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## Defining Social Housing: A Discussion on the Suitable Criteria

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### ABSTRACT

The term social housing has been characterized as a “floating signifier”, i.e. a term with no agreed-upon meaning. The lack of a definition often leads to misunderstandings, rather than constructive dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of such a system. The aim of this article is to contribute to clarity by providing a discussion on the potential defining criteria of social housing and suggesting a definition of the concept. Definitions of the term social housing and descriptions of European social housing systems used in the last eight years will be presented and discussed. Five potential defining criteria derived from the literature are evaluated as to their sufficiency and necessity for a definition.

### KEYWORDS

Social housing; housing policy; social policy; the EU; Sweden

### Introduction

Sweden’s three larger cities and university towns have suffered from an increasing housing shortage in the last two decades. In recent years, the shortage has also affected mid-size and even smaller towns. As in many other European countries, low-income households have the largest difficulty to satisfy their housing need, resulting in restricted mobility, overcrowding, black markets, homelessness, etc. Large immigration of no- and low-income households has further highlighted the tightness of affordable housing supply, especially after the 2015 immigration wave. An increasing group of households is in need of public assistance, which also increase the organizational and budgetary burden of many municipalities.

Public discussions on the housing situation cover a wide variety of measures that could reduce the housing shortage. Although Sweden under its unitary housing system does not have any long-term housing to which access is means-tested (Bengtsson et al. 2013), discussions have included the pros and cons of social housing models in other European countries (e.g. Bengtsson 2017). However, in Swedish discourse social housing has been depicted as a “floating signifier” (Boverkett 2017), i.e. a term that has no agreed-upon meaning. When evaluating whether any system or policy can serve as a solution, it is important to know the specifics of such a system or policy. The lack of a definition of the term social housing often leads to misunderstandings, rather than constructive dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of such a system. Interestingly, when evaluating the European literature on the definitions of social

housing it is clear that there is no consensus on the definition of social housing on the European level either (e.g. Braga and Palvarini 2013; Scanlon, Whitehead, and Fernández Arrigoitia 2014), but the scope of interpretation is much narrower than in the Swedish debate. The aim of this article is to contribute to clarity in the debate by providing a discussion on the potential defining criteria of social housing and suggesting a definition of this debated concept.

In this article, definitions of the term social housing and descriptions of social housing systems used in the last eight years will be presented and discussed with the aim of finding a definition of the term social housing in a European context. This will be done through an identification of the necessary and sufficient key criteria of social housing. It should be added that the authors of this article in no way argue for or against social housing. The aim of the article is twofold: first, we will critically evaluate the criteria we have found after performing a literature review of the years 2010–2017. Second, on the basis of this evaluation, we will provide a definition that will clarify the concept of social housing. We aim to produce a definition that enables us to classify what is, and what is not, social housing. Our proposed definition is therefore a central prerequisite for making it possible to investigate and compare the applications of social housing, and/or discuss the normative merits of social housing.

An analysis of the defining criteria of social housing could, apart from facilitating comparative research, have benefits such as assisting states and municipalities in deciding if proposed housing policy measures are compatible with EU legislation related to Services of General Economic Interest and identifying projects eligible for various financing sources within the EU. Such an analysis might have particular relevancy to countries receiving large volumes of immigrants. In relation to this issue, Sweden serves as an illustrative example. For those interested, a background on the Swedish housing system and European social housing is provided in the Appendix 1.

The rest of the article is structured as follows; after this introduction, we will discuss some of the philosophical and methodological issues related to definitions, which we will use in order to evaluate other definitions, and to show the virtues of our proposal. Next, in the third section, we will present some of the major definitions and descriptions that are currently used within the EU. In the fourth section, possible key criteria of the definition are discussed. Finally, our proposed definition is presented and discussed in section five. We end by a brief discussion that connects the issue yet again to the Swedish example.

## **Discussion on the Philosophical and Methodological Problems of the Definition**

### ***Choice of Method and Aim of the Definition***

Our ambition is to formulate a good definition of social housing, by which we mean that it must encompass clarity and relevant applicability. By clarity we mean that the definition should avoid vagueness and ambiguity, which serves as a means to achieve practical usefulness and applicability. By applicability we mean that the definition should be possible to apply in practice, in academia, by politicians, by policy advisors, etc. The latter goal connects to the overall aim of our proposed definition: that it should make classification possible, i.e. by applying it we should be able to decide which “entities” that are social housing systems, and which are not.

In order to achieve a definition that makes classification possible one needs to identify the necessary and sufficient criteria that make it decidable whether something is, or is not, social housing.

That some criterion is necessary means simply that all such entities which are social housing have this property. If one includes criteria that are not necessary, then the definition will become too narrow. Similarly, the criteria would be too broad if the criteria are not sufficient. For example, take the concept “birds” and consider the definition: “a bird is an animal that flies”. This definition would be too narrow, since it would classify birds that do not fly (e.g. penguins, or ostriches) as non-birds. But it would also be too broad, since it would classify non-birds as birds, since there are animals that fly which are not birds (e.g. bats, or various insects).

