

The HomeLab project, working on secure housing and employment opportunities for vulnerable and low-income groups in the Visegrad Four countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), has come to its end. After three years of intense work, analysis, and local development the project ended in September 2019. In five pilots, across very diverse Central and Eastern European locations, the project has engaged partners and stakeholders, fostered social innovation, and set up a locally adapted Social Rental Enterprise (SRE) model.



The pilot project sites have been diverse, including capital cities (Warsaw and Budapest), mid-size and smaller towns and their surroundings (e.g. the cities of Veszprém in Hungary, Olomouc and Pardubice regions in Czechia) and small villages (e.g. Slovakia's Prešov and Košice regions). The five participating NGOs ([Romodrom](#), [From Streets to Home Association](#), [Habitat for Humanity Poland](#), [People in Need Slovakia](#) and [Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta](#)) developed locally appropriate integrated service provision models for their SREs, while also advocated for the support of local and national governments, in order to upscale their models after the project ends.

The project's closing conference took place on 26-27 September 2019 in Budapest and brought together stakeholders from the Visegrad countries and beyond. It offered an opportunity to share and discuss project results and talk about future possibilities. Over 100 participants gathered from across Europe, bringing together policy makers, professionals, practitioners and researchers on various scales.

The European Commission was represented by Olga Martinez de Briones, the Project Officer for HomeLab; and by Judit Rózsa, DG EMPLOYMENT's Head of Unit for Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia. In her opening presentation, Ms Olga Martinez called attention to the various forms of homelessness and housing exclusion, especially after the crisis years caused a drop in investment into affordable housing.

Public sector speakers and attendees included officials from various Visegrad country ministries and municipalities. Representatives of NGOs and civil society networks arrived from the four project countries and beyond. Besides participant and partner organisations, members of the Dissemination Board Ms Clotilde Clark-Foulquier of [FEANTSA](#), and György Sümeghy of [Habitat for Humanity International](#) also presented their conclusions and recommendations. Presenters also came from bottom-up initiatives like [habiTAT](#) in Austria, and [Ethical Lettings](#) in the UK. The financial sector behind innovative housing initiatives was represented by a speaker on behalf of Slovenská Sporiteľňa, which represents Erste Bank's Slovakian branch, but also Slovakia's ethical banking business.

Key lessons: what we learned from integrated services development and setting up SREs

Integrated provision of housing and employment services, accompanied by social work was implemented in five pilot projects in the four Visegrad countries, across diverse vulnerable and socially marginalized groups. These pilots diverged in many aspects, yet some overarching conclusions could be gleaned from all:

- Most importantly, implementers and partners concluded that the **integrated provision** of housing, employment, and social work **can be an effective tool** to support diverse vulnerable groups; it helps to help stabilize their situation and makes results more sustainable than fragmented provision forms.
- **Coordination and cooperation between NGOs and the public sector** are vital for the success of these projects. NGOs were often more flexible and efficient in reaching out to excluded, vulnerable groups. On the other hand, the public sector could mobilize stakeholders and resources necessary for adequate support. Civil society has very limited funding and resources, even more so in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context. Here, building an allegiance with **local municipalities** is crucial for the success of integrated social service provision, and setting up SREs.
- Projects are important stepping stones in service development. For the implementer partners in HomeLab the funding was an exceptional opportunity to **professionalize and institutionalize** their operation. They could expand their services, develop new pillars and experiment with the most efficient ways of reaching their clients and stabilizing their situations.
- Networking, peer-to-peer learning and knowledge transfer opportunities, which were offered in HomeLab, are much sought after in the CEE region by NGOs. They allow the capitalisation and upscaling of project experiences.
- In CEE countries social providers and NGOs are in dire need of **funding for operation**, rather than just for innovation. This underlines the importance of advocacy in communicating project findings and policy consequences towards decision makers. To ensure the successful and sustainable social and labour market integration of vulnerable and at-risk population, providers are in need of funding that is stable, long-term, and calculable.

HomeLab: opportunities for the five pilots

The pilot projects implemented in the four Visegrad countries have had diverse target groups, but all of them socially and economically excluded, in low quality, insecure housing or some level of homelessness, with low work intensity and/or meagre, irregular income. Each implementer developed their own procedures for client involvement and integrated provision, and all developed a rich network of partners and stakeholders to optimize resources and efficiency in service provision.

