NGO COMMITTEE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

58th Session of the Commission for Social Development CSocD58

"Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness"

CIVIL SOCIETY DECLARATION

A home is one of the most basic human needs, without which a human being must live in precarious circumstances on the streets, under bridges, in slums, or on public lands, in unprotected and unsafe makeshift structures, with limited rights and few means to fulfill their potential. Yet, the number of vulnerable individuals and families living without a home is growing in low, medium, and high-income countries throughout the world. It is a problem beyond borders: it exists in every country and in urban, suburban, and rural contexts.

For the first time in its 75-year history, the United Nations is explicitly addressing global homelessness under the priority theme "Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness."

We welcome the commitment made by Member States in 2019 to implement social protection floors which are fundamental tools for alleviating poverty and a major contributor to the realization of human rights for all, especially the most vulnerable. We are conscious of the need to take the next step and relate housing to social protection systems to provide the security and safety of a home to those trapped in poverty and subject to discrimination.

Let us seize this opportunity to build on the outcomes of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission for Social Development and all prior relevant United Nations commitments to address inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies, including floors.

Let us re-dedicate our efforts to ending homelessness, in all its diverse manifestations and wherever it may occur, as we seek to achieve Agenda 2030.

UNITED NATIONS' CONTEXT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an historic moment for the advancement both of sustainable development and human rights, together. Nowhere is the merit of such an approach more beneficial than in addressing homelessness where Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) articulates the right to adequate housing. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) affirms this right. This is both a development issue, explicitly referenced in SDG 11 and a human rights concern as articulated by the Special Rapporteur in her report to the Human Rights Council on the right to adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and non-discrimination in this context (A/HRC/31/54).

Homelessness cuts across all of the SDGs: eradication of poverty, good health and well-being, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, climate change, and peace, justice and strong institutions. As a global society, we have abandoned, criminalized, and left behind innocent individuals and families through unjust housing policies. All human beings require the safety and security of a home to realize their potential and participate with dignity in society.

The end to homelessness will only come when the global community not only remedies the personal and structural societal causes that drive people to become homeless, but also accepts that homelessness inhibits access to other rights and services needed for survival.

The right to adequate housing means more than just a roof over one's head. Housing must be affordable, safe, secure, and protected from arbitrary eviction, with access to basic services (clean energy, water and sanitation) and available to all, free from discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion, age, or disability. Biased practices and policies disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and exacerbate the risk of homelessness.

GLOBAL ASSESSMENT

Homelessness results from multiple pernicious intersecting factors. The causes are both structural (poverty, inequality, unemployment and under-employment, insecure jobs, discrimination and social exclusion, aging out of youth services for orphans and vulnerable children, lack of affordable housing, the commoditization of housing, forced eviction, urbanization, rural-urban migration, land tenure, displacement due to natural disasters caused by climate change, and conflict) and personal (mental health, domestic violence, substance misuse, chronic or catastrophic illness coupled with a lack of access to healthcare and insurance). Importantly, homelessness of individuals and families is an accelerator for other forms of deprivation including infectious diseases, malnutrition, vulnerability to civil and political violence and human trafficking, among others.

Thus, the systemic and personal drivers of homelessness, together create a vicious cycle that can perpetuate a cycle of intergenerational homelessness. Member States must commit to accelerate full implementation of the SDGs, upholding all human rights, while allocating resources to assist individuals and families in immediate need to end homelessness and stifle the cycle of homelessness. While strongly valuing and recognizing the efforts of numerous organizations around the world addressing the daily pain and struggles of people who are homeless, we believe much more needs to be done at the systemic and structural levels to end this crisis including the upholding of all human rights, the provision of social protection systems including floors, and the availability of affordable housing.

Through the United Nations, Member States are uniquely positioned to end homelessness by mobilizing governmental resources and by calling upon the corporate sector and civil society to work together to create stronger communities and an enabling environment to resolve systemic causes and human rights violations. The United Nations and its agencies must be at the center of this common effort to end homelessness to achieve its goal of ending poverty. Whether it is in devising strategies that incorporate the experiences of homeless people, mobilizing and allocating resources, forming strategic partnerships, or sharing best practices, States can rely on the UN's coordinating mechanisms. The United Nations must devise policies to strengthen the political, economic and social protection of people, especially people in vulnerable situations. The best solution to homelessness is prevention.

