High-level Panel Discussion on the Priority Theme

"Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness"

Monday, 10 February 2020, 3:00pm – 6:00pm

Chair's Summary

The Commission for Social Development held a high-level panel discussion on the priority theme *"Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness"* that took place on Monday, 10 February 2020. The Chairperson of the Commission, **H.E. Mr. Gbolié Desiré Wulfran,** noted that 1.6 billon people around the world live in inadequate housing and emphasized the importance of finding solutions to the realization of the 2030 Agenda. He added that the high-level panel serves as a forum to share knowledge and experiences in addressing homelessness. The keynote speaker was **H.E. Ms. Mary McAleese**, Former President of the Republic of Ireland. **Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif**, Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) delivered an opening statement via video from Abu Dhabi, where the World Urban Forum was taking place.

The panellists were: **H.E. Ms. Aino-Kaisa Pekonen**, Minister for Social Affairs and Health of Finland; **Ms. Laura-Maria Crăciunean-Tatu**, Associate Professor, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania and Vice-President of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; **Mr. Dennis P. Culhane**, Professor and Dana and Andrew Stone Chair in Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania and the former Director of Research at the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans, United States Department of Veterans' Affairs; **Ms. Marissa Plouin**, Housing Policy Analyst, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; **Mr. Emeka Obioha**, Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences and Research Chair, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa; **and Ms. Jean Quinn**, **DW,** Executive Director of UNAMINA International and the Co-Chair of the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness. **Dame Louise Casey**, former Homelessness Czar of the United Kingdom moderated the panel.

Defining homelessness

There is no universally agreed definition of homelessness. Thus, it is difficult to measure, and data is often not comparable across countries. There are limitations with different types of measurements; and some people are more "visibly" homeless than others. It is important to find a common language to describe homelessness to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon and design appropriate policies and concrete measures to prevent and address homelessness.

As a working definition, homelessness can be described as a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space, which may compromise their capabilities, including the ability to enjoy social relations. This includes people living on the streets, in other open spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation, and people living in temporary accommodation or shelters for the homeless. In accordance

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with national legislations, homelessness may also include, among others, people living in severely inadequate accommodation without security of tenure and access to basic services.

Reliable and disaggregated data on people living in homelessness is needed in order to devise and implement context-appropriate and comprehensive strategies, and to assess if those solutions are effective in achieving the desired outcomes and progress over time. More broadly, timely and reliable data is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and to ensure that no one is left behind, reaching those furthest behind first. In this regard, people living on the streets are at the most risk of being left behind, as they are the hardest to reach and often are not included in national statistics, nor covered by social welfare systems. A working definition of homelessness, therefore, would be a starting point for the inclusion of people living in homelessness in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## The State of Homelessness

Homelessness is a global problem affecting people with diverse economic, social, and cultural backgrounds in both developed and developing countries. Official statistics suggest that homelessness affects less than one per cent of the population in nearly all OECD countries. Yet, the absolute number of homeless people in these countries is significant--about 1.9 million--and likely underestimated. The characteristics of the homeless population have become increasingly diverse and includes youth, family, and older persons. As the drivers of homelessness and backgrounds of the homeless population vary, different types of solutions should be pursued. A majority of OECD countries surveyed do not have an active national strategy to combat homelessness, with emergency shelters being the dominant form of support, and "Housing First" a minority solution.

While not well documented, family homelessness is a growing problem at the global level. Women and children who experience homelessness often struggle to secure access to basic services, leading to a sense of hopelessness. They are often part of a category of "hidden homelessness" where their housing is insecure and inadequate. Without stable housing, they often rely on informal support networks to avoid sleeping on the street. Furthermore, women and mothers who experience homelessness were often victims of domestic violence.

In the absence of a common definition/understanding of homelessness, the number of homeless people is assumed to be large in developing countries. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, data on homelessness is poorly available and not very accurate, as many estimates include related conditions such as inadequate housing, and unsafe, insanitary, or overcrowded housing conditions. However, homelessness is more of an urban than rural problem in the region, with rural-urban migration as one of its drivers. Also, data is often not comparable across countries.

