

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 Combating 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.

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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.

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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.

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