

Understanding the Resolution on “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness” (E/CN.5/2020/L.5)

INTRODUCTION

In its 75 years of existence, the United Nations never addressed the issue of homelessness until the Commission on Social Development (CSocD) made it the priority theme for the 58th Session held in February 2019. Therefore, this draft priority theme resolution is a ground-breaking achievement. Set in a context of the 25th anniversary of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and programme of action, the General Assembly resolution 70/1 (2015) setting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 and the New Urban Agenda, the purpose of this priority theme resolution is to consider homelessness in a human rights framework and to examine its relationship to social protection systems and floors. Adoption of a global definition and global measurement of homelessness would advance this purpose as recommended at the Experts meeting in Nairobi (2019). The resolution clearly moved toward these goals. Additionally, this resolution firmly situated homelessness as a cause and consequence of poverty requiring urgent multisector action by Member States who are responsible to alleviate homelessness to enter this accelerated period toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Part 1: Homelessness definition/description (OP 1-11)¹

Reaffirming that poverty has various forms and dimensions, including homelessness in all its forms, and the factors that make individuals and families vulnerable to homelessness (OP 5), this section reaffirms the commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (OP3) and calls upon Member States to recognize that homelessness constitutes *a violation of human dignity, and may be an obstacle to the fulfilment of all human rights* and that urgent national and international action is required to address it (OP 4).

The resolution offers a potential definition of homelessness, but calls it a description (OP 7).

“Homelessness is not merely a lack of physical housing, but is often interrelated with poverty, lack of productive employment and access to infrastructure, as well as other social issues that may constitute a loss of family, community and a sense of belonging, and, depending on national context, can be *described as a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space, which may compromise their ability to enjoy social relations, and includes people living on the streets, in other open spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation, people living in temporary accommodation or shelters for the homeless, and, in accordance with national legislation, may include, among others, people living in severely inadequate accommodation without security of tenure and access to basic services;*”

¹ Reference to “OP” followed by a number refers to the numbered paragraphs in the resolution. Reference to “PP” followed by a number refer to successive paragraphs in the preamble of the resolution.

The phrase in this paragraph “depending on national context” may be used to mitigate this comprehensive description from being used as a definition because it gives Member States flexibility to apply this description in a national context.

However, strengthening the description of homelessness is the recognition that homelessness is a form of poverty, as well as a global problem, affecting people of different ages with diverse economic, social and cultural backgrounds in both developed and developing countries. Further, it is driven mainly by structural causes including inequalities, poverty, a loss of housing and livelihood, a lack of decent job opportunities, lack of access to affordable housing owing to negative impacts of the commodification of housing, lack of social protection, access to land, credit or financing, high cost of energy or health care, lack of financial or legal literacy. Social or personal issues such drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness can relate to or contribute to homelessness (OP8). The resolution further recognizes that homelessness is a complex issue that requires the “whole-of-government” and the “whole-of-society” to address and prevent it (OP 9, 11).

Part 2: Homelessness Measurement (OP 12)

Having established in the preamble (PP 10,11) the importance of data in the formulation of effective policies, and of the UN Statistical Commission in establishing global indicators on social protection and “access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing” for Agenda 2030, the resolution now calls on Member States to collect disaggregated, specific data on individuals and families experiencing homelessness in all its different forms and to create categories “to accompany the already existing measurement tools”. Member states are prompted to standardize the methods of measurement and collection of data so that national and global policymaking can be brought into line (OP12).

The three elements of the resolution: *collection of accurate, disaggregated data* on those experiencing homelessness, *establishment of categories* of homelessness, and *harmonization* through the role of the UN Statistical Commission, is an important step forward. It will allow Member States to have a better understanding of the situation regarding global homelessness, will create better informed national and global policies and will ensure the inclusion of all those who are experiencing a form of homelessness, enabling cross-country comparisons and sharing of best practices.

Part 3: Policies and programmes that promote equality and inclusion through the affirmation of the fundamental dignity of the human person (OP 13-28)

From affordable housing and labor market policies to social protection systems, this section looks at policies that promote equality, social inclusion and dignity for all. It builds on the work of the 57th Session of CSocD recommending the resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council on 6 June 2019, “Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies (E/RES/2019/6).

OP 13, 14 and 15 urge Member States to consider adopting labour market policies that strengthen institutions, provide adequate labour protection and promote equitable and accessible participation for all, especially the most disadvantaged, specifically women and families while ensuring growth. The resolution promotes policies including wage policies, equal work for equal pay, access to childcare, and policies that promote a harmonious work and family life. Each policy aims to promote meaningful and equal participation for all in both the workforce, the economy, leadership and the home within the context of the country in which it is implemented.

OP 16 and 17 encourage Member States and governments at all levels to improve access to safe, affordable and accessible housing for all, specifically low-income earners, women and families. The resolution suggests the use of integrated housing and social protection policies, access to credit facilities and addressing barriers such as eviction and discriminatory laws. It also notes that the provision of adequate emergency and temporary shelter and services, including security of tenancy are necessary. Furthermore OP 18 invites all levels of governments to increase fiscal and human resources for the upgrading of slums and informal settlements.

