Homeless in Europe

A Magazine by FEANTSA

FEANTSA

EPOCH: A TURNING POINT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

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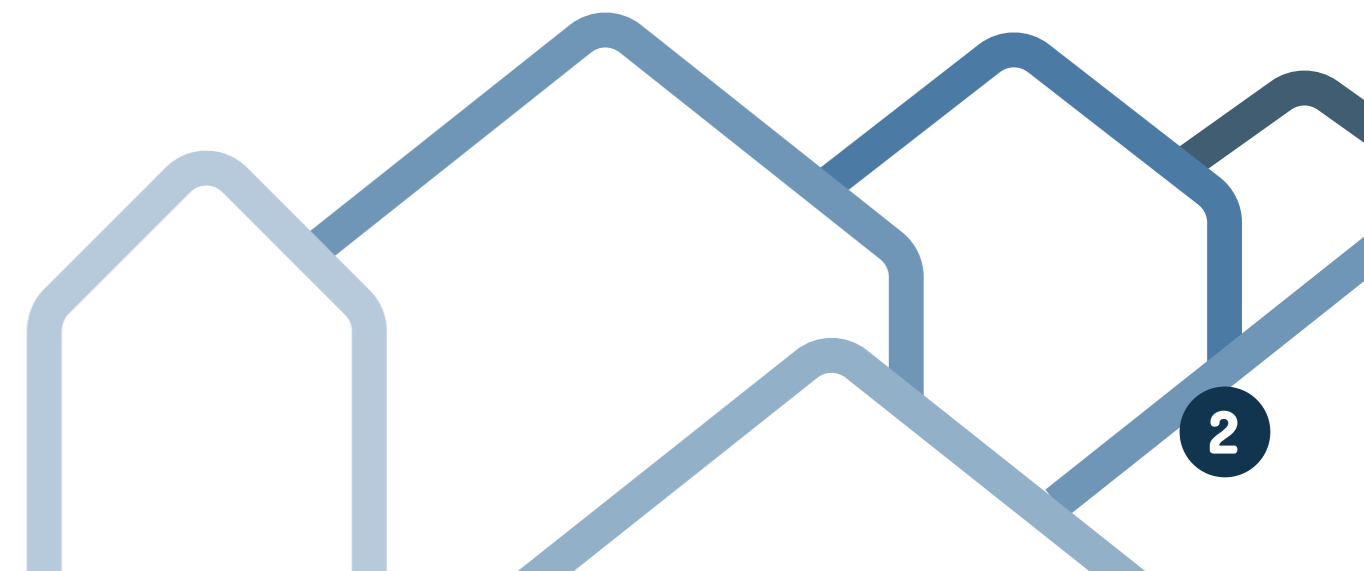
In 2021 the EU's Member States, the Commission, the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, the European Parliament and stakeholders including FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless), came together to launch the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH).

EPOCH is a landmark in European cooperation on homelessness. It is the first dedicated policy initiative coordinated by the European Commission on the issue. It is part of the Action Plan to deliver on the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is important to stress that responsibility for tackling homelessness remains primarily at the national, regional, and local levels. EPOCH simply seeks to coordinate and support the efforts of cities, regions, national governments, and stakeholders, in line with subsidiarity.

The establishment of EPOCH represents a turning point in how we collectively address the homelessness crisis in Europe. It provides an opportunity to reframe our approaches to homelessness. Most importantly, it establishes a common European goal of ending homelessness in Europe, which would mean:

- no one sleeps rough for lack of accessible, safe, and appropriate emergency accommodation
- no one lives in emergency or transitional accommodation longer than is required for the successful move-on to a permanent housing solution
- no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, or care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing
- evictions should be prevented whenever possible and no one should be evicted without assistance for an appropriate housing solution, when needed
- no one is discriminated against due to their homelessness status

To reach these objectives, EPOCH promotes prevention and integrated, housing-led approaches.

EPOCH has 3 workstreams: evidence, finance, and exchange. These workstreams aim to improve policy and practice by making evidence available, mobilising EU funding and finance and sharing knowledge and experience. A key focus of EPOCH's work so far has been national homelessness strategies.

EDITORIAL

By **Ruth Owen**, Deputy Director, FEANTSA

This edition of *Homeless in Europe* explores themes of reflection, collaboration, and progress in depth. Evident throughout each article is the need to remain critically engaged, open to learning, and willing to adapt our strategies to meet the evolving needs of the people we aim to serve.

We begin with an article from Yves Leterme and Patrick Develtere, Chair of and Advisor to the Steering Board of EPOCH, respectively. Here they offer a detailed overview of the origins and goals of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness. Launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform has united EU institutions, member states, and civil society in a common mission. Their article highlights the advances made in areas like data collection, mutual learning, and funding mechanisms, and the importance of this cross-border cooperation.

Following this we have articles from two Member States involved in EPOCH. From the French perspective, Clara Parez reflects on the progress made through EPOCH thus far. Her article discusses the advancements in collaboration and awareness, while pointing out the challenges that remain in making the platform's resources accessible and operational across member states. Clara calls for improved data-sharing mechanisms and expanded access to resources, underscoring the need for enhanced mutual learning between countries.

