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Together we can do more: Y-Foundation and Housing First in Finland

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Finland is the only country in EU where homelessness is decreasing. This is due to persistent policy work as well as finding new measures to decrease and prevent homelessness. Key thing in the process have been united forces. One active partner in this cooperation for over 30 years has been the Y-Foundation¹.

Policies to tackle homelessness

At the end of 2015 there were 6,785 single homeless people and 424 homeless families in Finland. These figures are in line with the declining trend in homelessness data collected every year from local authorities and social services². Over 80% of these homeless are people living temporarily with relatives or friends, not just rough sleepers or people in overnight shelters.

Thirty years earlier the situation was much worse: the number of homeless people was almost 20,000. Thousands of people were living in institutions because of lack of suitable housing and in Helsinki alone, over 2000 people were housed in dormitories or overnight shelters. Homeless people also often occupied sub-standard housing which other people had abandoned.

Since then reducing homelessness has almost continuously been part of Finnish government programs. Measures have varied over the years and progress has been made. However, all people could not find a permanent solution matching their housing and support needs. They ended up homeless repeatedly or stayed in hostels for long periods. That's why a new approach was adopted in 2008. Housing and services for long-term homeless people were now developed by applying the Housing First principle. This meant building new housing, renovating hostels completely and creating new services³.

Why Y?

One of the driving forces in promoting this new policy based on Housing First has been Y-Foundation. It already had long experience in providing normal housing for homeless people and developing facilities for supported housing. The foundation also had a wide network of partners among cities and service providers.

When measures to tackle homelessness were planned in 1980's there was a huge shortage of small rental apartments suitable for single homeless people. Buying housing from private market was considered to be the quickest way to get more housing for the homeless. That's why in 1985 a foundation was established and buying housing was its main model of operation for many years.

¹ <http://www.ysaatio.fi/in-english/>

² <http://www.ara.fi/en-US>

³ http://www.housingfirst.fi/en/housing_first/homelessness_in_finland

The letter “Y” in the name of Y-Foundation comes from the Finnish word yksinäinen (lonely), representing the original object to provide small rental apartments for single homeless people.

The founding members of the foundation were a wide range of non-profit organizations including five largest cities in Finland (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere and Turku), The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The Finnish Red Cross, The Finnish Association for Mental Health, The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, The Confederation of Finnish Construction Industries RT and The Finnish Construction Trade Union. Even today these bodies have representation in the board of the foundation.

Y-Foundation aims at ending homelessness in Finland. According to the charter its basic duty is to support health and social welfare by providing affordable, good quality rental housing, matching human dignity, to people who have difficulties in finding accommodation in the general housing market. Housing financing must be arranged in a way that rents match the solvency of tenants. Income from rents and other assets are used to increase the housing stock. As a non-profit housing provider the foundation is entitled to state subsidies and grants in construction.

Over the years needs have changed and new groups needing housing have emerged. At the beginning of 1990s the foundation started to buy housing for refugees coming to Finland. Several real estates have been built to improve living conditions of people suffering from mental health problems. From 2008 onwards the foundation has provided both scattered and congregate housing for the National Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness. Also various types of mixed housing have been built. Congregate supported housing with service facilities on-site can, e.g. be situated as part of a normal rental real estate.

The original policy was renting the apartments as secondary leasing in cooperation with local authorities, parishes or NGOs. The foundation arranged housing; local partners selected tenants and arranged support services when necessary. Nowadays the foundation also rents apartments directly to homeless people. Tenants are selected together with organisations offering support for their special needs clients.

Today the foundation also offers normal social rental housing via it’s daughter company for anyone to apply.⁴ Especially in the Metropolitan area more and more people are vulnerable to homelessness only because it is hard to find affordable housing. A new way of action started in 2016 is renting apartments from private landlords and letting them to homeless people. Availability of affordable rental housing is, however, the key thing in tackling and preventing homelessness.

Y-Foundation housing

The Y-Foundation housing stock is over 16,400 apartments. Some 5,300 flats are scattered housing bought from the private market and almost 10,000 apartments are normal social rental housing. The rest is supported housing facilities for tenants with special needs. These include, e.g. homes for long-term homeless people, service housing for elderly people and supported housing for people recovering from psychiatric problems.

Key features in Y-Foundation housing are:

- Needs based solutions
- Affordability
- Good quality
- Safe tenure
- Central location

⁴ <https://m2kodit.fi/>

- Supportive networks

The most important factor in buying and building housing is quality. The foundation provides normal housing, no shelters or temporary solutions. No matter if the apartment is in scattered or in congregate housing, quality is the same and the apartment enables independent living. In congregate housing the communities are always supported by building room for shared activities (a living-room, kitchen and room for group work) even though the tenants also have fully equipped homes of their own. Living is based on a normal lease.

