted, and hopes that all steps will be taken to prevent such situations.

3. **An as yet little-known population**

3.1. *A concern in every EU country*

3.1.1. The homeless may not appear as a concern of the European institutions. There was no specific reference to them in the White Paper on European social policy. But the

various European anti-poverty and exclusion initiatives and programmes (Urban, Integra, Poverty, ESF projects) have made it possible to support innovative schemes for dealing with the homeless in the Member States. Moreover, recent trends in European debate point to a growing interest in these issues.

3.1.2. It is agreed in all EU countries that homelessness is unworthy of generally prosperous countries. It is also agreed in all these countries that it is a sort of distillation of social and urban problems. The homeless are the most visible representatives of exclusion, which in its various forms is continuing to spread throughout Europe.

3.1.3. Perceptions of poverty and exclusion vary considerably. Nevertheless, in the eyes of those living everywhere in the EU homelessness is prominent among those phenomena seen as defining poverty. Against a backdrop of anxiety, rising long-term unemployment and concern over the causes of social exclusion, the homeless stand squarely at the centre of this problem in most Member States.

3.1.4. Since the late 1980s the number of people living under such conditions has become alarming. Although an objective increase in homelessness is borne out by the increasing local pressure on official or voluntary-sector services, little is actually known about the real scale of the problem: by the same token, hard data on the homeless themselves is hard to come by. Significant progress has however been achieved thanks to recent research efforts.

3.1.5. The state of extreme poverty and the high proportion of single males in this population is well-known. The growing proportions of women and of young people have also been widely documented by research in many urban areas of the EU. Similarly, high levels of alcohol or drug consumption and a poor general state of health, particularly tuberculosis and mental health (although this should not be overstated), have been acknowledged as important public health issues. Lastly, the growing number of homeless non-nationals, either from elsewhere in the EU or from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe, has also been recorded, with levels varying from country to country. The growing proportion of migrants among the homeless is an element which should be taken into consideration, although clearly not to the same extent in every country.

3.1.6. The problem takes different forms and is more visible in some countries and towns than others, depending on the welfare arrangements, but in most Member States the pattern has been similar in the 1990s: the emergence everywhere of 'Big Issue'-type street papers sold by homeless people, more calls for official intervention by the general public, and the growth of voluntary-sector initiatives.

3.1.7. The homeless are now high on local and national political agendas. At certain times of year, especially in winter when weather conditions become dangerous, the homeless arouse quite natural feelings of compassion. At other times, generally the tourist peaks, the reaction is far less sympathetic; while in some ways understandable, this is highly objectionable from many points of view.

3.1.8. A number of non-governmental organizations are concerned with this question at EU level, backing research and putting pressure on public bodies. They also point to similarities and differences between countries. FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, was set up in 1989, and since 1991 has been charged by the Commission with managing a European Observatory on Homelessness, working through a university network of national correspondents. Thanks to the network, information has been successfully compiled and circulated concerning the identity, numbers and make-up of a population that does not conform to conventional statistical models which are usually based on fixed households.

3.2. *A heterogeneous population*

3.2.1. The higher profile of the homelessness issue over the last ten years or so is explained firstly by the more obvious presence of individuals in the public areas in towns, although their real numbers cannot as yet be accurately gauged. Certain types of collective action have also made the homeless more visible: squatting, the emergence and spread of street papers, lobbying by activist associations, demonstrations and occupations of public areas or empty buildings.

3.2.2. While describing a population which all European citizens can see for themselves in the streets of their towns might appear simple, it is in fact extremely difficult to gain an accurate picture of this group, in particular because not all homeless people are readily identifiable as such in the street.

3.2.3. Knowledge about the homeless is scanty, firstly because there is no precise definition or established legal description of the term in each country. 'Homeless' means very different things from one country to another. The definitions, rules and practices of the different Member States further complicate the picture. In spite of efforts at clarification, there are no certain EU-level definitions either.

