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PROPOSAL TO DECLARE AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR  
DEVOTED TO THE PROBLEMS OF THE HOMELESS

Report of the Executive Director

SUMMARY

The introduction to the report outlines the proposal made by the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka at the thirty-fifth session of the General Assembly to declare an international year of the homeless and describes the action taken by the General Assembly on this proposal. Chapter I deals with the proclamation of the international year and its relevance to the purposes of the United Nations as a priority universal concern requiring action at the national, regional and global levels; it also deals with the proposed date and objectives of the year. Chapter II refers to activities preceding the proclamation, including action by the Commission, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly; it also covers financing and organization. Chapter III outlines the formalities of proclamation, the contribution of the year to international efforts, and measures and activities at the global, regional and national level. Chapter IV refers to the evaluation of the year, the impact of the year on current and future activities and the procedures for evaluation.

## INTRODUCTION

1. On 29 September 1980, at the thirty-fifth session of the General Assembly, the Rt. Hon. R. Premadasa, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, formally introduced a proposal for an international year of the homeless. The central theme of his address was that the world was facing a situation of general crisis and that the root cause of that world crisis could be the lack of a moral approach to problems of international understanding. In that context, he touched on several basic issues related to the reconstruction of world society and pointed out that the world could not have a new international economic order to achieve justice between nations while retaining an old economic order which allowed exploitation of disadvantaged groups at the national level.
2. In that connexion, the Prime Minister saw the provision of adequate housing as a basic aspect of the global assault on poverty and of the creation of an adequate living environment for all people. He pointed out that urban poverty, congestion and squalor were problems common to many of the developing countries, and he referred to the depressing situation affecting millions of people with regard to nutrition, employment, infant mortality rates, educational opportunities, health care, drinking water distribution and other basic needs. He concluded by saying that housing provided a key to the solution of several of those problems. The problem of housing was a global one, and he therefore called for the declaration of an international year committed to homes for the homeless. The year might be specially focused on the rehabilitation of shanty-dwellers, since the replacement of shanties with decent housing lay at the very core of development and represented an investment in mankind.
3. Acting on the Prime Minister's proposal, the General Assembly adopted resolution 35/76 expressing the view that an international year devoted to the problems of homeless people in urban and rural areas in the developing countries could be an appropriate occasion to focus the attention of the international community on those problems. The General Assembly therefore requested the Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements to report, after appropriate consultations with Governments, to the Economic and Social Council, through the Commission on Human Settlements at its fourth session, on the implications of declaring an international year, which would be committed to homes for the poor and the homeless and would focus world-wide attention on the rehabilitation of the shanty-dweller, taking into account the guidelines for future international years adopted by the Council in its resolution 1980/67 of 25 July 1980 and approved by the General Assembly in decision 35/424 of 5 December 1980, and in accordance also with the goals and objectives of the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade in the social field.
4. The Executive Director has held informal consultations with a number of Governments to obtain their reaction to the proclamation of an international year of the homeless.<sup>1/</sup> The secretariat of UNCHS (Habitat) has reviewed the experience of previous international years and has examined proposals for other international years in the near future. In particular, the Executive Director

<sup>1/</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term "homeless" includes people without any shelter at all and those who live in shelter unfit for human habitation, as determined by the country or locality concerned. The title "international year of the homeless" is, of course, provisional.

has reviewed the criteria and guidelines for the proclamation of international years adopted by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1980/67 of 25 July 1980 and approved by the General Assembly in its decision 35/424 adopted at its thirty-fifth session. The contents and structure of the present report are based on these guidelines and criteria. This format, which may be changed at a later stage, has been adopted in order to facilitate the discussion of the proposal by the Commission and to seek the views of Member States on this matter.

## I. PROCLAMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE HOMELESS

### Relevance of the international year

5. The proclamation of an international year of the homeless would be fully consistent with the purposes and principles of the United Nations. In particular, it would fall within the intention of Article 1, paragraph 3 of the Charter which deals with the need for international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character.

6. Reference can also be made to other basic instruments of the United Nations. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its article 25, cites adequate housing as one of the principal factors for human health and well-being: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services ..."

