

# 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  
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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 policy-makers, practitioners and service providers so that they can improve their strategies.



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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 work-stream 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.

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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.