3.2.4. Some studies and national legal provisions put both travellers and the homeless in the same category, since they are of no fixed abode. Placing such different people together in the same category can confuse matters. It is nevertheless true that the question of the acceptance and tolerance of travellers is from many points of view comparable to that of the treatment accorded to the homeless.

3.2.5.   The fundamental reason for this lack of knowledge is that the homeless constitute an extremely heterogeneous group, covering individuals living in highly diverse circumstances, ranging from the traditional tramp, usually male and living rough for years, to young women who have just been evicted. Research efforts have revealed that the duration of homelessness varies substantially. It may be a transient, chronic or permanent condition. Some have been on the streets for some time and are likely to stay there longer still, for others it is a brief and never-to-be-repeated experience; others find themselves homeless from time to time. Public perceptions and official reactions may not necessarily be similar in each case.

3.2.6.   An initial problem arises concerning the meaning of the word 'homeless'. In its common usage, it refers more to a kind of social status than to an individual's housing position. 'Homeless', 'vagrant', 'tramp' or 'beggar' are often taken to mean the same thing, with discussions on homelessness often turning into debates on begging. However, not all beggars are homeless, or vice-versa. Homelessness is also closely tied to the housing problem, but the presence of individuals identified as being homeless in Europe's towns and cities is not exclusively a housing issue.

3.2.7.   The term 'homelessness' is commonly used to describe, more or less accurately, a range of problems encountered daily by those who rub shoulders with persons labelled as homeless, who are involved in working with them or running schemes for their benefit. In this way, very different aspects (lack of housing, the public spectacle of social abandonment, begging, vagrancy, extreme forms of poverty, changes in market trends and housing policy, etc.), are brought together under a single heading.

3.2.8.   Convention definitions — which remain open to debate — emphasize the sporadic or persistent lack of stable housing. Analyses concur in recognizing the affinities between the circumstances of people living rough and people living in hostels, makeshift accommodation or in accommodation where they have no security of tenure. Consequently, the homeless population is not limited to the highly-visible and disturbing condition of those sleeping on the streets, or to a simple head-count of those seen by voluntary or official social services.

3.2.9.   Most studies concentrate more on the social processes at work than on loss of housing alone. The homeless are thus viewed in terms of the various processes of exclusion rather than from the single perspective of the poor functioning of the housing market.

3.2.10.   The most in-depth research suggests that thinking should always be in terms of social processes and should go further than a simple static description of circumstances. Looked at in this way, the homeless population does not constitute a fixed 'stock'. A clearer picture of the actual state of affairs can be gained by taking account of larger movements, of individuals' personal stories, and of people both falling into and escaping from this position. The situation is complex and must be understood as one stage — albeit among the last and most painful — in the process of social exclusion.

3.2.11.   It must always be borne in mind, then, that the homeless population is extremely heterogeneous and cannot be taken as a stable social category. Situations which differ widely in terms of social ties, housing or social security cover, for example, receive the same label.

3.3.   *Uncertain statistics*

3.3.1.   Despite these difficulties and the risk of being imprecise, some statistics on the homeless do exist both within each Member State and at EU level. However, as the originating researchers and observers recommend, they should be treated with great caution.

3.3.2.   It is nowadays essential to come up with statistical estimates in order to sway decision-makers and have an impact on public opinion. The aim of drawing attention to the homeless through a single measure has very often led to figures being announced without any of the necessary prior clarification (who are we talking about? over what area? for how long?), or without applying rigorous census or sampling methods. Current estimates frequently make no distinction between the number of individuals who are homeless over a whole year and those who are homeless at a given point during the year. They also often confuse the total number of homeless people with the number of cases dealt with by the appropriate social services. The effort to quantify the problem is distorted by the changing descriptions of the population in question, since these descriptions may vary depending on the interests of those who produce them. Some prefer a broad definition (bringing in those living in sub-standard housing), while others opt for a strict definition covering only the most marginal of the very poorest sector of society.