The virtue of such a classification goes beyond the scope of a simple conceptual analysis. Since – as we noted in the Introduction – if one wants to study the concept of social housing, e.g. its application, or its merits/demerits, one first needs to know what it is, i.e. one must first be able to properly classify it. An investigation into “social housing” that applies an improper definition (i.e. a definition that suffers from counterexamples, e.g. by being too broad or too narrow) will risk including data into the study which should not be included. Likewise, if one wants to produce a policy concerning “social housing” it is important to classify what to include and what to leave out.

Previous attempts to define social housing in a European context have had the ambition to include very different systems in all European countries. This approach has led to a wide variety of definitions, many of which are either too broad or too narrow often relating to a specific case study. Other proposals do not attempt to present a proper definition, but are merely describing a collection of properties that are connected to social housing, but are not formulated in such a way that makes them usable for classification.

Despite this, after analyzing previous definitions and/or descriptions we have concluded that these include the criteria which are relevant to consider. Together the existent definitions and descriptions jointly list all properties that are needed for a correct classification of social housing, but they also list properties that for various reasons, which we will explain, should not be considered part of the concept of social housing. Thus, in order to identify the necessary and sufficient criteria to be used for classification and definition of the concept of social housing we will analyze the previously available definitions and discuss the pros and cons of each of the suggested properties, which have been identified as part of social housing, in order to determine which of these properties that are necessary, and if they also are jointly sufficient. The fact that the considered definitions distribute fairly equally over a set of properties is indicative of some meta-agreement on the concept of social housing (despite the disagreement between the individual definitions). More importantly, our contention here – that we have identified the relevant criteria from our literature review – can be evaluated by considering further criteria and testing our final definition against possible counterexamples.

Standardly, a definition consists of three parts: definiendum (that which is defined), definiens (that which defines) and a defining connective that connects definiendum with definiens (often “if, and only if”), e.g. *x is social housing iff  $x$   $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n$*  in which  $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n$  are necessary and jointly sufficient criteria. The defining connective “if, and only if” is used to show that the criteria are both necessary (*x is social housing only if  $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n$*  – i.e. all social housing entities fulfils all of the criteria) and sufficient (*x is social housing if  $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n$*  – i.e. an  $x$  that fulfils the criteria is social housing) (cf. Hansson 2006, 9f, Gupta 2015).

But before one can supply necessary and sufficient criteria one has to pick a suitable definiendum (cf. Hansson 2006, 12). Just saying that we will define “social housing” is insufficient, since the concept could loosely be applied to as vastly different entities, such as policies (as in “this is a social housing policy”) or particular buildings (as in “this is a social housing building complex”).

The definition also needs to be *categorically congruent*, which “means that definiens and definiendum belong to the same general category of concepts”. (Hansson 2006, 10). We take social housing to be a system. Therefore, we will define social housing along the following lines: *x is social housing if and only if x is a system such that  $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n$* . This does not mean that there are no such entities as a social housing policy, it only means that social housing in itself is not a policy, nor is it some particular building. The reason for defining it as a system will become clear as we embark on identifying the necessary and sufficient criteria in the next part of the article.

Lastly, there are various kinds of definitions and it is important to qualify which kind of definition we have chosen and why. Standardly, there are at least two kinds of definitions used in the sciences (cf. Hansson 2006, 6; Gupta 2015). Firstly, lexical definitions reports common usage of the defined term. As such, if “social housing” is used in various conflicting ways a lexical definition should respect that. Therefore, a lexical definition is not our aim, since part of what we will do is to clarify and correct mistakes in common usage (i.e. we are interested in how it *should* be used). Secondly, stipulative definitions supply conditions for how a certain term will be used. As such a pure stipulative definition need not have any connection to the colloquial use of a term as such. Take “bald” as an example. A lexical definition may be “a person with lack of hair”. However, in a medical article one may stipulate that “bald” – in that particular article – will be used for the condition “telogen effluvium” (which is a special form of baldness due to, e.g. “rapid shedding after childbirth, fever, or sudden weight loss”<sup>1</sup>). A pure stipulative definition could even be completely disconnected from the general notion of the term, which in the context of social housing would imply that one ignores the important literature on the subject. However, a definition can also be an explication. An explicative definition explicates, clarifies and improves the defined term relative to previous conceptualizations of various definitions (Carnap 1962, 3; cf. Gupta 2015) – as such it can overlap with both lexical and stipulative definitions. While we aim for explication of previous definitions, the definition we will propose is also a descriptive definition – simply understood it is a definition that describes the concept one defines. While lexical definitions are also descriptive (cf. Hansson 2006, 6), we do not – as previously noted – aim to describe the common usage of a word (cf. Gupta 2015). Our explicative descriptive definition of social housing aims at the same concept as lexical definitions does (i.e. social housing), but the aim is also to improve, by stipulation, on previous definitions and try to correct some of the conceptual confusion that may exist in common, or academic, usage (cf. Robinson 1950; Gupta 2015).

