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REALIZING THE RIGHT TO SUITABLE SHELTER
Economic and Social Council

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of unsuitable shelter has gotten much more severe, with homelessness affecting an estimated 150 million people worldwide. While the issue of inadequate shelter has always been largely apparent in conflict-ridden areas, for example Afghanistan where roughly 11% of citizens are homeless, it has begun posing an issue outside of these zones. Most of the struggles of the global housing market can be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent worldwide economic crisis. One of the more crucial

problems caused by the pandemic was an exponential increase in unemployment and poverty rates, directly leading to more people being unable to buy homes, afford mortgages or rent. The problem, however, goes even deeper. Most governments attempted to tackle the negative economic effects of the pandemic with various policies, which in, for example, the European Union, increased the demand for mortgages and housing, boosting the market and increasing the prices. This, alongside the overall inflation made buying or renting property even less available, increasing homelessness, and refusing many the right to suitable shelter.

KEY TERMS

Shelter: A place or structure which provides vital surviving mechanisms and protection from factors such as the weather, conflict, or other threats to life.

Housing insecurity: A state of unstable, inadequate, or unaffordable housing. It can manifest in various forms, including homelessness, overcrowding, unsafe or unhealthy living conditions, or the inability to pay rent or mortgage.

Inadequate housing: Any housing with serious structural flaws or a lack of essential facilities like power or running water. It does not fulfill minimum requirements for health and safety.

Homelessness: State of not having adequate shelter or permanent residence. It can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including as temporary lodging with others, shelters, or sleeping on the streets.

Overcrowding: A situation where there are more persons residing in a certain housing unit than is recommended or allowed by local housing laws.

Housing discrimination: The unfair treatment of individuals or groups in any area of housing, based on unjust stereotypes regarding race, national origin, religion, sex or other characteristics. It is prohibited by law in a number of countries; however, violations still occur and often go unnoticed.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

When on the topic of suitable shelter, we need to consider what we consider as unsuitable. The UN has set some general standards as to what is considered suitable shelter. The OHCHR defines seven qualities which need to be met for housing to be considered adequate, namely security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy. A large part of the discussion of suitable shelter has also been happening by defining of the term homelessness. The UN-Habitat Program divides homelessness into multiple groups, going from street homelessness and those residing temporary accommodation, to so called "hidden" homelessness, which involves for example couch surfing.

As inadequate housing is a global issue, there is a multitude of different things which cause homelessness. One of the leading causes is poverty, which is caused by a multitude of different factors, such as unemployment, high costs and stagnant wages. Since people and families who can't afford housing, they often have to live on the streets or in makeshift shelters. Alongside poverty, a large cause is racial prejudice, with minority groups being more likely to encounter difficulties while finding affordable housing or prospects. This is due to the racial discrimination present in the housing market all over the world, from South Africa to the USA. Homelessness can also result from domestic violence and family problems, as victims of these problems are often compelled to flee their homes. Systematic flaws, such as a lack of affordable healthcare, inadequate social safety nets, or insufficient mental health treatment, contribute to homelessness and unsuitable shelter. To that is directly tied to another leading cause, which is drug addiction. In the US, nearly 70% of cities report substance abuse to be the largest cause for homelessness and residing without suitable shelter. Last but not least, another major reason for a lack of suitable shelter is armed conflict. In war-ridden nations, internal displacement is exponentially more likely to occur, with nations like Syria and Afghanistan having the highest rates of homelessness and living without suitable shelter.

Homelessness is known to have lasting negative effects on those experiencing it. In many cases, homeless people have poor access to sanitation and healthcare, which is why they are

cases, homeless people have poor access to sanitation and healthcare, which is why they are at a heightened risk of cardio-respiratory diseases, skin diseases and STDs such as HIV. Young adults and children who grow up without appropriate shelter are very often subject to a higher risk of developing mental illness, increasing the risk of specifically anxiety, depression and sleep disorders. These in turn also lead to an increased rate of drug abuse among homeless people. For example, in the US, roughly 38% of homeless people abuse alcohol and 26% participate in drug use. Due to their disadvantaged status, they are very often overlooked by the government, which can be tied to the heightened risk of physical and sexual assault. It is also much more common for those without sustainable shelter to participate and be charged for various crimes.