3.3.3.   Tables have been drawn up in each of the Member States, often based on reports from voluntary associations and sometimes using official data. Figures have been compiled and disseminated by FEANTSA, which clearly states that they must be used with care (Table A). They are more a reflection of the extent of care arrangements in each Member State than a detailed appreciation of the real situation. They also depend on the local definition of the problem. The figures have not all been compiled with the same degree of rigour and, since they do not always refer to people in the same circumstances, they cannot be used for very searching transnational comparisons. They do nevertheless give some idea of the scale of the problem and of the wide range of situations.

TABLE A

Estimate of the annual average number of persons using official and voluntary services for the homeless in the early 1990s

Country	For an average day, or for the day surveyed	For a one-year period
Austria	6 100	8 400
Belgium	4 000	5 500
Denmark	2 947	4 000
Finland	4 000	5 500
France	250 000	346 000
Germany	490 700	876 450
Greece	5 500	7 700
Ireland	2 667	3 700
Italy	56 000	78 000
Luxembourg	194	200
Netherlands	7 000	12 000
Portugal	3 000	4 000
Spain	8 000	11 000
Sweden	9 903	14 000
United Kingdom	283 000	460 000

Source: FEANTSA.

3.3.4.　Approximately 1.1 million European citizens pass through agencies for the homeless every day. Over a one-year period, this figure rises to 1,8 million. Again according to FEANTSA estimates, almost 18 million EU citizens live in very low-grade accommodation or 'unconventional' housing, i.e. in premises not intended as dwelling-places.

3.3.5.　It is worth pointing out that information from certain countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom) points to a recent fall in the number of recipients of services for the homeless, although it cannot yet be concluded that there is a downward trend, a freeze or even an increase in the total homeless population.

3.3.6.　What the figures do show is that the phenomenon is far from uniform across the EU, but that these differences are not necessarily closely connected with the types of welfare-state provision in the different countries. The problem appears to be statistically marginal in certain southern countries (Greece, Portugal and Spain) and certain northern countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden). Similarly marginal in Austria, it appears on far larger scale in France, Germany, Italy and in the United Kingdom.

3.3.7.　Given the growing demand for figures, much recent scientific research has concentrated on the question of how many homeless people there are. The research has served to outline what is at stake in making such counts, to clarify the methodological and ethical complications of surveys of the homeless, and to test methods which must go beyond the approximate estimates still used by care workers.

3.3.8.　Current work in this field has emphasized the limited value of simply producing tables of figures, and has moved beyond this issue to look at the characteristics of individuals and their personal background over time. More global methodologies for quantifying and assessing the population in question have therefore been developed and tested (partial surveys, more in-depth studies of social service samples, estimates of the ratio between the numbers of homeless on the streets and those in hostels). Surveys are soon to be carried out in some EU countries using procedures which ensure a degree of reliability. It is nevertheless a fact that we do not know for certain how many homeless people migrate from one EU country to another. Such movements are however reported by care workers, particularly in relation to young people, moving for example from festival to festival. Much more information is needed on this aspect.

4.　**Complex problems, varied responses**

4.1.　*A particularly complex social problem*

4.1.1.　Numerous studies report the political and social changes which have gone furthest to swell the ranks of the homeless. They include new forms of poverty, the advance of insecurity and long-term unemployment, the problem of mental illness, the closing down of institutionalized mental hospitals, drug and alcohol consumption, the increasing number of single-parent families, welfare cutbacks in some countries, counterproductive increases in others, and difficulties in access to housing.

4.1.2.　Depending on the point of view adopted by the various social actors, homelessness is first and foremost a question of housing, of employment, demographics, mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, cuts in — or excessive growth of — social budgets, the relative breakdown in family ties, or a spin-off of rising or changing poverty.

