

What is a crisis?

Speakers: **Laurent Demoulin**, Director, Diogènes ASBL; **Alain Maron**, Ecolo Member of the Brussels Regional Parliament; **Charles-Antoine Sibille** (Psychiatrist, Mental Health and Social Exclusion Support Unit – 107 Precarity Mobile Team)

Moderator: **Nicolas Marion**

Following the crisis in the management of homelessness in Brussels, service providers are now facing a major reform of their sector. The institutional categories and working methods for combating extreme poverty are changing; indeed, the whole approach appears to be changing: while some of these changes are in line with what those active in the sector have been calling for, the significance and practical implications of others are far from clear.

The new "Decree on emergency aid to and integration of homeless people" repeatedly refers to the action to be taken in an "emergency". The institution to be set up to manage emergency aid, Bruss'Help, would have a "crisis management" unit, which could be called on at any time of year. However, the legislator failed to define clearly what is meant by "emergency". The only certainty is that the notorious "winter plans" will be phased out (the 2018-19 winter plan will be the last), something which service providers have been calling for for a long time.

It is, therefore, legitimate to ask what is meant by a "crisis (situation)" which requires an "urgent" response. Isn't homelessness, by definition, a crisis? On what ethical and political basis can we establish a hierarchy of emergencies to be used to prioritise the actions to be taken, and therefore to be funded? Is there a form of destitution that does not justify the use of the term "crisis"? But if everything is a crisis, the notion itself is void of meaning. Thus, the future crisis-management unit may well be the scene of endless dilemmas, tension and even conflicts. Perhaps homelessness "crises" really means situations that jeopardise the system for managing homelessness? Indeed, "crises are [...] events of any kind that endanger a system, beyond partial or temporary dysfunctions, and which lead inexorably to its complete destruction"¹.

While law firms are working on the implementing rules for the new decree, it is worthwhile to raise these issues and to ask three experts in this field (a politician, a provider of services to homeless people, and a mental health/psychiatry practitioner) to try to provide some answers.

Objective of the meeting: to clear the ground, to ask the right questions about a crucial process that is underway, to provide the public with a list of unresolved issues that must nevertheless be raised.

Ultimately, this discussion could serve as background work for decisions taken on this new decree and on the new bodies to be set up, and make clear to those involved and to the lawmakers that there is a lack of consensus on this new framework.

¹ SPECHT, M., "Les représentations sociales des risques à l'origine des risques de crise", *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale* 2010/3 (issue no 87), p.395.