Henrique Manuel Marques Joaquim discusses Portugal's leadership role in launching EPOCH and the Lisbon Declaration. Henrique highlights the success of Portugal's Housing First model and its integrated approach to homelessness, while acknowledging the challenges that remain. Expanding local partnerships and ensuring that homelessness prevention strategies are robust and effective will be key to ensuring success across Europe.

Following this, we turn to an article that examines the broader issue of housing as a fundamental right. Mari Carmen Barrera Chamorro, Vice-President of the Workers Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, stresses that while rising housing costs and speculative markets continue to make access to affordable housing difficult, the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness is pushing for strong tenant protections and the adoption of the Housing First model across Europe. Ensuring that every person has access to affordable and stable housing is a matter of social equity.

Next, we look at the mutual learning arm of EPOCH, EPOCH Practice. Saoirse Browne provides the introduction to this initiative. EPOCH Practice is funded by the ESF+ and coordinated by FEANTSA. It was launched in early 2024 for an initial 2 years. With its focus on mutual learning and capacity-building, EPOCH Practice provides an essential space for learning. This article outlines how webinars, training sessions, and study visits are used to foster an exchange of knowledge crucial for finding long-term solutions to homelessness. As there is much scope to improve current policy and practice, homelessness is a field where the potential impact of learning is huge.

Finally, representing the EPOCH Practice Experts by Experience group, Silvia Busi reminds us that the fight against homelessness must engage with the knowledge and perspectives of those immediately affected. Through their lived experiences, these experts can shape policies and services to truly reflect the needs of those most affected. The reflections of Khadim Diagne, a member of the group, helps highlight how solutions to homelessness must involve those who have experienced it firsthand, fostering empowerment and inclusion in decision-making processes. Peer advocacy and support are essential tools for creating meaningful change.

Nearly four years have passed since Member States and European Institutions committed to ending homelessness and to making significant progress by 2030. We are halfway there, and we are not on track. The establishment of EPOCH, and the activities already underway are real achievements. But they will not deliver the change we need. The European Union is at the beginning of a new political mandate. We must continue to work together, listen to those with lived experiences, change policies and practices, mobilise resources, and start to deliver on our shared vision of a Europe where no one is left without a home.

"Nearly four years have passed since Member States and European Institutions committed to ending homelessness and to making significant progress by 2030. We are halfway there, and we are not on track."

EPOCH: FROM NECESSITY TO OPPORTUNITY

From Yves Leterme and Patrick Develtere, this article discusses the launch of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness in 2021, initiated amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It explains how key stakeholders, including EU institutions and civil society, united to address homelessness as a shared European issue. The Platform, supported by EU member states, set a goal to end homelessness by 2030, promoting policies for accessible emergency housing and reducing evictions. It details how the Platform has initiated workstreams on data collection, mutual learning, and financing, fostering collaboration and innovative projects to combat homelessness across Europe.

By **Yves Leterme**, Chair of the Steering Board of EPOCH and **Patrick Develtere**, Advisor to the Steering Board

The Platform on Combatting Homelessness was launched in 2021 during the first von der Leyen Commission. At that time Europe was in a full-blown corona crisis and, notwithstanding the fact that each and everybody was focused on this all-encompassing phobia, Commissioner Schmit, the Portuguese Presidency, and many other stakeholders from Member States and civil society were convinced that there was also an urgent need to collectively address the aggravating problem of homelessness. As some said 'addressing pressing social issues such as homelessness is primarily a responsibility of the Member States. But if it is a problem in every single European country it becomes a shared European problem. And why not look at it collectively through a European lens when there are tested and proven European solutions?'. The corona crisis also provided evidence that Member States and other stakeholders were able to address housing issues and related health problems of homeless people in a fast and concerted way.

So, a high-level conference in Lisbon was co-organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). At the event, national ministers as well as representatives of EU institutions, civil society organisations, social partners, and cities signed the "Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness" launching the Platform. They all pledged to work together under the umbrella of the Platform and to deliver actions within their respective competencies.

Currently, a new European Commission is in the starting blocks. Since 2021 a lot has been realised by the Platform and its members. But admittedly combatting homelessness remains an uphill battle. Witness the growing number of people confronted with homelessness due to multiple reasons, of which the housing crisis in the EU is the most prominent, going hand in hand with a growing number of people getting out of homelessness thanks to better and more appropriate policies.

> "But if it is a problem in every single European country it becomes a shared European problem ..."

FROM NECESSITY

During the previous Commission and motivated by blatant necessity the Platform engaged in a first attempt to address homelessness and housing exclusion in a concerted and collective way.

First of all, it was heartwarming and encouraging to see that so many different actors supported the Platform and its efforts. Combating homelessness became a multi-stakeholder venture at local, national and European levels. Apart from the European Commission other European institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Social and Economic Council, and the European Committee of the Regions also showed real commitment. In many Member States there was a growing awareness of the pressing challenges faced by people living without permanent shelter and its consequences for society at large. Their concerns were echoed by the Member States that happened to take up the role of Presidency of the Council of the European Union. That was notably the case for Portugal, France, and Belgium. The Platform was further dynamised and permanently challenged by very critical and active civil society actors such as FEANTSA and Eurocities, as well as by their national members.

