



Press release

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Sustainable Housing Experts: "Building Sector Should No Longer Be Seen as Engine of Economic Growth"

Experts discuss gap

Barcelona/Vienna, 8 July 2013 – Why are houses and apartments in many European countries empty, whilst in other parts people cannot afford to buy or rent a living space? Because the building sector is mainly used as an engine to boost economic growth, say Europe's leading experts on sustainable housing. From 6-7 June 2013 European housing experts convened in Barcelona to discuss the future of housing in the workshop "Sustainable Housing in a Post-Growth Europe". More than 50 professionals from 15 European countries took part in the event and now they demand a paradigm shift: The building sector should no longer be seen as an engine of economic growth, but instead better fulfil its basic function, i.e. provide liveable and affordable space for the Europeans to reside. Therefore, the experts call for a more sensible policy for distributing housing space. The workshop was organized by the consortium RESPONDER, which enables scientists and policy makers to exchange experiences and knowledge with regard to sustainable consumption issues.

Housing beyond growth: Less new buildings, more refurbishment

In the EU-27 there is more a surplus than a shortage of housing, numerous square meters of underused housing capacity are available in Europe. "Hence, housing policy first of all should mean: new construction is not a priority", said Joan Martinez-Alier from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. "Our most important general proposal is, therefore, to use the existing building space more efficiently. In addition, there is a great sustainability potential in reusing urbanized land and construction waste. Constructing a new building should always be the last option."

Mammoth task: Improving Housing's Energy Efficiency

40 % of energy consumption in Europe is used for space and water heating and the use of electric appliances. Improving the building stock's energy performance is crucial in achieving a more efficient use of natural resources and for protecting the climate. "The total energy demand in Europe's houses must be significantly decreased by energy efficient refurbishment", stated Albert Cuchí, architecture professor at the University of Catalonia. "This is not only necessary for ecological reasons, it can also contribute to improved habitability."

Social Housing

More than other economic sectors, housing directly influences people's everyday life and their wellbeing. Currently 12 % of Europeans are negatively affected by high housing costs. "We need targeted social housing policies that create affordable rents", stated Claire Roumet, Secretary General of the European Federation of Public, Cooperative & Social Housing (CECODHAS). "In most European countries social rent schemes are seen as an increasingly

residual part of housing policies. Frontrunner countries are e. g. the Netherlands. They provide a blueprint for successful policy strategies and at the same time reveal current challenges to social housing." The experts also discussed new approaches for sharing houses, which can not only lead to a better utilisation of the existing space, but also improve the way people live together. "With the decrease of family sizes and an increased number of single households, social isolation has become a severe issue", said Professor Dick Urban Vestbro from the The Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. "Co-housing strategies which promote a combination of private and common housing facilities can help reducing floor space per capita and, most of all, prevent social isolation and stimulate good neighbourhood life. Good examples can be found in Sweden, for instance."

House sharing

House sharing is an approach engendering effective utilization of the housing stock by sharing, and it includes flat sharing, co-housing and transitory or occasional sharing. Co-housing and cooperative projects such as the German-founded "Mietshäuser Syndikat" are initiatives that are conducive to sustainable objectives, building solidarity and, in the latter case, promoting affordable housing through cooperative means. The rent can even be maintained below market prices. Bottom-up case studies can thus reveal to be promising for identifying creative ways of matching the social and environmental criteria for a sustainable housing in a post-growth Europe. For this reason a better sharing of good case studies at the European, national and local level has been another key message participants identified as a result of the knowledge brokerage, together with an enhanced access to property for non-profit groups, especially aiming at unused buildings. As Marcel Seehuber from Mietshäuser Syndikat reported, the project has been rapidly spreading in five years since its foundation, now providing affordable housing to 1.650 inhabitants in Germany and other countries.

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About RESPONDER:

The European project RESPONDER aims to promote sustainable consumption by assessing potential contradictions with economic growth. The project links four communities by facilitating a structured dialogue: science, policy, pro-growth, and beyond growth.

Further information: <http://www.scp-responder.eu>



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The RESPONDER consortium comprises ten partners from eight European countries. The participants are:

Organisation	Country
Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, Research Institute for Managing Sustainability (project coordinator)	AT
Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW)	DE
Sustainable Europe Research Institute	AT
University of Barcelona, Institute of Environmental Science and Technology	ES
Technical University of Denmark, Department of Management Engineering, Innovation and Sustainability	DK
University of Surrey, Centre for Environmental Strategy	GB
Institute for Forecasting of the Slovak Academy of Sciences	SK
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Center for Environmental and Sustainability Research	PT
Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development, Sustainable Development Section	CH
German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety	DE