Not only is homelessness a social issue, but it is also a problem from an economic standpoint. While those without suitable shelter are often economically disadvantaged, the effects of homelessness are felt by the entire economy. The lack of suitable shelter increases risks of assault and health problems, which often require treatment. In many developed countries, homeless people receive financial aid from various governmental healthcare programs, which is paid for by taxpayers. For example, Australia has many governmental programs trying to aid the homeless, such as the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*, which dedicates at least $125 million for homelessness services. The cost of aid is high and with governments having to spend funding on resources such as emergency shelters, social services and various programs, it significantly dampens the available government budgets, which could be allocated to other things.

PREVIOUS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In the past, there have been attempts to tackle the lack of access to suitable shelter by various governmental programs, global organizations, and NGOs. The UN itself has set up many programs under the UN-Habitat division, for example the "UN Housing For All campaign, which has been working on providing suitable shelter to those in need. The UN has also declared suitable housing to be a right in Article 11 of the *International Covenant on Economic*, *Social and Cultural Rights*.

Various solutions to inadequate shelter have been set in place by governmental, NGO and non-profit organizations. Namely, micro-housing has become a famous phenomenon and a working solution for lower class families, with governmental housing programs aiding in their construction. Another possible option which has been brought up is co-housing, basically sharing the living space in order to save money. This has proved to be efficient for younger people and smaller groups needing to save money, but also those living with minimum wage and needing help paying rent. Adaptive reuse of existing spaces into housing units is also popular in cities facing housing crisis, as they get to repurpose empty lofts into functioning shelter, boosting the economy and giving options to those without access to sustainable shelter. Recently, developments have been happening in the technology aimed at designing and creating more modular housing, which could be more affordable, sustainable and produced from recycled materials. For example, researchers have been working towards utilizing large-scale 3D-printing from concrete and mud to create sustainable, standard housing units.

MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

Afghanistan
In many nations, the right to suitable shelter is prevented by conflict or war within the nation. This is why Afghanistan is one of the countries worst-off in terms of the lack of suitable shelter. A key reason for this is that 97% of Afghan citizens are at risk of poverty and over half are reliant on external humanitarian aid. To add to this, Afghanistan has a significant housing shortage and homelessness already affects around 11% of the population, or 4.6 million people. The country has some of the most internally displaced persons (IDPs), roughly 4.3 million, who lack access to basic human needs like sanitation, shelter or food. This is caused by the severe poverty within the country, caused by the long-term war conflict and lack of stable government, which could invest in better housing infrastructure. As the issue is still ongoing, it is causing significant healthcare and social problems and further hinders the country's economic situation.

India

The lack of suitable shelter is becoming a large issue in many rapidly growing nations, such as India. Just between 2021 and 2022, the population increased by 0.81%, or roughly 11 million people, which is extremely unsustainable for the housing market. Even back in 2011, there was a deficit of 18.78 million houses, which has since then only grown exponentially. What deepens this issue further is that India has a very poor wealth distribution, with more than 40% of the wealth going to the top 1% and the bottom half of its population only getting 3%. This is making shelter even less available, as not only is there a shortage, people in need also cannot afford it.

USA

A slightly different reason for homelessness can be the boosting of prices in the housing market, caused by inflation of overall prices of the factors of production due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was an attempt to tackle the housing shortage even before the pandemic, the US was still in a deficit of at least 2.3 million housing units in 2022. The general shortage of housing units is however not the sole issue, as it is often the price and availability causing people to not have access to suitable shelter. Since the 1990's, the price of housing has tripled, but it was most recently during COVID when the prices of housing outgrew the wage of the median American worker. With rent rates rising by more than 15% between 2021 and 2022, accessibility to suitable shelter has declined for many. It is also necessary to mention the prejudice and racial discrimination within the housing market, that the US experiences.

Netherlands

The Netherlands is facing what most could consider repeating cyclical housing crisis, with most homelessness being caused by the large number of students attending Dutch universities. In most cities, schools do not provide accommodation and the student housing crisis grows each year, with over 22 thousand students being without housing in 2020. This leads to a large number of the student population being homeless, staying at hostels and couch surfing, as a result of the student housing crisis.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How can governmental support lead to better access to suitable shelter?
How can those living in unsuitable conditions be saved from any negative long-term effects?
What can governments do to better keep track of those without access to sustainable shelter?
How can the economic crisis be managed in relation to growing rent and prices of housing?

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