

Evaluation of the area renewal offices responsible for communal housing in Vienna

The aim of this study was on the one hand to evaluate how and to what extent the area renewal offices responsible for communal housing (short: ARO/CH) are coping with their tasks, and on the other hand to find out problems and deficiencies from the point of view of the ARO/CH.

For this purpose we interviewed 37 holders and employees of the 17 ARO/CH, mostly during June, July and August 2004. The topics of the guided interviews were the structure and the task profile of the ARO/CH, their relationship to the contracting authorities, experiences in cooperation with different partners, their central fields of activity, as well as the work situation of the ARO/CH employees. The report is structured along these main topics; the summary tries to work out improvement measures on different levels.

Apart from the interview statements, the annual reports of all ARO/CH from 2002 and 2003 as well as their consulting statistics from 2003 were analyzed.

The research report only refers to the interviewees' subjective experiences and estimations – due to the methodical setting of the evaluation the "other side", especially the points of view of the contracting authorities and cooperation partners, was not taken into account.

Within the 17 institutions which hold the support-service of communal housing in Vienna, there are ***noticeable differences***, being quite various on the structural level: The majority of the ARO/CH (twelve of them) are combined with a classical ARO, whereas in some districts only an ARO/CH has been installed; the holders are architects in nine cases, housing developers in seven cases and in one district the City of Vienna itself acts as holder; the number of lodgings each ARO/CH is responsible for varies from about 2.000 to nearly 29.000, the amount of money available per flat varies from 5.2 Euro to 26.7 Euro.

Due to the extensive work order each ARO/CH has to concentrate on specific points of emphasis, which depend on requirements and possibilities in the respective district. As a result there is ***no consistent task profile***. The major task of all ARO/CH is to settle conflicts in communal housing, to offer support to the tenants and to do the required networking with

other social institutions. But whereas some ARO/CH spend only about half of the personal resources for this field of activity, others are working nearly exclusively for this purpose. Therefore, the remaining capacities, e.g. to realise projects or organise events, differ to a great extent.

Furthermore, the ARO/CH are confronted with *various demands* from the part of the primary cooperation partners. Some are kept busy by "Wiener Wohnen", others, however, seem to be boycotted by this institution. Politicians on the regional level, the second important cooperation partners, collaborate in some cases intensively with the ARO/CH, whereas in other districts they are hardly accepted.

The *employees' labour situation* also varies considerably, those employed by housing developers being a bit better off than their colleagues from architecture firms: Their average salaries are higher and regularly adjusted to the inflation rates according to collective agreements; moreover, supervision is being held within labour time. The highest salaries of employees are paid by architects, indeed, but also the lowest ones, seemingly due to the fact that salaries have to be negotiated, a binding pay scale being missing. In addition, these differences may also be due to the varying profit margin of the holders.

Besides these differences the ARO/CH also *have a great deal in common*. All of them are concerned with the same problems, in the first place neighbourhood conflicts revolving round noise pollution and mainly running along the lines Austrians versus migrants and old versus young. The central field of occupation is the handling of conflicts, whereby techniques of mediation are often used.

Furthermore, nearly all ARO/CH are in a way *discontented with their contracting authority*, the MA 25. It is in the first place the short financial resources which are criticised, followed by the reproach of missing understanding for respectively missing competence in social work. The high bureaucratic expenditures demanded by the MA 25 are a further reason for the discontentedness of many employees.

However, employees of the ARO/CH *feel disregarded* not only by institutions like the MA 25, “Wiener Wohnen” or by regional politicians, but also by their employers, who are accused of favouring the classical ARO because of their technical background. This means that, having no contact persons within the teams being competent in thematic terms, the employees of the ARO/CH would have to cope with difficulties totally on their own. Furthermore it appears that the meetings which are held together with the classical ARO are mainly concerned with edificial and technical items. Finally, the employees of some ARO/CH are paid lower salaries than their colleagues of the classical branch.

In addition to these problems mentioned in the interviews there is a further problem which, however, is named only in connection with specific aspects of daily work in the ARO/CH: a deep *deficiency in communication*. Even though this is probably not seen as that problematic by the interview partners themselves, it seems nonetheless to be a major reason for the discontentedness of many employees. Insufficiency of communication was mentioned in the first place with regard to the cooperation with “Wiener Wohnen” and politicians on the regional level, both being blamed responsible for this situation, but frequently also in terms of contacts between the various ARO/CH. Such reproaches are much more seldom with regard to the MA 25 or when communication within the ARO/CH is concerned.

The reasons for these deficiencies lie primarily in the *unclear conditions of work*, which are in the first place due to the contractual relations, being officially a contract for work and services but not fulfilling the required criteria of it. Contracts for work and services are defined by the personal autonomy of the contracting party, which is for example thwarted by the MA 25’s demand to account for the actual working hours. Further unclarity is due to the fact, that the competences of the ARO/CH in cooperation with other institutions, particularly “Wiener Wohnen”, are not regularised sufficiently. Moreover the criteria of the renewal of the contracts after three years’ time are not transparent, which in turn leads to distrust and rivalry among each other.

Deficiencies with regard to communication can also be explained by the *structure of the ARO*, namely by the hierarchical relationship between the two branches “classical” and “communal

housing". As the holders themselves are mostly technically trained, they are more competent and seemingly more interested in this area. Despite holders as well as employees often stressed the importance of synergetic effects in the cooperation of the two branches of ARO, this could not really be specified, which suggests that this is (at least partly) a mere slogan. The lacking support within their particular teams could also be responsible for the feeling of ARO/CH employees of being "at the mercy" of the MA 25 as well as of politicians on the regional level. All this reinforces the feeling of disrespect, which is commonly perceived in the external relations.

At the same time the interviews made evident that not being informed was frequently accepted and that employees did not ask for further information or explanation, which in return leads to *ideas and concepts not always conform to reality*. Whereas also holders are sometimes affected by this, this happens mainly on the part of the employees, namely with respect to the employers as well as to the MA 25. Thus several interview partners asserted that the annual reports were not to be exchanged among the ARO/CH, because the MA 25 wanted to prevent internal networking. But according to information by the MA 25 the reason for the small amount of copies of the annual reports was simply due to financial shortage, which would not mean that an internal exchange of the reports would be forbidden.

All these problems and misunderstandings bring about a great deal of *frustration* on the part of the employees of some ARO/CH and seem to be a greater burden than high expenditure of labour or bad work conditions.

If the central function of the ARO/CH is seen in its being a support-service centre for communal housing, easily accessible for various concerns of the tenants, then this demand is fulfilled by the ARO/CH in spite of all the problems mentioned. But the fulfilment of duties and requirements going beyond this differs a lot between the individual institutions.