The Platform came together in plenary sessions to discuss the ambitions of this collective endeavour and the way forward. It was decided that the objective remained to end homelessness by 2030 and that by then no one must sleep rough for lack of accessible, safe, and appropriate emergency accommodation; that no one has to live in emergency or transitional accommodation longer than is required; that no one should be discharged from institutions such as prisons, hospitals, or psychiatric care facilities without an offer of appropriate housing. It was also confirmed that evictions should be prevented whenever possible and that no one should be discriminated against due to their homelessness status.

The members of the Platform realised that it is never possible to reach the absolute end of homelessness and to completely exclude the risk of homelessness. Therefore, they opted for **'functional zero' homelessness**, where it becomes a manageable problem and the policy measures, available resources, and services are appropriate and sufficient to deal with homelessness associated problems. Reaching functional zero implies that we have and apply the tools necessary to make homelessness rare and exceptional, and that it is brief and permanently resolved when it occurs. This approach is more realistic and pragmatic than the first option, although it does not exclude to adhere to an absolute end option as an aspirational goal. A critical note is that reaching 'functional zero' does not imply that some people remain homeless because they are defined or considered 'voluntary homeless' or not accepting housing offers which are not adequate for them.

The Platform members, the Steering Board, and the secretariat of the Platform worked hard to develop a work programme for the EPOCH. Early 2022 it was launched under the French Presidency during a High Level Meeting in Paris. The work programme is built around **three work strands:** strengthening evidence on homelessness; mutual learning; and access to finance.

We first wanted to have a common understanding of the problem we are tackling. This means having the **instruments to count and monitor**. For this, we asked academics to develop and test an appropriate counting tool that can be used by different stakeholders and foremost by city authorities. The OECD helped us with a toolkit that provides evidence-based guidance and building blocks for policymakers, practitioners and service providers so that they can improve their strategies.

"The corona crisis also provided evidence that Member States and other stakeholders were able to address housing issues and related health problems of homeless people in a fast and concerted way."

None of the Member States were starting from scratch; there already existed many local projects and experiments, such as examples of housing-led solutions, and the majority of countries have developed a national plan or strategy to address homelessness. We also see that some of these initiatives have been very successful, effective, and impactful in the long run. To spread the message that there are European home-grown solutions to the many problems related to homelessness the Platform organised a number of **mutual learning activities.** These workshops were opportunities for national experts to learn from each other on a diverse palette of themes such as measures to prevent homelessness and housing exclusion, social and health care for homeless people, data collection, and funding opportunities. Since 2023, in an effort to make the mutual learning processes more tailor-made, EPOCH Practice, operated by FEANTSA, began hosting webinars, training sessions, and study visits and, as such, has further built capacity within our broad network of policymakers and practitioners.

It is crystal clear that you cannot develop appropriate programmes to combat homelessness and housing exclusion without **access to the necessary funding.** Therefore, the Platform joined forces with the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), based in Paris. A working group, co-chaired by the CEB, is mapping funding options and supports the development of projects to combat homelessness. Amongst other European funding sources, the European Social Fund + (ESF+) contributes to the provision of housing assistance programmes and social support for homeless people. The European Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme also decided to fund a selected number of innovative projects to test new approaches to combat homelessness.

... TO OPPORTUNITY

It is undoubtedly that EPOCH has created a fertile environment for further policy and practice to alleviate the hardship faced by people in homelessness or at risk of housing exclusion. Combatting homelessness is a long-term, uphill, and even permanent battle. So, we must not be complacent with what we have so far done and realised. We should do more, more intensively and better.

Apart from the enabling environment that EPOCH has started to shape and that will stimulate national policymakers and practitioners to do more than ever before, there are a number of opportunities that we have to grapple in order to extend our reach.

We believe that, first of all, the three work streams should be continued if we want a lasting effect. More work has to be done in terms of measuring and monitoring homelessness. At local, national, and European levels we need to know if we are on track, how the profile of homeless people is changing, and what are the driving forces behind homelessness and housing exclusion. The OECD toolkit should not end on the bookshelves but become an instrument in each Member State and be used as a follow-up instrument to monitor progress and to draw lessons. We can also continue to learn from each other. The experiments with housing-led solutions are just one example. Let us share these experiences, their potential and the pitfalls that go with them. And, of course, we all want more funding for different types of projects and programmes that address the needs of homeless people and prevent housing exclusion. We also suggest an **additional workstream on mainstreaming homelessness strategies** at the national level. Member States should be incentivised to develop hands-on and operational national homelessness strategies that could be stimulated by European funding.

> "It is undoubtedly that EPOCH has created a fertile environment for further policy and practice to alleviate the hardship faced by people in homelessness or at risk of housing exclusion."

The European Platform on Combatting Homelessness is already supported by the European institutions and the Member States. This was reconfirmed by the **La Hulpe Declaration** on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights in April 2024 as the signatories stated that homelessness remains an issue in many Member States and called for integrated strategies and follow-up. A **Council Recommendation** might boost this commitment and offer guidance to the Member States.

We also think that the new **Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights**, to be developed in 2025, must include homelessness and the strengthening of EPOCH. To sustain momentum, it could be useful if the action plan includes an explicit reference to the goal of ending homelessness and a focus on an intermediary objective such as ending chronic homelessness.

The future **Anti-Poverty Strategy** of the European Union is another opportunity and should include an explicit focus on homelessness. The same goes for the future **Affordable Housing Plan** of the EU. A proportion of the additional European investment associated with the plan could focus on the scaling up of Housing First and housing-led initiatives.

