

57th Session of the Commission for Social Development

“Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies”

Homelessness: A Prominent Sign of Social Inequalities

Summary:

“Too often being homeless is considered a personal and a moral failing, when it’s actually a structural and political problem” that makes visible the growing inequalities of our society. The world is urbanizing at an alarming rate with alarming results. Urban landscapes are now the most visible sign of gross inequality, modern glass and steel skyscrapers abut makeshift shacks; people sleep on the pavement silhouetted against the neon signs of multinational corporations. Our urban centers have become polarized: two cities existing side by side, separated by status and rights. Urbanization is now a classic tale of the haves and have nots, where some profit immensely while others struggle to survive, the result of policies and state inaction that has elevated some people at the expense of others. One of the most tragic manifestations of this sort of inequality is persistent and growing homelessness, people left without the protection of a physical space, or the security to which they are entitled through their inherent human rights.

Rationale:

Homelessness presents itself in different ways in different contexts. The most common and visible are those who are forced to live in the open; eating, sleeping, and staying in public spaces, often subject to daily public scrutiny, condemnation and sometimes violence. Others are invisible and thus neglected, particularly in the global south, where homelessness manifests itself in very precarious housing conditions without basic services and security of tenure. Homeless people face stigmatization, criminalization and discrimination because of their status as “homeless”, based solely on their association with a socially constructed group that is regarded as undeserving.

Inequality is the most consistently identified cause of homelessness, and yet homelessness is the least discussed representation of inequality. Perhaps this is because homelessness is too often attributed to individual circumstances and moral failures when, in fact, its causes are primarily structural and fundamentally linked to the prevailing ideology of the free market. Unfair distribution of land and property, occurring on a global scale, relegates an increasing number of the most vulnerable to a life in the margins-- they are the ones left behind!

The idealization of ‘home’ in our society constructs both a place and a social position which is supposed to allow comfort, security, autonomy, personal responsibility and the resources for engagement in the public sphere. When people experience homelessness, these meanings are rearticulated in order to construct positions of communal belonging and social survival.

Homelessness is also the result of government acquiescence to real estate speculation, a result of treating housing as a commodity rather than a human right. It is rooted in a global privileging of wealth and power, accompanied by blaming and scorning those who have little. Persons experiencing homelessness suffer from serious deprivation which creates a sense of urgency, and yet homelessness is an issue that receives scant attention in the international community.

The response should be clear: states must commit to measure and end homelessness. This would, in fact, be in line with the global target to ensure adequate housing for all by 2030, which is the commitment stated in the UN's sustainable development goals (Goal 11). It is also consistent with SDG 10, which addresses inequalities, as the commodification of housing is putting people on the streets throughout the world.

In this event, the UN Working Group to End homelessness (WGEH) proposes that states create national strategies to measure homelessness. At the same time, and in keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, and SDG 10, we call for member states to immediately create human-rights-based plans, including through legislation, which ensure open, accountable monitoring and review mechanisms related to homelessness and housing, as well as avenues to claim the right to housing for those who continue to live in homelessness.

Objective:

- A. To explore homelessness as a direct consequence of social inequalities, the commodification of housing, and inefficient governmental policies through the direct experiences of advocates, researchers, policy makers and persons living on the streets, to bring to light those who are seemingly invisible and to help those who are most left behind.
- B. To encourage a UN resolution which calls for member states to develop strategies for measuring, monitoring, and reviewing homelessness so that effective strategies can be developed globally for ensuring the human right to adequate housing.

Possible issues to be addressed, inter alia:

1. To show how moral hierarchies and social biases are experienced by people experience homelessness and are connected to the structural dynamics of modern inequalities.
2. To present homelessness as both a highly visible example of contemporary poverty/inequality and an experience with unique and profound consequences for people's identities, including experiences of stigmatization and the struggle for belonging and social connection.
3. To systemically examine homelessness so as to provide socio-political insight into the structural divisions and cultural boundaries that differentiate people in our societies.
4. To promote government policies that are consistent with social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection.
5. To encourage governments, the private sector and civil society organizations, to move beyond charitable approaches to homelessness, to focus on addressing individual needs and human rights, and to implement approaches aimed at addressing structural causes in order to restore justice and dignity to persons experiencing homelessness.

Proposed Speakers:

1. Geraldine Byrne Nason, Ambassador of Ireland to the United Nations (or her designee)
2. Karinna Soto (Chile) still waiting for her tittle
3. Louise Casey, Vice-president of the Institute for Global Homelessness (IGH)
4. Waiting for speaker from India to confirm
5. A person experiencing homelessness

Moderator: To be determined

Proposed Co-Sponsors:

Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations

NGO Working Group to End Homelessness

Institute for Global Homelessness