How do we know if a descriptive definition is successful? Anil Gupta suggests that:

It is useful to distinguish three grades of descriptive adequacy of a definition: extensional, intensional, and sense. A definition is *extensionally adequate* iff there are no actual counterexamples to it; it is *intensionally adequate* iff there are no possible counterexamples to it; and it is *sense adequate* (or *analytic*) iff it endows the defined term with the right sense. (Gupta 2015)

By counterexamples, Gupta simply means such examples that make the definition too broad and too narrow. This may seem circular, since in order to know whether a definition is too broad and too narrow we must know which objects that fall within the scope of that concept. However, we often have some agreement about which objects that a concept applies too, even if we cannot propose a suitable definition. Supposedly, many of us would know whether something is a horse or not, while not being able to define “horse” properly. However, everyone does not agree on which examples that constitute social housing. This requires us to supply arguments in support of our proposed criteria, which we will do.

The notion of “sense adequacy” is best explained by an example. Take the chemical definition of “water” as “H<sub>2</sub>O”. Although it may have no actual or possible counterexamples (cf. Kripke 1980), it is questionable if H<sub>2</sub>O gives us the sense (or meaning) of “water” in everyday contexts. If it would be adequate in every context, then the meaning of any sentence containing “water” would not be altered by eliminating “water” and replacing it with “H<sub>2</sub>O”, which it arguably can (Gupta 2015). Of course, “no definition will permit elimination in absolutely every context” (Belnap 1993, 121).

What we want to do is to capture a concept that is lasting, so that there are neither an actual, nor any possible (future) counterexamples. For example, imagine that we consider a historic definition of car, and if we realize that it excludes self-driving cars then we would have to modify such a definition accordingly. Now, all such examples are not clear-cut and we will thus have to argue for each individual example. Thus, in order to avoid future or historic counterexample we will discuss criteria used in previous definitions and consider whether such criteria suffer from actual or possible counterexamples. Our hope is that there is more agreement about the extension of social housing, than the intension, and that by showing the consequences of including certain criteria we can resolve at least some of the disagreement about the later.

## Defining and Describing Social Housing

Social housing is generally regarded as a diverse and value-laden term. No attempt to find a common definition has received general approval in a wider housing community. Instead, there is a multitude of various definitions and descriptions, of which some have been composed to fit a limited case study. Since there are few definitions that manage to supply both necessary and sufficient criteria, as well as supplying a suitable definiendum, conveyance of use will have to play a decisive role in identifying the key criteria of social housing.

The selection of definitions and descriptions of social housing used in this paper has been made on the basis of geography and actuality, including contributions from countries with both unitary and dual housing markets. First, we have chosen a European context which limits the scope to the EU countries, therefore the stance of the EU and the European social housing association Housing Europe are considered key. The most important contribution of the academy to describing the social housing systems in different European countries, *Social Housing in Europe* (Scanlon, Whitehead, and Fernández Arrigoitia 2014), has also been included. A search for academic articles on social housing, including definitions, published in 2010–2017 gave nine relevant articles, which are presented below. As the aim is to convey use in recent years no older articles were included. In order to also stress conveyance of use of the term social housing in a broader sense, the theoretical approach above has been contrasted to practice, as lexical definitions and one example of a practice-related definition used by the construction industry have been included to represent the meaning of the term in the public mind. Social housing is arguably a term of art, which would thus be reflected in the lexical definitions. Conversely, it might be argued that the addition of, e.g. lexical definitions are detrimental to our approach, either because the definitions differ in purpose from the academic definitions or because of a potential lack of quality. However, as previously stated, we critically evaluate each criterion, and hence the purpose and quality of the individual definitions do not affect the result.

In Table 1 below, the chosen definitions and descriptions of social housing are presented. In order to broadly classify them, key criteria included in each definition were identified.

**Table 1.** Definitions/descriptions and key criteria.

Year	Source	Definition/description	Key criteria
2017	Cambridge Dictionary	Homes provided by the government for people with low incomes to rent cheaply	Type of provider, tenure, target group
2017	Oxford Dictionaries	Housing provided for people on low incomes or with particular needs by government agencies or non-profit organizations	Target group, type of provider
2017	Wikipedia	Social housing is an umbrella term referring to rental housing which may be owned and managed by the state, by non-profit organizations, or by a combination of the two, usually with the aim of providing affordable housing. Social housing can also be seen as a potential remedy to housing inequality. Some social housing organizations construct for purchase, particularly in Spain and to an extent elsewhere.	Tenure, type of provider, target group <sup>a</sup>
2014	The Construction Industry (Byggingindustrin)	Housing excluded from the common housing market, which is publicly subsidized, owned by non-profit companies and reserved for low-income groups connected to an allocation system	Tenure, subsidies, type of provider, target group
2013	Social Housing in the EU (European Parliament, Braga & Palvarini)	There are three common elements in defining social housing across EU Member States: a mission of general interest, the objective of increasing the supply of affordable housing and specific targets defined in terms of socio-economic status or the presence of vulnerabilities	Target group, public intervention
2011	Housing Europe (The European Federation of Public, Cooperative and Social Housing)	Housing for rent or accession to ownership for which there are defined rules governing access to households with difficulties in finding housing. Core elements of social housing: affordability, the existence of rules for the allocation of dwellings, a strong link with public policies at the local level, security of tenure, quality standards and a strong involvement of the benefiting households	Tenure, target group Target group, public intervention
2014	Social Housing in Europe (Scanlon et al.)	The definition of the tenure may be based on rent levels (social rents are below-market rents), ownership (social dwellings are owned by particular types of landlords) or existence of a government subsidy or allocation rules (social dwellings are assigned to households via an administrative procedure rather than the market)	Tenure, subsidies, type of provider, target group