And, last but not least, during this Commission the **future financial framework** (MFF) of the EU will also be on the drawing board. Ring-fenced funding to combat homelessness should not just remain a dream. It is an opportunity to collectively get away with widespread homelessness and housing exclusion, one of the most painful scars in the European social model we are so proud of.

In this article, Clara Parez discusses the progress achieved through the EPOCH platform in tackling homelessness across the EU. She highlights the advancements in collaboration and awareness from a French perspective, while noting that challenges persist in making the platform's resources fully operational across Member States. Suggestions include improving data sharing, expanding access to resources, and enhancing mutual learning between countries.

AN EPOCH OF INNOVATION AND AWARENESS: STILL ONLY HALFWAY HOME

By **Clara Parez**, intern at the Interministerial Delegation for Access to Housing (DIHAL) working on the European affairs

"In most Member States, significant progress has been made in raising awareness about homelessness. I believe there are more and more municipalities, Member States, and regions which successfully engage in dialogue, agreeing on definitions of homelessness, and developing methodologies to measure the phenomenon. These are essential prerequisites for any public policy or solution. To address the issue, stakeholders must first recognise that there is a problem and reach some sort of consensus on the key aspects of the issue. Thanks to FEANTSA's efforts, progress is being made, though it is not yet perfect and not yet uniform across all Member States. However, it is a positive start." [1]

This quote is from Yves Leterme's speech during the 95th Interministerial Delegation for Access to Housing (DIHAL) workshop about the EPOCH platform on April 29th, 2024. Yves Leterme, President of the EPOCH Steering Committee, highlights the dual nature of the platform. The EPOCH platform has driven progress, but progress is still uneven and far from the ambitious 2030 target set by the Lisbon Declaration. Therefore, in this article, we will come back to the improvements brought by the platform but also discuss its limits and the areas for further development.

As Yves Leterme underlined, one of EPOCH's key successes lies in its ability to foster dialogue and get stakeholders to collaborate on common definitions or methodologies. The platform is a genuine hub for discussions, facilitating exchanges between stakeholders, and impelling initiatives and innovation. The use of the ETHOS typology to define homelessness across the Union expresses a significant evolution toward a shared vision and a common language between the Member States. Webinars and other forms of mutual learning opportunities are valuable resources to enhance international cooperation and dialogue. Therefore, as a tool for fostering discussion and connecting different European states, the EPOCH platform can be deemed a success as it plays an essential role in promoting a united effort against homelessness within the European Union.

> " **The platform is a genuine hub for discussions, facilitating exchanges between stakeholders, and impelling initiatives and innovation.**"

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[1] The original quotation was in French. Please find the event from which the quote is taken :
95th DIHAL Worshop about EPOCH platform, April 2024

One of the strengths of this platform is its capability to shed light on the issue of homelessness. The signing of the Lisbon Declaration in 2021 by the stakeholders - European institutions, all Member States of the EU, social partners, cities, etc. - engendered the establishment of the first international platform dedicated to finding common solutions to tackle homelessness. Thanks to the European Commission's role (DG EMPL) in supporting its secretariat, the platform has a solid foothold within the European institutions and is a real lever for organising international cooperation on this issue. The collaborative work of the Commission with the OCDE, COEBank, and FEANTSA contributes to the production of useful and valuable data for all stakeholders. Thanks to the Commission, the platform's existence and its strong output of publications, meetings, and webinars, has brought the issue of homelessness to a higher level, placing it on the agendas of several Member States and the European agenda (at least, during council presidencies).

Yet, while the platform has brought attention to this phenomenon, as a Member State we face difficulties in sharing its resources and making them truly operational. The participation of State representatives is central to becoming informed about the situation across the Union.

"Homelessness is no longer a hidden problem."

The webinars, mutual learning events, and working groups are valuable for Member States seeking to gain knowledge, but these resources could be designed and made accessible to other key stakeholders: including NGOs, local authorities, and social workers. To promote a common vision and increase common knowledge on homelessness, information must be shared across all levels of governance and decision-making. This dissemination includes a significant work of translation. Resources must be translated to ensure they are reachable to all non-English-speaking stakeholders. Expanding access to these resources would help us work towards a shared vision of fighting homelessness.

In addition to the challenges of sharing data within our State, exchanging data between Member States is also an issue. The platform's capacity to facilitate dialogue needs to be expanded. While its advantages are undeniable, it is necessary to qualify its power to connect its stakeholders and recognise the current limitations of these exchanges. Regarding EPOCH Practice, improvements are needed to ensure that their activities are operational. While it is greatly appreciated to engage with other countries offering different perspectives and strategies to fight homelessness, the variety of definitions and words used to analyse and describe national situations can lead to unilateral speeches and presentations rather than a communal discussion. One solution may be to include brief presentations on each country's situation during mutual learning events focusing on a specific aspect of their approach followed by sharing specific and precise data on this subject could be an effective way to enhance collaboration and mutual learning. These difficulties underline the need for shared knowledge making the work carried out by the OECD essential to the sustainability and the success of EPOCH platform.

"To promote a common vision and increase common knowledge on homelessness, information must be shared across all levels of governance and decision-making."