In construction one key feature is central location. Especially tenants with special needs benefit from a local community and it is important that services are easy to reach. This empowers people to take responsibility and makes support work more effective. Scattered apartments in private housing companies help to tackle segregation. Providing social housing in owner occupied housing stock gives former homeless people an option to get a good quality home and a quiet neighbourhood.

Building partnerships

Y-Foundation complements housing markets by offering tailored housing solutions based on local demand. Foundation's key partners are local authorities as they define city specific targets for cooperation. Partners assess needs and suitable housing options are planned together. When necessary cities also help to arrange building sites. This is vital in order to keep rents on a reasonable level.

The foundation takes care of property management; local partners arrange necessary support services. Cooperation is based on a contract, which defines roles and responsibilities of each party involved. As an independent organization the foundation has been able to build partnerships also with church social work and several NGOs developing support for their target groups. The possibility to arrange housing via Y-Foundation has enabled many organizations to develop services matching the special needs of their clients.

Today the foundation has cooperation with over one hundred partner organizations all over the country. This means a lot of networking to do. Yet it is worth the effort: in tackling homeless joint forces are more effective than separate projects. The wide network has benefited foundation's development work. It has been easy to find partners for new projects and disseminating results has also been efficient.

Finances

The two main sources of financing core activities are RAY, Finland's Slot Machine Association⁵, and ARA, the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland⁶. RAY funding covers 50 % of purchasing costs in scattered housing. RAY and ARA also finance housing support and advice services which enable effective networking with local partners and service providers to prevent recurring homelessness. ARA grants interest-subsidy loans and subsidies for construction and renovation of social housing. Invest subsidies for special-needs groups can reach the maximum of 50 % of approved investment costs.

Y-Foundation uses also loans from banks and other financial institutions. Residential rental return is used to cover the costs of running the organization, capital expenses and the costs of housing management. The profit is used to cover repayments of loans and the remaining amount is invested in new apartments for special-needs groups.

⁵ <http://www2.ray.fi/en>

⁶ <http://www.ara.fi/en-US>

Personnel

Y-Foundation works nationwide and has flats or housing units in 56 different cities and municipalities. Our main office is in Helsinki but we have also regional offices in 6 cities. The staff of 116 employees has varied professional background. The main departments or units are: customer service and rental, construction and renovation, real estate management and maintenance, finance and administration. We have also units for development work, housing services and communication. Recently we started also a pilot project for preventive housing advisory services.

Sustainable housing

The aims in providing housing are good quality and longevity. National regulations on construction by the Ministry of Environment steer building activities and promote greater energy-efficiency and use of renewable energy sources. In Finnish climate conditions these are important goals. ARA evaluates building plans before granting financing in order to ensure quality in social housing. Among other things this means good insulation, airtightness and triple glazing in windows. The foundation uses good quality materials, dependable appliances and the apartments are well-equipped.

Professional property management and good upkeep are important to lengthen the service life of constructions. Necessary renovations must be done in time. Energy efficiency is monitored and technical inspections of heating and ventilation appliances are done regularly to improve energy efficiency performance. One essential feature in environmental sustainability is location. Central location as well as good transport links reduce private motoring. Public transportation makes it possible to use the money in buildings and reduces the need for expensive parking spaces.

Promoting welfare and inclusion

Permanent home and safe tenure are crucial for wellbeing. Over the years we have become convinced that it is possible to tackle even severe problems and difficult life situations in safe circumstances. Yet, realism is needed: all people can't climb the steps of staircase model housing services and some need support on a regular basis. There isn't one right housing model; the solution must be based on people's needs.

Good housing benefits also the welfare system. Treatment or rehabilitation is more effective in proper living conditions. A safe home gives an opportunity to focus on other things in life and membership in a community is an effective way to promote welfare. Investment in supported housing is also cost-effective. Evaluations on the Housing First -facilities and services have proved that adequate housing and support decreases the use of expensive emergency services⁷.

Every now and then the work of Y-Foundation has been challenged by attitudes and fears of the surrounding community. Some building projects have been delayed because of complaints from the neighbourhood. At the end, however, all projects have been completed. This NIMBY-phenomenon has mainly been due to prejudices against people with mental health problems. Nowadays this kind of pressure is easy to tackle since we have many good examples to show the critics. It is remarkable that in spite of resistance, all complaints have ended after tenants have moved in.

Open communication with the neighbourhood is crucial in overcoming fears. Yet, it is fair to be aware of risks when people with troubled past are housed. Sufficient support and responding to feedback coming from the neighbourhood are important. Also new work methods like targeted neighbourhood work pave way to better understanding and co-existence.