4.1.3.　There are two major schools of thought on how to explain homelessness. The focus can be on analysing structural phenomena (unemployment, changes in the housing market, etc.); or it can be on the more personal reasons which lead to an individual becoming homeless (emotional trauma, illness,

initial social disadvantage, etc.). Supporters of explanatory models based on individual variables are apt to criticise structural approaches which fail to take account of specific circumstances. Those advocating structural dynamics will criticise observers or commentators who concentrate on individual cases as, by so doing, they help stigmatise them.

4.1.4.   The structural/individual controversy can only be resolved by an intermediate stance. The most advanced analyses emphasize the necessary links to be established between housing market trends, welfare schemes and the employment market and more individual elements such as looser social links, especially family ones, certain personal inadequacies and highly disadvantaged social origins. Homelessness is not rooted exclusively in either structural or personal problems: it is most probably the result of interactions between the two categories. This cocktail of factors generates a downward spiral which can take some individuals onto the streets, each problem exacerbating the next.

4.1.5.   In the final analysis, homelessness simultaneously embraces the problems of institutions' structural inadequacies and of dealing effectively with personal weaknesses.

4.1.6.   The practical, day-to-day aspects of homelessness are equally complex. In addition to the housing problem it also — and sometimes predominantly — involves employment, health and behavioural problems. Some homeless people are in fact housed in hostels or temporary accommodation, and their primary problem is that of access to employment. Others are chiefly affected by serious health problems which stop them finding or keeping accommodation. Yet others, because of their behaviour, can cause disturbances in the public areas they use as places of refuge and as a source of income. The various more or less legal activities they carry out in order to survive can, to some extent, come close to being anti-social (forming large groups, threatening behaviour, aggressive begging); this can further harm the quality of life in towns and inflate a feeling of insecurity.

4.1.7.   Housing access policies should be considered within the context of more general measures promoting social integration, so as to be able to offer the person in need an integrated service, providing for healthcare and access to employment.

4.2.   *Constant concern for the management of public areas*

4.2.1.   For local authorities and managers of public areas (stations, shopping centres, parks, etc.), dealing with homelessness means constant concern about how to treat the homeless and how to regulate and supervise the zones for which they are responsible.

4.2.2.   By their mere presence or by their behaviour, the homeless are often mentioned as one of the factors in a climate of insecurity. The homeless themselves also have to live in a particularly violent and dangerous environment.

4.2.3.   Homelessness is clearly a key factor in the highly topical issue of security. The anti-vagrancy bye-laws introduced in a number of EU towns (in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) have triggered political controversy and major debates on the freedoms of movement and expression. Such municipal measures, which are open to criticism, but which are demanded by a significant sector of public opinion, are the expression of the commonplace NIMBY ('Not In My Back Yard'), or even NIMEY ('Not In My Electoral Yard'), syndrome — meaning, in this case, the fear and rejection of facilities for the homeless in the vicinity. The homelessness issue runs head-first into the dilemma that while there is widespread sympathy for the homeless, people always want action on their behalf to be taken somewhere else.

4.2.4.   The appalled collective reaction of districts or entire towns to the problem puts the facile image of universal sympathy for the homeless into perspective. This kind of reaction often grows from the easy temptation to ostracise, but it nevertheless serves to show that simplistic utopian or doom-laden approaches are misplaced. The question of homelessness also involves issues of security and anti-social behaviour and therefore brings policing policy and all measures to regulate public areas into question.

4.2.5.   The day-to-day management of homelessness in urban areas reflects the difficulties experienced by officialdom in dealing with complicated problems and taking the necessary steps to provide a just response to varied — and in many ways ambiguous — demands from inhabitants who are either saddened or worried by seeing homeless people in their streets and towns. A mid-way course must always be steered between the temptation on the one hand to ostracise the homeless, and on the other to adopt an excessively idealistic approach. There is a constant need to remind some individuals of their duties and to steer others towards greater tolerance.