### A priority concern

7. In the past, the provision of adequate shelter for the poor and the homeless was seen primarily as a charitable humanitarian concern. More recently, this concern has begun to be seen in a broader social context involving such issues as social justice in the sharing of the benefits arising from national development, public participation in decision-making and in national development through communal, self-help and individual efforts, and the provision of health, educational and other social services on an equitable basis, with emphasis on the needs of the poor. These social issues are related to the cultural and spatial aspects of providing adequate shelter for the homeless, since the design of individual houses and neighbourhoods should allow for the preservation and enhancement of national cultural values and traditions. The construction of houses also often involves decisions relating to the preservation of historical buildings and monuments and to the relationship between houses and cultural and recreational amenities.

8. Recently, great stress has been laid on the contribution of human settlements to over-all national economic development. The provision of adequate shelter on the requisite scale can certainly contribute to economic development through the generation of employment in the construction industry and in related fields in the formal and informal sectors, through capital formation and the mobilization of resources, and through the effective utilization of local building materials and technologies. The political significance of the subject lies in the fact that large segments of the population without adequate shelter may constitute a potential and increasingly real threat to the political stability of an area or a nation. In a very real sense, the homeless poor represent tangible proof of the failure of existing programmes and institutions and serve as a daily reminder of the failure to meet one of the basic needs of the population.

9. Only a few years ago, most national development policies and plans gave little or no priority to the problems of slum and squatter areas, even though an increasingly large number of people lived in such areas. There was a common tendency on the part of public officials to believe that slums and squatter settlements would disappear without any special action by government. In some cases, when action was taken, it took the form of removing the inhabitants by force and destroying the meagre shelters they had managed to provide for themselves. It has now been established that the problems of the homeless, particularly those in slum and squatter settlements, cannot be solved simply by ignoring them or by enforcing wholesale relocation.

#### A universal concern

10. The provision of homes for the poorest segments of the population is a subject of vital concern in all countries, regardless of their economic and social systems. In the developing countries particularly, the problem has reached crisis proportions. It is not uncommon to find cities in the developing world with more than 50 per cent of their population living in slums and squatter areas, known variously as barriada (Peru), gececondu (Turkey), chica (Ethiopia), bidonvilles (French-speaking Africa) or shanty towns (English-speaking Asia and Africa). The magnitude and complexity of the problem have created a need for concerted national action and substantial international co-operation and assistance.

11. An international year of the homeless would draw world attention to the dire need to improve the settlements of the millions of poor living in urban and rural slums and squatter areas. The provision of homes for the homeless provides a unique, visible and practical focus for co-ordinated and concerted action by individuals, organizations, Governments and the international community. It would of course be unrealistic to assume that all problems could be solved within a period of five to ten years. Nevertheless, the proclamation of an international year of the homeless could set in motion a continuing process which, in some countries at least, would lead to the solution of the problems of the homeless. Information on successful measures and on the experience of these countries could then be disseminated to other countries.

#### Action at the national, regional and global levels

12. An international year of the homeless would automatically call for action at the national, regional and global levels. The main focus of an international year would be at the national level, the aim being to marshal political will, to mobilize human, material and financial resources and to undertake a concerted programme of actions. At the regional level, the main effort would be directed towards facilitating exchanges of information and experience. At the global level, an intergovernmental body could provide over-all co-ordination of the programmes and activities of the international year. It could report to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly during the preparatory process and on the results achieved at the end of the international year.

13. An international year of the homeless would provide an opportunity for assessing and evaluating existing policies, strategies, plans and programmes at the national, regional and global levels. This evaluation process would in turn allow a rethinking of policies and strategies, thereby promoting a renewed commitment to effective implementation. An international year would also set the stage for further action in this field over the next 20 years. Follow-up activities would include research, exchanges of information and the provision of direct technical and financial assistance to the developing countries.

Proposed date

14. At present, the following international years and world conferences have been officially proclaimed or proposed:

- 1981 - International Year of Disabled Persons
- 1982 - World Assembly on Aging
- 1983 - World Communications Year
- 1984
- 1985 - International Youth Year
- 1986

It would appear, therefore, that either 1984 or 1986 would be suitable for an international year of the homeless. Given the complexity of the subject and the need to make preparatory arrangements and secure the necessary resources, a definite decision should be made as early as possible, and preferably at the thirty-sixth session of the General Assembly.