The end to global homelessness is contingent on the way Member States understand solution based development. The global development paradigm is largely economic. However, market-based approaches must incorporate a moral and ethical dimension. A developed country is not one with a higher GDP, but one where every person has equal access to contribute to the betterment of their society. In some States, the drivers of homelessness are being dealt with head on, with quantifiable results. Other States must seek and adapt best practices in order to leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind first.

ADOPT A DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The first step in this process is to adopt globally agreed upon language to describe and define homelessness. Different definitions of homelessness create different perceptions of policy priorities. We endorse the proposed definition of the Nairobi Expert Group on ending homelessness with one modification for clarity in bold:

> *"Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty, and a failure of multiple systems and **the implementation of** human rights."*

Using this definition we identify four broad categories of homelessness:
- People living on the streets or other open spaces;
- People living in temporary, emergency or crisis accommodation;
- People living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation; and
- People who lack access to affordable housing.

The first category is characterized by those lacking access to any kind of adequate, safe and sustainable accommodation. These individuals and families are pavement dwellers, sleep on the street, live in open and/or public spaces including parks, streets, or abandoned or public buildings. This category includes people living in cars, rickshaws, boats, or other forms of private and public transportation.

The second category includes persons and families living in temporary, emergency or crisis accommodation: night to night homeless shelters, homeless hostels, domestic violence sanctuaries, refugee and internally displaced persons' camps, or other temporary housing structures. People experiencing this form of homelessness may have some form of short-term safe and secure accommodations, but it is not sustainable. Although there are multiple reasons why someone may require temporary or crisis accommodation, these situations require social protection, respect for human rights, and a proactive plan to ensure a transition to a sustainable living environment.

The third category includes persons and families living in inadequate and insecure accommodations. Persons and families experiencing this category of homelessness may live in accommodations that are designed to be more stable (apartments, hotels, informal settlements, or houses) but have become inadequate, unsafe or unstable. This can mean, for example, living in spaces that have become over-crowded, unsanitary or unfit for human habitation due to landlord neglect of premises, living under the threat of violence or eviction, squatting, "sofa surfing" or doubling-up. The physical building may have nothing to do with the fact that it has become insecure. This is one of the least visible, but most significant, violations as it may appear that people in this category have adequate housing.

According to UN Habitat, land and housing affordability is a critical contemporary challenge, and this is the fourth category laid out above. While in different countries and regions the specificities of the challenge vary, the universal truism is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for low and middle income urban residents to obtain and retain adequate and affordable land and housing. These individuals and families lack the capacity to pay for market value housing. Persons with disabilities, single parent families, especially those headed by women, and ageing populations are represent a substantial part of this group. This requires governments to mobilize in two directions. First, to create affordable and safe housing with enabling strategies such as accommodating tenures, payment flexibility for those with insecure income or in transitional periods, and financial systems that extend credit to these vulnerable populations. Governments should also provide legal counsel to those faced with hardship and complex case issues. Finally, Member States must address or eliminate forced evictions and laws that criminalize or blacklist, persons who are homeless.

Importantly, market changes such as the financialization or commodification of housing are forcing people into homelessness. The consequences of using housing as a vehicle for wealth and investment rather than a social good needs urgent attention. Global capital markets and financial excess are transforming housing and real estate worldwide. The shift from housing as a place to create a home to housing as an investment has been devastating, forcing evictions, especially in low income neighborhoods as they become part of speculative investments. Member States need to regulate investment in residential real estate so investment supports the right to adequate housing and in no way undermines it in fulfilling SDG 11.1.

