

**Interview with Véronique Stella**  
**Project coordinator at the Fondation Abbé Pierre. France**

The Fondation Abbé Pierre (FAP) is part of Emmaus France's B2 social action and housing branch and belongs to the international Movement. The foundation has traditionally focused on political lobbying and therefore publishes a report on substandard housing at the beginning of each year. The report reviews the current situation in France and looks at French housing policy mechanisms (or rather the absence of housing policy). As its name suggests, the FAP is a foundation and collects and redistributes donations in the form of funding or associations that enable people to stay in their homes in the long term and improve people's living conditions. The foundation is headquartered in Paris and its work is implemented in the regions of France by regional units (Paris Region office, Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur, Brittany, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Alsace-Lorraine, Rhone-Alps, and Reunion Island) and the Aquitaine volunteer platform.

In practical terms, the FAP provides support and housing via:

- **The Boutiques Solidarité drop-in centres** – there are 27 such centres, which were started in the early 1990s. They provide personalised support and basic services and also offer a range of other activities (including cultural and sports activities) and social support. On average, the Boutiques Solidarité are open 274 days a year. 213 employees work in the BS and 245 volunteers help to provide support.
- The foundation is strengthening its commitment to create housing for the poorest people and is seeking to address the housing crisis in France via its **2,000 Roofs for 2,000 Families Programme (2008-2011)** (<http://sites.google.com/site/2000toits2000familles/>), at a time when the authorities have failed to effectively tackle the crisis. There has only been a 30% increase in social housing (PLUS – social rental housing loan and PLAI – rental loan to aid integration) since 2004. The support comes in the form of:
  - The development of **Pensions de Famille**. The *pensions* are not emergency housing offering a temporary solution but instead are real communities in which each resident has a housing contract and their own independent flat and access to **shared spaces for socialising**. This sustainable format combines independence (independent flats) and a community ethos (shared spaces and daily support) for people who are alone and cannot access 'ordinary' housing due to a variety of personal reasons. The flats are managed by social landlords (public housing) and are allocated by special housing committees. The foundation has a network of 38 *Pensions de famille*. From 2005 to 2010, the foundation invested close to €6 million in its network (property, fittings, operations, funding). 1,730 housing units have been created, 1,762 places have been created, 97 associations have been supported and 193 projects have been given backing.
  - **Funding a range of projects run by associations**. These associations are more in sync with requirements because they work at the grassroots. The foundation also funds a wide variety of projects ranging from a research unit on the issue to housing renovation projects (bringing into line with standards and so on). The

foundation has an emergency fund for one-off situations and uses it to help disaster victims in France and abroad.

- **Building economical housing** to combat the problem of fuel poverty. The foundation makes use of third sector project owners. It provides both funding for building works and support for the associations in question. One of the foundation's partner associations is *Un toits pour tous* from Grenoble. The association is an experienced project owner and has drawn up universal construction project specifications.
- The **large-scale SOS Taudis project** targets slums and offers building subsidies and support when dealing with the judicial arsenal.

- **Identify**  
*Professionals in contact with a household that is experiencing difficulties (public sector or third sector social workers, home help workers etc) or SOS Slums volunteers alert the Fondation Abbé Pierre.*
- **Support**  
*The authorities, social landlords and owners: all those involved in each substandard housing situation will be approached to work with the associations so that the occupants' living conditions can be improved as quickly as possible.*
- **Understand**  
*Each substandard property is visited, in the company of the occupants, so that the FAP can gain a better grasp of the steps that need to be taken.*
- **Act**  
*The FAP's partner organisations have the remit of meeting the occupants' needs by conducting a comprehensive assessment and, if necessary, by arranging safety measures. They will be tasked with carrying out the necessary renovation work and with supporting the families until their home is fit for habitation. In extreme cases, the associations will seek to rehouse the occupants.*
- **Lobby**  
*If the work needed is taking a long time or if the authorities – or any other responsible entity – fail to take action, the FAP, in agreement with the occupants, may publicise the case in order to highlight the unacceptable situation and encourage those involved to take action.*

The foundation's work stems from the recognition that fixed housing-related costs have become unaffordable. Living in a house or flat does not just involve paying rent; it also involves paying costs that are directly affected by the rise in energy and water prices, among other factors. These costs are increasing and are affecting lower income households. The fact that poor and lower income households now have to spend 15% of their income on energy is a telling statistic. These same households often live in old buildings that consume more energy. A lack of insulation or poor insulation, old gas or electric heating and fuel oil boilers are just some of the situations that explain the growing poverty of people and families who are already experiencing difficulties. In total, it is estimated that 5 million households are living in fuel poverty in France. This is why **fuel poverty** has become one of the foundation's major work areas.