4.2.6.   There is of course no miracle cure to tackle this type of dilemma both fairly and efficiently. But positive experiments have been devised by companies, security services and local authorities throughout the European Union for public areas, those who use them and the homeless. In the Committee of the Regions' view, it would be helpful to set up a network to pool these practices, to discuss them and evaluate their efficacy, fairness and whether they will work elsewhere.

4.3. *A question of local and regional cooperation*

4.3.1.   Homelessness is a local issue, but involves a fundamental question of cooperation between different towns within a given region. A brief glance at the background is necessary to grasp the importance of this point.

4.3.2.   Ever since the birth of Europe's towns, the question of vagrancy has been a prominent concern for local authority managers. In the Middle Ages, assistance to vagrants — the attitude to which varied in line with the local social and political set-up — could be provided for an entire town. No town, however, could alone provide such relief at regional level. Towns had a choice: to take in the indigent before their doors, or to send them away. But if one community, for religious or political reasons, decided to take them in, it had no way of knowing whether other local authorities would do likewise, or whether they would take advantage of this willingness to provide shelter and send wanderers their way. A tension was therefore created between the regional scale of vagrancy and the local character of relief. This tension was exacerbated by the increasing numbers of the poor and vagrants at the beginning of the modern period. Central authorities took action everywhere in Europe to bind the poor to a given territory. Relief resources were however inadequate, and the system could easily be thrown out of balance by a war, epidemic or poor harvest.

4.3.3.   With the growth of towns and their interdependence, central states intervened in order to provide balanced regional assistance alongside the local charitable arrangements, which could no longer cope. The poor were no longer simply kept enclosed so they could be fed or punished. They were offered work which was intended to change, chastise, cure or reform them. Charitable workshops took in all kinds of people, with very varying degrees of coercion or forced labour. The principle was to employ the able-bodied poor in a self-financing system of relief. Here, central authorities had a decisive part to play by supporting towns. With modest support for local assistance arrangements, they could maintain overall cohesion. The role of European states in opposing vagrancy and helping the poor has continued to expand ever since. Local authority autonomy has been eclipsed by the emergence of increasingly powerful states, able to rule over the communities within their territory.

4.3.4.   The central authorities initially thought that the poor would be prevented from moving freely by obliging each parish to feed its own poor. The illusion of forced labour subsequently spread until it was seen to be ineffective.

4.3.5.   If the history of coping with vagrancy is looked at in this way, it helps explain current circumstances. The lesson of this model is that self-governing communities are not capable of action to manage vagrancy in the absence of a central, regulating authority. Thus the purpose of state intervention is to organize the monitoring of movements and inter-town cooperation. The involvement of central government cannot, however, entirely dispel the dilemmas facing local authorities.

4.3.6.   Local authorities to this day tend only to take on destitute persons whom they identify as being their responsibility, and experience unease at the attitude neighbouring towns may adopt. Collective management of homelessness remains a question of balance and territorial organization. For local authorities, it means minimizing the social and electoral costs of looking after the homeless, while meeting their legal and moral obligations. The question, then, is always to distinguish the 'right' homeless people who should be taken in from those who are the responsibility of other authorities. The choice, which is always arbitrary, is made on the basis of the ancient division of the 'deserving' poor and the rest.

4.3.7.   Consequently homelessness still raises questions of cooperation between local authorities at a time when administrative systems are finding it hard to adjust to present day regional facts. The collective method of dealing with homelessness can, from this point of view, be seen as a constant shuttling back and forth of people and responsibilities. With the opening of borders and the inward movement of disadvantaged individuals, particularly from poorer neighbouring countries, the problem is becoming increasingly acute. The Committee of the Regions would argue that a better understanding of the situation, prior to an attempt to regulate it more fairly and effectively, certainly comes within the remit of the European institutions. The Community level is appropriate for dealing with problems which involve significant transnational aspects.

4.4. *Progress on the right to housing*

4.4.1.   In view of the increasing prominence of the question of homelessness and under pressure from associations and public opinion, national governments have developed the right to housing in each country.