The objective of an international year of the homeless

15. The main focus of an international year, if proclaimed, should be on the provision of shelter and the improvement of living conditions for the inhabitants of urban slums and squatter areas and for the rural poor of the developing world. In addition, attention should be paid to other groups of homeless such as: (a) refugees fleeing from their homeland (thought to number 10 million, with 5 million in Africa alone) and refugees returning to their countries for resettlement; (b) victims of natural disasters awaiting post-disaster rehabilitation; (c) nomadic and semi-nomadic groups; (d) transient workers and new migrants; (e) special-need groups such as the aged, the handicapped, young people and children. Special emphasis should be placed on the participation of women in the international year, since the majority of women are still house-bound. Many current activities focused on these groups would have to be co-ordinated with the activities of the international year and, conversely, some of the activities undertaken as a part of the international year would contribute to the objectives of these other various programmes.

16. The primary objectives of an international year would be:
- (a) To enable the homeless poor and other vulnerable groups in urban and rural settlements to secure adequate shelter;
  - (b) To focus world attention on their situation, needs and present efforts to build, maintain and improve their own shelters and neighbourhoods;
  - (c) To demonstrate how national and international support could accelerate the provision of houses for the homeless and contribute to national economic and social development;
  - (d) To assess and improve present policies, programmes and institutional and management capacities at the national and local levels to meet the needs of the poor in respect of adequate shelter;
  - (e) To develop, test and disseminate information on training programmes aimed at helping the poor to acquire the organizational and manual skills require to build, maintain and improve their own shelters and neighbourhoods.

An essential feature of the programme would concern the effective mobilization of the manpower and financial and material resources of the homeless themselves, whose efforts would be encouraged and supplemented through national and international assistance. Another essential feature would concern the role of an international year of the homeless in the context of the new International Development Strategy and ongoing national economic and social development.

17. An international year of the homeless would also provide an opportunity to assess the progress made by Member States in the realization of relevant sections of the Vancouver Declaration and the recommendations for national action of the Habitat Conference. The impact of the Habitat Conference has so far been felt largely in terms of national and international policies and strategies. However, the Commission on Human Settlements has recognized the need for concrete action in respect of shelter, infrastructure and services, since there is an area of activity in which direct impact is possible in terms of improving the living conditions of the poor segments of the population. When the Habitat Conference was held, no provision was made for the celebration of an international day or year in conjunction with it. An international year of the homeless would be the first such year devoted to the provision of homes for the homeless in the broader context of human settlements development and improvement.

#### Habitat Day

18. In view of the diversity and complexity of the problem and the need to stimulate and co-ordinate national, regional and global action involving the participation of the entire United Nations system, Governments, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, a full year should be devoted to this theme. A month, a week or a day would not suffice. It is, however, suggested that, during the international year of the homeless, one day should be designated as International Habitat Day or World Habitat Day in order to provide a symbolic climax to the activities undertaken during the preparatory process and during the international year itself.

## II. ACTIVITIES PRECEDING THE PROCLAMATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE HOMELESS

### Action by legislative bodies

19. According to the guidelines established by the General Assembly, a final decision on a proposal for an international year should be taken by the General Assembly not earlier than one full year after the introduction of the proposal, thus allowing the views of all Member States to be taken into account and allowing the competent organs to make a thorough assessment of the proposal in the light of its practical desirability and the probability of real results. The legislative action described below would be required.

#### (a) Action by the Commission

20. The Commission should consider the present report at its fourth session. The Executive Director of UNCHS (Habitat) would then revise the report in the light of the views expressed by the Commission and submit it, together with possible decisions and recommendations of the Commission, to the Economic and Social Council at its second regular session of 1981, which is scheduled to take place in Geneva from 1 to 24 July 1981.

#### (b) Action by the Economic and Social Council

21. The Economic and Social Council would consider the report at its second regular session of 1981 and submit it, together with its comments and decisions, to the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session, which will be held in New York from September to December 1981.

#### (c) Action by the General Assembly

22. After the finalization of proposals for an international year by the secretariat and their consideration by the Second Committee, a statement would be prepared on the financial implications of the year. The administrative and budgetary aspects of the international year would then be considered by the Fifth Committee.