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Year	Source	Definition/description	Key criteria
2017	Bengtsson, B.	A system that provides long-term housing to households with limited resources through some form of means testing	Target group
2010	Blessing, A.	Temporary, income-dependent or ongoing tenure of belowmarket rental housing provided by public, private non-profit or private for-profit entities according to a government defined social mandate, in return for state-provided 'object subsidies', guarantees, tax concessions or other forms of financial support	Target group, tenure, type of provider, public intervention, subsidies.
2010	Haffner et al.	Social housing is that which is administratively allocated on the basis of need <sup>b</sup>	Target group
2010	Haffner & Oxley	In theory, a lower-than-market price or rent in combination with a needs-based allocation system may be the only aspects about social housing that are predestined	Subsidies, target group
2010	Oxley et al.	The essential defining characteristic, as with market housing, is how the accommodation is allocated. Social housing is not allocated by demand and by price but is rather allocated according to some politically or administratively defined and interpreted form of need. It is explicitly not allocated by market forces. It exists because governments have decided that some housing, at least, should not be allocated by market forces. [...]	Target group, public intervention
2014	Oyebanji, AO	Social housing is a form of government regulated housing provided and managed by the public agencies or non-profit organizations using public and/or private funds for the benefit of many households, based on degree of need, made available at below-market price with the delivery of social service and not for-profit motives on a short or long-term basis	Public intervention, type of provider, subsidies and target group
2010	Malpass & Victory	Social housing model (post-welfare state model) <sup>c</sup> Role in the housing system: predominantly residual Ownership: mix of local authority and other social housing providers Procurement/development: mainly non-municipal providers Governance: managerialist; heavily regulated by the centre	Type of provider, target group, tenure

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Year	Source	Definition/description	Key criteria
2013	Priemus, H.	Organizational culture: customer-oriented; focus on asset management Tenants: Active consumers Tenure: rented and shared ownership We define social housing as housing that is aimed to house predominantly households in a weak negotiating position in the housing market, such as low-income households, physically and/or mentally handicapped, ethnic minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers. The social housing providers are supposed to give priority to households who are not able to provide housing services for themselves without assistance. In general, there is a public framework in place which governs the position of social housing providers. In general, we observe three main tenures in European countries: owner-occupied housing, commercial-rented housing and social-rented housing. In some countries, a fourth tenure is also popular: cooperative housing	Target group, public intervention, tenure
2013	Yates, J.	Social housing in this paper describes below-market rental housing for people on low incomes and for those with special needs	Subsidies, tenure, target group

<sup>a</sup>The key criterion is not out-spoken, but implicit.

<sup>b</sup>As interpreted by Scanlon et al.

<sup>c</sup>Malpass & Victory refer to the main characteristics in the transition from public housing (welfare-state model) to social housing (post-welfare state model) in England.

## The Criteria of Social Housing

The definitions and descriptions of social housing were examined in order to find out what aspects of social housing that were discussed and what common traits were found (Table 2). The following five key criteria were identified: target group, form of tenure, type of provider, public intervention and subsidies. Below the relevance of each of them for a definition of social housing will be discussed. However, before doing so we need to address the issue of why we define social housing as a system.

### System

As noted previously, we take social housing to be a system. Although support for this can be found in the reviewed definitions, we did not want to conflate this issue with the other key criteria since this question is – as noted in the methods section – distinctly different from consideration of the other criteria.

**Table 2.** The presence of key criteria in the sources.

Source	Target group	Tenure	Type of provider	Subsidies	Public intervention
Cambridge Dictionary	x	x	x		
Oxford Dictionaries	x		x		
Wikipedia	x	x	x		
The Construction Industry	x	x	x	x	
Social Housing in the EU (Braga and Palvarini)	x				x
Housing Europe	x	x			x
Social Housing in Europe (Scanlon et al.)	x	x	x	x	
Bengtsson, B.	x				
Blessing, A.	x	x	x	x	x
Haffner et al.	x				
Haffner & Oxley	x			x	
Oxley et al.	x				x
Oyebanji	x		x	x	x
Malpass & Victory	x	x	x		
Priemus, Hugo	x	x			x
Yates, J.	x	x		x	

However, that social housing is a system can be strongly motivated by considering other options, namely that social housing should be defined as a (or several) building(s) or as a policy. First, for a house to be dedicated to social housing there must be a system or policy in place. Without a social housing system or policy, the building ceases to have anything to do with social housing. The right thing to say is that a building may or may not be part of a social housing system (or policy), not that the building as such is social housing. Thus, defining social housing as something that applies to a building would be misleading about what is actually a necessary criterion. Conversely, note that a social housing system merely requires access to housing, not particular buildings.