At the same time, social stakeholders' knowledge of legal instruments is worsening, with this being explained by the predominance of emergency initiatives which monopolise training / information sessions and above all hamper the implementation of medium and long-term projects.

Making these instruments available and scheduling training does however enable people to equip themselves to take action and set up projects.

Currently, the foundation seems to be replacing the government and holds the role of “Ministry for Substandard Housing”; this constitutes a major problem.

The foundation does not work on environmental issues as such but **for several years has been focusing on access to energy for all and reducing energy costs**. This issue has been driven forward by social workers who have informed the foundation that households are finding it hard to pay their energy bills (energy and water), with these costs being a real financial burden. We use the following approach “How can this bill be reduced?” It could be referred to as ‘sustainable development for disadvantaged people’. We are at the heart of sustainable development: environmental factors are taken into account because they are linked to the person’s economic situation (reduce the bill) and social situation (being able to live with dignity in their home and have a basic level of access to energy). The rationale is based on the overall cost and the foundation is investing heavily in lobbying about fuel poverty. Our report on the issue makes the foundation a pioneer in this area.

An emerging concept throughout Europe, fuel poverty is at the crossroads of several issues: **housing energy efficiency, the cost of energy and low household incomes**. The increase in energy costs and the recent economic crisis are making this issue even more of a concern and a proactive policy is needed to combat it.

### *Support scheme in Hérault: Construction work support fund*

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This initiative is run in partnership with the General Council which has a Housing Support Fund that targets two areas:

- Social support for households living in substandard housing.
- Financial support for households in difficulty (the fund reimburses the cost of switching on a meter, pays guarantees, and pays outstanding rent and energy bills).

300,000 households are in a situation that makes them eligible for financial support from this fund and we are seeing a real explosion in applications for support, meaning that some households cannot be helped. Indeed, the fund had already been used up by June. The foundation has estimated that ‘poor’ households spend 50% of their income on paying the rent and other housing related costs, including energy.

In Hérault, a procedure has been put in place to address the issue. Social workers pinpoint households in their designated areas who are finding it difficult to pay their energy / water bills and contact specialised associations who visit the households and make recommendations. However, it is important to stress that this is not part of the MDE scheme (electricity demand management, run by ADEME, [http://www.ademe.fr/bretagne/actions\\_phares/energie\\_maitrise/demande.asp](http://www.ademe.fr/bretagne/actions_phares/energie_maitrise/demande.asp)) Our target public live in houses and flats that leak energy, do not turn on the heating in order to save money and constantly live with restrictions, or receive massive fuel bills having had the heating on as little as possible in order to get through the winter months in their poorly insulated homes. Everyday ways of saving energy and water and thus cutting bills are therefore not relevant to them. Accusing them of

harming the environment would make them feel even worse, when in fact the real culprit is the housing itself.

The first consequence of fuel poverty is outstanding bills (with the famous question at the end of the month “Which bill should I pay?”), combined with unacceptable living conditions that lead to the household getting into excessive debt. It is an acknowledged fact that households with excessive debt all have outstanding energy or water bills.

### *The 2,000 Roofs for 2,000 Families programme*

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**One of the aims is to build economical housing (low water and energy costs)** but without any energy labels, because in practice labels are hard to obtain and maintain from a technical standpoint, and they do not always take into account the lifestyle of those living in the building. Moreover, the numerous parties involved in the construction process have their own labels, so the decision has been taken not to add a further constraint. While low-energy dwellings offer effective insulation, the ethos does not take into account the lifestyles of households who are ‘over-equipped’ with electrical and electronic devices. This is a reality and nowadays people cannot live without these devices.

An original aspect with regard to fuel poverty is that the companies and associations specialising in renewable energy have approached us, unlike housing management bodies.

In practical terms, economical housing is created by:

- **Insulating peripheral walls and particularly outside walls if the dwelling is not part of a bigger complex.**
- **Double and even triple glazing.**
- **A heating system tailored to the household’s needs and not based on environmental considerations.**

It is important to emphasize that regulations on environmentally-friendly features are often stringent. For example, the social and health services oppose the use of rainwater in toilets because it is not drinking water and people could potentially drink it.

### *The situation across Europe*

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The UK is 25 years ahead of France in terms of fuel poverty and the country’s ‘energy’ network is a greater source of inspiration than the French network. A process of reflection on how housing should be built is underway. This progress should be put into context: traditionally, the UK has brick buildings that are energy-consuming and are coal-heated. The switch to another source of energy has brought to the fore the issue of fuel poverty and has triggered a debate about putting in place a national political programme.

France belongs to the European Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency project (EPEE). The project seeks to raise awareness and set up a programme to tackle fuel poverty in Europe. In Europe, several tens of millions of people are now victims of fuel poverty. The European EPEE project bringing together five partner countries (France, UK, Belgium, Spain and Italy) was launched in December 2006 in order to analyse the phenomenon, identify existing initiatives and put forward new solutions.