DEVELOP STANDARDIZED MEASUREMENTS OF HOMELESSNESS

The natural consequence of the lack of a common definition of homelessness, and a second major obstacle, is a shortage of reliable data and research in this field. Countries that do measure homelessness are few and have varying definitions, measurements and capacities. Agreeing to a global definition of homelessness, as recommended by the Nairobi Expert Group and in this declaration, will pave the way for reliable data and comparative measurement. Common taxonomies and methodologies for collecting data and sharing best practices must be developed. We must stand in solidarity with those who have been or currently are homeless and listen to their voices throughout the process since only they have a full grasp of the dramatic circumstances, dimensions and effects of this issue.

Effectively ending global homelessness in all its dimensions will require a strong multilateral commitment to address all its systemic and personal causes and to measure progress. To make this possible, Member States, civil society and the private sector must collaborate. Partnerships, financing, and data collection for accountability are inseparable to effectively address homelessness, including its effects such as disrupting social cohesion, on the path to ending poverty.

Even as extreme poverty has fallen globally, inequality is on the rise and 1.6 billion people still live in poverty. Homelessness must be addressed within existing anti-poverty strategies. Social protection systems and floors have been agreed to during the 57th session. Addressing homelessness must be the next step in this very promising anti-poverty strategy. The international community has identified a variety of options to generate resources to finance basic social protections; it is time to add resources to remedy homelessness and provide adequate and affordable housing for all so that no one is ever locked out or left behind.

CALL TO ACTION

We call upon Member States to:

● Reaffirm the international consensus on housing as a basic human right and a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, as expressed in the UN Declaration of Human Rights Article 25, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Copenhagen Declaration and Program of Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the New Urban Agenda (Habitat), and the Declaration and Program of Action on a Culture of Peace;

● Resolve in the Commission for Social Development and propose to the General Assembly collectively ending the global crisis of homelessness as a major marker of development, a necessary step in the eradication of poverty, and the realization of all the SDGs;

● Adopt the slightly modified definition of homelessness provided by the Nairobi Expert Group as well as appropriate taxonomies and methodologies to this definition that will enable States to measure and address the systemic drivers of homelessness, which cut across the SDGs;

● Agree on collective standard metrics of both quantitative and qualitative data, to coordinate these efforts with the UN Statistical Commission and to comprehensively disaggregate data including a sex, gender, and family- based dimension;

● Consider affordable housing as a related factor in social protection systems and ensure its coordination with Social Protection Floor policies in national legislation concerning cash transfers;

● Establish access to safe education facilities and safe transportation in homeless areas so that children without homes are offered the same access to their right to education as homed children in order to break the poverty and homeless cycle and contribute to the achievement of all SDGs;

● Expand fiscal space and mobilize resources to resolve the crisis of homelessness by increasing services for the personal drivers and addressing the structural drivers, including access to legal counseling, by including it in national budgets, in the understanding that these are necessary measures to reduce poverty and to invest in the future of human capital;

● Listen to the voices and invite the participation of persons experiencing homelessness to jointly create solutions alongside Member States, the private sector and others;

● Take measures to reduce and prevent homelessness as a point of departure to break the cycle of poverty; sharing good practices such as the "Housing First" principle applied by the Y Foundation in Finland which has helped make Helsinki the only large city to officially end homelessness;

● Accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and Social Protection Systems and Floors with the understanding that these are mutually reinforcing and interdependent and that only by a comprehensive strategy will they be achieved by 2030;

- Coordinate efforts within the United Nations and its agencies and establish global partnerships to address the challenges of financing for development, sharing good practices and creating an enabling environment of solidarity around these common objectives;

- Protect people from fast-tracked development programs and the financialization of housing being implemented in the name of sustainable development;

- Enact citizenship, inheritance and ownership laws which are respectful of land rights for women, widows and other discriminated populations,

- Enact legislation to address environmental protection, social protection and housing provisions for victims of forced displacement and natural disasters resulting from corruption, weak legislation and standards, unregulated or insufficient renting, and predatory industries such as lending, mortgage, and extractive industries; and,

- Recognize that the human right to adequate housing must be integrated into all poverty eradication strategies, reaching the furthest behind first, so that no one is locked out, left behind or left homeless in this decade of action to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.