To enhance constructive discussion and mutual learning, it is crucial to produce common baselines and unified references that are regularly updated by researchers and experts. Mutual learning could be geared more towards forming homogeneous groups to tackle specific problems (with the view that the groups are not fixed and that they evolve according to the issues addressed). Member State could be asked to prepare questions and short outcomes on this specific issue – and then get more involved and engaged in the meetings. In addition to the mutual learning events, research documents such as the Country Fiches produced by FEANTSA, the Country Notes produced by the OECD or other study reports are significant tools to apprehend the global situation and the specificities within the Union. Therefore, a dedicated research team could work on simplifying and popularising information enabling Member State representatives and all stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of each other's contexts and facilitating comparisons. The recent work published by the OECD in April 2024 has been useful by providing insights into the methodologies used in other countries. This could be complemented by research on public policies related to homelessness in the countries. In France for instance, the phenomenon of homelessness must be considered a multifactorial issue; therefore, it requires a comprehensive understanding of housing, social and health policies.

A better awareness of the phenomenon and its various manifestations within the European Union is one keystone to raise international coordination and collaboration to tackle homelessness. One of the steps that might be necessary to continue carrying this subject at the European level is to institutionalise the platform and to anchor EPOCH Platform in the Union's ecosystem.

Finally, the platform serves as a great resource for the Member States and the stakeholders. The EPOCH platform represents an important shift in European politics: homelessness is no longer a hidden problem. Although the platform has only existed for three years objective results are already visible: many Member States have adopted a national strategy to combat homelessness, stakeholders are more aware of the availability of European funding, and the ETHOS category is widely recognised and used across Member States. The platform is the completion of a long history and a strong desire to eradicate homelessness in Europe.

EUROPEAN PLATFORM ON COMBATTING HOMELESSNESS: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

From Henrique Joaquim, this article highlights Portugal's key role in launching the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) in 2021. The platform promotes collaboration, best practice sharing, and targets to reduce homelessness by 2030, following the Lisbon Declaration. Portugal's Housing First model and integrated approach to homelessness serve as examples for other countries, though challenges remain in preventing homelessness and expanding local partnerships across the EU..

By **Henrique Manuel Marques Joaquim**, Executive Manager of the National Strategy for Social Inclusion of Homeless People in Portugal

Homelessness remains one of the most pressing social challenges across Europe, impacting thousands of individuals faced with precarious living conditions. To tackle this growing issue, the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) was established, marking a turning point in the EU's approach to addressing homelessness in a structured and collaborative way. Notably, the platform was launched in Lisbon, during a high-level event organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, underscoring Portugal's pivotal role in fostering a shared European response to this challenge.

EPOCH was created in June 2021, following the Porto Social Summit, where the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights was approved, embodying the growing recognition of the need for coordinated action among EU Member States. During its Council Presidency, Portugal wanted to highlight the importance of raising awareness of this complex social problem and the need for integrated intervention based on a person-centred approach. This high-level conference in Lisbon was co-organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, the European Commission, and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA).

This high-level event brought together representatives from national governments, EU institutions, civil society organisations, and advocates for homeless individuals. The aim was clear: to create a space for mutual learning, knowledge sharing, and joint commitment toward ending homelessness in the EU by 2030. The Lisbon Declaration, signed by all national ministers, as well as representatives of EU institutions, civil society organisations, social partners and cities, was a key outcome of the event, reaffirming the commitment of all participating parties to work collaboratively toward reducing homelessness.

As part of the National Strategy, Portugal has sought to draw inspiration from solutions that have yielded good results in other countries, such as the Housing First model. Therefore, the country's involvement in the creation and initial development of the platform is particularly significant. By adopting access to a stable housing solution as a starting point, we aim to change interventions which are based on more traditional approaches. In this way, and by encouraging the sharing of experiences and mutual learning, we have developed a housing-led strategy based on the principle that we need to find different response models for different profiles of homelessness.

" From its foundation to the present, EPOCH has been a hub for sharing best practices and ... facilitating cooperation across Europe."

From its foundation to the present, EPOCH has been a hub for sharing best practices and a basis for facilitating cooperation across Europe. Governments have been encouraged to adopt national strategies (where none yet exist) and set concrete targets to reduce homelessness. The sharing of strategy-making processes, counting and diagnostic methodologies, and discussions on financing mechanisms have been very important and fruitful. The participation of various stakeholders such as the OECD, EUROCITIES and civil society organisations, particularly FEANTSA, has been a great asset in policy-making.

The creation of a working group coordinated by the Council of European Bank specifically focused on defining financing strategies, has also been important. In this space, it has been possible to identify existing financing possibilities as well as to study future sources of financing.

Coordinated by FEANTSA, a new stage is being set in Lisbon with the creation of a Community of Practice and visits to different countries to learn more about their experiences and models.

However, despite these efforts, the journey to end homelessness remains complex and multifaceted, with varying levels of progress across the EU.

It is essential to remember the objectives defined in the Lisbon Declaration to which we are all committed:

- no one sleeps rough for lack of accessible, safe, and appropriate emergency accommodation;
- no one lives in emergency or transitional accommodation longer than is required for a successful move-on to a permanent housing solution;
- no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing;
- evictions should be prevented whenever possible and no one should be evicted without assistance for an appropriate housing solution when needed;
- no one is discriminated against due to their homelessness status.