⁷ http://www.housingfirst.fi/files/3313/Presentation_Virpi_Sillanpaa_Cost-effects_of_Housing_First_Case_Harrmala_Tampere.pdf

Participation of people who have experienced homelessness has been promoted in many ways in the national program on long-term homelessness. “Experts by experience” have been training support workers in educational events organized by Y-Foundation. New forms of community work, peer support and low threshold activities have been developed. The foundation promotes inclusion also by an employment project started in 2015. It creates employment opportunities for the tenants. This is linked to another ongoing development project, creating a new concept for affordable social rental housing. For us inclusion means that we make best use of human resources. In doing so we are also building pathways to hope.

This brief overview of the main operations of Y-Foundation gives some idea of the scope of our work. There are certainly several aspects needing further analysis and elaboration in this work model. I will concentrate now on three questions: our role in the national programmes, the importance of affordable social housing and our understanding of Housing First and the principle of normality.

Y-Foundation and the national programme to end long-term homelessness

Y-Foundation has been actively involved in implementing national programmes to reduce homelessness. The role of Y-Foundation became even more prominent when the National Programme to Reduce Long-Term Homelessness was started in 2008. As the programme is based on the principle of Housing First, the role of Y-Foundation buying scattered apartments was quite natural. With the 50% financing from RAY Y-Foundation buys yearly some 100 flats from the private market and mainly in big cities. We have continued this core activity also during this latest programme period. The only difference has been that since 2008 all newly acquired apartments in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area have been allocated to long-term homeless people.

Y-Foundation has also taken part in the process of converting former hostels and shelters into supported housing units. The foundation has been in charge of constructing four supported housing facilities. One of them was a former dormitory which was renovated into independent modern apartments; three other ones were completely new buildings for long-term homeless people who used to live in shelters or hostels. These supported housing units have on site - personnel to support tenants. Services are provided by NGOs and municipalities.

For us the discussion about scattered versus congregate housing has been a little bit beside the point as scattered housing has been the prevalent model in Finland already for a quite a long time. The need for supported housing units became evident when the renovation of shelters and hostels was planned. In our understanding shelters and hostels were an integral element of the staircase model. If we wanted to make a paradigm shift towards Housing First, the role of hostels had to be reconsidered. Our experiences showed that hostels as a temporary solution were maintaining a certain culture of homelessness. They didn't provide any privacy and possibilities of recovery and support were very limited.

When the support needs of long-term homeless people living in hostels were assessed it became obvious that there was a group of homeless people who needed more intensive support and services, for example because of somatic ailments, than was possible to provide in scattered housing. So far experiences of supported housing units show that there is a need for this kind of alternative in the service system for homeless people. Certainly most homeless people prefer independent scattered housing but there is a group of long-term homeless people for whom scattered housing brings the risk of loneliness and social isolation. Supported housing unit is an alternative for those who prefer more communal housing and need more services as long as it provides also privacy in your own independent apartment.

The Development team of Y-Foundation has been leading a national development project which has supported the implementation of the national programme⁸. This project has arranged training, networking and developed tools for evaluation. The project has managed to create a national structure for development work in homelessness services and it has activated several hundreds of professionals to take part in the work. It has also brought together professionals from NGOs and municipalities which has been utterly important for the implementation of the programme on the local level.

The importance of affordable housing

The Finnish housing stock consists mainly (70%) of owner occupied housing, 15% are private rental flats and 15% social housing flats. The share of social housing is quite small compared to some European countries, but it's importance is especially big in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area where social housing is the only affordable housing option as market based rents have been increasing rapidly. Social housing is mostly provided by non-profit municipal housing companies.

The role of social housing for homelessness policy is important on many levels. A sufficient stock of affordable social housing is the best preventative measure and social housing is also one of the main routes out of homelessness. For these reasons Y-Foundation in its new strategy in 2014 decided to concentrate efforts to increase the available social housing stock by constructing new housing blocks and also by purchasing social housing flats from other social housing providers.

At the beginning of 2016 Y-Foundation made a deal of buying 8,631 social housing flats in 28 cities from a big national housing cooperative company. This housing stock makes Y-Foundation the biggest nationwide social housing provider and the 4th biggest landlord in the country. This social housing stock gives us new alternatives to alleviate homelessness. It also gives us huge possibilities to utilize the human potential of our 16,000 tenants. We are now working intensively with think tank Demos Helsinki to develop a social housing concept of our own. The aim is to find new ways to empower and socially include our tenants for example by creating new job opportunities for them.

Housing first and the principle of normality

Some key principles of Housing First are easily identifiable in the operations of Y-Foundation: the separation of housing and services, support and services based on individual needs, own apartment and own rental contract and the respect for clients. For us the principle of normality is utterly important and in its actualization you may find some conscious deviations from the original Pathways to Housing HF -model.