Link: <http://www.epee2009.eu/index.php?action=accueil>

In partnership with the CLER (**Renewable Energies Liaison Committee**), one of our planned projects is to develop the green 'energy auditor' profession in order to review energy efficiency and also create professions that foster economic inclusion. The same model is also in place in Belgium where a system of home visits enables sources of indoor pollution to be detected and energy audits to be carried out (the 'green' ambulances, <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/brabant/article/387298/la-province-a-son-ambulance-verte.html>) and in Germany (economic inclusion via the creation of the 'energy auditor' job remit).

The project will be rolled out in the first instance in the Gers region. The area is conducive to a pilot study as it is small (26 districts in a rural area). 500 visits will be made annually. The aim is to systematically arrange an energy audit visit for every FSL (housing solidarity fund) application. The outcome of the audit would not in any way affect access to funding, but would enable an audit of energy expenditure to be carried out. Housing energy efficiency, the cost of energy and low household incomes are the three factors that cause people to live in fuel poverty. Housing energy efficiency is the one on which action can most easily be taken.

Unlike what was said about the electricity demand management scheme, the aim is to do 'small-scale renovation work', not for the small savings that it will generate but instead for its 'trigger' role in the sense that it will mark the start of a series of more major insulation and water-saving renovation works.

The water and energy market situation in France is specific to the country. In the past, public energy and water services offered consumers protection from rising prices and ensured that households spent little on energy. Little attention was paid to building insulation, for example. Today, with privatisation and the resulting increase in prices, we are suffering the consequences, although France is still one of the countries with the cheapest energy in Europe.

Another interesting aspect of the British approach is the link that is made between fuel poverty and the abnormally high death rate. Numerous studies have been conducted with the aim of assessing the impact of fuel poverty on public health, such as the hospitalisation rate caused by living in fuel poverty, which showed that every €1 invested in an energy-consuming dwelling would cut a household's healthcare expenditure by €0.40.

One of the proposals made by the foundation's 2010 report on substandard housing falls under slogan two "Control prices and regulate markets": *"Tackle fuel poverty and work to ensure access to basic services by taking action at three levels: at local level to improve the energy efficiency of energy-consuming buildings occupied by poor and lower income households, progressively ban the renting out of dwellings that leak energy by incorporating energy performance criteria into laws on unfit and insalubrious buildings, and going beyond inadequate social energy tariffs, set up a support scheme enabling the poorest people to truly access essential services (energy and water)".* The Minister responded to the proposal by stating that "The Fondation Abbé Pierre already deals with social housing, so it cannot also get involved in energy consuming housing that causes people to live in fuel poverty." To overcome this refusal to consider fuel poverty as a contributing factor to unfit housing, our plan is based on copying the British model and lobbying about the link between fuel poverty and

health, as was done for lead poisoning. A pilot study has been put in place in Languedoc Roussillon to demonstrate this link.

Belgium is also very interesting in this respect. The country has a 'rental permit' scheme that takes into account the dwelling's energy consumption irrespective of the household's usage, with this being a key instrument in tackling fuel poverty. Moreover, an 'adequate minimum income' has been put in place. The adequate minimum income is the budget needed by a household to 'exercise its citizenship.' Two categories of expenditure have been identified and spending on housing / energy / water falls into one of them. The budget has been set at €1,100 per month, which should be seen in the light of the RSA (Back to Work Allowance in France), which totals €400 a month.

[Link to Olivier Sidler's report \(Négawatt association, 2007\) as part of the European CONCERTO project:](http://www.negawatt.org/telechargement/Docs/Sidler%20Renovation%20final%201107.pdf) launched by the European Commission, CONCERTO aims to address the challenges of sustainable development by proactively developing Europe-wide solutions to energy issues.  
<http://www.negawatt.org/telechargement/Docs/Sidler%20Renovation%20final%201107.pdf>

An important point highlighted by Sidler is that energy saving must be incorporated right from the construction phase, with a practical example being fitting a 'standby killer' alongside switches to prevent electrical and electronic devices from consuming power in standby mode. Housing must be well designed right from the start.

#### *[Energy costs evaluation campaign as part of the 2,000 Roofs for 2,000 Families programme](#)*

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This campaign uses a research panel of 50 dwellings and aims to highlight households' energy costs even when rents are low and to underline the amount spent on energy out of the total monthly budget. It will start in June 2011 and will run for 18 months. The aim is not to provide hard and fast rules for energy costs by seeking to correlate the type of household and water / energy consumption, because this largely depends on individual usage, but instead to alert people about the consequences of fuel poverty even when rents are reduced.