"Tackling homelessness requires collective effort, innovative thinking, and unwavering commitment."

Looking forward, the platform has enormous potential to deepen its impact across Europe. The different economic shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with rising housing costs in many urban areas, have heightened the risk of homelessness in both long-standing and newly vulnerable populations. As such, the platform must continue to adapt and innovate in the face of these evolving challenges.

To achieve this, EPOCH needs to place a greater emphasis on prevention, ensuring that individuals at risk of homelessness receive support before they enter into a crisis. Early intervention, along with the expansion of affordable housing options, must be a key priority moving forward. While national policies are critical, it is at the local level that innovative solutions are often pioneered. Therefore, one area of potential growth is fostering closer partnerships between national governments and local municipalities, where homelessness is most acute.

Having defined an integrated intervention based on a person-centred approach, it will also be important to find integrated sources of financing. To be efficient we need sources that provide financial support to develop approaches that prioritise access to stable housing and facilitate social integration with adequate support.

It will also be important to promote and guarantee the participation of people who live or have lived in a homeless situation.

As the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness continues to evolve, its success will ultimately depend on the strength of its partnerships, the dedication of its stakeholders, and the resilience of the communities it serves.

The Lisbon Declaration was not just a statement of intent, but a call to action – a reminder that tackling homelessness requires collective effort, innovative thinking, and unwavering commitment. The platform, as a benchmark for European cooperation, based on the *people-first* principle, must continue to push boundaries, ensuring that no one in Europe is left without a place to call home.

"[Portugal's] involvement in the creation and initial development of the platform is particularly significant."

The article stresses that housing is a fundamental right.
They outline how, while rising housing costs and speculation worsen access, the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness pushes for affordable housing, tenant protections, and the "Housing First" model.
The article also highlights the need for coordinated EU action to address homelessness and ensure social equity.

HOUSING: A MATTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS

By **Mari Carmen Barrera Chamorro**, Vice-President of the Workers Group of the European Economic and Social Committee

Housing is a fundamental right essential for an individual's personal and professional development. However, 895.000 individuals are homeless on any given night in Europe,[1] a severe limitation and violation of their European citizenship rights.

The European Commission launched the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) in 2021, following the signing of the Lisbon Declaration, with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) heavily involved in its steering board. Despite this positive step forward, housing is increasingly becoming a speculative asset throughout the European Union. Rising house prices are pushing many people further away from the possibility of owning a home, severely impacting people experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion, as well as youth, women, migrants, and other vulnerable groups.

Social actors and civil society must urgently campaign for the incorporation of housing policies into the political agenda. It is crucial for progressive forces to strengthen their discourse by recognising housing as the backbone of a just society.

According to the EESC, the lack of access to decent housing exacerbates inequalities and limits opportunities for social and labour integration. In our own-initiative opinion, 'For an EU framework for national homeless strategies based on the principle of Housing First', we advocate for an EU strategy on homelessness, fully embedding the EPOCH Platform. This integration would allow national policies to combat homelessness to be included in the European Semester process. This strategy should also be supported by a Council Recommendation on homelessness. Additionally, we must address the issue

"We need coordinated action and robust public policies that guarantee access to adequate housing for everyone."

of human rights violations, and therefore urge the Fundamental Rights Agency to prioritise addressing the criminalisation and penalisation of people living on the streets as a key human rights concern.

In the European Union, access to adequate housing is a growing challenge. This increase highlights the urgent need for effective policies to ensure housing access. Our opinion emphasises the fact that investments in affordable housing not only benefit individuals but have a positive impact on the economy by reducing costs associated with homelessness, such as emergency services and healthcare.

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1   8th Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe, FEANTSA and Fondation Abbe Pierre.

To combat homelessness and ensure that housing is no longer a speculative asset, we need coordinated action and robust public policies that guarantee access to adequate housing for everyone. This includes measures such as regulating the rental market, building social housing, and implementing policies that protect tenants from unjust evictions. Additionally, EPOCH must continue to actively promote Housing First as a systemic solution to the chronic issue of homelessness. In our EESC opinion, we propose launching a European training programme to increase the acceptance of this solution.

Eradicating homelessness in Europe requires integrating homelessness measures across all European social policies. To this end, we urge the Commission to continue addressing homelessness in all relevant EU actions and strategies. We advocate for the European Commission to conduct a study on the growing number of persons experiencing homelessness despite employment, as we are concerned about the scope and nature of this issue, as well as the increasing number of homeless mobile EU citizens. Therefore, we propose that the European Labour Authority provides guidance to Member States on how to address these issues.

The newly elected European Parliament has a crucial role to play in this challenge. As progressive forces, we must be firmly committed to the cause of housing, understanding that without decent housing, there can be no real social progress or improvement in people's quality of life. It is time for governments and European institutions to take decisive action to ensure that housing is treated not as a mere investment asset, but what it truly is: a fundamental human right. Only then can we build a more equitable and solidary society.

One of the greatest challenges we face as a society is recognising that without solving homelessness and housing access, there can be no equity or social justice. Adequate housing is essential for people to reach their full potential and actively contribute to society. Addressing this crisis is crucial to building a fairer future rooted in the principle of solidarity. In short, building the Europe we all want.