Second, couldn't social housing be defined as a policy? Certainly, it could and there certainly are social housing policies. However, we take it that the most interesting thing to define is something that corresponds to the actual presence of social housing. A policy alone does not suffice. A policy must be activated in order for social housing to exist. In such cases, what we have is not a collection of social housing buildings, but a system.

### Target Group

The question of who shall benefit from a social housing system is probably the most central question to be answered when constructing or revising a social housing system. All sources have target group as a key criteria. Hence, there seems to be consensus in housing research communities and society at large that target group is a necessary criterion of the definition. We agree with the consensus opinion, simply because social housing aims to be a solution to a specific problem, a problem which affects *some specific group of people* (i.e. a target group). Thus, a target group is necessary. But how might the target group be defined?

Broadly, we could speak of the target group as households having access problems to the housing market. Housing Europe (2011) expresses this as "households with difficulties in finding housing". But the question is which access problems should social housing aim to solve? In the chosen definitions and descriptions, target groups are either specifically defined as certain groups, for example low-income households, or generally as groups "in need".

A group that is specifically pointed out in the definitions is low-income households (Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford Dictionaries, the Construction Industry, Braga & Palvarini, Bengtsson, Blessing and Yates). Further, Priemus points out a number of groups “in a weak negotiating position”, for example low-income households. Some of the definitions also mention an allocation system that ascertains that the defined target group receives the benefits of the social housing programme (The Construction Industry, Housing Europe, Scanlon et al., Haffner et al., Haffner & Oxley, and Oxley et al.). We take this to indicate that targeted households have limited financial resources and/or a weak negotiating position otherwise such an allocation system would not be needed. This notion is supported by the context in which allocation systems are mentioned in some definitions, for example Housing Europe “defined rules governing access to households with difficulties in finding housing” and Haffner & Oxley “a needs-based allocation system”.

Five of the definitions mention the word “need” (Haffner et al., Haffner & Oxley, Oxley et al., Oyebanji, and Yates). Arguably, the term “need” is too broad to be a defining criterion. Households in need might be specified as vulnerable households in a weak negotiating position having limited financial resources, but could also be specified in a very broad manner, meaning households that are unsatisfied with their present housing situation (even a rich person can have needs, in a broad sense, that are not satisfied). Intuitively, such a broad specification would not be acceptable, therefore more precise wording has to be found.

Furthermore, there are various kinds of needs which cause housing problems and there are many groups in special needs. Housing reserved for such groups may include student’s lodgings, refugee’s lodgings, homes for addicts, homes for the elderly, etc. Such housing is reserved for clearly defined smaller groups with special needs, which might be of shorter duration and are not always tied to financial restrictions. We exclude these and other special needs for various reasons. Some we exclude because the needs are standardly temporary (the two first examples). The two last examples standardly include functions that go beyond supplying housing (e.g. care or treatment) and as such are not essentially housing problems. Such housing is (hopefully) provided in any welfare state irrespective of the existence of social housing.

Having said this, we are left with two potential criteria related to the target group: low income and a weak negotiating position. Based on the above, there is no reason to exclude either proposal. However, “low income” is, arguably, a too broad criterion, as households that are at present low income, but might have previously accumulated wealth, are included. Intuitively, households that might resort to housing acquisition should not be encompassed by a social housing system. Therefore, the wording “low-income households” should be replaced by “households with limited financial resources”. Which particular groups of households shall be considered having limited financial resources has to be defined in the context of macro- and socio-economic conditions, as well as funds available, in each particular country.

Further, a weak negotiating position that is not accompanied by the restriction of limited financial resources, does not seem to be a necessary criterion, as such problems might be overcome by other types of support, for example contract negotiation support from social authorities or housing acquisition.

From the above, it is concluded that social housing systems should target households with limited financial resources (quantified relative to the context). To make sure that the housing provided is occupied by the target group, an allocation system with that aim has to be in place.

## **Form of Tenure**

The form of tenure is possibly the least controversial question regarding social housing. The popular notion that social housing is rental housing is captured by the Cambridge Dictionary. Blessing, Scanlon et al. and Yates also refer only to rental housing (though other forms of tenure are mentioned in the anthology by Scanlon et al.). However, Housing Europe states that social housing is “housing for rent or accession to ownership” and Malpass & Victory mentions “rented or shared ownership”. Priemus lists a number of tenures: owner-occupied housing, commercial-rented housing, social-rented housing and cooperative housing. Among the remaining sources, the form of tenure is not mentioned.

