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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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Statement

Opening Session of the 58<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development

**Monday, 10 February 2020, 10:00am – 1:00pm**  
**Conference Room 4**

Mr. Chair,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations. It also marks 75 years of this distinguished Commission, and 25 years since the World Summit for Social Development took place in Copenhagen. It was then that a crucial step was taken towards confronting social injustice and inequality. The World Summit for Social Development pledged to eradicate poverty, promote full employment and foster social integration to achieve stable, safe and just societies for all.

Yet, 25 years on, conflict, poverty and disease continue to shorten the lives of many. Global mega trends such as high and rising inequality, slowing economic growth, climate change, the rapid pace of technology and its impact on the future of work, are squeezing the prospects of social and sustainable development. People's livelihoods are increasingly at risk.

In short, we are not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. That is why the Secretary-General has launched the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030.

As we embark on the Decade, this Commission has a unique mandate to ensure that those left behind see meaningful improvements in their daily lives. Especially people living in poverty and in vulnerable situations that include the growing homeless population in our midst. They want affordable housing, quality education, basic health services and adequate social protection, to name just a few of the most pressing needs.

Excellencies,

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs just launched the *World Social Report 2020*. It provides fresh evidence of our growing unequal world, noting that 7 in 10 people today live in countries where inequalities increased, compared to 1990. At the same time, DESA's *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020* report shows that global GDP growth in 2019, hit a 10-year low.

Such developments are having a major impact on the ability of countries to implement the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As we continue to tackle the critical issues of social development, we must focus on the vulnerabilities of those left behind. We must find solutions to their daily struggles.

In this context, this Commission's spotlight on the theme of "*Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness*" is timely and important.

Sustainable Development Goal 11, target 1 commits to ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing, basic services and upgrading slums. Indeed, adequate housing is the basis of stability and security for families and households. It also impacts the achievement of other SDGs – including on poverty and employment, inequality and the environment.

Homelessness is a harmful form of systemic discrimination and social exclusion. It is a global phenomenon that affects people everywhere – in developed and developing countries; in rural and urban areas.

The causes of homelessness are many and are interrelated. They include the unraveling of working-class communities due to poverty and health shocks. They include declining manufacturing employment – especially the loss of jobs for low- and middle-skilled workers due to globalization, automation and stagnant wages, or personal issues such as substance abuse. Unchecked gentrification has also pushed property taxes and rents high. This is forcing low-income owners and tenants to move to places often far away from their workplace.

In many countries, the supply of adequate and affordable housing is also failing to keep up with demand. According to UN-Habitat, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing conditions, with about 15 million forcefully evicted every year. Further, housing has been largely unaffordable for most of the world's population over the last 20 years.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees also estimates that more than 70 million people have been forced from their homes, including 25 million refugees. Many of these refugees live in inadequate shelters.

And, moreover, according to the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, homelessness is also a global human rights crisis, linked to growing inequalities in income, access to land and property.

Distinguished Delegates,

For the most vulnerable, homelessness is not merely a lack of physical housing, but also a loss of family, community and a sense of belonging. The erosion of self-esteem and despair that is experienced often leads to the breakup of families, substance abuse, poor health outcomes and loss of life. It affects people of all ages, genders and socioeconomic backgrounds.

For example, the older homeless population is growing rapidly and will continue to grow over the next decade. Older women, in particular, are at risk. They are more vulnerable to poverty and face multiple forms of discrimination, including unequal and unfavorable property and land inheritance rights.

Young people are also vulnerable to homelessness, especially given their lack of financial stability and resources. Young migrants are often denied access to housing as they do not have appropriate identification or are still looking for employment.

Excellences,

We must redouble our efforts to rid the world of this inhumane scourge that is homelessness. Let me highlight some inclusive and practical steps in this regard.

1. Provision of adequate, accessible and affordable housing, quality services, schools and health care, decent jobs and livelihoods, to help rebuild lives;
2. Expansion of social protection systems to prevent people falling into homelessness due to shocks related to illness and job loss; and
3. Adoption of climate change mitigation measures as well as measures to strengthen peace and security to build safe and accessible neighborhoods.

Effectively addressing homelessness requires adequate policies and partnerships of governments, civil society and faith-based organizations, philanthropic organizations, financial institutions and the private sector, and homeless people themselves.

I am very encouraged to know that this Commission has brought together many of these stakeholders. I am confident that your deliberations will chart a bold and practical path to bring hope and dignity to the millions of homeless people and people living in substandard shelters.

In closing, allow me to briefly highlight the follow up to the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing. The fourth review and appraisal, which starts with the adoption of the modalities resolution in this session, presents a unique opportunity. As the Second World Assembly on Ageing approaches its 20-year milestone in 2022, it is vital to generate renewed momentum to advance the ageing agenda. I count on your continued support in this regard.

I look forward to your forthcoming deliberations and the outcomes of this Commission session.

Thank you.

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