HomeLab provided an opportunity for growth and development for each implementer, in specific areas:

- **Romodrom** in the Czech Republic launched its Olomouc office, and developed important professional contacts, with e.g. the Social Real Estate Agent, and the Caritas College of Social Work in Olomouc;
- **PIN Slovakia** developed a strong network with employers who are open to involve excluded Roma job seekers, opening the door to legal employment – one even included a sensitivity training for its non-Roma workers to help the job integration of the new workforce;
- In Warsaw, **Habitat for Humanity Poland** established stable contractual cooperation with the Municipality of Warsaw, going beyond the project scope; and developed from scratch a new Social Rental Enterprise to temporarily house vulnerable persons until their long-term accommodation can be secured;
- **From Street to Home Association** in Budapest could expand and diversify its activity substantially under HomeLab, expanding its Social Rental Enterprise scheme with a mobile home programme, and incorporating into its usual services the newly developed Give Work programme;
- **Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta** in Veszprém could seize the opportunity to embed integrated service provision in the everyday procedures of its local organisation VESZOL, which manages various affordable housing schemes, among which the municipally owned social housing stock in the city.

Confronting ideas about social and affordable housing – the Housing panel in the HomeLab conference

Access and affordability of housing was a cross-cutting topic of the closing conference. Nonetheless, it was also addressed specifically in a panel discussion, where project partners were accompanied by external practitioners Ms Georgina Summerfield of Ethical Lettings UK, and Mr Florian Humer of Austria's HabiTAT.

Besides social housing, discussants also identified a need for an **intermediary sector of affordable housing for the low income, but not extremely vulnerable population**. Social housing in CEE is open for the most vulnerable part of the population (although the available stock is not always sufficient). Nonetheless, there are many low-income persons and families who do not need social housing – yet struggle to cover private rent or mortgage repayment.

In CEE countries, municipalities are the most important social landlords by far. However, their capacities to reach out and involve vulnerable groups is often limited. In the experience of the HomeLab project, their cooperation with civil society actors holds great promise. Some of the municipalities cooperate with NGOs aiming to improve the housing situation of groups with housing difficulties. To convince municipalities NGOs need arguments, which are most importantly based on the implicit guarantees that NGOs provide by their integrated services. These reduce the risk of non-payment, anti-social behaviour, and damages. The main bottleneck of this cooperation appears to be the lack of a guarantee fund.

Private rentals are included in the Czech, Polish and Hungarian pilots; however, the lack of sufficient rent allowance hinders the larger scale involvement of private housing for social purposes. Experience so far shows that an SRE can successfully target a very specific group of landlords, those who are socially sensitive and/or do not have first-hand negative experience with tenants, and would appreciate a secure and simple scheme to let their apartment. Implementers found that effective publicity campaigns are needed to reach out to private landlords. Moreover, the Czech and Polish examples showed that real estate agency knowledge should also be channelled into the programs.

Finally, the panel also showcased some important initiatives, where a closer cooperation with the private sector can also contribute to scaling up the model.

Low skilled and excluded job seekers on the labour market – results of the Employment Panel at the HomeLab Conference

The employment panel consisted of project partners and representatives from pilot implementers, accompanied by Ágnes Kelemen of Hungary's Autonómia Foundation, Daniel Skobla of the Slovak Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, and Alena Zieglerová of the Czech Institute of Social Inclusion.

Providing individualized employment support to clients was crucial throughout the project. Intervention needs vary greatly in all beneficiary groups. Some disadvantaged people need help in basic skills, such as literacy, or the importance of showing up on time for an interview. Many only need less support, but almost all beneficiaries need some level of support in finding adequate job placements, applying for a position, and preparing for interviews. In addition, retaining a job for a longer period may be challenging for many socially excluded individuals, especially if they do not have previous experience in being employed for a long time.

With this background, the panel focused on the possibilities of employment integration of vulnerable groups. HomeLab implementer partners emphasized the importance of establishing direct links and information networks with employers. In their experience SREs proved to play an important role as guarantors and intermediaries towards employers.

The most important result of the pilots was the importance of networking and developing close cooperation with private employers, especially with large companies. The role of implementers was surveying their labour force needs, matching the clients with these needs, and if needed providing competency development trainings to prepare the clients for job integration.

Sensitisation of private companies and public labour offices seems to be equally important in combating discrimination towards marginalised groups, but it can only be effective if it is accompanied by enabling services on both side of the labour market, by employers and groups to be employed as described above.

Lessons learned from failures was important as well. Among others, establishing contact with public employment offices did not prove as successful as implementers hoped, as these offices focus less on the most disadvantaged job seekers, who need quite intensive employment support to secure and retain a job. And private sector job placement agencies did not have much added value either; they often only ensure the employment of vulnerable clients for a short timeframe, which coincides with the subsidization period of employing long-time job seekers.