We believe that the social inclusion of people who have experienced homelessness is best promoted if they are treated as everybody else, in a normal way, with normal civil rights and obligations. This means that housing should be provided in central places where also other people live and that people have normal rental contracts. But for us it also means that all tenants pay their own rent either with their own income or with general benefits they are entitled to like everybody else. So they don't pay for example 30% of their income to the organization that provides services. For us this is an important element of social inclusion and it also makes tenants less dependent on the organization providing services.

Nordic welfare model is based on the principle of universalism i.e. public social and health services are available to everybody. In implementing Housing First clients are expected to use their civil right for services and for this reason there is less need for multi professional teams like ACT or other service arrangements specially designed for HF –clients. In the Finnish HF –model the role of support worker is more like a case manager and a personal supporter. This is very much in line

⁸ http://www.housingfirst.fi/en/housing_first

with our understanding of the principle of normality and the elements that can further social inclusion of people who have experienced homelessness.

Together we can do more

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the work of Y-Foundation and we have had several groups and individuals coming to study visits also from outside Europe. Our work embodies the principles of the Finnish way to tackle homelessness and I think that showing these principles in practice is the most valuable thing we can give our visitors. We are grateful for the interest in our work and also for the international recognitions. We have received the World Habitat Award (2014) and the European Civil Society Prize (2015). These recognitions have given us confidence that we are on the right path and they also have encouraged us to set more ambitious goals for our work.

International cooperation and exchange of experience are crucial preconditions for our efforts. Y-Foundation is an active member of FEANTSA and for us FEANTSA is the key European platform in international cooperation also in the future⁹. But we want to be even more active also on the European level. The Housing First Guide Europe which FEANTSA recently launched has created quite new possibilities to fight homelessness¹⁰. Awareness of Housing First has risen to a completely new level.

For us in Y-Foundation it is important to strengthen European cooperation in ending homelessness and further the implementation of the Housing First philosophy. For this reason, we have together with FEANTSA launched the idea of a Housing First Europe Hub to build a more solid structure of cooperation for European actors striving to implement Housing First.

Our guests are always astonished of the scope of Finnish cooperation: different partners on the national and local level, NGOs, municipalities and state organizations are working together to tackle homelessness. This cooperation has also brought indisputable results. I think that this is the most important message we in Y-Foundation have to give: Ending homelessness is a realistic goal and together we can do more.

Y-Foundation housing, some examples:

Tellervokoti in Porvoo

- 14 flats for supported housing + room for services for people recovering from mental health problems



⁹ <http://www.feantsa.org/>

¹⁰ <http://housingfirstguide.eu/webste/>

Address: Mannerheiminkatu 25, Porvoo
 Renovation completed in 2002.
 Service provider: Itä-Uudenmaan Sosiaalipsykiatrinen yhdistys ry
<http://www.ituspy.com/index.php?id=7>
www.ituspy.com

Taipaletalo in Porvoo

- 23 flats (37 – 38 m²) for supported housing for people recovering from mental health problems, room for services, 7 flats (78 m²) for social rental housing. The service provider hires also scattered housing from Y-Foundation.



Address: Puupolku 2, Porvoo
 Construction completed in 2010.
 Service provider: Itä-Uudenmaan Sosiaalipsykiatrinen yhdistys ry
<http://www.ituspy.com/index.php?id=8>
www.ituspy.com

Pitäjänmäki in Helsinki

- 111 flats (33-42 m²) + service facilities for long-term homeless people



Address: Pitäjänmäentie 12, Helsinki
 Construction completed in 2011.
 Service provider: Salvation Army:
<http://www.pelastusarmeija.fi/paikkakunnat/helsinki/asumispalvelu>
www.pelastusarmeija.fi

Rukkila in Helsinki

- 27 flats (28 – 40 m²) + service facilities for young long-term homeless people



Address: Kartanonkaari 29, Helsinki
Renovation completed in 2011.
Service provider: Suoja-Pirtti ry
www.suoja-pirtti.fi

Väinölä in Espoo

- 35 flats (36.5 – 50 m²) + service facilities for long-term homeless people



Address: Kuusiniemi 5, Espoo
Construction completed in 2014
Service provider: Salvation Army
<http://www.pelastusarmeija.fi/paikkakunnat/espoo/asumispalvelu>
www.pelastusarmeija.fi

Sotkankoti in Hämeenlinna

- 25 flats (31.5 – 35 m²) in terraced houses + service facilities for long-term homeless people recovering from substance abuse problems



Address: Sotkankatu 5, Hämeenlinna
Construction completed in 2013
Service provider: Hämeenlinna A-Clinic

Koivula in Helsinki:

- 21 flats (34 – 46 m²) + service facilities for people recovering from mental health problems



Address: Lapinlahdentie 6, Helsinki
Renovation completed in 2005
Service provider: Alvi ry
www.alvi.fi

Social rental housing in Helsinki:

