



Multi-stakeholder forum on the priority theme: Sharing solutions

“Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness”

Wednesday, 12 February 2020, 10:00am – 1:00pm

Chair’s Summary

The Commission for Social Development held a multi-stakeholder forum on the priority theme “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness: Sharing solutions”, on 12 February 2020. The keynote speaker was **H.E. Mr. Francisco Delgado**, Vice Minister of Human Development and Social Inclusion of Costa Rica. The panellists were **Mr. Luiz Alvaro Salles Aguiar de Menezes**, Secretary for International Affairs, São Paulo Municipality, Brazil; **Dr. Sam Tsemberis**, Founder and Executive Director of Pathways to Housing, and the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Centre; **Mr. Chris Gardner**, the author of “Pursuit of Happiness”, entrepreneur, single parent, speaker and philanthropist; **Ms. Amanda Misiko Andere**, MPA, Chief Executive Officer, Funders Together to End Homelessness; and **Mr. James Abro**, Author of “Facing Homelessness: a personal memoir of homelessness and recovery. **OBE Mark McGreevy**, Group CEO of DePaul International and founder of the Institute of Global Homelessness at DePaul University moderated the panel.

Causes of homelessness

Many countries have structural factors that create and sustain homelessness. These include the erosion of progressive taxation and cuts in health care and social programmes, such as social housing and social protection, combined with increasing rents or decreasing affordability of housing, particularly in cities. There is a high correlation between level of income inequality and homelessness across the globe.

While there are common factors for homelessness across the globe such as ill-health, job loss, evictions, and domestic violence, structural factors such as unequal access to education, justice and social protection are consistent drivers of homelessness. In certain cases, mass incarceration, especially of young people, is the main cause of homelessness. Homelessness must be addressed urgently, otherwise the situation will become a global catastrophe.

Solutions to reduce homelessness

It is crucial to address the structural causes of homelessness (e.g. inequality, unaffordable housing), instead of responding only to factors affecting each individual homeless person (e.g. healthcare, homeless shelters for individuals). Moreover, programmes should focus on the needs of clients, rather than dictating what the needs of homeless people are. Social exclusion, mental health issues, and substance abuse must be addressed to combat homelessness.

Safe, affordable housing, decent work, as well as addressing prejudice and discrimination in the provision of public services are all essential. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are also crucial for combating homelessness because female-headed households are often at greater risk of homelessness. Similarly, racial inequality must be tackled if homelessness is to end.

In the experience of a panellist who has been homeless, current homeless shelters are not the solution. Such facilities feel and function like a prison where people are screened and searched by uniformed staff in an uncaring environment. The solution is to change the shelters to make them feel more like a home, that is, safe and secure, and provide support that allows homeless people to get back on their feet on their own terms. They should be empowered to lead a full and meaningful life with dignity. Homeless people want personalized support from the government to escape this predicament and should be included in designing the solutions. In order to end homelessness, it is necessary to ask ourselves “what if that was us?”

Specific solutions are needed for young people as their numbers are increasing in the homeless population. In Denmark, for instance, young people under age 30 make up a third of homeless people. In addition to providing support to young people experiencing homelessness, solutions should focus on preventing young people from becoming homeless, understanding why they are homeless, and understanding their needs. Adults can contribute to solving problems faced by young homeless people if they treat them with respect and support them in achieving their potential.

Affordable housing

Homeless shelters are an inadequate response because a home is not just physical housing. Social housing is essential to support families and individuals in vulnerable situations in affording their rent. Housing is an integral part of one’s right to an adequate standard of living, not a commodity. Affordable, accessible, and stable housing is the primary solution. The problem is that presently, houses are increasingly seen as commodities.

Need for a definition and measurement of homelessness?

Several speakers were in favour of having a working definition and global measurement of homelessness. Having a definition of homelessness would assist in collectively addressing homelessness. While definitions could be limiting, they are needed when policies and services for homeless people have to be designed and provided. Reliable and good data are necessary in order to know the target population and if solutions are actually working and achieving the desired outcomes over time.

It was noted that a “one size fits all” approach regarding homelessness does not work. The definition arrived at by the Expert Group Meeting on Homelessness, held in Nairobi in May 2019, provided a typology of homelessness. Such a broad and flexible definition of homelessness, which can be adapted locally, enables all the different actors—States, local governments and NGOs—to share a common language by which they could determine what type of homelessness they are addressing. However, prioritization is still important when trying to define homelessness because of the wide range of homelessness that exists in the world. In addition to being broad and flexible, the definition of homelessness could also be expanded to include those at risk of becoming homeless.

However, the two panellists who have experienced homelessness noted that definitions are not important because the homeless population is fluid and changes every day. What is more important is what is done for homeless people. There is no such thing as homelessness, instead there are individuals who are experiencing displacement.

Public-private alliances

Panellists reiterated the need to build strong alliances between the private and public sectors, noting that governments cannot solve the problem of homelessness on their own. They also noted that while an important piece in the puzzle to reduce homelessness, private philanthropy cannot replace public investment in tackling structural barriers that limit housing supply for all, including vulnerable populations, because it does not have the resources to replace public funding. Therefore, funding of public programmes should not be disrupted.

Genuine public-private partnership models start by identifying where private funds can be leveraged and in turn, spur innovation and collaboration. An alliance between local governments and the private sector is needed to provide pathways to decent work for vulnerable populations, including victims of domestic violence, people with disabilities, and older persons, thereby preventing homelessness.

Examples of country strategies

In **Brazil**, the city of São Paulo, where 3.3 million people live in inadequate conditions, aims to reduce the number of homeless people by establishing an alliance between the private sector and the public administration to create programmes that prepare citizens for the labour market. Initiatives, such as the "Tem Saida" (Way Out) programme, implemented in São Paulo, are specifically designed to give financial autonomy to women who have suffered domestic violence. This particular project has the support of private companies which provide employment opportunities.

Costa Rica uses technology to address homelessness through the development of an app that allows individuals to find relevant facilities. Costa Rica will also start a pilot project on housing this year with the European Union.