Social housing does exist in various forms of tenure in Europe today, as stated for example in Wikipedia’s updated article. Further, the authors that have presented definitions which contain a more limited form of tenure (e.g. rental housing) have either applied stipulative definitions or have not presented any arguments for why social housing must be limited to a special form of tenure.

Also, consider a situation such that we have a system that fulfils all (other) necessary criteria for social housing, then consider two situations in which there are some houses with a low (but above zero) market value: (a) The houses are given to those in need. (b) The houses are let at no cost to those in need. There seems to be no sensible reason why situation (b) would be considered accurately part of social housing, while situation (a) would not.

If we do not wish to explicitly exclude any particular form of tenure, it follows that tenure as such becomes a redundant issue, i.e. not necessary. It is thus concluded that the form of tenure is irrelevant for the definition of social housing and is therefore excluded from the definition.

## **Type of Provider**

When it comes to the type of provider of social housing, public actors or non-profit organizations are often mentioned. Collins Dictionary defines social housing as “accommodation provided by the state [...]”. Cambridge Dictionary state that social housing is “homes provided by the government” and Wikipedia says that “social housing [...] may be owned and managed by the state, by non-profit organizations, or by a combination of the two”. The Construction Industry also states that social housing is owned by non-profit companies. The notion that social housing is provided by public bodies or non-profits seem to be strong in the public mind.

Housing Europe on the other hand reports on the variety of types of providers in different countries and point out that municipal/public housing cannot per se be pointed out as social housing. In their definition, they also refrain from mentioning any type of provider. Braga & Palvarini also do not include the provider aspect in their definition.

Scanlon et al. state that the definition of social housing might be based on ownership as social dwellings are owned by particular types of landlords. The characteristics of these landlords can however be very diverse, which the examples from the anthology shows; in the Netherlands social housing is provided by housing associations, which are independent from the state, but need approval of their status under the Housing Act and their responsibilities and other operating conditions are regulated in the Social Rental Sector Management Order. The German system allows both private and public providers of social housing. In

Sweden, municipal housing companies used to be regarded as social housing providers, which is however no longer the case.

Three of the remaining academic sources mention the type of provider. Blessing mentions “public, private non-profit and private for profit entities” and Oyebanji “public agencies and non-profit organizations”. Malpass & Victory mention a “mix of local authority and other social housing providers” as owners and “mainly non-municipal providers”. We would like to note that the “catch-all” approach of Blessing, including virtually all types of providers, makes mentioning the type of provider in the definition redundant (it seems as if there is no provider that Blessing wants to exclude). In contrast to Malpass & Victory who see a mix of public and private providers, Oyebanji has excluded for-profits. In general, we see no reason why for-profits could not participate in a social housing system. There are in practice systems with alternative providers (e.g. for-profit providers) that work to benefit those with housing market access problems. Consider, again, that we have a system that fulfils all other necessary criteria of social housing, then if that system was: (a) public for-profit, (b) public non-profit, (c) private for-profit or (d) private non-profit does not really seem to be an issue that should settle whether it is social housing or not. Arguably, it is the function, not the actors behind, that matter. We therefore see no reason to exclude such alternative providers.

Based on the above, it is argued that public bodies and non-profit organizations are likely to be the major providers of social housing, but that there is room for a wide variety of providers working with different incentives. It is thus concluded that the type of provider is irrelevant for the definition of social housing.

## **Subsidies**

All sources, except Malpass & Victory and Priemus, explicitly link social housing to affordability and/or below-market price or rent. However, Malpass & Victory describe the system as “residual” and Priemus mentions “households in a weak negotiation position [...], such as low-income households”, which seems to imply that affordability and below-market conditions are incremental parts of their reasoning.

When it comes to subsidies, the Construction Industry is most explicit and very restrictive; according to the journal, social housing is publicly subsidized. Scanlon et al. state that the existence of government subsidy and below-market rents might be defining criteria of social housing. Blessing also has this view, as she writes “below market rental housing [...] in return for state-provided “object subsidies”, guarantees, tax concessions or other forms of financial support”. Haffner & Oxley restrict their wording to “lower-than-market price or rent”, which is supported by Yates although she only mentions rent. Oyebanji also mentions below-market price, but mention the use of both public and private funds to reach the targeted price. The remaining sources do not explicitly mention subsidies. There might be a strong link between the notion in the lexical definitions that social housing is provided only by public bodies or non-profits, implicitly meaning that there is an element of subsidy. The EU (Braga & Palvarini) does not mention subsidies in their description, but explicitly link social housing and public subsidies in their SGEI directives.

We take below-market prices or rents to be a basic principle of social housing systems, as it aims to provide housing to those that cannot afford the housing options available to them. Social housing fills a gap in the housing supply, that is, it is a segment of the housing sector that will not be provided on market terms. Provision of such below-market housing is therefore dependent on financial support.

