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priority Theme: Affordable housing and social protection
systems for all to address homelessness

Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa del Sacro Cuore, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of the Mission, Fondazione Proclade Internazionale – Onlus, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Loreto Generalate, International Presentation Association, Dominican Leadership Conference, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Passionists International, Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Salesian Missions Inc., Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and UNANIMA International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations representing Catholic women and men Religious, welcome the opportunity to address homelessness at the 58th Session of the Commission for Social Development. Homelessness is a growing problem in almost every country and, as such, needs urgent attention from UN Member States and all stakeholders. We affirm the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' indication that housing is a fundamental component of the human right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being (Art. 25). We therefore regret the policies, strategies, and lack of awareness and political will that have led to the present, deteriorating global situation of housing. We appreciate the efforts being made by some Member States and many organizations working to address and improve the situation and trust that the 58th Commission for Social Development will constitute a new impetus to address this problem which undermines the dignity of our fellow human beings and exacerbates our unsustainable relationship with the natural environment.

Homelessness is an assault on human dignity and a social and economic infringement of the human right to housing. Being without a home also poses a direct threat to an individual's other fundamental rights, including the rights to liberty and security of person, to State and societal protection of the family, to freedom from arbitrary deprivation of property, and to education. Because most governments require a home address for voting registration, homelessness further silences, disempowers and denies homeless people their right to equal suffrage and participation in public affairs in their own country's political system. We note that this 58th Session of the Commission for Social Development is the first time that global homelessness is being addressed at the United Nations, and therefore we call on Member States to formally recognize every instance of homelessness as a violation of a fundamental human rights.

According to UN Habitat, about 1.6 billion people are living in inadequate housing and an estimated 200 million are completely without a home. Global incidence of homelessness is underestimated for a variety of reasons, but one of the most prominent obstacles to proper measurement of this problem is the incongruity among national definitions of homelessness. In order to overcome this fundamental stumbling block to addressing the global and multi-faceted housing crisis, we urge the immediate adoption of an internationally agreed definition of homelessness. To this end, we embrace and support the international adoption of the definition proposed at the UN Expert Group Meeting on Affordable Housing, which was held in Nairobi in May 2019. The Expert Group defined homelessness as "a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights." In defining homelessness, they include:

- People living on the streets or other open spaces,
- People living in temporary or crisis accommodation, and
- People who lack access to affordable housing.

The growing trend of family homelessness, women, children and girls demonstrates the changing image of homelessness as a phenomenon increasingly experienced predominantly by women, children and girls, victims of descent- and work-based discrimination, and indigenous peoples. Affordable housing shortages; commodification of housing; the increasingly devastating effects of climate change; the unceasing rise in the incidence of land-grabbing, especially that associated with

under-regulation of extractive industry activity; and the continually growing social and economic inequalities within and among countries have all conspired to exacerbate this trend in both high- and low-income nations. People living in informal settlements without secure tenure or basic services in urban and rural settings, are vulnerable to abuses from landowners, extortion from criminal groups and being relocated due to urban gentrification.

Young adults experiencing homelessness are an often-overlooked group, as social protection programs and studies tend to focus on adult people, families in general, or children. People aged 15-24 face obstacles to securing adequate housing as global unemployment rate for young adults is triple that of global adult unemployment rate (ILO World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2018). Furthermore, even where youth are employed, they are typically over-represented among the working poor. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 70% of employed youth were living in extreme or moderate poverty in 2017. In the European Union, the relative poverty rate among young workers was 12.9% versus the 9.6% rate for adult workers in general. (UN World Youth Report, 2018). The unavailability of decent work that provides living wages for young adults places them at direct, significant risk of homelessness. It is also a major driver of youth employment and education migration to cities or countries where they are distant from their social networks and lack the support of a family-based housing “safety net” or the means to negotiate for fair rent and decent housing conditions. Young people who have been in the custody and care of the state are also particularly in need of special housing support (sometimes called “after-care” programs) when they reach the legal age of adulthood in their country when they abruptly become ineligible for child protection programs and services.

People who are homeless, especially women, children, and girls, are vulnerable to human trafficking and violence, including physical and sexual assault. It affects not only their physical well-being but also their psychological and emotional health. Homelessness has an adverse impact on the education of children. They are made to feel ashamed and live in constant fear of being separated from their families. Without access to affordable, safe, and secure housing, women and children suffering from domestic violence, remain in danger.

Homelessness is a human rights violation and a crisis that the global society needs to address if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and leave no one behind. Homelessness is a whole-of-society issue and requires the collaboration of all levels of government, community organizations, trade unions, and private corporations. Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, recently stated that housing-related Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved by 2030 unless states develop and implement human rights-based housing strategies.

Criminalizing homelessness and blaming homeless people for their circumstances will not solve this crisis because these approaches fail to address its structural causes. Many countries are already employing human rights-based housing strategies, which include building affordable housing close to workplaces, schools, transport, and other basic amenities. Governments in partnership with community organizations provided basic social protections, including legal, health and skill training services. Fundamental to all strategies is the centrality of the dignity of the person in all policymaking, implementation, and evaluation processes.

We recommend to the UN and its Members States the following strategies:

- Prioritize the eradication of homelessness and address the needs of people in the most desperate circumstances, especially women, children, widows, older persons, victims of descent- and work-based discrimination, and indigenous people

- Implement national social protection floor policies and programs that include access to adequate housing for all
- Develop and implement human rights-based housing strategies that adopt a whole-of-government approach and works in collaboration with civil society and private corporations
- Employ participative processes in the development of housing strategies and ensure people who are experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing are not only consulted but empowered and enabled to participate meaningfully in decision-making on issues that affect them directly
- Implement measures that address the rising costs of housing including regulation of financial, housing, and real estate markets and taxation reforms that discourage speculative property investments and encourage affordable housing development
- Initiate policies focused on the prevention of homelessness, such as those aimed at ending evictions and providing supportive services

In the spirit of our common mission to establish a just society in which human dignity is upheld and common good is the governing principle, we urge you to take up these recommendations and bring an end to the crisis of homelessness our members are witnessing and working to resolve around the world.