> "Without solving homelessness and housing access, there can be no equity or social justice."

EPOCH PRACTICE – ADVANCING MUTUAL LEARNING AND EVIDENCE BUILDING

Launched in January 2024 and coordinated by FEANTSA, EPOCH Practice aims to end homelessness in the EU through mutual learning and capacity-building. This article outlines the goals and mechanisms of EPOCH practice, including webinars, study visits, and training sessions, all targeting EPOCH Members and broader stakeholders. With advisory groups, including those with lived experience of homelessness, EPOCH Practice fosters collaboration to develop sustainable, inclusive solutions for homelessness by 2030. By creating spaces for dialogue and knowledge-sharing, EPOCH Practice aims to move from managing homelessness to finding long-term, sustainable solutions.

By **Saoirse Browne**, EPOCH Practice Project Officer

BACKGROUND

In January 2024, EPOCH Practice was officially launched. Led by a small, dedicated coordination team, it marks the transition of the Platform's mutual learning and evidence building activities from the European Commission to FEANTSA. The project is co-financed by the European Union; the French Interministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing; the King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium; and the Council of Europe Development Bank. The project has an initial two-year timeline.

EPOCH Practice's activities focus on learning and capacity building to support progress towards the goal of ending homelessness in the EU. The primary target audience for the project is EPOCH Members, who signed the Lisbon Declaration in 2021. However, the project provides ample opportunity for the broad inclusion of FEANTSA members, civil society organisations, national, local and regional authorities, and European Union bodies. At the root of EPOCH Practice is the belief that the solution to ending homelessness does exist and can be best achieved by sharing with and learning from each other.

STEERING & CONSULTATION

The project is guided by three different advisory groups who meet at regular intervals. The first, the **Advisory Board**, is made up of the project's funders, the Chair of the EPOCH, and the German Federal Ministry for Housing. The Board provides expert steering, guidance, and recommendations on EPOCH Practice's proposed work programme and activities. The **Expert by Experience** group is composed of ten people with lived experience of homelessness. This group was recruited to reflect, to the extent possible, the diversity of gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and migration status within the population of people experiencing homelessness. The group met in-person in Brussels in April 2024 for an in-depth review of the project's activities and decided to meet online at regular intervals to continue their input. The Expert by Experience group represents one of the core principles of the project: the participation of people with lived experience is vital in ensuring that changes to homelessness systems meet the actual needs of people experiencing homelessness. The third group, the **Expert Committee**, is discussed below.

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WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

- **Webinars**

At the time of writing, EPOCH Practice has organised three webinar events. The first webinar focused on recent homelessness data from the United States and the insights that Europe could draw in comparison, led by Dr. Dennis Culhane. Dr. Culhane explored the causes of rising homelessness in the U.S. and the relationship to recent U.S. policy interventions. The second webinar discussed the exercise of voting rights and citizenship for persons experiencing homelessness, within the context of the European elections. It included a presentation from Focus Ireland on their *Voter Registration Drive* campaign. The third webinar spotlighted homelessness in rural areas, focusing on presentations, service provision, and policy recommendations in Belgium and the U.K. It included a case study of implementing Housing First in rural England, and the creation of a best practice guide for local authorities in isolated geographies. All of the webinar recordings can be located on the FEANTSA website.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

- **Open Call**

Currently accepting submissions, the *Open Call for Inspiring Practices* seeks to locate a minimum of twelve inspiring policies, services, or practices across diverse aspects of homelessness including, but by no means limited to, housing, health, migration, peer work, and empowerment. The projects can vary in scale, timing and location.

The submitted practices will be screened and selected by a dedicated Expert Committee, composed of five experts from academia, civil society, and peer work. The chosen practices will be platformed by EPOCH Practice through the dissemination of concise briefs, and thereafter a published compendium, to members of the Platform and the wider audience of stakeholders involved in combatting homelessness. The Open Call is accepting submissions until 30th September.

> "Collaboration and knowledge exchange must be effectively instrumentalised to achieve the Lisbon Declaration's ambitious 2030 goal."

COMING UP

- **Community of Practice**

The EPOCH Community of Practice (CoP) is designed for Member State delegates, generally high-level national civil servants, to engage in a genuine exchange of challenges and solutions encountered in policy work towards ending homelessness. In September, representatives of twenty Member States will congregate in Lisbon for the first in-person meeting. The event will include a keynote presentation of new research on the state of play of national homelessness strategies in the EU Member States and a focus on the strategic direction of the EPOCH in light of the new EU political mandate.

- **Study Visits**

The first of three study visits also takes place in Lisbon, directly following the CoP. The study visit is open to applications from a broad array of stakeholders involved in the fight against homelessness, who can disseminate their learnings within their national contexts following the session. Organised in conjunction with the Lisbon municipality and the Portuguese Institute of Social Security, the trip brings participants to the city's homelessness services to explore practices implemented in the field. The Lisbon study visit will be a hands-on, dynamic field trip to a variety of services, including those specialising in women's homelessness and pioneering harm reduction. It will also include policy presentations from the national and municipal authorities and panels on housing-led and housing-first approaches. The study visit brings together a broad array of stakeholders in a practical setting to facilitate the exchange of best practices. While the Lisbon study visit is fully subscribed, the second EPOCH Practice study visit will open for applications in the first half of 2025.