### Financing

23. According to the guidelines established by the General Assembly, an international year should not be proclaimed before the basic arrangements necessary for its financing have been made, and such financing should in principle be based on voluntary contributions. While the cost of an international year of the homeless would have to be worked out after agreement had been reached on the types of activities to be carried out, it is clear that all the existing posts in the UNCHS (Habitat) manning table have been justified on the basis of the approved work programme. Moreover, in view of the present level of voluntary contributions to the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation, it would be difficult to finance the preparatory work for an international year of the homeless from the resources of the Foundation. Accordingly, additional resources and a separate budget devoted exclusively to the international year would be required.

### Organization

24. The guidelines established by the General Assembly require that a year should not be proclaimed before the basic arrangements necessary for its organization have been made. At the intergovernmental level, the Commission on Human Settlements could act as the intergovernmental body responsible for guiding the work of the secretariat and reporting to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council. The Commission could hold one-day or two-day special sessions immediately before its regular sessions.

25. At the secretariat level, it is assumed that UNCHS (Habitat) would be designated as lead agency for an international year of the homeless and that a small secretariat, headed by a senior officer reporting to the Executive Director of UNCHS (Habitat), would be established to work solely on activities related to the year. It would also be necessary to establish focal points in the specialized agencies and in organizations whose work and activities would have a bearing on the international year. Focal points would also be established in the regional commissions. Provision would have to be made for a meeting of these various focal points at least once a year.

26. The regional commissions would be the organizations responsible for co-ordinating the activities of the international year at the regional level, while national committees would be organized at the country level. Intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations would be expected to play an important role at all levels.

### III. CELEBRATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE HOMELESS

#### Proclamation of an international year of the homeless

27. According to the General Assembly guidelines, there should be a period of two years between the proclamation of an international year and the beginning of that year. Accordingly, as indicated above, if 1984 is to be designated as the international year of the homeless, the General Assembly will have to make the appropriate decision at its thirty-sixth session in 1981. If 1986 is to be designated as the international year of the homeless, the formal proclamation should be made in 1983 or earlier, because there are great advantages in an early announcement in terms of making the necessary arrangements and preparations at the national, regional and global levels.

#### Practical contribution of an international year of the homeless to international development efforts

28. There is no doubt that an international year of the homeless would make a practical and significant contribution to international development efforts. It may be recalled that one of the issues which the Commission examined at its third session was the relationship between human settlements and the new International Development Strategy. In this connection, the Commission adopted its resolution 3/2 recommending to the General Assembly, through the Preparatory Committee for the New International Development Strategy, that it should include human settlements development as a distinct and intrinsically important framework of development efforts recommended for commitment by all Governments for improvement of the quality of life.



29. The contribution that human settlements programmes can make to over-all socio-economic development, particularly through the multiplier effect of construction activities and the capacity to generate employment and incomes, is very significant. Furthermore, human settlements activities lend themselves well to the promotion of the important social objective of the equitable distribution of the benefits of economic development. Few more effective ways can be found for extending the fruits of national economic progress to the urban and rural homeless poor than providing adequate shelter, infrastructure and services - drinking water, sewerage, transportation, energy, health care and education. These services have an immediate and positive effect on the quality of life and on environmental conditions.

Measures and activities at the international level

30. As indicated above, in order to have its full impact, an international year of the homeless would require activities at the national, regional and global levels. There follows a partial list of possible activities that might be undertaken. This list would be revised after further consultations with Member States, specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system and in the light of the volume of resources that might eventually become available for the international year.

Global level

31. Possible activities at the global level would include:

(a) Consultations with Governments on the objectives, scope and activities of an international year of the homeless;

(b) Consultations within the United Nations system and with inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned;

(c) The preparation of documentation for and the servicing of inter-governmental bodies (e.g. the Commission on Human Settlements, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly), as appropriate;

(d) Promotional and information activities;

(e) Research into specific problems of the homeless, including the preparation of guidelines for use at the national level;

(f) The training of national officials to undertake activities related to the international year;

(g) The co-ordination and provision of financial and technical assistance for some developing countries, upon request, to help ensure their full participation in the international year;

(h) The identification and organization of one main event during the international year to represent the climax of the international effort, e.g. a "Habitat Day" or an "International Forum";

(i) The evaluation of the results and impact of the international year and the submission of a report to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council after the conclusion of the year;

(j) The monitoring of the results of the international year on a continuing basis with a view to introducing necessary changes in regular human settlements programmes.