Financial support to European social housing providers come in many different forms, for example debt guarantees, advantageous loans, investment contributions, below-market priced land, etc. (Scanlon, Whitehead, and Fernández Arrigoitia 2014), which are provided by public entities. Non-profits linked to civil society also invest in the sector on an off-market basis. In countries where inclusionary zoning is applied, relinquishment of profit of private developers is potentially also activated (Calavita and Mallach 2009; Drixler et al. 2014). All these various types of contributions should be viewed as subsidies, as they add “money given as part of the cost of something, to help or encourage it to happen” (Cambridge Dictionary 2017). Whether such subsidy is provided by the state or by private entities is not deemed to be of importance to the definition.

We take subsidies of some kind to be necessary, since if the target group has access problems due to limited financial resources, then subsidies are needed to resolve their housing situation (based on the housing norms of the respective country). It is probable that public or non-profit providers will be the dominant contributors in most social housing systems, due to the inherent social aspects and financial restrictions, but it does not implicitly exclude for-profit providers, should their participation prove socially and financially viable.

To sum up; social housing systems are not self-supporting, but need some form of public or private financial contribution or support to reach affordability targets, hence an element of subsidy should be included in the definition.

### **Public Intervention**

Public intervention in social housing can come in three main forms; regulation and/or linkage to public policies, subsidies and direct provision of social housing through public bodies or publicly owned companies. As was discussed above, public intervention as direct provision of social housing can be discarded as irrelevant for the definition of social housing, as public bodies are not the only providers of social housing. However, public and/or private subsidies are an essential part of any social housing system. In this section regulation and linkage to public policy will be discussed.

Housing Europe does not include public intervention in their attempted definition, but points out that a useful operational definition should include “a strong link with public policies at the local level”. Blessing refers to a “government defined social mandate” and Oyebanji goes further and state that “social housing is a form of government regulated housing”. Oxley et al. state that “it [social housing] exists because governments have decided that some housing, at least, should not be allocated by market forces”. Further, Priemus states that “in general, there is a public framework in place which governs the position of social housing providers”. Braga & Palvarini point out that there is a mission of general interest, which might mean that the state has a responsibility to see to that this mission is fulfilled, should it not be taken care of under satisfactory conditions by non-state interests. The remaining sources do not mention public intervention.

The references to public intervention above either relate to a particular research setting/country or are deemed too vague to indicate that public intervention is a necessary criterion. For example, Priemus wording “in general” indicates that public intervention is an unnecessary criterion. Further, the relation between public intervention and the reference made by Braga & Palvarini is not clear or strong enough to serve as a sufficient and necessary criterion.

As noted above concerning the other criteria, there is no strict relation between social housing and public bodies. Although public initiatives are probable to be a driving force behind most social housing systems, private initiatives, for example by non-profits, can exist without public support. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that public intervention is a necessary criteria for social housing.

## The Proposed Definition

From the above, it has been concluded that social housing is a system and that it shall fulfil the following criteria:

- (1) The target group for social housing is households with limited financial resources. To make sure that the housing provided is occupied by the target group, a distribution system with that aim has to be in place. Moreover, housing must be provided long term, rather than temporary.
- (2) Social housing systems provide below-market rents or prices and hence are not self-supporting, but need some form of public or private financial contribution (subsidy).

From these conditions, the definition is formulated as:

Social housing:  $x$  is social housing if and only if  $x$  is a system providing long-term housing to a group of households specified only by their limited financial resources, by means of a distribution system and subsidies.

In order to understand the definition, it may be worthwhile to consider both a potential counterexample as well as a few examples.

First, given that resources for social housing are limited, actual social housing systems often limit access to groups specified not only by their limited financial resources, but also by need. One may think that this violates the first criteria. However, it does not, since the definition does not require that the system is successful in providing for all households within the specified financial limits that apply for social housing. In a situation when demand exceeds supply, it is reasonable that a queue system is added within the system. As long as that system does not negate the first criteria, there are various possible options (e.g. need, lottery, time).

Second, what European countries would according to the here proposed definition have social housing? Two countries, Sweden and Germany, are tested: According to the above definition, Sweden does not have any explicit social housing. While income-weak households in Sweden do get financial support, through housing allowances, the target group is not directly provided housing. In general, the housing queue system applied in Sweden is based on time only and the need for housing exceeds availability. Thus, while the Swedish system satisfies one criterion, it does not satisfy the criterion that requires that housing is actually provided (cf. next section for exceptions). The German “de jure” social housing fulfils the above criteria as it creates housing with below-market rents through subsidy policies and allocates this long-term housing to households with limited financial resources through a distribution system with that aim. The lower-priced part of the housing stock owned by limited profits, sometimes referred to as “de facto” social housing, does not fulfil the criteria as it does not apply any strict distribution system directed towards low-income households,

but is potentially open to all citizens, and the element of subsidy is not clearly defined. This conclusion is coherent with Scanlon, Whitehead, and Fernández Arrigoitia (2014).

## Discussion

As stated in the introduction, this article is not meant to argue for or against social housing in a Swedish context. A decision to introduce a social housing system in a country, which has not had such a system for 70 years, and then only on a very limited scale, would have to be based on careful analysis of the long-term affordable housing shortage and effects on central government and municipal budgets. Such data are at present not available.

