

– NGO Committee for Social Development Statement –
**COVID19 Impact: Further exacerbating inequalities and injustice
for people experiencing poverty and homelessness**



Rationale:

For the very first time in UN history, the issue of the homelessness and affordable housing was addressed at the 58th session of the United Nations Commission for Social Development - which took place at the UN NYC headquarters from February 9 to 20, 2020. The outcome was a groundbreaking draft resolution on the Priority Theme “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness”. Recognizing “*that homelessness constitutes a violation of human dignity*”, the resolution states that “*homelessness is a complex issue that requires a multisectoral approach and integrated responses, cutting across fiscal, economic, labour, housing, health, social protection, urban development, environmental and population policies*”. As developed at length in the resolution, such a multidimensional approach will require common efforts from Member States, the United Nations system and civil society as a whole. Concretely, this should be carried out through the implementation of a complex set of measures, including social protection systems that are universal, integrated and based on human rights in order to provide security to all - especially those without shelter.

Now - more than ever before - is the time to act upon these commitments.

As the pandemic now unfolds in all corners of the world, and as millions of individuals and families are asked to self-isolate, stay confined in homes and practice social distancing, homeless families and individuals are once again doubly exposed: to the threat of being infected and the lack of means to coping with it. Due to poverty and inequality, an already highly vulnerable population, with low access to healthcare and shelter, people experiencing homelessness are indeed more at risk to be exposed to the pandemic¹ and less likely to find a safe haven for protection. With many food pantries, public and social services closed down, finding food, places to shower, or accessing social benefits become even more challenging².

Inequalities are further exacerbated for children experiencing homelessness and poverty, as school closures in many countries create major education disruption for all children, especially for those who do not have a proper space to study, or access to public libraries, internet and computers. Many children also rely on schools for daily meals as well as for safety and stability³. Women, especially single mothers, living in poverty and experiencing homelessness are also disproportionately impacted as they are more likely to assume the responsibility of caring for the family in these uncertain times. Furthermore, the increase in reported domestic violence during the pandemic could lead to increased homelessness for women, given the current stress on social services and the shutdown of many support systems.

Further social isolation and stigma around people experiencing homelessness translates into increased trauma, and diminished access to social protection and decent living conditions.

Our recommendations:

As governments worldwide are now adopting emergency packages in response to the Covid19 crisis, it is crucial that the needs and demands of homeless workers, individuals and families be at the center of these measures so that no one is truly left behind, especially in times of a global sanitary crisis.

¹ Jack Tsia, Michal Wilson, “COVID-19: a potential public health problem for homeless populations”, The Lancet, March 11, 2020 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30053-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30053-0/fulltext)

² Catherine Kim, “During the Covid-19 pandemic, nowhere is safe for homeless people”, Vox, March 18, 2020 <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21183812/covid-19-coronavirus-homeless>

³ “COVID-19 : with half of world’s student population out of school, UNESCO launches coalition to accelerate remote learning solutions”, UNESCO, March 18, 2020 <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-unesco-convenes-education-webinar-equity-schooling>

In this view, the NGO Committee on Social Development recommends that all governments at all levels implement the following in the fields of 1) Public health, 2) Housing and 3) Cash transfers and social protection:

1. Public health measures (short term):

- Create and disseminate health information campaigns directed to communities facing homelessness, notably through direct street outreach and care.
- Distribution of personal protective equipment, opening of emergency hygiene facilities and hand-washing stations.
- Free tests, treatment and quarantine locations for vulnerable groups, whether or not they have medical insurance.

In most places, a severe underfunding of healthcare systems is being exposed by the inability of governments to deal with the crisis. The high number of casualties should raise the alarm of the immediate need to create, reinforce and maintain quality public health care that is universal and affordable to all, as the resolution insists on OPs 13 and 24⁴.

2. Housing related measures: While OPs 16-19 address most of the following measures for the long-term, some acquire a new urgency due to the pandemic and therefore demand immediate action:

- Provide immediate shelter to all; requisition of vacant buildings should be considered.
- Provide immediate funding and resources to emergency shelters to avoid overcrowding while keeping families together.
- Provide emergency isolation centers and safe quarantine spaces for homeless individuals and families that show infection symptoms.
- Pass emergency moratorium on evictions and rent freeze orders to ensure that no individuals or families can be evicted during the crisis.
- Halt forced closures of encampments during the crisis.
- Prioritize permanent housing for the most vulnerable, following the Housing First approach

3. Short-term cash transfers and long-term social protection measures :

- Cash transfers to the most vulnerable to ensure minimum income security. Ensure that these transfers do not conflict with the allocation of existing social benefits.
- Paid sick leave for working individuals (OP 21).
- Basic income guarantee/job security during crisis, especially for women who tend to cumulate work and domestic care (OP 15).
- Include the most urgent demands by those directly affected by homelessness (OP17).
- Support workers in the informal economy by bringing them into the formal economy (OP 23 and 24)
- Design and implement child sensitive social protection (OP 21) as well as specific schemes for women-headed households (OP 16)

The CSocD58 Priority Theme resolution offers detailed and comprehensive policy recommendations to implement all of the above-mentioned measures, with the support of local civil society organizations.

Conclusion:

The current pandemic crisis is a harsh reminder that the most vulnerable people are the first victims in times of major socio-economic disruptions. Consequences will be dire if appropriate measures in terms of universal healthcare and strong social protections are not taken for society as a whole, and for people experiencing homelessness in particular. More than ever, today's crisis represents an opportunity for governments and the United Nations system to take the right actions - and by so doing, to put people's dignity, rights and lives first.

⁴ OP numbers refer to Operative Paragraphs in CsocD58 Priority Theme Resolution.