

EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE IN EPOCH: A REALITY CHECK

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.



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 - Vienna, 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 Carità 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.”

“We need to be more participatory. We must be present at the demonstrations for housing and better living conditions. We must be listened to in order to improve our condition and get out of homelessness.”



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.

“Because on the street, only homeless people, no matter how many rights they had, were left out.”