## Drivers of Homelessness

The drivers of homelessness can be categorized into two categories: structural social and economic conditions, and personal or family dynamics. Structural causes include inequalities, poverty, lack of decent job opportunities, lack of access to affordable housing driven by the commodification of housing, forced eviction, lack of social protection, lack of access to land and credit or financing, and high costs of energy or health care. In developing countries, poverty, especially rural poverty, is the main driver of homelessness. Personal and family circumstances, such as chronic illness, mental disorders, substance abuse, disabilities, family breakdown, domestic violence, or child abuse, also make individuals and families particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

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Women and children are often affected by a combination of both structural and personal drivers, such as mental health, domestic violence, human trafficking, or lack of an identity document. Focusing on children in family homelessness is key to break the intergenerational cycle of homelessness. Some children, for instance, end up living on the streets because they became orphans or lost the main breadwinner of the household.

Lack of access to affordable housing (the housing cost exceeding 30% of a household's income) is one of the underlying causes of homelessness in both developed and developing countries. Over the last 20 years, housing has been largely unaffordable for the majority of the world's population. On average, housing costs have increased three times faster than average income in OECD countries during the same period. Housing has become the single largest household expenditure and for low-income households in particular, less affordable. In countries where most of the housing is private, public institutions are unable to regulate housing costs effectively. As a result, evidence-based programmes that have successfully reduced the number of homeless people are no longer sufficient to tackle the homeless crisis, as the number of people who become homeless and require assistance overwhelms the capacity of existing schemes.

Preventing and Addressing Homelessness

To prevent homelessness, there is a need to address its underlying causes, including through taking a rights-based approach. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes everyone's right to an adequate standard of living, including housing. State parties are encouraged to strengthen legal remedies to protect people from forced evictions[1], thus preventing them from falling into homelessness. Such a solid foundation will also be important in meeting other development goals, such as reducing poverty.

Preventing homelessness requires sound housing and social policy, especially building enough affordable housing and supporting people with low-income through housing allowances. For example, in Finland, the responsibility and financing to support the homeless population is shared across national and local levels, and between social and housing policies. Universal social and health services provide support to people who are at risk of homelessness, and support reintegration into society after being homeless.

In Africa, many countries have focused on the macro, social structural factors behind homelessness, while less attention has been paid to micro, individual-based factors, such as individuals' health conditions and the loss of a breadwinner. Countries have tried to tackle homelessness through affordable housing policy as one of many possible strategies. Given the poor conditions in which many people live, affordable housing itself is often too expensive for low-income households and homeless populations. Providing affordable housing of decent quality for all is therefore urgently needed. Governments can build social/subsidized housing, through public-private cooperation and in collaboration with NGOs, and promote community and cooperative practices where people themselves organize to build their own houses.

Sharing national strategies for tackling homelessness

Finland is the only country in the European Union where homelessness has decreased. Finland aims to eradicate homelessness by 2027 by continuing to implement the national homelessness strategy launched in 2018 based on the "*Housing First*" policy. Evidence has revealed that housing one chronically homeless

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[1] E/1998/22, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 7 (Sixteenth session, 1997)

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person saves about 15,000 euros per year, as providing permanent housing enables her/him to solve other problems. Ending homelessness with *Housing First* is therefore considered to be both ethically right and economically sustainable.

The Government will launch a programme in collaboration with local governments, service providers and organizations in major urban regions. Moreover, the Government will integrate the goal of eradicating homelessness into the national agreement of Land, Housing and Transport and the agreements of urban regions. To better understand homelessness and the factors behind it, Finland will start collecting statistical data on homelessness based on existing national databases.

In the **United States**, a number of subnational jurisdictions are using application programming interfaces (APIs) that enable different agencies to access databases to connect health records with homeless records so that care can be provided in a more coordinated manner. Mobile technologies were also used to reach people experiencing homelessness. There are two major programmes tackling homelessness among veterans. The first provides housing vouchers, subsidies, and support services, while the latter targets those who are homeless on a temporary or emergency basis, with a focus on helping them become debt-free. The initiatives have received large support, with mobilization from NGOs and the community. After eight years, these policies have helped reduce the number of homeless veterans by 50 per cent.

In **Brazil,** housing policy is guided by the principle of a universal right to housing. The Government's policy has reached 97% of municipalities over the past decade, promoting access to housing as well as access to social protection. The Brazilian Government has been redesigning housing policy, shifting from the welfare model to the housing first model, which will be launched in 2021. Housing first policies are currently piloted in three state capitals.  **Venezuela** has been building a comprehensive social protection system to tackle homelessness, including increasing housing by 35% to expand access to housing. The **European Union** uses the rights-based approach to housing.

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