4.4.2.   The fifteen Member States have ratified all international texts on human dignity. They implicitly recognize the right to adequate accommodation as a fundamental human right, as an essential element in respect for human dignity. Since the Habitat II Conference in June 1996, which witnessed some disagreement between the US and the EU over the right to housing, a European vision of the right to housing has emerged, reflecting an undertaking by states to move towards implementation of this right, although national circumstances, approaches and laws may differ.

4.4.3.   The right to housing has been incorporated into the constitutions of some Member States (Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden). In France it is regarded as an aim worthy of incorporation in the constitution. UK and Irish laws, which do not recognize the right to housing, do respond specifically to the problem of the homeless by requiring local authorities to house certain priority categories of people (United Kingdom) or simply to list the homeless and draw up housing priorities (Ireland). In Germany, it is the responsibility of the *Länder* to ensure that no-one sleeps in the street. They may, in the interests of public order, requisition empty housing. In Denmark local authorities must provide suitable accommodation.

4.5.   *Emergency initiatives: introduction and consolidation*

4.5.1.   Because of their higher profile and considerable media coverage, the homeless have triggered a reaction on the part of public opinion and the public authorities. The sense of outrage and indignation has spawned the questionable concept of 'social emergency'.

4.5.2.   Arrangements for coping with the homeless, particularly under emergency conditions, have mushroomed over the last decade or so. The homeless are now the object of specific instruments and provisions. Conventional action in the form of housing and food has been consolidated, and now represents a complex service-delivery system put in place by voluntary bodies and public services. Some new types of service have recently been devised (mobile outreach teams, day reception centres, specially adapted housing arrangements, etc.). A variety of actors, including both professionals and volunteers, now work with a range of widely varying measures.

4.5.3.   In a complex legal framework where conflicts of jurisdiction and funding difficulties are commonplace, innovation has been forthcoming from individual towns and the voluntary sector. At the local level in particular, fresh schemes and arrangements have been tried out, based on partnership agreements between local authorities and voluntary associations.

4.5.4.   Nevertheless, the bulk of public work for the homeless in all countries is still founded on a raft of emergency accommodation and care measures, rather than a real strategy providing a policy for housing and social integration.

4.5.5.   It is apparent that a close evaluation of the problems and achievements of the different arrangements for providing emergency care and shelter would be helpful at this stage. Certain centres, or types of action, do indeed seem to offer dignified and effective care which is appreciated by people in need. In other cases, assistance may be rejected by the homeless, due to an intolerable lack of privacy and an atmosphere of violence.

4.5.6.   Observers and field workers agree on the need for, but also the limits of, emergency responses. They are by nature a sticking plaster, not a cure. They also note a certain tendency to institutionalise such efforts, with measures originally conceived as temporary becoming permanent — but without the financial support necessarily becoming equally stable, and without homeless people really having the opportunity to seek a way out of the process of exclusion in which they are caught. The risk is growing of a two-tier approach to public action on health, housing, employment and social protection. This is a source of very serious concern, which must not be overlooked in the context of strengthening European policy to boost economic and social cohesion.

5.   **Conclusions**

Under the Treaty establishing the European Community, the Committee of the Regions is charged with representing regional and local authorities: at the same time, it is empowered to deal with matters of economic and social cohesion and the specific machinery of the structural and cohesion funds.

On this dual basis, the Committee of the Regions has five recommendations and observations to make.

5.1.   *Supporting a research programme on the homeless*

5.1.1.   Research on the homeless offers a number of paradoxes. Few sections of the community have been subject to such concentrated media, political and scientific attention. There has been a torrent of press articles, seminars, books, surveys and speeches. Research has been conducted in at least three directions: homelessness as a social phenomenon, as a way of life, and as an area for action.

