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."

---

[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.