Regional level

32. Possible activities at the regional level would include:

(a) The assessment of regional policies and strategies having a bearing on the international year;

(b) The organization of seminars, meetings and workshops for the benefit of national officials responsible for activities related to the international year;

(c) The analysis of country reports on activities related to the international year and the dissemination of the resulting information to the countries of the region and to the international secretariat;

(d) Support for global and national activities;

(e) Follow-up action to monitor progress and to disseminate the results of the international year among the countries of the region.

National level

33. Possible activities at the national level would include:

(a) The establishment of national committees for the international year to co-ordinate all national activities and to liaise with regional and inter-regional bodies and organizations;

(b) The preparation of national reports to assess the current situation of the homeless and to identify programmes and projects of high priority to be undertaken before, during and after the international year;

(c) Research into building materials, designs, technologies standards and codes particularly relevant to the homeless;

(d) The mobilization of financial and human resources to provide homes for the homeless and to promote community development based on self-help techniques and the full participation of the homeless themselves;

(e) The implementation of specific projects with a built-in evaluation and information component to measure results in quantifiable terms (e.g. number of dwellings improved or built, number of people affected, number of jobs created, amount of training provided and improvement of living conditions in specific respects);

(f) The issuing of commemorative stamps and medallions, the awarding of prizes, and other similar activities of a promotional nature to focus attention on the problems of the homeless;

(g) The preparation of films and reports to publicize successful methods and techniques with a view to applying them on a wider basis, adapting them as necessary in the light of local circumstances.

#### IV. EVALUATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE HOMELESS

##### Identifiable and practical results

34. According to the guidelines established by the General Assembly, each international year should have objectives likely to lead to identifiable and practical results. The subject of an international year of the homeless is eminently suitable in this respect, since the real success of the year would be measured by quantifying, in each country, the number of dwellings built or improved within a given period of time, as well as the number of families affected indirectly by projects involving training and technical assistance. Other indicators would be established to measure numbers of jobs created, increases in the income of the homeless, improvements in the provision of water and sanitation, increases in the use of local building materials, numbers of training opportunities provided, etc.

##### Impact on current and future activities

35. An important aspect of the evaluation process would involve assessing the impact of activities during the preparatory period and during the year itself. Activities continuing after the year and attributable to it would be identified and reported on with a view to ensuring their integration, as appropriate, into the future medium-term plans and programme budgets of the United Nations system. Similar exercises would be encouraged at the national level to ensure that the year did not become an event confined to a single year but generated a continuing process focused on the problems of the homeless.

##### Procedures for evaluation

36. Procedures for evaluation would include the assessment of results at the country level, and this would be the responsibility of the national committees. However, international assistance would be provided in the form of guidelines and procedures, and in some cases it might be necessary to provide national authorities with technical assistance as well. The results of national assessments would then be synthesized at the regional level, and, finally, a consolidated report would be prepared. As required by the General Assembly guidelines, these procedures would be established during the preparatory process and would form part of the implementation and follow-up of the year.

37. A final report would be prepared and submitted to the Commission on Human Settlements and to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council. If 1984 were to be designated as the international year, this report would be submitted in 1985. If 1986 was proclaimed as the international year, the report would be submitted in 1987.

#### V. CONCLUSION

38. The proclamation of an international year of the homeless would have a profound and far-reaching impact on the lives of millions of families with no or inadequate shelter in urban slums and squatter settlements. An international year of the homeless would also help to focus world attention on the plight of other homeless groups, including refugees fleeing from their homeland, refugees returning for

resettlement and victims of natural disasters awaiting post-disaster rehabilitation. In addition to its social and humanitarian aspects, the provision of homes for the homeless would make a significant contribution to national development through the generation of employment and through the mobilization of human, financial and material resources.

39. For an international year of the homeless to realize its full potential, there would be a need for adequate time for preparatory activities, sufficient resources to carry out a range of activities at the national, regional and global levels, and the commitment of the entire world community, including Governments, the United Nations system and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.