

Expert Group and Intersessional Thematic Meeting on: **Definition of Homelessness**

OEWG-H process

The Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H) was established pursuant to resolution 2/7 on Adequate Housing for All, adopted by the UN-Habitat Assembly in 2023. Accordingly, the first session of the OEWG-H was held at the headquarters of UN-Habitat in Nairobi on 9-11 December 2024. The elected co-chairs, France and Kenya, developed a road map for 2025 which includes virtual intersessional meetings to pursue the work on the identified priority thematic areas, and a second meeting of the Working Group (OEWG-H2) to be held in 2025.

In June 2025, virtual intersessional thematic meetings were held for each of the four topics: Housing Finance, Tenure Security, Informal Settlements, and Social Housing. Member states made observations and recommendations on each theme. The draft recommendations will be presented at the second session of the OEWG-H, scheduled to take place in Nairobi from 22 to 23 October 2025.

A second round of virtual intersessional thematic meetings will take place in September. There will be two sessions for each topic to cater for different time zones, according to the following schedule:

- **Sustainability:** 16th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic) and 4:00-7:00 pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)
- **Definition of Homelessness:** 17th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic)
- **Definition of Informal Settlements:** 17th September 2025 at 4:00-7:00pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)
- **Monitoring framework:** 18th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic) and 4:00-7:00 pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)

The recommendations from the sessions held in September will be presented at the third session of the OEWG-H in 2026. Similar processes will take place in the following years, and a comprehensive set of housing policy recommendations will be presented at the third session of the Habitat Assembly in 2029. Such recommendations will already guide policy reform at the country level before 2029 and will inform other key multilateral processes.

Objectives of the meeting

The meeting intends to review and provide inputs to the information contained in this paper, including:

1. Map existing definitions of homelessness
2. Identify core elements of a harmonised, inclusive and culturally sensitive definition of homelessness
3. Key considerations and approaches for monitoring homelessness

The homelessness challenge

Homelessness is one of the most visible manifestations of poverty, and inequality in our societies. It reflects not only a failure of housing systems but also a profound denial of human dignity and human rights. As noted by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, homelessness "is a profound assault on dignity, social inclusion and the right to life. It is a prima facie violation of the right to housing and violates a number of other human rights [...], including non-discrimination, health, water and sanitation, security of the person and freedom from cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment".¹ This understanding has been affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in resolutions such as A/RES/76/133 and A/RES/78/172.

Homelessness intersects with a range of global challenges - poverty, inequality and social exclusion - and is increasingly recognised by Human Rights Mechanisms (through the UN Human Rights Index) as a major barrier to achieving SDG11 on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities, achieving poverty reduction (SDG1), addressing structural inequality (SDG 10), ensuring access to justice (SDG 16), to health and well-being (SDG3) and to gender equality (SDG5). Yet, despite growing recognition of its structural drivers, homelessness continues to be shaped by persistent stigma and misconceptions which frame it as a result of individual failure or behaviour. This is reinforced by the fact that homelessness remains underrepresented in global development agendas and under-measured in national statistics

A key reason for this gap in visibility and response is the absence of a shared international definition. Without agreement of what constitutes homelessness, efforts to measure, compare, and address it remain fragmented. Definitions vary widely across countries and institutions, shaped by cultural, linguistic, and policy contexts. As a result, many affected people and groups, especially those who avoid visible homelessness due to safety concerns, cultural stigma, or mistrust of services, are often excluded from official counts and policy responses.

The UN Secretary-General's report on Inclusive policies and programmes to address homelessness² along with General Assembly resolutions 76/133 and 78/123, recognise this challenge and call for improved data collection. This includes gathering disaggregated data and the harmonising measurement methods across countries to strengthen both national and global policy responses.

The challenge of measuring homelessness

UN-Habitat estimates that more than 300 million people worldwide are currently experiencing homelessness. Yet, existing data largely capture only visible or street homelessness, failing to reflect the full extent of the phenomenon. Many people living in precarious, temporary, or overcrowded conditions—such as those couch-surfing, residing in informal dwellings, or staying in unregistered accommodations—are excluded from official statistics. This “hidden homelessness” remains largely invisible to policymakers and housing strategies.

Key gaps include the lack of harmonised definitions, which leads to inconsistent and incomparable data, and the limited scope of data collection, often restricted to shelters or those on the streets.

¹ Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing (A/HRC/43/43, para.30)

² A/78/236 – paragraph 81 and 82a

Women and children are particularly undercounted, as they tend to rely on informal networks or remain in unsafe situations due to safety concerns, stigma, or discrimination.

Only a limited number of countries regularly produce disaggregated data on homelessness, and even fewer apply comprehensive typologies that reflect its diverse forms. The absence of comprehensive and standardized data hinders efforts to fully understand and address the issue, undermines accountability, and hampers efforts to track progress toward inclusive housing goals.

Beyond technical improvements, measurement must be grounded in a human rights approach. As emphasized by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, defining and measuring homelessness should prioritise people in the most vulnerable situations, while also recognising the agency of people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness cannot be fully understood through the absence of shelter alone. It also entails the loss of stability, security, and social connections—a condition many people describe as central to their experience. These social dimensions are rarely captured in current metrics but are essential to building inclusive and effective responses.

At the same time, caution is needed not to conflate all forms of inadequate housing with homelessness. While over one billion people live in informal settlements many have established a sense of home, and most do not consider themselves as experiencing homelessness. However, within these contexts, some people living in particularly unsafe, overcrowded, or precarious situations with no viable alternatives and may reasonably be understood—and may self-identify—as experiencing homelessness. Definitions and measurements must be nuanced enough to reflect this complexity.

Why do we need a definition of Homelessness?

While there is growing consensus around a broader conceptual definition of homelessness—one that goes beyond rough sleeping to include people living in shelters, displaced households, survivors of domestic violence, and others in precarious situations—there is still no internationally agreed operational definition. This lack of agreement has led to the use of multiple typologies, making it difficult to compare data, assess progress and align responses across countries.

Defining homelessness has implications on who qualifies for support, which living arrangements are deemed inadequate, and how resources are allocated. It also shapes eligibility criteria for assistance and the design of policy and programming. Consistent definitions are necessary for effective data collection, monitoring trends, and ensuring accountability. When definitions are narrow or inconsistent, responses become fragmented, making it harder to measure progress or evaluate interventions. Definitions also serve as a foundation for advocacy, enabling governments, civil society, and international actors to align their efforts and language.

Two aspects are essential to any definition. The conceptual aspect establishes a shared understanding of homelessness as a multidimensional, rights-based issue, creating a common language for global dialogue and advocacy while clarifying boundaries with related conditions such as informal settlements or inadequate housing. The operational aspect translates this framing into measurable categories for data collection, monitoring, and policymaking. These categories must be flexible enough to reflect local contexts while allowing comparability across regions and countries.



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I. Guiding questions for the Expert Group Meeting

1. How is homelessness measured in your country? What are the lessons that you wish to be shared from this approach?
2. What are the essential elements that should be included in a global definition of homelessness?
3. Which operational definition can ensure localized data collection and comparability across national contexts?
4. Is there any technological innovation that can improve data collection?