

Two out of three EU countries do not measure energy poverty but a new observatory launched on Monday (29 January) should provide member states with the information they need to address a problem that could affect more than 100 million people in Europe, says the chair of the EU's Energy Poverty Observatory.

Faced with a lack of information about the widespread problem of energy poverty, the European Commission has launched a new website intended to raise awareness, provide information and dispel misconceptions about the phenomenon.

EU energy Commissioners Maroš Šefčovič and Miguel Arias Cañete attended the launch of the Observatory, which is led by Dr Harriet Thomson and Professor Stefan Bouzarovski. Stefan Bouzarovski is the chair of the Energy Poverty Observatory and a professor of geography at the University of Manchester.

He spoke to EURACTIV's energy and environment reporter, Sam Morgan.

What exactly is the EU energy poverty observatory and what does it aim to achieve?

It is an information hub to share data, knowledge and best practices on energy poverty in the European Union. The key element of the Observatory is an interactive website providing data on the extent and structure of energy poverty in Europe, as well as a repository of knowledge resources and events. More widely, it aims to help grow and strengthen a network of practitioners, decision-makers and researchers working on energy poverty.

Does the observatory hope to influence policy-making indirectly or will it have a more direct role in the process?

The Observatory is, in essence, a decision-support tool. We are a service to policy-makers working at different tiers of government: from the local to the European. We aim to provide a variety of resources that will raise awareness of the issue and facilitate the implementation of energy poverty amelioration programmes.

Energy poverty is closely tied to energy efficiency and buildings: what are your thoughts on the agreement reached on the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive last year? Is it ambitious enough to address the problems your work highlights?

The higher the renovation and energy efficiency targets are set within EU directives, the more we are likely to see a reduction in energy poverty rates. I am aware that these issues are highly politically contentious, however, and there has been a tendency to water down targets that were initially proposed as obligatory. In terms of the EPBD, it is very good that, as far as I understand, there will be an explicit commitment to reduce energy poverty by addressing renovations in older buildings. The requirement to establish long-term renovation strategies is also very important.

Energy poverty affects Europe in diverse ways due to factors like climate. How easy is it,

with that in mind, to legislate across the board? Croatia and Finland (for example) will have different needs but will fall under the same laws.

I agree that energy poverty is contextual and complex to capture through blanket policies. However, it is possible to address its causes via EU level legislation and policy.

Energy inefficient homes and appliances are one of the key drivers of energy poverty, and there is a lot that still can be done on that front. Opportunities also exist for reducing energy poverty via smart urban development. And there is significant room for integrating energy poverty targets within, for instance, building renovation and energy efficiency efforts, utility regulation as well as cohesion policy.

We've seen other areas of public interest receive a boost in attention and support due to exposure. For example, plastic pollution because of BBC's Blue Planet documentary or climate change after the Paris Agreement. Does energy poverty need to come up with some sort of a landmark wake-up call to get people to take it more seriously?

It is important to remember that energy poverty is not only about space heating, but also includes the affordability of, and access to, other types of energy services - space cooling, lighting, appliances and even information technology.

If a dramatic wake-up call were to happen, I think it will be connected to the health effects of a summer heatwave, rather than problems related to space heating in winter. In Europe, summer heatwave events are increasingly more frequent and intense due to climate change - just remember last summer's 'Lucifer'!

If public opinion connects energy poverty to inadequate domestic cooling among vulnerable groups during a hazardous summer heatwave, this could become a turning point for transforming public awareness of the problem.

You aim to facilitate the sharing of knowledge between countries through the Observatory. Which member states do you think can offer the most useful best practices and advice to others?

Our Observatory offers a repository of policies and measures categorised according to country, type of measure, target groups, financing method and energy carrier.

From that repository, you can see that best practice to address energy poverty exists throughout the EU, even if traditionally, north west member states such as Ireland, France and the UK have been at the vanguard of energy poverty policy.

I would also add that many Central European countries - particularly the Czech Republic and Poland - have made major strides in making wholesale improvements to the energy efficiency of their housing stock, and this has aided the reduction of energy poverty.

You also want to improve transparency. Could you be more specific on where transparency

is most needed, is it an EU-level issue or a national problem?

Here, I understand improving 'transparency' more broadly - basically ensuring that information on how to measure, monitor and combat energy poverty is readily available.

There are vast differences among member states in this regard...

I would say that part of the problem is that in some countries, energy poverty is considered a subset of income poverty - this clashes with my own position, which sees energy poverty as a distinct form of material deprivation, that of course has a strong income dimension but is not limited to it.

I could say that EU-level institutions are among the most transparent on this topic, as relevant information and reports are easily available to all interested parties and there is a more comprehensive understanding of energy poverty.

Source: euractiv.com