However, we contribute to this discussion by providing a clarifying discussion of the criteria of social housing, and on the basis of this discussion, the above definition of the concept. As noted in the introduction, such clarification would be useful in the Swedish setting, allowing a more informed public debate, as well as evaluation of housing policy options related to the reduction of the affordable housing shortage.

Indeed, would the Swedish non-market-led rental sector function as intended, there would be no need for social housing. However, the housing system has created groups of “insiders” that benefit from below-market rents and “outsiders” that have great difficulties to access rental housing (Stephens 2017) and are therefore obliged to for example sub-let at market price or resort to home acquisition (an option which is viable to but a few low-income households). To partially compensate for this, limited solutions are applied by some municipalities, some of which could be categorized as social housing according to the above definition. The cost of such solutions is often high and physical provision of good-quality housing often difficult to achieve. In short, many municipalities seek cost-efficient solutions to fulfil their housing provision duties, possibly addressing larger groups than housing policy does today. This situation is expected to get increasing attention as refugees arriving in 2015 and onwards need to leave the temporary accommodation provided by the migration authority and access the housing market. Further, there is an interest in solving access problems by groups needed for a balanced societal development, such as key workers employed in for example health care, education and the police force. Future decisions on appropriate solutions to the affordable housing shortage need to be based on a well-founded analysis of the various options. It is our hope that this article will contribute to a balanced evaluation of such options.

## Note

1. <http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=53390>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix 1. The Swedish housing system and European social housing

In the post-war period up until the 1990s, Swedish housing policy focused on extensive public construction programmes (inter alia the Million Homes Program) and large municipal housing companies with a rent-leading role, in a model that in the international literature often was depicted as social housing (although this was contested by many Swedish academics). After the financial crisis of the 1990s, housing provision has been market-led and housing construction levels moderate. Further, municipal housing companies have also gradually become more market-oriented. However, the basic norms of the housing system have not changed considerably.

The Swedish unitary housing system is meant to serve all types of households and societal groups with the aim of social inclusion (Grander 2017). The cornerstone of the system is the "user-value" rent-setting system that keeps rents in the major part of the stock below-market. There is no outspoken part of the housing stock to which access is means-tested (Bengtsson et al. 2013). However, households that are in immediate need of public assistance to solve their housing situation are provided with more or less temporary solutions by the social authorities (Lind 2014). The number of households served in this segment is restricted and the system can be described as residual. A social housing system that serves wider layers of low-income households and key workers does not exist. Since a change of law in 2011, municipal housing companies are expected to act on market-like terms and hence have no explicit role as providers for weaker households (Grander 2017). In reality, however, many companies do take on a limited responsibility for households brought forward by social authorities.

In recent years, public discussions on possible solutions to the affordable housing shortage have included discussions on social housing systems in other European countries. In 2015, after the last large immigration wave into Sweden, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) published a report suggesting social housing to be a potential solution to the housing situation of newly arrived immigrants (Boverket 2016). However, social housing has been a "taboo" topic in Sweden (Bengtsson 2017, 1) in the post-war period. Many regard social housing as a bad system in which low-income households are concentrated in deprived areas on the outskirts of cities. References have been made to the stigma of social housing provided to families with many children constructed in 1935–48 (*barnrikehusen*) (HSB 2016). Among decisive agents such as the Tenants' Union and the Swedish Association of Public Housing Companies (SABO), there is strong opposition against social housing,

including means testing, as such measures are deemed to be a threat against the unitary housing system. However, the critic against the malfunction of the rental housing system has increased in recent years (Stephens 2017). Central government politicians focus on measures to increase the total housing supply through construction as the remedy against housing shortage, rather than reform of the rental market (for example, Regeringskansliet 2016).

During the last 25 years, there has been a decline in social housing in most European countries and, it is argued in this article, the term as such has undergone a redefinition. Previously social housing was considered an umbrella term for more or less all housing provided as part of social policy (Housing Europe 2005) or “as a kind of short cut for different types of housing provision which responds to administrative procedures as opposed to market mechanisms” (Housing Europe 2011). As housing policy in different European countries has been both very diverse and considered to include unitary systems that focus on provision of housing for all citizens, as well as dual systems, that focus on housing for low-income households, it has been difficult to define what social housing is in a European context. The EU summarizes in a report (Braga and Palvarini 2013, 6) that “no common definition of social housing is available at the EU level, with different states adopting different definitions that translate into varying levels of public intervention within the sector”. The European Parliament resolution of 11 June 2013 on social housing (point 6) expresses a need to clarify the definition of social housing. The trend in most EU countries today is to limit access to social housing to households at the lowest end of the income scale (Malpass and Victory 2010; Scanlon, Whitehead, and Fernández Arrigoitia 2014). This has been made mainly as a result of fiscal constraint and, in some countries, avoidance of unlawful competition with private housing providers. As this trend has had time to develop and countries that formerly adopted a unitary approach to housing have abandoned such housing policies, the scope of social housing has narrowed and the possibility to find a common European definition has increased.