- **Trainings**

Another key EPOCH Practice learning activity is the provision of training to stakeholders. The first training session will provide an introductory foundation to women's homelessness. It is designed for NGOs and local, national, and European policymakers, and will focus on connecting data and research to gender-informed homelessness policies and services. The training aims to give practitioners and policymakers the basic tools they need to best address the unique and intersectional experience of homelessness for women. It will be delivered in collaboration with experts from Housing First for Women Berlin. While the first training session is fully subscribed, it will be followed by an event in the European Parliament on women's homelessness on 5th November. If you have an interest in attending the Parliament event, please contact us via epoch.practice@feantsa.org

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CONCLUSION

EPOCH Practice undertakes to gather the evidence and tools to best equip Member States to combat homelessness across Europe, with due respect for differing national contexts. Our guiding belief is that collaboration and knowledge exchange must be effectively instrumentalised to achieve the Lisbon Declaration's ambitious 2030 goal. EPOCH Practice is demand-led, continually seeking the opinions and requirements of social workers, civil servants, experts by experience, researchers and civil society. To that extent, EPOCH Practice relies upon the strength of community building and stakeholder input. The transition from managing homelessness to solving it throughout the Union will only be achieved if we successfully work together and share in both our successes and our challenges.

To stay up to date with EPOCH Practice's activities, we invite you to subscribe to our bi-monthly newsletter.

The "Experts by Experience" group, comprised of people with lived experiences of homelessness, works with EPOCH Practice to ensure their voices shape policies and services. Representing diverse backgrounds, they emphasise that tackling homelessness is about more than housing – it's about rebuilding lives and restoring dignity. Through advocacy and peer support, they highlight the value of involving those affected in decision-making to create more inclusive, effective solutions.

EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE IN EPOCH: A REALITY CHECK

By **Silvia Busi**, on behalf of Khadim Diagne, and the Experts by Experience group, EPOCH Practice officer

The Experts by Experience is a group of ten people each with lived experience of homelessness working together with the EPOCH Practice Team to ensure that the voices of people experiencing homelessness are heard, their points of view are taken into account, and that the activities of EPOCH Practice are founded on the reality of the situation and delivered in an inclusive and respectful way.

The group is diverse in age and nationality. The youngest participant is 20 years old and the oldest 67 and they come from eight countries: Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Finland and Greece. They have all experienced homelessness in different ways and bring variety to the group, representing the manifold realities of those who experience homelessness.

One participant in the group defined it as an octopus; each individual shares the experience of homelessness, however, they are so different that each one is like a different tentacle.

Khadim, one of the members of the group says:

"The phenomenon of homelessness represents one of the most dramatic forms of social exclusion in our times. Behind every person living on the street, there is a story of suffering, missed opportunities, and potential rebirth. Overcoming this condition does not just mean finding a roof over one's head but giving people the chance to reintegrate into society and contribute to its functioning.

I was born in Senegal. At 16, my family decided to bring me to Italy, where my older sister and my uncle lived, with the idea of studying and then returning to my country. However, the reality was very different from what I had imagined: my relationship with my uncle broke down, and at 17, I found myself having to live in a state of housing insecurity.

EPOCH Practice Experts by experience group - Milan, October 2024

It was a hard and frightening experience, but I was fortunate to meet people who invested time and resources to help me.

Thanks to their support, I was able to get back on my feet and rebuild my life. This experience allowed me to see up close how important social assistance is for those in vulnerable situations. I experienced housing insecurity firsthand, but I also witnessed the transformative power of solidarity.

Social services often represent the first step toward social reintegration. They offer not only material support systems. It is through the work of social operators and communities that many people manage to overcome moments of great difficulty and rebuild an independent life.

Today, I work as an operator at the Casa della Caritá and I am a member of the Experts by Experience group in EPOCH Practice. My commitment is to give back what I have received. I want to be a point of reference for those in difficulty, offering a helping hand to those in vulnerable situations. I believe that, even in the most challenging circumstances, there is always the possibility of starting over.

Addressing the issue of homelessness does not just mean providing a roof. It is about rebuilding lives, restoring dignity, and offering concrete opportunities for a better future. Social services, along with community resources, are fundamental in this transformative process.

Let us build together a more inclusive society, where no one is left behind and where everyone has the opportunity to realise their potential, regardless of where they start from."

"Overcoming this condition does not just mean finding a roof over one's head but giving people the chance to reintegrate into society and contribute to its functioning."

To achieve that, the group is working on advocating for the greater participation of people with lived experience in discussions around the topic of homelessness, in policy design, and in service delivery.

Experts by experience and peer workers are fundamental because they know the reality of the group. They know the language and body language of people experiencing homelessness and can both understand it and "translate" it for others. They have the empathy necessary to build a trustworthy relationship with service users. They know how to get the right proximity, ensure dignity, and advocate for participation with respect.

The group wants to demonstrate to all stakeholders involved in the fight against homelessness that listening to people with lived experience and their opinions, learning from them, getting their advice, and working with them as peer workers, is not just possible *but fundamental* to tackling the problem. There is a wealth of expertise there to be used and not wasted.

For all these reasons, the group is currently developing the content of various activities to be delivered to stakeholders, intending to provide tools to reach these goals.

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