But while reaffirming that affordable housing policy is essential to end homelessness, the resolution equally insists that a multidimensional and integrated approach is needed and complementary. Hence the focus from OP19 to 28 on promoting the implementation of social protection policies that prevent poverty, unemployment, and contribute to access to healthcare, gender equality, decent work and social inclusion (OP 19). These provisions clearly emphasize the CSocD priority theme resolution on Social Protections of the 57th Session. Ending homelessness is therefore part of a wider strategy towards poverty eradication and more inclusive and equal societies.

In particular, the principles of universality and human rights based approach (HRBA) for social protection are described (OP 20), and a clear call to implement social protection floors in accordance with national circumstances is established. Social protection floors has been defined by the ILO Recommendation 202 as composed of 1) a basic social security so that all those in need have access to essential health care, including maternity, newborn, child, long-term and palliative care, 2) a basic income security for children, 3) a basic income security for persons of active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability, inter alia, and 4) basic income security for older persons (OP 21),

Further, the resolution recognizes the importance of investing in inclusive and responsive family-oriented policies as well as in programmes in education, training, decent, work-family balance, health care, social services so that intergenerational poverty is halted. (OP 22 and 32). Concretely, specific mentions are made around regular and predictable cash transfers for vulnerable families (OP22) including for families headed by a single parent and in particular those headed by women (OP 26) so that all can access basic services, high quality education and health services. Poverty reductions programs and social protection should not exclude people in informal or precarious jobs (OP 27). Social protection floors should be extended to persons experiencing homelessness, the informal sector (OP 23-24) and persons affected by climate change and natural and human-made disasters.(OP28).

Having described the issue of homelessness and its drivers, the importance of developing standardized global indicators to measure it, the urgency of alleviating homelessness, and supporting short and long-term policies, the resolution moves to a call to action of governments, recognized as the main actors in implementation and financing.

Part 4: Call to action of Governments (OP 34-44)

This section explicitly recognizes that governments have the primary responsibility to end homelessness including prevention, support for persons who experience homelessness, and long-term solutions (OP35).

The section goes on to identify various means of implementation and mobilization of both actors and financial resources. In summary, governments in broad-based partnership with other actors including international and regional organizations, civil society, and the private sector must join forces in ending homelessness to achieve the common goal of Agenda 2030. Governments should be held accountable to:

- strengthen laws combating discrimination, (OP 34)
- increase advocacy and awareness-raising, (OP 34, 37)
- provide services and resources to create housing, (OP 35, 36)
- mobilize funding from all sources, (OP 36, 38, 39)
- honor commitments to international development assistance and goals, (OP 40,41,42, 43)
- promote the exchange of information and good practices that address challenges to social inclusion and address homelessness through affordable housing and social protection policies (OP 44).

Governments are called to fight discrimination through the legal system and penalize discrimination as well as create public campaigns to explain the causes, destroy myths, and dissipate doubts about homelessness (OP 34). While insisting on governments as main actors who must, through their actions and policies, address homelessness, it also calls on them to form broad-based partnerships with civil society (service providers) and private sector (supply and demand of affordable housing). Governments are also called on to work with the UN system, philanthropic societies, and academia, to educate, raise awareness, and to support and empower vulnerable groups and individuals, including family and youth (OP 35-37).

Domestic resources including but not limited to national budgets, the tax system, subsidies and incentives must be tapped into first for “national ownership.” All these resources must be increased and supplemented by international assistance to achieve all the SDGs, which are interdependent (OP 38-39). International cooperation is imperative to help developing countries and small island states develop their human capacity, institutions, and technology. Developed countries must meet commitments of Official Development Assistance (ODA) (OP 40,42). Financing for Development must be a cooperative effort, focused on the essential role of official development assistance to developing countries. In order to be effective such assistance must align with national objectives, harmonize methods, promote good management and maximization of results, and ensure transparency and mutual accountability (OP 43).

Finally, all actors are invited to share information and good practices on programs, policies and measures that reduce inequality, promote social inclusion, address homelessness, provide social protections and ensure affordable housing with the final objective in sight: to achieve Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (OP 44).

CONCLUSION

The draft resolution asserts that homelessness is a multidimensional issue that is interrelated to poverty, directly connected to all SDGs and transcends national borders. It uses inclusive language and encompasses all vulnerable groups so that nobody is left behind. It stresses that homelessness violates the dignity of the human person and may be an obstacle to the fulfillment of all human rights. In doing so, it paves the way for future recognition of homelessness as a violation of the human right to housing (Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). It promotes meaningful participation, partnerships and social inclusion of all vulnerable groups throughout its text. Even if it comes short of agreeing on a global definition of homelessness embraced by all, it provides a detailed description of homelessness in all its complexity. It is therefore crucial to celebrate the fact that a common description of homelessness was agreed upon by Member States. It is not only a historic milestone for the international community but it provides a solid foundation for future advocacy and a recognition of the far-reaching impact of homelessness everywhere providing common ground for future collection of data, a crucial step towards the eradication of poverty.