The foundation is endeavouring to study total consumption, i.e. water, gas and energy. Training / information is vital and not only so that building work can be done and practical steps can be taken to reduce consumption, but also and above all to rethink usage and offer households support. Once again, the aim is not to make recommendations that make people feel guilty but instead to present options and how they work. Everyone is then free to do as they think best.

A scheme, involving the presentation in the home of a "Home User Guide" three months after moving in, in order to make 'gradual' changes to the dwelling and habits, based on the results of this evaluation campaign, will be set up.

The foundation also wishes to highlight via this project that steps can be taken to reduce energy and water consumption without having particular expertise and without belonging to a network.

#### *[The foundation's position with regard to energy suppliers](#)*

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The foundation advocates the implementation of an 'energy cap' to help the poorest households to cope with their energy bills. The idea is to rethink energy prices on social grounds because today the

traditional water and energy suppliers and the suppliers of certain fuels (fuel oil and wood) do not offer any preferential rates. The problem with regulated tariffs is that they increase constantly, so why not set up a system of capped tariffs as is the case for rents?

### *Network based working: RAPPEL (Network of Poverty and Housing Fuel Poverty Stakeholders).*

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<http://www.precarite-energie.org/> (a large number of publications and reports are available on fuel poverty in France and abroad).

This ADEME funded network enables housing, energy and social sector stakeholders to join together to discuss and lobby. Each of the stakeholders works on a “facet of fuel poverty”. The network is closely linked to the European EPEE programme described above and has a number of monitoring units enabling it to put forward proposals and solutions.

Representatives of the following organisations make up the monitoring committee:

- ▶ ADEME (French Environment and Energy Management Agency): <http://www2.ademe.fr/>
- ▶ ANAH (French National Housing Agency): <http://www.anah.fr/>
- ▶ BCE, Building - Climate - Energy
- ▶ CCMSA (Mutualité Sociale Agricole Central Fund): <http://www.msa.fr/>
- ▶ CLER (Renewable Energies Liaison Committee): <http://www.cler.org/>
- ▶ CSTB (Scientific and Technical Centre for Building): <http://www.cstb.fr/>
- ▶ EDF: <http://www.edf.com/>
- ▶ FNHD (National Housing and Development Federation): <http://www.habitat-developpement.tm.fr/>
- ▶ National PACT Federation: <http://www.pact-arim.org/>
- ▶ The Fondation Abbé Pierre for housing for the disadvantaged: <http://www.fondation-abbe-pierre.fr/>
- ▶ GEFOSAT: <http://www.gefosat.org/>
- ▶ GDF SUEZ: <http://www.gdfsuez.com/>
- ▶ High Committee for Housing for the Disadvantaged: <http://www.hclpd.gouv.fr/>
- ▶ Secours Catholique: <http://www.secours-catholique.asso.fr/>
- ▶ UNAF (National Union of Family Associations): <http://www.unaf.fr/>
- ▶ USH (Social Housing Union): <http://www.union-habitat.org/>

### *Personal observations*

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Energy saving must be incorporated right from the building design phase, particularly as it boils down to common sense rather than engineering. The environment and sustainable development are issues of secondary importance, in the sense that they are not the priority. The dignity of households and the fight against fuel poverty are at the heart of our action. Performance resulting in a reduction in financial expenditure while offering a comfortable day-to-day living environment holds sway over any environmental considerations in our eyes. However, obviously it is better if devices/systems and works carried out are in fact “environmentally friendly”. Analysis of fuel poverty goes beyond simply

reviewing a dwelling's energy efficiency and requires other contextual factors to be taken into account, such as the climate.

ADEME has developed a very practical tool, Dialogis, but unfortunately it is being used incorrectly. This piece of software enables a home's current consumption to be evaluated and variants to be applied. For example, "if I install double glazing, my energy consumption will be X" with the results being given in monetary and energy units.

With regard to the Movement as a whole, we should continue to challenge the petroleum based model and develop new recycling trades. This involves both everyday steps and innovation in our recycling work. All too often, we focus on recycling and selling, while we could in fact give a third and even fourth lease of life to goods, and show ourselves to be more creative and innovative. Even if our recycling work is subject to numerous constraints, sometimes with just a little adjustment we can improve everyone's day-to-day lives and use recycling as a way of accessing basic energy, particularly in very vulnerable homes and shantytowns. This is a must, especially as 'swapping' is developing all the time and is rivalling our recycling business. We must go further and propose new things. We are currently in the midst of a social revolution, including at Emmaus, and we must not simply endure it but instead proactively think it out while remaining rooted in our values. We have an undeniable functional basis but it must be opened up more to others and adapted to our society. We should promote our community way of life as a means of tackling growing isolation. Moreover, in my view, the stress should primarily be placed on a return to a local form of development that is environmentally friendly.