5.1.2.   These efforts have undoubtedly helped to improve our understanding of a group which, in the early 1990s, seemed unprecedented, vague and ill-defined. But this sum of knowledge does not appear to be circulating and is little-used by the public authorities. Moreover, it cannot provide answers to the numerous questions regularly asked by decision-makers, journalists or the general public.

5.1.3.   No new programme can be carried out other than on the basis of what has already been done, in close cooperation with the official actors involved. Certain areas so far untouched deserve to be explored, such as movements of homeless people between EU countries, or assessment of care policies. Other questions, which have already been the subject of investigations, such as the growing proportion of women among the homeless, or homeless people's links with their families, should be looked at with particular attention.

5.1.4.   A programme of this kind could lead to a European forum, organized by a major institution and drawing in top-level political representatives, as well as local authorities and NGOs. It could be part of the Commission's work on 'the city of tomorrow'.

5.2.   *Consolidating an exchange of specialist knowledge and initiatives*

5.2.1.   One of the major shortcomings pointed out by many observers of the homelessness issue is the lack of interchange between towns and actors at European level. Numerous networks, especially voluntary ones, are already swapping information and comparing experiences, building up a real store of thinking on a European scale. Examples of this, in addition to FEANTSA, are the European Anti-Poverty Network and the network which has grown up around the European Charter for housing rights and the struggle against exclusion.

5.2.2.   The Committee of the Regions proposes that a lightweight structure be built up at EU level, using the knowledge and methods of these bodies, to catalogue and disseminate initiatives, good practice and local studies, in the form of publications, seminars and an Internet site. The aim here is to support and supplement FEANTSA's work, from the point of view of local authorities.

5.2.3.   The pooling of experience and initiatives should be seen as part of the gradual harmonisation of bodies and instruments guaranteeing access to housing and the right to housing within the context of Member State legislation.

5.3.   *Approaches to economic and social exclusion in the Structural Funds*

5.3.1.   While noting the value of EU action in this area, the Committee of the Regions recommends that homelessness be explicitly included among ESF objectives, through support for projects combating economic and social exclusion. This should improve the chances of finding employment. The ERDF and Community initiatives such as URBAN and INTERREG should include assistance measures to promote employment for the homeless. It is important for the European Social Fund to be used in future to support initiatives to help people in difficulty. Even though Community texts often refer to employment and the labour market, it must nevertheless be stressed that local

and regional authorities organise projects on the supply side (housing, health, adult literacy) which eventually enable the beneficiaries to return to work. It must thus be possible to take these projects into consideration in the national employment plans which will serve as a basis for national Objective 3 programmes.

5.3.2.   In the Committee of the Regions' view, funds must possess the necessary degree of flexibility to help implement local initiatives which further integration and greater European cooperation.

5.4.   *Giving further consideration to the principle of the right to housing at EU level*

5.4.1.   Given that housing is the first factor enabling an individual to set out on a process of social and vocational integration, the Committee of the Regions calls upon the European institutions to give further consideration to the principle of the right to adequate accommodation.

5.5.   *Observation on proximity to poorer countries and the question of further migration*

5.5.1.   The Committee of the Regions wishes to draw attention to the problems raised by movements of disadvantaged persons from one country to another.

5.5.2.   Homelessness brings the question of poverty home to the rich countries and raises the issue of how to respond with generosity and tolerance towards events on the EU's own borders. The homeless in certain EU countries include increasing numbers of non-Union citizens, particularly political — and also economic — refugees from the countries of eastern Europe. False fears must not be raised about these movements, but they are nonetheless taking place.

5.5.3.   This delicate question needs to be firmly pointed out in the run-up to EU enlargement and in the light of the fundamental objective of economic and social cohesion. The current problem of migration from less advantaged countries poses the future question of integrating these countries, the technical question of how to manage these phenomena, and the thorny question of how to cope with the human problems — particularly glaring in the case of sometimes very young children — wandering the streets of Europe's cities.

Brussels, 3 June 1999.

The President

of the Committee of the Regions

Manfred DAMMEYER