Economic and Social Council

Commission for Social Development
Fifty-eighth session
10–19 February 2020
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority Theme: Affordable housing and social protection
systems for all to address homelessness

Statement submitted by Reachout and Smile Initiative for Social Empowerment, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

INTRODUCTION

The forces which affect homelessness are complex and often interactive in nature. A number of people are homeless as a result of high cost of rent and as such, homeless people have been found to exhibit high levels of personal disability (mental illness, substance abuse), extreme degrees of social estrangement, and deep poverty. In the 1980s, the number of poor people increased, and the supply of low-income housing dwindled; these trends provide the background against which the homelessness problem has unfolded.

Social forces such as addictions, family breakdown, and mental illness are compounded by structural forces such as lack of available low-cost housing, poor economic conditions, and insufficient mental health services. Together these factors impact levels of homelessness through their dynamic relations. Historic models, which are static in nature, have only been marginally successful in capturing these relationships.

HOW IS AFFORDABLE MEASURED?

Housing affordability can be measured by the changing relationships between house prices and rents, and between house prices and incomes. There has been an increased effort by policy makers in affordable housing as the price of housing has increased dramatically, creating a crisis in affordable housing. Since 2000 the world has experienced an unprecedented house price boom in terms of magnitude and duration, but also of synchronization across countries. Never before have house prices risen so fast, for so long, in so many countries. Prices doubled in many countries and nearly tripled in Ireland. The bursting of the biggest financial bubble in history in 2008 wreaked havoc globally on the housing market. By 2011 home prices in Ireland had plunged by 45% from their peak in 2007. In the United States prices fell by 34% while foreclosures increased exponentially. In Spain and Denmark home prices dropped by 15%. However, in spite of the bust, home prices continue to be overvalued by about 25% or more in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, New Zealand, Britain, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS FOR ALL TO ADDRESS

Affordability is not just about the ability to buy or rent a home, but also about being able to afford to live in it. This definition of affordability goes beyond meeting expenses related to operations and maintenance, taking into consideration transport, infrastructure and services. If a home is economical enough to buy and maintain but located too far from work or school, it cannot be said to be affordable.

The factors contributing to a lack of affordability vary from city-to-city, but broadly include housing costs rising faster than incomes, the supply of houses not keeping up with demand, scarcity of land, and demographic changes such as population growth, ageing and shifts in household composition. Cities where a lot of people spend more than one-third of their income on rent are more likely to experience homelessness crises, according to a new report by a team of researchers from the University of New Hampshire, Boston University, and the University of Pennsylvania. The report, which was released on December 11 and was sponsored by the real estate website Zillow, analyzed 386 real estate markets across the country and found that increases in rent prices in less affordable areas make the homelessness rate rise faster.

Inability to afford housing is the key driver of increases in homelessness. The federal government's most important program to help low-income people afford housing is the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program (including Section 8, HUD-VASH and other tenant-based vouchers that are all included in the Appropriations Committee's Tenant-Based Rental Assistance, or TBRA, account). Leading housing advocates report that 11 million households spend more than one-half of their income on rent. And a recent Harvard study reports that 38.1 million households spend more than one-third of their income on housing. Too many families in both categories are an unexpected bill away from sliding into homelessness.

Social protection systems, including floors, play a key role for the reduction of poverty and inequality and also contribute to preventing homelessness and facilitating access to adequate housing. Homelessness, broadly defined as "living in severely inadequate housing due to a lack of access to minimally adequate housing" (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016, p.125), is a global phenomenon. It affects people in both urban and rural areas, as well as in developed and developing countries. Causes are diverse and include unemployment and poverty, lack of affordable housing, migration, or ill-health. The Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing proposes a three-dimensional approach anchored in human rights:

- Recognizing that homelessness has both a material and social aspect: the lack of minimally adequate housing that would provide a secure place to establish a family of social relationships and participate in community life;

- Recognizing homelessness as a form of systemic discrimination and social exclusion; and

- Recognizing those who are homeless as right holders who are resilient in the struggle for survival and dignity, and as central agents of the social transformation necessary for the realization of the right to adequate housing (UN, 2015).

SDG target 11.1 commits to "ensur[ing] access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums". Despite the fact that the share of the urban population that lives in slums was halved between 1990 and 2014, the absolute number has actually increased as urban population growth is outpacing improvements in slum conditions (UNECOSOC, 2018).

Many countries have already achieved significant progress with regard to achieving universal social protection for at least one area of their social protection system. This includes most high-income countries, as well as a growing number of middle- and low-income countries, including Argentina, Cabo Verde, China, Georgia, Lesotho, Mongolia, Namibia, Nepal, South Africa and Uruguay. However, more efforts are needed to expand coverage and ensure comprehensive and adequate social protection for all, to prevent homelessness and facilitate access to adequate, safe and affordable housing, including for marginalized and vulnerable groups. Such efforts of national and local governments are essential to re-engage and recommit to their role of providing social protection and ensuring access to affordable housing for marginalized and vulnerable groups, reaffirming that housing is a human right rather than a commodity.

It is about time we stop building shelters and start building affordable housing. To reduce homelessness in our society, house owners should be kind hearted enough to reduce house rents so that the low-income earners could afford it thereby reducing the numbers of homeless people on the streets. Labor market interventions, consisting of both active and passive policies, should provide protection for the poor who are capable of gaining employment.

SUMMARY

The right to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living is, as the right to social security, recognized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). The right to social security can contribute to the right to adequate housing.

Addressing the housing affordability challenge requires systematic changes. City governments must streamline their regulatory landscapes and enable transparent land acquisition, emphasize property rights over title, develop a rental regulatory framework to protect tenants as well as landlords, encourage mixed-income and mixed-use housing developments, enable more innovative financing models in developing new homes or upgrading existing homes and encourage skill-building in the construction industry.

The private sector must embrace innovative mechanisms to finance development and help establish the creditworthiness of those looking to improve their housing situation. Employers need to work with communities to provide affordable housing for employees, or help with housing costs through loans, subsidies or mortgage deals. Private developers need to invest in sustainable design concepts to create energy-efficient housing, and improve productivity by mainstreaming 3D Printing, prefabricating components, and using alternative materials and advanced automated equipment.

The non-profit sector also has a key role to play in working with housing providers to implement alternative tenure models, while supporting advocacy efforts, formulating policy and providing technical support, information and know-how to developers and homeowners.